

ArtsFest Brings Art to Life
By FLETCHER DALTON, Bureau Chief
Boston, July 26–27

Jeff Vachon brought 11 guests to ArtsFest, Boston's first major celebration of the arts, held this weekend.

"They all loved it," he said.

"This was because it was hands-on, interactive, appealing to everyone, and open to all," said Steve Potoff, Boston's joint territory chief, explaining that although ArtsFest was produced by the arts division of the Culture Department, one did not have to be a recognized artist to present creative work.

Almost the entire square footage of the community center became exhibit space for painters, photographers, poets, sculptors, storytellers, musicians, writers, designers, weavers, puppeteers, a jester, a juggler and a chorus. There was also music by and for children.

In an intimate coffeehouse setting — minus espresso — poets and comedians held sway, some live, some on film. Although the length of Buddhist practice of the performers ranged from several months to a quarter of a century, the general attitude here, as indeed everywhere at the festival, seemed to be one of sharing life's experiences with the audiences, not just entertaining them.

Guang Wong found the ambiance of the coffeehouse refreshing. "The poetry was by common people, writing about ordinary things like friendship, their frustrations, and dreams," he said. "I have great appreciation for these people who have the courage to take up a pen and write, not concerned about criticism or whether they are great poets or writers, but willing to share their feelings with others."

ArtsFest was a mere sketch of an idea 10 months ago. Through continuous effort and concentrated daimoku by members, the idea expanded and caught the imagination of the entire joint territory. In a unique, irresistible preview of the festival, Arts Division Chief and ArtsFest Coordinator Flo Chien, accompanying herself on an acoustic guitar, regaled the joint territory planning board with song. The board responded and helped by assisting with communication and promotion.

Although many of the performing artists had been heard previously — at their own gigs or various Buddhist activities — never had so many been heard and seen in one place at one time.

"This festival is bringing the arts back from a marginal position in society and restoring them to their humanizing role," said Carol Sylla, a choreographer and teacher who specializes in African movement and dance. "Here, everyone can express themselves in a non-censuring atmosphere. The arts embrace everyone. As SGI President Ikeda says, 'The arts are vital to our lives.'"

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