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# Team effort revitalizes Canal Fest of the Tonawandas

**ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY KAREN CARR KEEFE**

Senior Contributing Writer

Teamwork brought Canal Fest of the Tonawandas from hiatus to hurrahs this past Sunday. It was opening day of the eight-day festival with a ceremony on the Renaissance Bridge between its Twin Cities hosts, Tonawanda and North Tonawanda.

Canal Fest President Peter Chenier said this event was truly brought back by popular demand, a helping hand by state and local officials, and dogged determination of the organizers.

"Earlier in the year when we took the vote to put a hiatus on, to rebrand the event, it was a lot of contributing factors. It broke our heart," he said. "After that went public and the senator and the governor got involved, it did reenergize us. And this weekend has been great. The public has come up to us to thank us for putting the event back on – nonprofits being happy. It's great. It's worth what we go through."

In March, the burden of festival expenses and the dampening effect of COVID nearly caused organizers to skip 2023 and start rebranding for 2024. But lawmakers and local officials stepped in and gave a boost that resuscitated the event.

Among those on hand for the festival opening ceremonies were the volunteer team of Canal Fest, and local officials including North Tonawanda Mayor Austin Tylec, members of the Common Council, City Clerk-Treasurer Donna Braun, New York State Sen. Rob Ortt, 8th District Niagara County Legislator Rich Andres and representatives of Gov. Kathy Hochul and Assemblyman Bill Conrad.

Tylec spoke of his enthusiasm for the event.

"Both sides of the canal are excited to have Canal Fest back this week. Every year it seems to be a little bit different, but they're going to be full force," he said. "We have a lot to thank with the governor's office, Assemblyman Conrad and Sen. Ortt, too. There's a ton of support coming on the state end to make sure that this event was possible."

Nonprofits have benefited from the festival over its 39-year history



Food vendors draw in festivalgoers from the opening day through to its close on Sunday, July 23.

because it affords them the opportunity to increase visibility in the community and fundraise for their causes. Fire companies, the Boys & Girls Club, the Salvation Army, Lions Club – all have come to count on the foot traffic that can bring revenue to their tents along the canal each summer.

For many festivalgoers, it's the highlight of the summer, with food, rides, concerts, a parade, craft and car shows, and a gamut of summer delights.

The festival opened with "The Star-Spangled Banner," the "Pledge of Allegiance," heartfelt speeches, and a bang from a ceremonial cannon that punctuated the patriotic and historic nature of the Erie Canal.

Grand Islander Jim Driskel said he has been tasked with shooting off the Canal Fest cannon for 25 or 30 years.

"It officially starts the Canal Fest when the blast goes off," he said.

It also echoes the festivities when the Canal itself was opened in 1825 to a line of canon fire that repeated along each of the original 363 miles of the waterway between the Tonawandas and Albany.

Driskel said his brother made



Canal Fest pageant winners on the Renaissance Bridge for opening ceremonies are, from left, Zoey Zuckerman, teen princess; Kristin Blair, junior princess; Alyssa Juliano, Canal Fest co-queen; and Candice Strahin, Canal Fest co-queen.

the casting for the cannon.

Chenier has been involved in Canal Fest for almost 30 years and on the board of directors for 25. He knows the attraction of the festival and what works.

"We have music on both sides for the first time in the history of Canal Fest," he said. "We brought back the 'Diaper Derby' (where toddlers crawl to the finish line) because people wanted it back."

Chenier said the new ride vendor, Reithoffer Shows, was brought on board by the Carrousel Society of the Niagara Frontier.

"They're well-known throughout the country, and I'm excited for them to come in because it's some-

thing new and it's going to give a whole new feel to the event," he said.

Canal Fest closes with evening fireworks on Sunday, July 23. For a list of events, visit [www.canalfest.org](http://www.canalfest.org).

Chenier summed up what officials proclaimed in ceremonies on the bridge – that the festival is back and putting its best foot forward, thanks to the efforts of lots of community-minded volunteers, and help from state and local officials.

"It's amazing how this group works together as a team. There's no individuals here – it's us," he said.

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