Camden Jam celebrates culture and community

Shannon Eblen, @ShannonEblen 8:59 p.m. EDT September 19, 2015

This summer, Camden residents had the opportunity to enjoy outdoor yoga classes, drive-in movies, concerts and a youth musical workshop.

“When you think about Camden, you don’t think of those sort of activities,” said Anthony Perno, CEO of Cooper’s Ferry Partnership, an organization devoted to revitalizing Camden. “Those are things we take for granted in the suburbs.”

Those activities were the result of a push from the City of Camden and the Cooper’s Ferry Partnership to highlight culture, create a sense of pride in the city and get people out in public spaces. Through a grant, they created Connect the Lots, an initiative that asks residents what programs they want to see in the community, whether it is exercise classes or concerts, and then makes it happen.
To cap a successful summer of activities, the city will celebrate on Saturday, Sept. 19, with the Camden Jam, a daylong arts and music festival.

"The Camden Jam is the culmination of all of these things; it's the biggest thing we've done," said Meishka Mitchell, vice president of the Cooper's Ferry Partnership.

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Camden Jam brings together community to celebrate music and the arts

The Jam will have two concert stages and 14 bands. Performers will range from local talent, such as the Camden High marching band, to big acts like Harold Melvin's Blue Notes and the Cintron Band. There will be stilt walkers, cheerleaders, animals from the Philadelphia Zoo, environmental activities for kids and an interactive art gallery. Community organizations will set up booths, as will food vendors. School supplies will be distributed to the kids.

"Really, anything you can think of will be there," Mitchell said.
And while the event is free, even the local performers will be paid to showcase their talents. The program is supported by several sponsors, including ArtPlace America and the William Penn Foundation, not to mention the support from the city and Mayor Dana Redd’s office.

Gallery Eleven One has been an active supporter of the public programs. The gallery, owned by Ronja and William Butler, launched Camden’s Third Thursday Art Crawl. Ever since the inception of Connect the Lots, “we tried to help develop ways to work together,” Ronja said.
For the Camden Jam, the gallery is doing a large, public art project, the Camden ArtBox. The Butlers procured an old shipping container and are turning it into a gallery space to showcase local artists, primarily local high school art students. William Butler, an artist, will do a mural on one 40-foot-long side of the container, while the other side will have a mural created during the event, by the community.

“We wanted a venue for the youth of the city to showcase their art,” Ronja Butler said. The Butlers intend to save the ArtBox and hope to find a permanent home for it where it can continue as an interactive gallery space.

“It’s fun to be a part of these things when it’s going to have a big impact,” Ronja Butler said. “We are feeling really blessed that we are able to be a part of this.”
The Camden Jam will be held in Roosevelt Plaza. Other Connect the Lots events over the past two summers have been held in empty lots around the city, particularly North Camden, as the program, Mitchell said, is “about vacant and underutilized spaces.” It focuses on cleaning up and promoting the spaces as a place to provide positive, safe public events within neighborhoods.

Perno said he thinks the eventual goal is to build housing on the empty lots, “but to create housing opportunities, you have to address the social fabric of the neighborhood.”

Both Mitchell and Perno said residents have been active participants in the programming. They communicate what activities they would like to see in their neighborhood, then work with Connect the Lots to make those events happen. For instance, the youth wanted a skate park in 2014, and this year, in the same space, they requested a miniature golf course. Both pop-ups were a hit.

The turnout has exceeded expectations, bringing a few thousand people to the bigger events, such as the Camden Night Garden in the spring. Organizers expect the Camden Jam to attract 2,000 to 3,000 guests.

The event has been advertised on radio, in newspapers and on social media, and fliers have been distributed widely in the area, but organizers said the success of past events is key to turnout. Although the Night Garden in April was a big success, Perno said, “having people show up is one thing … people loved it so much they wanted to see it happen again.”

That enthusiasm also was apparent at the Summer Youth Musical Theater Workshop, directed by Reg E. Gaines of the Broadway hit “Bring in Da Noise, Bring in Da Funk.” At the end of the workshop, the students
put on a 20-minute performance showcasing their talents and hard work.

“The audience not only asked them for an encore,” Mitchell said, “they asked them to perform it all over again.”

“When we have these things,” Mitchell continued, “there are residents who come out and say, ‘This doesn’t happen here.’” They start to believe, she said, that they are not deserving of those events and activities.

And that is what Connect the Lots is meant to change.

Shannon Eblen: SEblen@gannett.com; (856) 486-2475If you goCamden Jam: Camden Arts and Music FestivalRoosevelt Plaza Park520 Market St.12 p.m. to 8 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 19Free to enter, food and drink for purchaseFor more information, call (856) 757-9154 or visit www.connectthelotscamden.com 177 CONNECT