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Small Gathering to a Major Event — Pottstown Fete en Blanc



By Peggy Lee-Clark, Executive Director, Pottstown Area Economic Development, Inc. (PAED)

Pottstown’s Fete en Blanc started in 2017 with a simple conversation. Twila Fisher of Hobart’s Run and I were discussing a few fledgling events that we were trying to get started in Downtown along with Sheila Dugan who was the Main Street Manager at that time. The three of us were working collectively on mid-week summer outdoor lunches to take place in the Downtown, and monthly Friday night dinners being held on the back patio of the New York Plaza Building. Twila mentioned wouldn’t it be great to have a white dinner in the middle of Downtown. Without much planning or lead time we decided to do it in Smith Family Plaza.

I think we probably shared it through Facebook with less than a month’s notice. Twila and I set up a few tables with white cloths and chairs. We asked a winery to be there, a couple of restaurants set some food out and somehow between 25 and 28 people dressed in white showed up, including kids in strollers. It was a beautiful September evening and Twila and I ended up having to chase out the stragglers so we could load up the tables and chairs in our cars.

Fast forward to 2023, for the 6th Annual Pottstown Fete. Like many things in life, Fete has evolved. Our mission with this end of summer event is two-fold — we do it to celebrate the Pottstown Community but, we also do it

to showcase Pottstown to the outside world. This year, over 60 percent of the 750 tickets sold were purchased by people who live outside of Pottstown. We have people attending from outside of Pennsylvania.

Neither PAED nor Hobart’s Run are in the event business, but our organizations are committed to finding ways to tell Pottstown’s modern-day story. Fete en Blanc provides the platform to do just that. We have had the event annually since 2017 with one year off during the COVID shut down. The event now sells out quickly. We have generous sponsors and tickets are no longer free for attendees.

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POTTSTOWN FETE EN BLANC

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Even though PAED's Staff and Hobart's Staff donate their labor, which is hours and hours, our expenses continue to grow. We no longer procure our own tables, chairs, and linens from a variety of sources. We learned that lesson a bit late. Three years into this idea we had 500 attendees. Set up wasn't too bad with our mighty little team but, it's tough to clean up after a party of that size with six people. Thank goodness for several kind-hearted attendees that helped us break down all those tables and chairs and collect the mountain of trash that was left.

I'm not sure if the cleanup lasted longer than the actual event but, it sure did seem like it. We have always promoted the event as a rain or shine event but, I'm not sure we envisioned the violent deluge that came through Pottstown this year in the afternoon bringing down branches, creating gullies of water, and tearing apart one of the tents protecting the sound board. At 5:00 p.m. our planning team were all watching the weather from our second-floor conference area and pulling up various weather apps on our smartphones deciding what to do. At about 5:10 p.m., Twila and I both agreed we both would meet in Smith Family

Plaza dressed in our white, sit with whoever showed up and celebrate as we always had. We got a few looks from our colleagues like we both had lost our minds but, down to the venue we went to dry chairs, put out flowers, place recycling bins, and set up the registration table.

Guests began to arrive shortly before 6:00 pm. They helped wipe things down, wrung out tablecloths and proceeded to decorate their tables with candles, dishes, and centerpieces. Nobody seemed to give it another thought to what had been transpiring 45 minutes prior. Once again, we had a beautiful evening with 600+ showing up to wave goodbye to summer, enjoy the music of the Louis Rieger Quartet, sip on something from Kiki Vodka or a beverage from Sly Fox, eat a delicious meal or snack they bought from one of our local restaurants and revel in what is special about Pottstown. There was a shared feeling when we all left that anything is possible with persistence and passion. People will be talking about this one for years to come and have already started asking how they can be part of next year's story.

Peggy Lee-Clark can be reached at 610.326.2900; email: pleeclark@paedinc.org.

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