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Ageless revelers still turn heads at Key West's Fantasy Fest

BY CAMMY CLARK
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KEY WEST -- If you think Key West's annual 10-day drunken party where fantasies come to life and body paint passes for clothing is just for the young, think again.

During Fantasy Fest, grandparent baby boomers in togas -- and leather, chain and lace numbers that leave little to the imagination -- keep up with the iGeneration.

“Just because you've been around longer, doesn't mean you can't still enjoy life,” said Judi Bradford, the white-haired organizer of the provocative Fantasy Fest parade. “Old people here are not as old as counterparts elsewhere. We have found



Ponce de Leon's fountain of youth."

Fantasy Fest is celebrating its 30th anniversary this week with the theme “Villains, Vixens and Vampires.” Just as it did during humble beginnings in 1979, the debauchery draws people of all ages. Even the homemade bikini contest at the Hog's Breath Saloon attracts senior citizens.

“One year, a woman who definitely owned an AARP card wore cobwebs -- and that was it,” said Art Levin, the bar's manager. “She didn't get heckled. Nobody gets heckled.”

Beautiful young men and women with model bodies aren't the only ones asked to pose for pictures and videos. Dames in their 60s and beyond, gents that many would say are past their prime -- all are asked to strut their stuff while strangers document the moment via video to show people back home.

Suzie Walsh, a 64-year-old retired German and preschool teacher from Marco Island, obliged several requests. Her breasts and stomach were body-painted to complete her costume as Minnie Mouse.

"She's a virgin body painter," chimed in her friend, fellow retiree Cindy Crane, dressed as a Florida Gators cheerleader.

"My kids don't want to know," added Walsh, who has four children in their 30s and five grandchildren. "I guess they'll find out now."

Louise Johnson, a 54-year-old pharmaceutical consultant from a San Francisco suburb, strolled rowdy Duval Street in a see-through number that turned heads.

Johnson said she is comfortable flaunting what she has after 14 years of attending the radical Burning Man festival in a Nevada desert and going topless at Caribbean island beaches.

BARING HER CHEST

But baring her chest is not something she would have done in her younger years. "Oh, God, no," Johnson said. "I was a good Catholic girl."

Juango the Artist has been body-painting Fantasy Fest revelers for the past four years. He said about 65 percent of his clients are 50 or older.

"They don't care if their body is sagging; they don't care what others think anymore," he said. "It's all about having fun. Like one woman who had to be close to 70 -- she wanted SpongeBob [in body paint.]"

Ashley Hoover, co-director of Fantasy Fest, said: "It makes sense that older people come down. That's the point of Fantasy Fest. If you are a lawyer, and have to be conservative most of the time because you work on Wall Street, you can come down here, put on a mask and be free. You can be whoever you want to be for 10 days."

But, Hoover noted, organizers have spent many advertising dollars going after the 20- and 30-something market. That's one reason they chose three-time Playboy cover model Bridget Marquadt as grand marshal for Saturday night's parade.

"We picked her because we wanted to attract a younger group of people," Hoover said. "We need to keep revamping."

But the festival doesn't need to advertise to "Fantasy Fest frequent flyers," who circle the last week of October in their calendars every year. They are the addicted, coming back year after year despite passing milestone birthdays. At the Hanging Tree Bar, a group in their 60s, all wearing matching crab hats, downed cocktails. They met at the 1993 Fantasy Fest and return every year for another round.

"Don't call us old," said Renny Kline, 65, of Tampa. "Old is when you are back home on the couch or in a nursing home. We are mature. Well, maybe not mature. We just are not old."

CRUISING DUVAL

This year, Bob Gordon's experience as a retired probation officer in Daytona Beach came in handy when Donnie Kline was mouthing off to a police officer for playing his ``aoooga horn" too loudly while cruising Duval Street in a decorated golf cart.

``That's Donnie, the craziest of all of us," said his wife, Renny.

Donnie, dressed in a red teddy with fake boobs and the red crab hat, dropped his drawers to reveal a red pouch covering his privates. He reached into the pouch and emptied the contents: wallet with ID, money wad, camera and two sets of keys.

``Want to help me put them back in?" Kline asked as his wife rolled her eyes.

Across the street, Suzie Walsh, Cindy Crane and their husbands dressed in traditional Mexican ponchos and sombreros were getting ready to return to their hotel rooms for a quick change into red costumes for the evening's red party. On Friday night, all four planned a group body-painting session.

``Nobody in Marco Island has more fun than the four of us," said Dave Walsh, 63, who retired from Ford Motor Co.

Levin, of Hog's Breath Saloon, has been in Key West 22 years and said many revelers have come full cycle: ``They began coming as spring breakers, graduated to parents pushing baby strollers and now that their kids are gone, they come back to have even more fun."



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PoetC7 wrote on 10/30/2009 01:12:49 PM:

I was living in Key West when they presented Fantasy Fest for the first time. It was intended to revive the local economy, so it's been successful in that regard. Funny, though, how a nude woman, spray painted silver from head to toe and riding as a hood ornament on a hearse in the first parade provoked them to create a "no nudity" rule the second year. Now, the tourists are spray painting their nude bodies and no one cares. My, how times have changed!

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mim wrote on 10/30/2009 10:28:47 AM:

Seems, that everyone has a different idea of beauty. People turn their heads, but due to shock. Bally or one of the gyms should attend this festival and provide free passes.

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lopezosc wrote on 10/30/2009 09:55:32 AM:

eeeeee

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