

German Festival draws families to 11th edition

BY RAVEN L. HILL
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Emily Moore and Maxwell Heaton are just the kind of people that organizers of the annual German Festival want to attract.

Both are in their early 20s and have German ties. Moore comes from a German family, and Heaton lived in Munich for four years. They saw the festival advertised online and decided to check it out.

"We're kind of scrounging for the D.C.-Baltimore area German nooks and crannies," said Moore, wearing a traditional German dress and flip-flops.

Heaton added, "As soon as we heard 'gathering of German,' we said, 'Let's go see that for a day.'"

The two-day festival, now in its 11th year, was held Sunday in air-conditioned comfort at the Exhibition Hall on the Maryland State Fairgrounds in Timonium. The event is organized by the German-American Citizens Association of Maryland. Approximately 2,000 to 3,000 people were expected to attend.

Longtime volunteers said they were encouraged to see young families with children and teenagers sprinkled among the graying crowd.

"You can't keep something like this going without getting the younger people involved," said Towson resident Betty Niemann, who's been volunteering for decades.

The festival is the major fundraiser for

the German-American Citizens Association of Maryland, an umbrella group for religious, civic and cultural organizations. Organizers said it is the oldest celebration of ethnic pride in the state.

For years, it coincided with Baltimore's "Showcase of Nations" and was held in Carroll Park. In moving to the state fairgrounds, organizers got more space for attendees to enjoy food along with craft, jewelry and clothing vendors, but bad weather over the last two years hurt attendance — not much, but enough to make organizers thankful that it was moved inside this year.

"We are counting our blessings," volunteer Bill Reamy said.

In trying to create a program that would appeal to various age groups, there have been some adjustments. Rock bands were on the program for past festivals. This year, there were only German bands.

No one seemed to mind.

The festival is a family affair for LeAnn Reilly. Sitting with her father, husband, brother and sons, Reilly said they look forward to it each year.

"We're a German family and so this is our heritage ... the music, the fellowship, the fact that it celebrates the German and American," said Reilly, who lives in Pasadena.

Mark Schweitzer, her brother, chimed in, "The atmosphere."

"The food's wonderful, too!" Reilly said.

From beer to bratwurst, pickles to pretzels, sauerkraut to strudel, vendors served up plates throughout the day.

"I love German food. I love German beer," Reamy said. "I enjoy the camaraderie or, as we say, 'gemuethlichkeit.'"

Vendors said the spirit of fellowship trickles into their booths.

Daniel Licht, owner of Ernst Licht embroidery and importers in Oley, Pa., said he's impressed that the following has remained intact.

"This club has had to move from location to location. Typically, you would see a drop in attendance — it may just fall apart. In this case, you really see the people follow," Licht said. "They look forward to this. They talk about it all year long. I think that's a unique thing about this festival alone. ... They have such a strong connection to people."

When he visits German-American clubs across the country, Licht said he's noticed that getting and keeping young people involved is the key to success.

"I see the culture growing. I see the younger generation is taking part in it and it's important to keep that heritage," he said. "I would put it along with any other cultures where they want to hold their heritage... you can see the value of it as it's shared. A lot of this is about continuing the traditions."

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BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR/BALTIMORE SUN
Al Zorn, left, and Joe Fellner draw beer at the German Festival, where German chocolate cake from Old World Delicatessen and Bakery of Randallstown was available.

