

A Brief History of the Solano Avenue Stroll

By Allen Cain, on behalf of the Solano Avenue Association.

Edited by the 2009/10 Board of Directors. (July 07. 2009)

The Solano Avenue Stroll was organized in 1974 as a 'thank-you' party for customers by the Thousand Oaks Merchant Association led by Lisa Burnham and Ira Klein. The Stroll took place on the very west end of Solano Avenue in Berkeley as a sidewalk sale on a Friday evening. Perhaps about a hundred people came together in the early days to create and eventually expand the sidewalk event, including Carl Brodsky, Emmett Eiland, Sue Johnson and later, Dolly Walker, Rosemary Burns and Kathy Lee. Membership dues then: \$35.00.

While the Avenue eventually closed to traffic by the 1980s, the Solano Stroll was still a neighborhood event drawing small crowds, now on a Sunday afternoon. The event had lost its direction. It now featured beer, loud free rock bands and mostly closed shops. The Stroll was about to be discontinued by the late 1980s when new leadership emerged to take the Stroll in a different direction. The Solano Avenue Association achieved its non-profit status in 1983.

Robert Cheasty is credited with leading the Solano Avenue Stroll and the Association in this new direction, creating the Association and the Stroll as we know them today. The year before he took over as President of the Solano Avenue Association, the Stroll drew about 15,000 people and only about half of the Avenue was closed. Alcohol related disturbances and arrests were not uncommon. Robert created a five-year plan to professionalize the Association and write a new tone and direction for the Stroll. An Executive Director was hired and major changes were implemented to the Stroll: eliminating alcohol sales, vastly improving the entertainment, encouraging artists' participation, greater engagement with the Cities of Berkeley and Albany, greater merchant participation and the controversial step of bringing in outside booths, vendors and community groups to the Stroll. Over the five years the stroll grew to about almost 200,000. It has continued to increase to its current size of about 300,000.

Within a couple of years, in 1989, Lisa Bullwinkel joined as Executive Director (the third one in as many years). As an artist and event producer herself, Lisa fully embraced and encouraged the new direction. She skillfully directed the changes and improvements and brought a greater awareness of the value of art and performance to the events. She escalated the recruitment of the highest quality performers and of artisans for the booths. Over the next sixteen years Lisa also increased the SAA's involvement with other business associations, community organizations and governmental entities to enhance communications and the influence of SAA in the region.

This was a period of growth with expected growing pains. The Stroll became increasingly more expensive to produce, and not enough merchants participated. "It was still difficult to create the feel of a street festival when there were dead pockets with no activity up and down the Avenue" recalled Robert Cheasty. "We had to push the merchants to participate, to keep their stores open on the day of the Stroll. Eventually we convinced the Board to allow outside vendor booths and organizations to fill the empty spots." With only about half of the merchants staying open on Stroll day, the Association finally brought in outside vendors under the condition that nothing would compete with the existing merchant group and that they be vetted for quality.

This bolstered the income of the Stroll (offsetting the loss from eliminating alcohol sales). Equally important, the outside vendors (and additional high quality entertainers) solved the problem of dead spaces along the Avenue – the Stroll buzzed from top to bottom. The Stroll finally paying for itself.

Fast forward: Today the Stroll draws 300,000 people over the course of the day. It takes about 600 staff hours to produce the event, plus hundreds of additional hours of volunteer time. The event expenses exceed \$50,000. It is one of four events in the entire United States and Canada that operates in two separate municipalities simultaneously.

The Solano Avenue Stroll hosts about 75 performing groups, 150 arts and crafts booths, 150 non-profit organizations, and almost 50 food booths. The non-profit organizations include libraries, scout troops, humane societies, and more. There is a “green zone” for environmental organizations, a strong presence of faith booths and most elected officials in the area come and stay to talk with friends and constituents. All of these groups rely heavily on the exposure the Solano Avenue Stroll provides and consider it a key annual activity in marketing themselves. Ninety-two percent of them attend repeatedly each year.

In the year 2000, the Solano Avenue Stroll became an official “Local Legacy,” installed into the United States Library of Congress with the help of Congresswoman Barbara Lee. The Solano Avenue Stroll “celebrates America's rich diverse culture.”

This Stroll is family friendly – safe, “smoke-free” with no alcohol sales, and a “Kids Town” with lots for little ones to do. There are very few police incidents the day of the event, mostly lost children. The street is virtually spotless the following Monday, and “restored” within 48 hours.

The Stroll draws locals and “out-of-towners”. On the east end, the Stroll is referred to as “Berkeley’s Reunion” and on the west end much of Albany turns out. Both ends are united by the festive Parade that starts at the top of the street with dancers, bands, floats and kids kicking off the Stroll. Solano Avenue merchants benefit from the exposure to 300,000 potential customers who see Solano’s products and services. While not everyone sees an immediate boost in sales that day, ripples from the event continue for months. (Source: Office of Economic Development, City of Berkeley.)

The SAA takes meticulous efforts in producing the Stroll. The membership pays to produce it and the money pulled in from the Stroll is put to events that benefit Solano Avenue and the surrounding community throughout the rest of the year. We require little support from either the City of Albany or the City of Berkeley to sustain ourselves as an organization.

The Solano Avenue Association Board of Directors is comprised of fifteen volunteers who have business or professional interests on Solano Avenue (or within one block of it). They meet (at least) every other Tuesday and work continuously to make Solano a street that serves its community. Solano Avenues is the antidote to sprawl – it brings a sense of vitality to the urban core. The Solano Stroll celebrates that vitality.

Despite its magnitude, 300,000 people leave the Solano Stroll with a smile on their face at the end of the day. They have had another good day -- and they know the Solano Avenue Stroll is an event that gives back to the community.