



The central tent served as the gathering spot for entertainment at Saturday's Juneteenth celebration. (Photo by Brad Robertson, SDN)

# Juneteenth celebration beats the heat

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A constant humming from generators filled the air in the field of the now-closed East Oktibbeha County High School near Crawford on Saturday.

Juneteenth—a mixture of June and nineteenth—might have passed, but its celebration is in full swing.

Jackie Ellis was the host of the event along with her group, the Education Association of East Oktibbeha County Schools, which hopes to improve the lives of students in the area and foster a community that looks out for each other.

This was the second year the association organized a Juneteenth celebration

at the high school, which was shuttered in 2015. Dozens braved the blistering heat to join in the jubilee.

For Ellis, who graduated from the building when it was named B.L. Moor High School, returning to the school is always special.

"This is a historic moment for us to be back on this campus," Ellis said. "It's a part of our philosophy to retain our history. We care so much about being here."

History was present in more than one way at the event. Juneteenth is observed on June 19 and is the oldest lasting holiday celebrating the end of slavery following the Civil War.

The date was chosen as it was the day news of emancipation reached

slaves in Texas, the edge of the defeated Confederacy, in 1865.

Saturday's celebration consisted of community members dancing, singing and cooking tailgate-style meals at their tents, surrounding a central hub in a rough circle. Different tents were managed by different graduating classes of Moor High School, going back as far as 1970.

In recognition of the communal theme, tents were asked to cook as much as they liked but to donate some to the central tent, where guests could come and enjoy a meal.

Ellis said she hoped one the schools could be repurposed as a community center, open to the public.



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"We want it to be public," Ellis said. "We don't see why we can't do it here when other counties are doing it."

Ellis said the association was trying to work with county officials to make her dream of a community center in the county.

Organizations in attendance included the District 5 Fire Department, the Oktibbeha County Sheriff's Office and the Oktibbeha County NAACP, which was hosting a voter registration drive.

Vice President of Oktibbeha County's NAACP Willie Earl Thomas Sr. said that while they were glad to give

people the opportunity to register to vote and potentially join the NAACP, the holiday was important.

"We've come to celebrate Juneteenth," Thomas said.

The NAACP was also present at last year's celebration.

Also in attendance was a cardiologist from Jackson, Dr. Ervin Fox, who made the drive to raise awareness about an upcoming study of heart disease in rural southern states.

The Risk Underlying Rural Areas Longitudinal (RURAL) Cohort Study will take place over the next six years and looks to examine why people in the rural South might be subject to shorter lives.

2 counties from Mississippi will participate in the study, Panola County and Oktibbeha County. Alabama will be the first state RURAL visits next year, with Mississippi, Louisiana and Kentucky following in years after.

Fox said community involvement was crucial to the success of the study. He stressed that the study was not just focused on African-Americans but rather it was open to everyone.

Juneteenth is recognized as a holiday by 46 states, including Mississippi, and the District of Columbia. A resolution passed through the U.S. Senate last year recognizing the holiday, but the House of Representatives has not yet approved it.