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10-day festival of laughter set for Grand Rapids

Associated Press

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GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. — Thousands of people are expected to turn out for a 10-day festival of laughter in western Michigan featuring performances by comedians Bill Cosby, Betty White and Margaret Cho.

"Gilda's LaughFest" opens Thursday in Grand Rapids. Other headliners at the event created by Gilda's Club Grand Rapids in celebration of its 10th anniversary include Mike Birbiglia,

Kathleen Madigan and Gabriel Iglesias.

The event has been in the planning stages for nearly two years. Gilda's Club Grand Rapids is a cancer and grief support group affiliated with Gilda's Club Worldwide. It's named after Gilda Radner, the "Saturday Night Live" fixture and Detroit native who died of ovarian cancer in 1989.

"My sister, Gilda, loved to laugh, and after she was diagnosed with cancer, she found out that finding the funny, even in a cancer journey, was so important," Gilda Radner's brother, Michael Radner, said in a statement. "I applaud all ... who are helping to celebrate laughter for the health of it."

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As of earlier this month, nearly 27,000 tickets had been sold to see more than 60 headliners. Visitors are expected from as far away as New York, New Jersey and California. There are also 110 free events being held throughout the city. About 50 venues are hosting performances.

Organizers also are offering a simulcast of White's performance on March 15. Individual tickets, which go on sale Monday, cost \$12.50.

LaughFest's official kickoff is at downtown's Rosa Parks Circle on Thursday night, when organizers want to break a Guinness World Record for the number of participants who toss rubber chickens at one time.

A free LaughFest dance party and concert is March 19 at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel. And on March 20, organizers are planning an event at Calder Plaza where people will hold up placards to form a huge smile that will be documented in an aerial photograph.

"Since Gilda's gift to those on a cancer journey was permission to laugh, we wanted to pass that permission along to people in our community and beyond," said Leann Arkema, president and CEO of Gilda's Club Grand Rapids. "Our goal is to show how laughing together can lift the human spirit in life, work and play.

"It's about laughter for the health of it."

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<http://www.laughfestgr.org>

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