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Thousands Attend Light Festival in North Adams

By **Tammy Daniels** - April 28, 2008

iBerkshires Staff

NORTH ADAMS — Upwards of 3,000 people covered the banks of the Hoosic River and thronged the two bridges spanning its concrete wall on Saturday night, all to see the lights.

Organizer Ralph Brill deemed the Hoosic River Lights Festival a success, saying it was weak primarily in its links to local vendors and other cultural offerings.

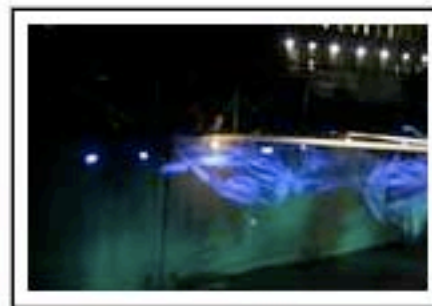
"We've been saying that this is just a prototype," said Brill late Saturday as people continued to walk between the half-dozen art installations in and around the river. "Next year, we'll know how to coordinate things better."

The festival included the impressive "bridges" of light across the flood control chutes 45-foot span. Named "River Revival," the installation was the creation of the Lighting Research Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

Professor Patricia Rizzo and her students were among those gathered along the street to see their the completion of their project. Rizzo said the center would likely be interested in participating again next year, if asked.



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The festival started around 6:30 p.m.; the lights were on but optimum viewing didn't occur until after the dark settled in. Hundreds lined the bank near "River Revival" waiting and chatting with friends.

The temperatures, which had been above normal for more than a week, dipped nearly 20 degrees. But the dark, cloudy skies in the morning dissipated over the

day, leaving Saturday night clear and cool.

Organizers had been holding their breath hoping the rain would hold off for the one-night event, which ended at 11.

"It's OK if it rains — at 11:01," quipped Rizzo earlier in the week. Luckily, the rain held off until the event was over.

Despite the chilly temperatures, three brave souls involved in the project donned bathing suits to sun themselves on the beach — a section of the floor of flood control chute devoid of water.



Emily Conrad and Jeff Galusha's lighting installation flows with the Hoosic River's current. [Courtesy of the artists]

Encapsulated in concrete a half-century ago, the waters that once powered the mills along its path is no longer accessible through much of the city. The goal of the project, said organizers, was to link the city back to the river that runs through it and celebrate it.

Above the bathers was volleyball net of blinking lights; along the Holden Street bridge, people could write out wishes on plastic slates that had light-emitting diodes inserted in them. The design by Rikayo Horimizu and Inhye Lee of Tokyo is based on a Japanese tradition of sending wishes to a river.

The mostly children's wishes included puppies, ponies, more wishes and desire "for my dad to be nicer to me."

The tree-shaded walkway between St. Anthony's Parish Center and the Northern Berkshire District Court was hung with hundreds of glow sticks, painstakingly cracked and shaken by volunteers Phil and Gail Sellers. Their work was stripped away during the evening by youngsters and college students, making it more interactive.



White helium balloons with small blinking lights gave off a ghostly glow as festivalgoers wandered the neighborhood with them.

Down by Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles artist Sarah Michael hung a long piece of shining mylar along the river's wall. Lit from above, the mylar reflected back onto the rippling water. On the River Street side, people lined up to listen to the river through piping set up by Bennington College art student Jazmine Raymond.



"It was mostly just because the river is in this big ditch," said Raymond. "I felt like there's a disconnect between the river and then everything else ... it's way to bring it back so you could have an intimate moment with it.

"I like rivers. They're beautiful. It just seems trapped to me."

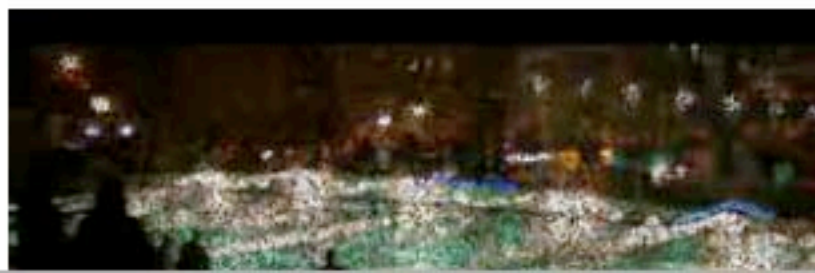
Brill didn't think people quite knew what to expect; he was relieved at the number of positive comments and inquiries he'd received during the evening.

"People visited with each other, they brought their children. It was a great night," he said.

The evening brought out a wide range of people - from local officials to college students to seniors to other artists.

Local artist Jarvis Rockwell was having fun using Raymond's listening device. "I like the bright lights on the water. I really like the event," he said.

The project cost more than \$10,000; the Porches Inn was the main sponsor but the city and Brill both contributed. Mass MoCA supplied the electricity and Brill also provided the balloons.



Brill said the festival's major weak spot was the lack of vendors and other organizations involved. An ice cream truck and hot dog vendor — who ran out of dogs — were the only



ones who showed up to service the hundreds walking back and forth along River Street.

He's hoping that the light event has proved it can guarantee a crowd, which will drive more venues to join in. "I'd like to see some really good food here," he said.

Emily Conrad and Jeffrey Galusha of New York City hope to expand on their installation, strings of glow sticks glowing along the current that took them 8 hours to sew together.

"We wanted to the visualize the current," said Conrad. After doing this pieces, she's got a far more ambitious project, one that would somehow embed sensors or test papers that would show the viewer what is in the water.

"The lights would show types of pollution by their colors," said Conrad, or the river's speed and temperature. "The colors would show the viewer what activities are going on in the water."

This year's festival was put on fairly quickly. It took Brill more than a year to get permission from the Army Corps of Engineers to use the river; many of the artists had little time and no budget to put their works together.



If Saturday's turnout is any indication, the festival will be back again next spring. Brill's hoping to put a committee together this time to work out all the details.

"I think it's fabulous," said Kay Canavino of Adams. "I can't wait to see what they do next year."

Updated on April 29, 2008.

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This event was a pleasant surprise. I was drawn down by the spot lights. Bravo to Ralph Brill and the artists and volunteers responsible for bringing life to the river and the city. I was disappointed that there was not more support by vendors and local bands. Hopefully, this event will continue with more events and publicity. Almost missing this event has prompted me to make iBerkshires.com my home page on the web for local news and events.

from: Diane

on: 04-28-2008