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MARTIAL ARTS, ART FAIR AND CHURCH'S UNDERGROUND RAILROAD MUSEUM HIGHLIGHT EAST SIDE NEIGHBORHOODS DAY EVENTS

BY DEB SEATON

Special For ARISE Detroit!

In 1994, the then 45-year-old Square Williamson joined the Alkebu-Lan Village as a student.

The martial-arts facility and community center has been a fixture on Detroit's east side on Harper for over 40 years and eventually, Williamson became a master instructor of the African-style martial art Alkebu-do, which uses open-hand combat and some weapons.

“It’s a good place to be,” said Williamson about the activities the center offers, including African drumming, dancing, and entrepreneur training. “It keeps the kids off the street and have a place to go opposed to running loose.”

Alkebu-Lan Village was one of the more than 150 entities – including churches, block clubs and community organizations -- that partnered with ARISE! Detroit in the 15th Annual Neighborhoods Day on Aug. 7, showing neighborhood pride and support through various programs and projects. During the week leading up to Neighborhoods Day, the Village contributed with a neighborhood cleanup in different areas near the center and on Neighborhoods Day, held a martial arts demonstration.

Alkebu-Lan CEO Marvis Cofield said the organization has partnered with ARISE! Detroit Neighborhoods Day for the past 15 years and agrees both institutions have the same beliefs: it is up to residents of Detroit to maintain and rebuild their communities. Since its inception, Cofield estimates more than 450,000 children and families in and outside the city have benefited from the facility’s influence.

“Alkebu-Lan Village is 43 years old,” said Cofield. “We’ve been in the neighborhood doing some good because we believe in order to build our neighborhood, we have to rebuild it one brick, one building, one block at a time. If not us, then who?”

Janet Henderson, chief operating officer, of **First Congregational Church of Detroit**, felt that same determination by including the church in Neighborhoods Day for the first time. The 177-year-old church is also the home of the Underground Railroad Museum. The museum was active for 22 years before closing because of COVID-19 and reopened this year.

Henderson said when her children were younger, they all participated in Neighborhoods Day each year. When she heard the 15th annual event was approaching, she decided to get the church involved. Their participation included providing free refreshments to the community, rummage sale and cleanup in the community.

“I feel it’s important for people to come together and become neighborhoods again,” she said. “Our churches are the main sources of the neighborhoods, so we need to do more things to help our neighborhoods.”

It’s not the first time for Mark Loeb, art show director for the **Belle Isle Art Fair**. The fair has participated with Neighborhoods Day for six years and this year’s show featured 100 juried artists from Detroit and other areas. Loeb said years ago Detroit had many art fairs, but a lot have disappeared, though some are coming back little by little.

Neighborhoods Day, he said, gives those artists the opportunity to focus peoples’ eyes on the possibilities of the arts.

“More each year, people seem to be embracing Neighborhoods Day,” said Loeb. “I do a lot of work in different neighborhoods on different projects. It’s great for people to be able to do things in their own neighborhood because Detroit is not Downtown and Midtown. Detroit is hundreds of neighborhoods.”

Over on the North End, Executive director of **Stafford House** Community Organization Patricia Dockery said the organization has participated in Neighborhoods Day for the last 10 years, holding an annual flea market. The organization also holds educational programs with Detroit Public Schools, modernizing and redeveloping local parks, sports and youth development programs.

“Because we are interactive in our neighborhood and we do many programs for the community and a lot of youth development programs, it’s important that we engage with our community – that our neighbors know what we are doing and participate,” said Dockery.

But if one has smaller children and was looking for free books or to enroll in daycare, **Jude Family Childcare Learning Center** held a family fun day with games, food and even a traveling dentist. If one needed a job, those certified could apply for a childcare position.

For Neighborhoods Day, learning center director Choyce Harris of the learning center said this is an opportunity for the community to know there is quality childcare in the community.

“Our goal is to make sure we have quality childcare in this neighborhood,” she added. “A lot of people feel they have to go out of the neighborhood to receive quality care. A lot of people when they find out we’re here and they live right in the neighborhood, so this is a good opportunity to reinforce our presence.”

Meanwhile, volunteers with the **Emmanuel Christian Men Home** have gone through the neighborhood introducing themselves and cleaning brush and debris from backyard alleys.

Toni McIlwain, home director and a board member of ARISE Detroit!, is another organization that has worked with ARISE! Detroit! for 10 years. McIlwain said the men in the facility and other contributors participate in Neighborhoods Day because the city needs to know what the residents of the home can offer. The facility is a home for men – some of them have been incarcerated or had substance abuse issues but are now in recovery.

McIlwain said Neighborhoods Day is just as important for the men in the home as it is to Detroit neighborhoods.

“I think the residents need to know how valuable they are,” she said. about the facility’s residents, “and they show how valuable they are through the work that they do. This is their home – they want to show that they do it themselves.”

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