

Celebrating Juneteenth in Rockford



At a young age I remember going to Sinnissippi Park in June for a huge celebration kind of oblivious to the significance of the event that I was attending. The one thing I remember about these celebrations were that they were always full of love, dance, community, and an overall celebration of freedom. The sense of joy felt throughout each, and every individual created a sense of community that was so refreshing that I could not wait to learn the history of Juneteenth. On June 19, 1865, about 2,000 troops arrived in Galveston Bay, Texas to inform the over 250,000 enslaved people that they had been freed by an executive order from President Abraham Lincoln. This message came more than two years after the Emancipation Proclamation.



Juneteenth is truly a day to celebrate freedom for all. The Juneteenth celebration commemorates the emancipation of African Americans from slavery in the United States. For over 30 years Rockford has been home to the longest Juneteenth celebration in the state of Illinois. While Juneteenth just became an official state holiday in Illinois on June 16, 2021, that has not stopped Rockford from celebrating Juneteenth since 1990. Rockford's own Tommy Meeks has spearheaded the Juneteenth celebration in Rockford since the very beginning. Juneteenth celebrations in Rockford started off at Levings Lake Park and has since been moved to Sinnissippi to help accommodate the continued growth of the two-day celebration.



I had the opportunity to sit down with Mr. Juneteenth himself; Tommy Meeks, to have a conversation about Juneteenth in Rockford and discuss the 33rd Annual Juneteenth Celebration in Rockford. Tommy has not only been the driving force behind the Juneteenth celebration in Rockford he is an award-winning community activist and a trailblazer in the Rockford community for creating culture and celebrating unity to help create positive spaces to uplift, inspire and have a genuine good time together. Tommy's journey with Juneteenth began during a drive to Arkansas with his Uncle James and Aunt Maggie. During this time Tommy's Aunt Maggie informed him that his grandfather never let any of his children work on June 19th. At this moment, Tommy became very intrigued as to the reason why. Why was this one day in June so important to take off work?

With the information Tommy found about the history of Juneteenth and the significance it meant to so many he felt a golden opportunity to create a celebration right here in Rockford. His primary goal with the celebration was to bring all ethnic groups and backgrounds together to have fun, eat some good food and enjoy some great music. Tommy also became engaged with civil rights and Juneteenth advocate Rev. Ronald V. Meyers who further assisted him on making this celebration larger than anyone could ever have imagined. Thirty-three years later, we are still telling the story of Juneteenth in Rockford thanks to Mr. Tommy Meeks. As to why it was so pivotal to create this celebration in Rockford Tommy stated, "I wanted to bring Juneteenth to Rockford help the black community find a role here and a space where we can come together and celebrate this important holiday for us."



Each year there is always something new to keep your eye out on during the celebration. Music and dance are always huge parts of Juneteenth but last year Chautauqua Dialogues which provides a forum for people to bring their own diverse experiences and backgrounds to offer input with issues that impact the greater community. This year's Chautauqua Dialogue will be led by Civic Leader Omar Muhammad.

Do not let me stray too far away from music because music is what keeps so many of us pushing through any hard days. We all have that favorite song that we go to in order to give us that extra push. With June being Black Music Month I had to ask Tommy for three songs to get people prepared and in the spirit to celebrate Juneteenth this year. Tommy mentioned "Strange Fruit" by Billie Holiday, "Wake

Up Everybody” by Harold Melvin & The Blue Notes featuring Teddy Pendergrass, and last but certainly not least, “A Change is Gonna Come” by Sam Cooke. All three of these songs paint pictures and tell stories around real experiences of hope, resilience, and purpose.

Juneteenth
1865

Juneteenth Collaborative Weekend Celebration
Sinnissippi Park - Rockford, IL
Sunday, June 18th & Monday, June 19th

Sunday	Monday
11:00am- Community Church Service with Pastor Alexander of Hope Fellowship & Pastor Copeland of New Zion	1:00pm- RPS District 205 Talent Show
1:00pm- All Black Graduation with Tony Turner of Conscious Coaching	2:00pm- John Stanford Band
3:00pm- DJ Dex & Money Dance Giveaway	2:40pm- Colonel Robert Nolan 10th Calvary Buffalo Soldier
4:00pm- Live at Levings Talent Show and Concert at Sinnissippi	3:00pm- ILLROCK Drum & Bugle Corp
	3:30pm- Tyrone Garrett Tynacity & the Sweats
	4:00pm- Traditional Juneteenth Awards & Juneteenth Queen Presentation
	4:15pm- Rep Eric Sorensen w/ Special Guest
	4:20pm- Money Dance with DJ Rated AG
	4:35pm- Chautauqua with Omar Muhammad
	5:00pm- Goddess Warrior the Poet & Xen Kingsley
	5:20pm- Dorothy Paige Turner and the Juneteenth Players
	5:45pm- Juneteenth Community Awards Presentation
	6:00pm- Money Dance with DJ Rated AG
	6:10- Kristina Puzin
	6:30pm- Too Deep
	7:40pm- Trip Giveaway to Las Vegas & Cash Prizes!
	7:50pm- Soul Serious Featuring Sondra B & Claire Morales from the U.K.

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RPS District 205, Plumbers & Pipefitters U.A. Local 21, Crusader Community Health, Northwestern Illinois Building Trades Union, Jim & Pam Keeling, Rock Valley Credit Union, Mid-American Carpenters Local 792, Project First Rate, Sheet Metal workers 219, Think Big, Ponds Funeral Home, Winnebago County Diversity Council, Andrell Bragg-Shaw LPC Counseling Associates of Rockford

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This year’s two-day Juneteenth Celebration is guaranteed to have you up dancing and feeling the spirit behind Juneteenth. Keep your eye out on Sunday for DJ Dex & The Money Dance Giveaway at 3 p.m. and the Live at Levings Talent Show and Concerts, live at Sinnissippi Park at 4 p.m. Earlier on Sunday there will be a Community Church service at 11 a.m., led by Pastor Alexander of Hope Fellowship and Pastor Copeland of New Zion. Stick around to celebrate graduates at 1 p.m. with the All Black Graduation with Tony Turner of Conscious Coaching.

The celebration does not stop here because Monday’s schedule is jam packed with things to check out all throughout the day. Kicking off with the RPS 205 Talent Show at 1 p.m. on Monday is

promised to please with a great selection of music including the John Stanford Band, ILLROCK Drum & Bugle Corp, Dorothy Paige Turner & the Juneteenth Players, Too Deep, and all the way from the U.K , Soul Serious featuring Sondra B & Claire Morales. Other activities for Monday will include Colonel Robert Nolan 10th Cavalry Buffalo Soldier, poetry by Goddess Warrior the Poet & Xen Kingsley, and multiple Money Dance giveaways that you do not want to miss. Monday's celebration will also be a celebration of those making a difference in the community with the Traditional Juneteenth Awards & Queen Presentation as well as the Juneteenth Community Awards. Click [here](#) for more information about the 2023 Juneteenth Celebration.



Juneteenth celebrations are the all-encompassing thing that celebrates the holiday as well as the community. The feeling of liberation, the many different art forms on display, the food, the laughs, the people and the overall joy you feel while at the event makes this the place to be every year in June. Juneteenth is a complete community celebration that uniquely blends history and art for the whole community to enjoy. If you are free to put your dancing shoes on come out and celebrate history June 18-19 out at Sinnissippi Park and see how 33 years of the Juneteenth celebration has truly made in difference right here in Rockford. See you all on the dance floor!