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## La Grande Fête was about celebrating a culture through art

By Julia Fairclough

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Judith Laguerre talks about traditional Haitian cooking.

Somerville has a large Haitian community, so there should be a Haitian festival here and I'm glad it's happening, said Soul Brown, as she nodded to frenetic beat of Watch Out!, a local Haitian Kompa band, on Sunday afternoon.

"A lot of people came out to represent from the Red and Blue," she said, referring to the Haitian flag colors. "It's wonderful to be sharing ideas and culture."

Brown was among over 150 people who met at Union Square Plaza for La Grande Fête: A Celebration of Haitian Culture, sponsored by the Somerville Arts Council as part of its ArtsUnion project series, and in conjunction with the Haitian Coalition.

The event included Haitian music and dance, art, literature readings, a documentary viewing, authentic Haitian cuisine catered by local restaurants and a Haitian food table lined with traditional ingredients used in Creole cooking.



Brown is the director of Books of Hope, an organization at the Mystic Learning Center that creates opportunities for self-expression and advocacy through creative writing for young people. Teenagers like Jessica Jean-Louis, 18, who presided over the Books of Hope table at the festival, get together on Thursday nights to write. A group of young Haitian writers from Books of Hope read their work from the stage on Sunday night.

"It's good for the Haitian community to come out and to celebrate our shared culture," Jean-Louis said. Jean-Louis never used to take her writing very seriously, until she joined the group. Working with others encouraged her to improve upon her writing and appreciate the skill. After three years being in the program and participating in public readings, she doesn't get nervous anymore. It's all about communicating ideas.

Over 150 people who met at Union Square Plaza for La Grande Fête: A Celebration of Haitian Culture, sponsored by the Somerville Arts Council as part of its ArtsUnion project series, and in conjunction with the Haitian Coalition. ~Photos by Julia Fairclough

Brown added that it was wonderful to see the half dozen Haitian teens come to the event. It's important for them to celebrate their heritage since they tend to assimilate quickly and adopt American traditions, more so than their parents.

Carey Dardompre, a local artist, liked that the event was family oriented and less raucous than some ethnic festivals around town. It was also nice to see familiar faces in the square, as he used to have a

gallery down the road in Cambridge.

"It's great to see people express themselves through singing, drumming, writing and painting," said Jean Brice, who sat at a Haitian paintings table. "Tonight we celebrate our culture through art."

Marie Louise Jean-Baptiste, who moved to the United States from Haiti in 1982 and who teaches Haitian cooking classes, appreciated the Haitian food table. Judith Laguerre, who volunteered to teach people about Haitian cooking, displayed the traditional Haitian ingredients that one will find in just about any dish: hot peppers, sweet bell peppers, garlic, shallots, chives and parsley. Laguerre also displayed Haitian specialties, like djon-djon mushrooms and malanga and name roots.

Jean-Baptiste looked over the table approvingly, relating to the importance of Laguerre's traditional method of making everything painstakingly from scratch.

"An event like this is good for Haitian pride," she said. "This is our culture."

