

Durham Mardi Gras brings a taste of New Orleans

Despite numbing temperature, city's parade doubles in size in its fourth year



Blaise Kielar, music director of the Bulltown Strutters, gets passionate as he helps the band play Mardi Gras classics. (Staff photo by Zoe Schaver)

By Zoe Schaver
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Sally Grant spent three years of her life in New Orleans. So when she heard Durham musicians and artists held their own raucous downtown Mardi Gras parade each year on Fat Tuesday, she knew instantly she had to get involved.

The organization known as Durham Mardi Gras was founded four years ago by a Durham-based, New Orleans-style parade and party band called the Bulltown Strutters.

The organization obtained the legal permits to finally have its parade and festival right in the midst of the streets of Durham, along North Corcoran and West Geer Streets as well as Rigsbee Avenue.

The March 4 parade stretched all the way to Motorco Music Hall, where the night featured several bands, a drag show and a dozen food trucks.

The crowd was double the size of last year's crowd, said Chauncey Taylor, a lead vocalist in the Bulltown Strutters.

Durham Mardi Gras originated when the Strutters began playing music in a bar in downtown Durham, Taylor said.

This is the first year Sally Grant actually became part of a krewé in Durham Mardi Gras.

Krewés are essentially social groups that get together during Mardi Gras to throw parties and parades.

One day, when Grant was playing with her daughter at a local playground, she met Katy Barron, who started the Society of the Sacred Bull, an organization made up mostly of local Durhamites from the Trinity Park area who have small children in tow.

It was perfect for Grant.

"In New Orleans, being in a krewé is a really big deal. It's a really big social honor," Grant said.

Barron also lived in New Orleans for a brief period and experienced the one-of-a-kind New Orleans Mardi Gras.

That time spent in New Orleans inspired Barron and her husband to found the Society of the Sacred Bull last year.

"We are very ragtag. Just showing up is the goal right now," Barron said. "Next year we hope to have floats and a theme."

A number of other krewés populated the parade, including the Krewé du Boeuf Gras and the League of the Tutu.

"I figured, I can be a part of the party or stay awake all night 'til the noise goes down," said Bambi Riggsbee, who joined the League of the Tutu because women in her neighborhood pulled a group together and got her involved.

"We've been having tutu-making parties for weeks. They're a lot of silliness and alcohol. And carbs — the real forbidden substance."

J.J. Kelley, who came from England to Durham, also ended up involved in the League of the Tutu, spending the day sporting her own fluffy pink tulle around her waist.

"I came to visit my friend and she said, 'How would you like to be involved with this?' And I said, 'This is just an excuse to put me in a tutu,'" she said jokingly.

A shared theme among attendees of Durham Mardi Gras was that many had seen the New Orleans Mardi Gras festivities first-hand, and were eager to create something similar in Durham.

"This is the closest thing to it," said Tom Wolf, a Durham resident who lived in New Orleans for 30 years. "It's not quite the same as New Orleans, but it's delightful."

Blaise Kielar,

one of the original members of the Bulltown Strutters and its current music director, said Durham Mardi Gras is possible because of Durham's artistic character and creative drive.

"Durham brings a real gritty, interesting, creative, diverse aesthetic," he said.

"We decided we'd make this into a citywide party, and by God, we've taken it up several notches this year," Kielar said. "Just in the amount of people who've shown up in sub-freezing weather."

DURHAM MARDI GRAS KREWES

Krewé de Hoop

Krewé du Bull

Krewé de Castor

Krewé du Boeuf Gras

Society of the Sacred Bull

League of the Tutu