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# VCU/Monroe Park Fall Festival: Celebrating the Heart of VCU

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## **VCU/Monroe Park Fall Festival: Celebrating the Heart of VCU**

### **Team Members**

Gail Bartee, Bryan Brown, Clare Greene, Edward Howard, Christine Isaacs, Ronald Miller, Mike O'Berry, Patty Strong.

### **Sponsor**

John Duval

### **Project Description**

The “VCU/Monroe Park Fall Festival” seeks to create a unifying comprehensive fall festival tradition for *both* VCU campuses. Our proposal responds to the VCU2020 strategic plan by creating a festival designed to highlight VCU/community partnerships and promote “One VCU”. Theme V of the strategic plan emphasizes “maintain[ing] VCU as a model for university-community partnerships” and “develop[ing] collaborations between businesses, government agencies, [and] communities ...”. Individual units across the university will respond to these initiatives in countless ways, but unless we promote our community partnerships in a unified, centrally located, vibrant and celebratory way, much of what we do will remain invisible to our larger audience.

The festival would emphasize VCU programs and accomplishments as well as its commitment to our surrounding community. At the same time, the festival would celebrate the rich and diverse history of both Monroe Park and VCU.

As an urban and geographically disparate university, we believe VCU needs an annual celebratory event to help establish tradition, positive unity and connection among students, faculty, staff, and the community. Rich in history but vastly under-utilized, Monroe Park provides a meaningful venue for this event where students, staff, faculty and community members could come together to showcase their unique historical pasts and current contributions to VCU and the surrounding areas.

### **Project Goals**

Our team quickly identified four principle goals for the festival, all of which hold equal importance.

The festival will help:

- recognize VCU’s past, present, and future,
- reestablish Monroe Park as a community landmark,
- promote VCU’s partnership with the Richmond community,
- highlight the connections between the Monroe Park and MCV campus by

celebrating “One VCU”.

### **Project Strategies**

Encourage collaboration and participation. We need the participation of:

- Schools across both campuses,
- Bordering neighborhoods,
- Bordering businesses and non-profit organizations.

Increase student engagement.

- Involve students in the planning and implementation process,
- Develop interdisciplinary activities designed to highlight student talent,
- Organize student-led community projects in conjunction with the festival (community clean – up, for instance).

Emphasize both VCU and Monroe Park history

- Design permanent display features to highlight prominent university and park history,
- Utilize a late 19<sup>th</sup> Century/Early 20<sup>th</sup> century theme to emphasize history.

### **Action Steps**

Our team saw a number of important actions to consider in order for implementation of these strategies.

- Student organizations must be central to the planning and implementation process,
- Event should include community service component with special health and educational “fair” services provided,
- Specific programs from across the university should oversee the construction of booths highlighting accomplishments,
- Bordering neighborhoods should construct displays or have booths highlighting their own histories and documenting VCU/community partnerships,
- Businesses and non-profit organizations should be given the opportunity to participate in a variety of ways,
- Entertainment features should be emphasized to increase the draw of the event.
- Planners must work toward an atmosphere of fun and celebration, providing both entertainment and food,

- Event would be planned around a late 19<sup>th</sup> century/early 20<sup>th</sup> century theme to highlight history of the park, including displays with historical anecdotes and photographs.

### **Process Observations**

We had a wonderful group of kind, like-minded folk. This made pulling the project together doable and bearable despite tremendous schedule and time constraints. We all emphasized that the lack of time proved our biggest obstacle; however, the lack of time forced faster trust relationships and better cooperation. Our group was honest with each other from the beginning and not intimidated by any one member "taking charge."

We all felt some disappointment and a lack of motivation upon learning of the recent 1st annual Fall Festival after our project was already well underway. Eventually, though, we saw that this event proved and reinforced the need for such a celebration. Our own vision, with its community, history and 'one VCU' angle, is on a grander and much deeper scale, so our own plans can only improve the current Fall Fest.

We were a rare group of good listeners. No one felt left out or stifled. We had no anger, tension, or unwillingness to actively participate. We enjoyed our time together and felt we did our best work together as a group. Unfortunately, our time together was sorely limited. Despite being given "group time" during leadership sessions, the afternoon hours were not good for us as a group. We would have benefited from morning time together.

Throughout the process, we learned the value of trust, communication, and cooperation. We learned to take advantage of individual talents, experiences, and connections to pull the project together.

OK, and lastly, we just really like each other.

### **Recommendations**

We recommend that the current Fall Fest implementation team incorporate part or all of our plan into the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the event. The VCU Fall Fest has already brought together Family Weekend, The Grace Street Festival, Open House, faculty mini-lectures, and annual alumni events yet this embraces *only a fraction* of the VCU community. It's a good start. At the same time, however, it would be more inclusive to invite the participation of the MCV Campus and neighboring communities.

### **Conclusion**

VCU and the surrounding community would benefit greatly from an inclusive, comprehensive annual festival centered in Monroe Park. A celebratory event such as this would secure the park as the true 'heart' of the Monroe Park campus. In fact, the park needs this sort of investment in order to reclaim its historical stature and leave behind the

non-descript and often unsavory position it now holds. Likewise, VCU will benefit from having Monroe Park as an anchor. Reviving and enlivening the park with an annual festival will go a long way toward providing VCU with the emotional and visual center, the “heart” it deserves.