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The Wilmington Fire Department added extra patriotism to the North Carolina Azalea Festival parade as they marched in full gear along Water Street last Saturday morning.

Minority participation questioned in Azalea Festival

NAACP leaders are looking to add more diversity to last weekend's festivities

KATIE BLANCHARD
SPECIAL SECTIONS EDITOR

Azalea Festival-goers may have seen a little bit of everything along Water Street this weekend, but some area leaders say that one element wasn't widely visible—minority participation in the event.

For four days, people from across the nation join local residents to celebrate the region's cultural history. But some say that the festival organizers don't try hard enough to appeal to the minority community in promoting and coordinating the event. Among those is Rev. John Fredlaw, president of the New Hanover County chapter of the NAACP. Fredlaw said the lack of minority presence has caused him to try harder to encourage underrepresented community members to participate in the festival.

"I felt as president and as a leader, trying to eliminate the gap between the races and the mental gap, and healing the wounds amongst the races, that we should participate in the festival,"

Fredlaw said. "It's a part of Wilmington and a large part of our history."

The North Carolina Azalea Festival began in 1948, and its organizers have always strived to accentuate southern heritage. However, this celebration, with no hoop skirts and southern belle images, does not seem to reach out to the area's minority population.

A few years ago, local African Americans had talked about boycotting the Azalea Festival for many reasons, one of them being the lack of events that encourage minority participation. For example, over the festival's 55-year history, only a small number of African-American women have been crowned Azalea queen.

However, no actions were ever officially taken against the event or its organizers. The festival's organizers say they have tried to encourage involvement of all area residents by having performances by guests such as Bill Cosby, Dornie Warwick and, this year, Natalie Cole.

"(The festival) doesn't exactly promote minority participation, but we must promote ourselves," Fredlaw said. "You cannot go to the table and sit down unless you're there."

Fredlaw has been encouraging the local NAACP, including the UNCW chapter, to get more involved in the event. Representatives from the UNCW chapter set up a table at the parade, where they sold raffle tickets to raise money for their organization.

"(The festival) doesn't exactly promote minority participation, but we must promote ourselves,"

—Rev. John Fredlaw

"I would like to think that we will be able to participate a little more next year, maybe we could get enough people to march in the parade instead of just having a table," said Tammy Massey, president of the UNCW chapter of the NAACP.

Fredlaw said he feels that being visible in the festival as a minority community member was vital to improving the diversity of the event.

"I felt that this year we should participate in it, and we did," Fredlaw said. "We became a unit in the Azalea Festival."

Recruitment aimed at future leaders

MOLLY HANDLER

STAFF WRITER

About 50 future UNCW student came to campus last weekend in a new program aimed at improving the acquisition and retention rates of university student leaders.

Resident advisors, hall government participants and Resident Hall Association leaders hosted the students, all of whom have already been accepted to UNCW.

The visitation program is not designed to show the new students around the campus buildings or administration. Instead, the agenda was geared toward giving information to those wanting to pursue leadership programs in both the community and college government.

"We put this (program) together if hopes that some of these people will get involved. We have a hard time keeping people involved each year due to such a high turn over of people moving off campus," said Craig Wymer, the residence coordinator of Galloway Hall.

The incoming freshmen arrived on Friday and were assigned to stay with several students already living on-campus in Schwartz Hall, Galloway Hall Graham-Lett Hall, the Apartments and the Suites.

"The (students saw) how hall government works and (can decide whether they) can see themselves doing it. The students will also be able to move in three days earlier than most freshmen if they show an interest in hall government. This is an incentive to start elections as soon as the dorm opens," Wymer said.

One of the visiting students, Jess Ellenburg said, "I loved (the program) and I wanted to stay in Wilmington after visiting. I can not wait until the fall."

There was an evaluation at the end of the program, which asked about the overall experience of the students, including weekend, the food, the activities and if they are interesting in joining hall government as a result of the program.

"We will be able to see in August based on the turnout for RHA and hall government," Wymer said, with regard to the success of the program.