

The Festival, Culturally Speaking

Bruce Babbitt
Secretary of the Interior

The National Mall in Washington, D.C., is a symbolic center of our country. Framed by monuments to Presidents Washington and Lincoln and their singular accomplishments, the Mall begins at the U.S. Capitol, where our participatory democracy is constantly renewed. Bordered by the Smithsonian's national museums, which enshrine our knowledge of history, culture, science, and the arts, the Mall is home to our national civic rites – presidential inaugurations, Independence Day festivities, and victory celebrations. The Mall is also our national town square, where generations of Americans have gathered to speak to each other, to represent themselves and their concerns to their fellow citizens.

On the Mall since 1967, the Festival of American Folklife has been a living museum of grassroots culture, presenting to the public a great diversity of people from more than 50 nations, every state and region of the United States, scores of ethnic groups, more than 100 Native American groups, and numerous occupational and cultural communities. Artists, musicians, craftspeople, cooks, storytellers, workers, and other tradition bearers have brought their wisdom, knowledge, art, and skill to the Mall and have shared it with Festival visitors.

We live in an era in which culture becomes increasingly globalized. Information, products, and creative ideas rapidly traverse the planet, reaching its farthest corners. The prospects for unity and accord among humankind based upon shared knowledge and experience have, perhaps, never been greater. At the same time, people here and abroad continue to draw upon their local, regional, community, and grassroots traditions for a needed sense of cultural identity.

Unfortunately, we hear daily of examples where

differences in language, religion, race, and culture also guide people's acts of anger and destruction. These differences need not be a source of conflict. They can be a source of strength and creativity, as they often have been in our own national experience. The world must learn to live with diversity, and to establish ways in which cultural differences can be understood, appreciated, and, indeed, used for the wider benefit of all.

Exhibitions, educational programs, and discussion forums are important activities nurturing public understanding of cultural diversity. The Festival has been a leader in this effort. It is a museum without walls, where people from around the country and the world can speak directly with others about their own history, their own culture, and their own lives. The dialogue created at the Festival, in which cultural traditions can be respectfully presented, discussed, and even passed along, is vital to our continued civic health. Sometimes this dialogue is celebratory, sometimes sobering. But to appreciate its importance, one need only look around the globe to places where cultural conversations have stopped and where they have been replaced by intolerance, abuse of human rights, and violence.

For some 20 years, the Department of the Interior, through the National Park Service and with the cooperation of its other bureaus, has been a proud partner in the Festival, sharing a commitment to broad-based cultural education. We continually engage the American public in every state and territory through our national parks, historical sites, monuments, and memorials. Our work, and our partnership with the Smithsonian and with many others, help Americans understand their cultural heritage and, we genuinely hope, each other.