

'Eat & Greet' gathers community and officers together

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By Sarah Burghardt

Columbia Heights Police Department hosted their annual event to connect with Circle Terrace neighborhood

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Officer Andy Museus and Yassir Mohamed, 11, bond at the community gathering.



Giddy children wait in line to get their faces painted as police officers and volunteers man the food line handing out hamburgers and hotdogs. Picnic tables are filled with officers and residents, enjoying delicious food and good conversation. On the grounds of the near-future

City of Peace Park, over 300 individuals gathered together on Circle Terrace Boulevard for a warm summer night of peace and unity. The Columbia Heights Police Department hosted their annual “Eat & Greet” event on Aug. 30, allowing officers and neighbors the opportunity to bond on a more personal level. This event was the second “Eat & Greet” held on Circle Terrace, with two others held prior on the 4600 block of Tyler Street.

The residents of Circle Terrace are incredibly diverse, with the majority of the neighborhood being Somalian. The neighborhood is nearly 100 percent made up of rental properties and is largely transient as most families have lived in the location for less than five years. To further connect the community, outreach events like the “Eat & Greet” allow residents to come together and build relationships with officers and other community members.

The location of the event was held in anticipation of the City of Peace Park. Sergeant Justin Pletcher said the event was a chance for both parties to see how engaged everyone was in the community. “To have the police department, all the organizations, and 300 or more people to show up, I really think that’s going to be a huge example for community policing in the future where this building and park are going to be built,” he said.

Captain Lenny Austin said these events are also great opportunities to introduce support services that are offered throughout the county, since many residents may be unaware of the advantages that these services can provide. Organizations in attendance of the “Eat & Greet” included the school district, parks and recreation, and Southern Anoka Community Assistance (SACA). Austin said that this event also demonstrates a true partnership among the city. “It’s not just about the police, but it’s about everyone,” he said.

Officer Andy Museus said the “Eat & Greet” is beneficial to both the officers and residents. “It gives the police a chance to see people in a positive light, rather than an enforcement environment,” he said.

Austin said its very important to be involved and engaged with the community. “Having community support allows us to do our job much more effectively, especially when it comes to crime and public safety,” he said.

The event was sponsored by Safe Summer Nights, a similar community initiative in Saint Paul. The “Eat & Greet” was their first event that was sponsored in Columbia Heights.

“We really appreciate the partnership. It made the event extra special by bringing in Safe Summer Nights,” Austin said.

The City of Peace Park project is awaiting funding to come through from a Community Development Block Grant and has plans to break ground this fall.

The park will house a community center, which will be home to a number of opportunities for the members of the neighborhood. The multipurpose building has plans to house parks and recreation functions, community placing functions, social services, adult and youth outreach, and educational opportunities.

The Columbia Heights School District and Recreation Department both plan to contribute different services to the center.

Kristen Stuenkel, director of community education at Columbia Heights schools, said the district is excited to be involved. “Our plan is to offer parental support and education and classes for English learners. We’re very excited for the opportunity to connect with the Circle Terrace Neighborhood,” Stuenkel said.

The building will be staffed by officers within the confines of the city’s budget. It will also be available for rent, with a fee that would go back into building maintenance, with possible uses including community picnics or birthday and graduation parties.



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