

Title: Juneteenth in Kansas City

Author: Dr. Michael Sweeney

Juneteenth commemorates the June 19, 1865, announcement by Union General Gordon Granger to enslaved people in Galveston, Texas, that they were “henceforth, and forever, free,” more than two years after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. JuneteenthKC, under the leadership of Makeda Peterson, organizes events in Kansas City, Missouri, that commemorate and celebrate Juneteenth. The idea of community is central to Juneteenth events in Kansas City. Juneteenth brings together and highlights African American arts, businesses, civic leaders, culture and history. The celebration is an expression of pride in being African American. Juneteenth provides an opportunity, says Makeda, “To manifest in that one day what it means to be an African American in Kansas City.”

Horace M. Peterson III, founder and director of the Black Archives of Mid-America, initiated the modern Juneteenth commemoration in Kansas City in 1980. For many years, the Black Archives of Mid-America sponsored the celebration, which took place in the historic Eighteenth and Vine District, the business and cultural center of life for African Americans in Kansas City during segregation. Juneteenth as organized by Horace Peterson and the Black Archives generally included a parade, food, and live entertainment, but it also included voter registration drives and other activities that worked to better the community. The Juneteenth commemoration in Kansas City highlighted individuals who contributed in some fashion to the community’s wellbeing, recognized as grand marshals for the parade or appointed Mr. or Mrs. Juneteenth. Each year, the Black Archives selected a theme to highlight some aspect of African American life and culture. The theme for 1986, for example, was “In Pursuit of Good Health,” which served to make African Americans more aware of health care services in the City. The

1989 theme of “Celebrate Youth” served as a catalyst to bring free dance lessons by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater to the historic Eighteenth and Vine District.

Juneteenth in Kansas City grew throughout the 1980s before a period of decline in the early 2000s. In 1990, the ten-year anniversary of the modern Juneteenth celebration in Kansas City, the *Kansas City Star* noted that the first Juneteenth commemoration in 1980 included 200 people, though another article from 1991 puts the number closer to 1000; the newspaper reported attendance of roughly 25,000 in 1990. Horace Peterson passed away suddenly in 1992. Without his guidance, Juneteenth slowly died off in the late 1990s. Festivals in the historic Eighteenth and Vine District in the early 2000s focused less on African American culture and independence and more towards music and food.

Makeda Peterson established JuneteenthKC in 2012 to carry on the Juneteenth tradition in Kansas City, modeled on the work of her father, Horace Peterson. Makeda had been working at social service agencies in the greater Kansas City area, which further cultivated her passion for giving back to the urban core. Her mother, Barbara Peterson, was serving on the board of the Black Archives of Mid-America at that time. Makeda visited with community members about the value of Juneteenth to the wellbeing of the African American community in Kansas City. Juneteenth was clearly a source of pride, and the broader community felt its absence. Since Horace Peterson was so central to making Juneteenth an important part of African American life in Kansas City, Makeda felt personally motivated to get back involved in the Juneteenth commemoration. JuneteenthKC successfully organized and held Juneteenth festivities in 2012. JuneteenthKC, now a 501c3 organization, collaborates with other organizations and city departments to reenergize and grow the Juneteenth commemoration in Kansas City. For example, in 2017 Juneteenth expanded to include activities at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

for the first time, including artist demonstrations. Renée Stout discussed cultural appropriation and the role of the creative process in healing and empowerment.

Juneteenth in Kansas City in 2018 consisted of a number of components, with activities occurring over the whole month of June. The 2018 theme was “Passport to Freedom.” JuneteenthKC kicked off the celebration on June 1 – First Friday – in the historic Eighteenth and Vine District. The evening included fire-breathers, large puppets, and face painters, but it also highlighted Black businesses in the District. The Juneteenth parade – the second organized by JuneteenthKC – occurred the next day and included fifty entries, many of which promoted Black businesses and organizations. The parade brought approximately 1500 people to the Eighteenth and Vine District. Dr. Mark T. Bedell, superintendent of the Kansas City, Missouri, School District, was the Grand Marshall. Benny Shelby, who owns the Kansas City Blues and Jazz Juke House in the Eighteenth and Vine District, was Mr. JuneteenthKC. Melissa Robinson, president of the Black Health Care Coalition, was Ms. JuneteenthKC. There was an after-event at the Gregg-Klice Community Center, which brought back the drill teams for additional performances. The following weekend, on June 9, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art commemorated Juneteenth with a series of activities, including a conversation with African American sculptor Ed Dwight, artists’ demonstrations, and storytelling; this was a partner event with JuneteenthKC, which helped to market the event to the community. Finally, the next weekend, was the Juneteenth Heritage Festival. There were over seventy-five retail vendors, over fifty health service providers and non-profit vendors in the Gregg-Klice Community Center, and then a main entertainment stage hosted by MetroPCS and the Kansas City Neighborhood Tourist Development Fund that had local acts, live musicians, and a gospel show.

JuneteenthKC has continued the tradition started by Horace Peterson of including educational and health services in the Juneteenth commemoration. During the 2017 Juneteenth commemoration, Truman Medical Center's Health-Mobile gave out free bags of groceries, the Kansas City Health Department provided free vaccinations to children and adults, and a blood drive occurred at the American Jazz Museum. JuneteenthKC often waives fees for vendors who can bring in health and wellness services to the community. JuneteenthKC also added a swim campaign to the Juneteenth commemoration in 2017. JuneteenthKC worked with Kansas City Parks and Recreation to highlight the importance of swim education in youth and adults by giving away 500 free swim lessons. The "Make a Splash" is important to Makeda, since her father died in a drowning accident. The goal of the swim campaign is to help people understand the various environmental elements that affect our experience with water. In 2018, free swim lessons were again available at Gregg-Klice.

In future years, JuneteenthKC wants to expand the number of organizations holding Juneteenth activities. In addition to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, JuneteenthKC has established relationships with the Bruce R. Watkins Cultural Heritage Center and the American Heart Association to host Juneteenth activities as well. These institutions are encouraged to commemorate and engage their respective communities in their own ways, but the overall goal is to celebrate together. "We're inviting the larger community to join us in the celebration," says Barbara Peterson; "the historical roots of Juneteenth are in the Emancipation Proclamation, but it is also in subsequent legislative activities that promoted freedom for everybody. It is not just the African American community that benefited [from these legislative actions], but it is everybody who benefited. When you expand freedoms for some, you expand freedoms for everybody."

## Bibliography

Diuguid, Lewis W. "Juneteenth is finding its voice." *Kansas City Star*, 6 June 1991.

"Nelson-Atkins Focuses on Emancipation with Juneteenth Celebration." *Dispatch Post USA*, 18-24 May 2017, p. 2A.

Penn, Steve. "Juneteenth celebration to feature loads of jazz." *Kansas City Star*, 15 June 1990, p. C4.

Sweeney, Michael. Interview with Barbara Peterson and Makeda Peterson. 6 July 2018.