The Basilica Block Party

25-years of rock on the block

“Tell me this is going to be OK.”

The caller was Archbishop John Roach. The date was Tuesday, May 30, 1995 — the day after Memorial Day. And the reason for the Archbishop’s call to former pastor Michael O’Connell? The first ever Basilica Block Party.

The planning committee worked with local firm Odney Advertising to create a public service announcement (PSA), basically a no-cost advertisement, promoting the new event to be held at The Basilica. Over the slow holiday weekend news cycle, the PSA played repeatedly on television. Stations had call-in polls asking people what they thought of a Catholic church hosting a rock festival. The Basilica Block Party was born.

Over more than two decades, young adults have come to the event in droves and filled our pews on subsequent weekends. Each year, more than 1,600 volunteers devote time and energy to help the event run smoothly — doing everything from picking up the bands from the airport to picking up the trash at the end of the night. A dedicated committee of more than 75 people work year-round to ensure each Basilica Block Party is a fun and safe event for people of all ages.

The Basilica Block Party has shaped our parish beyond just the two nights every July. Couples have met through the block party and gotten married, friendships have been formed and deepened, and families have grown up volunteering together. It has become part of the fabric of our parish and community.

The event has evolved and adjusted with the times. A “green team” helps ensure the recycling of cardboard, glass, plastic and aluminum, and also separates organic trash for composting. These efforts reduced the event’s trash by more than 80%, bringing the actual trash produced from 16 tons to under 3 tons now. Committee members all participate in extensive “See Something, Say Something” safety training in conjunction with the City of Minneapolis and the Department of Homeland Security. This year, for the 25th anniversary, we have a great lineup of new artists and old favorites for an amazing weekend of music and celebration.

Originally the event raised money for the structural restoration the church building. Decades of harsh winters took a terrible toll on the incredible structure. Years of deferred maintenance led to a desperate situation in the early 1990s when The Basilica’s condition nearly caused it to be closed. Through three major capital campaigns and funds raised at the Basilica Block Party, The Basilica building and campus have been preserved.
But our historic building and campus need constant care and upkeep. Today, proceeds from the event benefit The Basilica Landmark, a separate 501(c)(3) charitable organization which preserves, restores, and advances the historic Basilica of Saint Mary. A portion of the event proceeds supports the St. Vincent de Paul outreach ministries at The Basilica to assist our neighbors in need.

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Meet Holly Dockendorf, Special Events Coordinator

HOLLY began working at The Basilica in 2015 as an Events Intern and then as the Development Assistant. She became the Special Events Coordinator in 2017 and oversees the many committee members, volunteers, and consultants who work on the Basilica Block Party each year.

She graduated from Becker High School and the University of St. Thomas with a degree in Communications and Journalism and a minor in Recording Arts. At St. Thomas, Holly was Station Manager for the campus radio station KUST and had her own radio show. She managed the inaugural UST Sampler compilation CD project, showcasing student musicians and original songs, plus a release party with live performances. She also interned at First Avenue and was Volunteer Coordinator for Doomtree Zoo, a local rap collective music festival.

Not surprisingly, Holly likes to attend concerts and music festivals in her free time. She also follows various music journalism platforms, enjoys learning about music history, and collects vinyl records. Other interests include travel, reading, and spending time with her nieces and nephews. Holly says she is “an avid watcher of The West Wing, a tree Zoo, a local rap collective music festival.

What is the most challenging part of coordinating the event? The most rewarding?

There are so many different facets of the event, including logistics, food, beverage, bands, production, etc. My role connects these different areas together to make the event flow. I have the honor of working with a great committee, and the most rewarding part is watching it all come together.

What drew you to working at The Basilica and with the BBP?

The Basilica Block Party was the first music festival I ever attended and introduced me to one of my favorite bands. I started to learn more about the Minneapolis music scene and jumped at the chance to intern with the event. I was drawn to an event that creates such special live music moments for guests.

Please share a Basilica Block Party memory.

There are moments I look forward to each year. I love watching the attendees experience live music and the joy it brings them. It is great to help create a setting for those musical moments. A few of my favorite memories include watching Walk The Moon perform from backstage, watching sound checks, and having my favorite high school teachers on-site to experience the event in person.

At the time I was a stay-at-home mom with small children. I never imagined I would still be the finance chair 24 years later. It truly has been part of our family for as long as the kids can remember. The most rewarding part is working with great volunteers who work really hard to make everything go smoothly. The Basilica’s [senior citizen] Monday money counters also work at the event. I love that these volunteers, not in the event’s target age group, choose to come back each year to count money because they are so invested in the event.

— ANN DeTORRE, Finance Chair

I wanted to work with a church that had the gumption to throw a music festival. The concept was ahead of its time, and being done by a church made it even more unique. Going to the top of the MCTC parking ramp to watch the gates open and people run down the street to get their spot in front of the stage was always memorable. The double sell-out in 2012 was an all-time high. The music industry has gone through so many changes over the years, impacting how the bands make money. We had to be more strategic with the band line-up through the years.

— MEGHAN GUSTAFSON, Special Events Coordinator 2007-2017

When you look back at it now, it seems so “normal” for a parish to have a rock concert. But back when this started we had to convince everyone of what we were trying to do, as people looked at it as a parish picnic. We were trying to attract people and funds to The Basilica, so all ideas were on the table. We had a bonfire dream team, with Sue Hayes and Lynn Pirner anchoring the Special Events Committee and making everything so much fun. I remember Sue was always up early and Lynn up late, so we joked we had 24-hour event coverage. So many people, parishioners and non-parishioners alike, came together to make this happen. I couldn’t have imagined a better group of people to work with to make this happen.

— SUSAN ZARAMBO, Director of Special Events, 1994-1997

I got a call out of the blue from Sue Hayes about an idea they had from Old St. Pat’s in Chicago. The challenge was to put on an even better rock concert here at The Basilica. My most vivid memories are the few times we had weather emergencies. We had to get folks safely to cover, and then get the party rolling again after the weather passed. The most rewarding part is when we are all set up and welcome guests at 5:00pm on the Friday night. When we started with the event, I went on record stating this event would not significantly change the parish membership, but was I wrong on that! It has had a very significant positive impact on the parish growth over the last 24 years.

— TOM SULLIVAN, Event Executive Director

The sea of young people enjoying music on a Minnesota summer night in front of the historic church building was always a powerful image. Year after year, I was consistently impressed with the volunteers who give so much of their talents and time to make the event run smoothly. The level of professionalism involved in planning the event is impressive and imperative to its success. There is a vitality to the parish and community because of the Basilica Block Party.

— EMILY CARLSON HJELM, Special Events Coordinator 2001-2003 and Executive Director of The Basilica Landmark, 2006-2016