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Ecopalooza: Learning to live green locally

By SETH FREEDLAND/The Daily Journal



On a sun-soaked Saturday morning, a grinning, gray-haired woman pulled a microphone close and kicked off Ecopalooza with a fitting greeting.

"Welcome, brothers and sisters of Planet Earth," she proclaimed. A spiritual invocation of the four energies -- earth, air, fire and water -- followed and Ukiah's first Green Living Day was underway.

A smattering of guests migrated around Alex R. Thomas Plaza, inspecting organic foods and biodegradable products. Jody Johnston, a co-producer of the event and a local artist, stood in the Plaza's center unable to contain her joy. But even the excitement of celebrating "green living" in Ukiah was underwritten by a logical hope.

"We're in a time and an age when we need to look at alternatives for fuel, for food, to live more locally," she said. "People from all walks of life are beginning to see the necessity to live as a community, to support one another."

Assembled booths along the plaza's perimeter offered face-painting, psychic readings and wares from a handful of local businesses. As a sticky sweet odor emanated from a group of seated attendees, a grown man rotated a hula hoop around his waist nearby. A woman wearing a sunflower tiara introduced herself as Betty Biodiesel as she introduced the day's activities. The assembled wardrobe color scheme commingled tie-die swirls and flat earth tones.

Kristen Michel, another co-producer of the event, said she wrote her college thesis at New College in Santa Rosa on, essentially, constructing green-friendly community events. ("This is my thesis," she laughed, gesturing wildly.) Michel moved to Ukiah last year and sought out a like-minded soul on an online bulletin board. One response came from Larry Sheehy, Saturday's third co-producer, who said he hoped Ecopalooza would grow to complement the popular SolFest in Hopland. The difference Ecopalooza offers, he said, was in bringing eco-friendly philosophies directly to downtown Ukiah with the hope of making it more "mainstream."

"The world needs all the greening it can get," Sheehy said. "We hope to make this an annual celebration of the local."

Despite its civic focus, a worldwide audience had the opportunity to follow Ecopalooza on KMEC -- an ability provided in part by Jim Persky, who was downright elated to learn Ukiah offered a free plug for his new electric car.

Giddiness seemed to be contagious, as Madrone Matishak, 8, giggled watching her sister receive a painted sun on her cheek. When asked why she came to Ecopalooza, Matishak furrowed her brow. "Just to have fun," she said and scurried off.

Matishak's effervescence notwithstanding, there was some work to be done by the adults. City Councilmember Phil Baldwin, who orated the Green Living Day proclamation, urged guests to pay close attention to local politics. "We're in jeopardy," he said, warning against various development projects within city limits on the horizon.

An organic food producer sojourned all the way from Fairfax to take part in Ukiah's festival. Lydia Kindheart of Lydia's Loving Foods said she posted her booth in Thomas Plaza because Mendocino County has "a lot of good, earthy folks here."

Two such individuals would almost certainly be Vicki Prince and Susan Grelock, from the Ukiah Natural Foods Co-op. Agreeing that Ukiah was "one of the most progressive cities in the country," they noted with obvious pleasure the solid turn-out spilling over from the adjacent weekly Farmer's Market.

Representatives from one sponsor of Ecopalooza, the Solar Living Institute (hosts of SolFest), dispensed chocolate-chip cookies baked in a solar oven. Metallic plates cooked the dough at 250 degrees into perfect morsels -- exactly the solar power intern Rebecca Darley said the nonprofit SLI hoped to popularize. In spite of her concerns that there was not enough publicity for the event, Darley said she believed Ecopalooza would be "grander" in the near future.

Debatedly the most populous group in attendance was the California Conservation Corps, which brought 18 full-uniformed members from all over the state. Kosta Ivashu, a CCC supervisor, said he hoped Ecopalooza would not only educate the community on green-friendly lifestyles, but also teach his Corps members a thing or two. He said his team would recycle 99 percent of all garbage left at the Plaza, with only Styrofoam escaping their abilities.

Hours later, the event's population jumped when live music began. Diane Patterson, an acoustic guitarist from Santa Cruz, sparked a lively mood with tunes of equality and environmentalism. A small cluster of women danced barefoot, skirts flowing. A few feet away, still dressed in their stiff uniforms, a few Corps members heard the music, sat their trash-collection equipment on the ground and began to dance in buoyant twirls.

Seth Freedland can be reached at udjsf@pacific.net .