

## Event brings out Caribbean flavor

*Richmonders learn about region's history and its many cultures*

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Rebecca Seo found what she imagined of the Caribbean islands, except the beaches.

"I think the food, music and crafts are good," she said.

While eating, the Chesterfield County resident danced to traditional calypso music with her two children, and nephews and nieces.

The beaches may have been missing, but Seo noted a hot, sweltering sun peeking out of the clouds during yesterday's Carib Fest, held at the Kanawha Plaza at Eighth and Canal streets in Richmond.

Carib Fest started three years ago as a way not only to teach about the islands' beaches, but also about the people, their ideas and the multiethnic cultures shaped by Europeans and African slaves in the early days of colonization.

Organizers brought in art, crafts, food, vendors and music to do just that. Ambassadors of Caribbean countries represented the cultures.

"There is a very rich ancestral longing for nurturing our culture," said Beryl Walters-Riley, founder and executive director of the Virginia Jamaica Education Exchange Foundation.

"Our culture is deep. It's rich. It's extraordinarily important."

Beyond preserving and expanding the heritage, Walters-Riley said, they want to expand international trade and education about the Caribbean.

Trinidad native Jacqueline T. McDonnough, a Virginia Commonwealth University professor and volunteer coordinator for the event, couldn't resist shaking her body to the reggae music.

It is at the Carib Fest that she realized how many Caribbean immigrants live in the Richmond area, she said. People who attend have a real experience, McDonnough said.

"They are taking a trip to the Caribbean without having to leave Richmond."

Nirva Vernet, who teaches at Richmond public schools and VCU and is from Haiti, taught people through art and apparel. Dressed in what she called African slave dress, she talked about the history of Haiti.

Haiti is not the only island to struggle with poverty and is very multicultural, she said.

"We need to disprove many misconceptions about the islands of the Caribbean, especially Haiti," she said.

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