

# Chattanooga Unite: A Tribute on the River

By Chip Baker, CFEE



Summertime in Chattanooga, Tennessee is usually hot, with average days ranging somewhere between 90 and 100 degrees, and a pretty fair amount of humidity. On July 16, 2015, it was one of those typical hot and humid days. And it was about to get hotter.

Each year of its 34 year history, the 8 day Riverbend Festival is held in June. The festival is located in downtown Chattanooga, with the beautiful Tennessee River as its backdrop. Chattanooga is a mid-sized community

located in Southeastern Tennessee and is about a 2 hour drive north of Atlanta, Georgia. Chattanooga, like so many other towns in the United States, is full of charm, magnificent scenery, and a great place to raise a family. It is not a place you would expect to find domestic terrorism.

After the festival in June, our staff takes some time off to unwind, celebrate the 4th of July, and get ready for our next series of events, which begin in the latter part of July.

## The Tragedy

During the Riverbend Festival this year, the mother of a staff member was in ill health and had been sick for a few months. At one point, during the festival, it appeared that she had taken a turn for the worse. But, she fought hard and hung on until her death on Monday, July 13. She was a part of our extended family and she had a beautiful service that our entire staff attended on Thursday, July 16. The service lasted about 45 minutes and afterwards we got in our

cars and headed to the Chattanooga National Cemetery for the burial.

As we followed the police in the funeral procession, we went through many side streets and finally took a bridge across the Tennessee River. It was just on the other side of the bridge where we were to exit onto a street called Amnicola Highway. It was here that the tragedy struck.

Little did we know, just before we crossed the bridge, a gunman was in the vicinity of our exit. Ten minutes prior to him being there, he had driven by an Armed Forces Recruiting Center, about 10 miles away and opened fire. One Marine had a superficial wound but, fortunately, there were no other injuries. But now, he was at the Naval Operations Support Center on Amnicola Highway. He went on a machine gun shooting rampage that killed 4 Marines and mortally wounded a Navy petty officer.

Right in the middle of all this was our funeral procession. As we exited onto Amnicola Highway, to our right about 100 yards away, was a police car with 4 officers behind it and guns were drawn. The only way out for us was to continue down the ramp onto Amnicola Highway and pull a U-turn, which we did. As we made the turn, about 40 yards on the right, the officers had begun to fire into a wooded area. We couldn't see what their target was, but it was loud, rapid fire.

We then made our way to the Chattanooga National Cemetery. Of course, our police escort was gone and it was every person for him or herself! When we arrived at the cemetery, we had no idea what we had just experienced. The funeral had turned into a mysterious experience. After the funeral, we said a prayer for the certain shooting victims, and returned to work.

The feeling of July 16 was similar to what we all felt on September 11. Our airspace was closed down and rumors were rampant around town. Even the blood bank (called Blood Assurance) was on the radio asking for blood. Many felt compelled to give and did. That night, local and national television networks covered the tragic events of the day.

### The Plan

By the next day, our staff was already trying to figure out how to help. We are in the event business and we do events to help our community, therefore, we needed to do an event. But, what kind of event should we do? This kind of thing is not supposed to happen here so what is the right event to plan?

In the spring of every year, we do a military based event at a vintage baseball stadium where Babe Ruth once played. The venue holds about 5,000 to 6,000 people. It would be easy and quick to

do something there. We checked with our local country radio station to see if they wanted to partner and they did.

Then, like a mushrooming cloud, the event grew. Why not move it to the 20,000 person university stadium. What about the weather? Maybe we should move it to an indoor venue that holds 10,000 people. Or we could do it in a huge field which is located right next to where the shootings occurred. The venue changed almost daily. The final venue selected was where we produce and operate our annual Riverbend Festival, right in the heart of our downtown, with room for 70,000 people plus! Our target date was September 16, 2 months to the day after the tragedy of July 16.

### Kindness

It took about a week to narrow our options to the Riverbend Festival site. Next was the creation of a budget, with no known source of revenue quickly followed by the question, how are we going to coordinate and pull off this herculean task in a relatively short time?

Right off the bat, country music star, Brantley Gilbert, offered his services, free of charge. One after another, people would offer their goods or services, at no cost. From time to time we have occasionally seen the vicious underbelly of humanity but this was not the case as everyone was doing anything and everything they could to help. An example is that our main stage for Riverbend is a three story barge. It had to be transported, by tug, from 30 miles away and then back. This was expensive yet free. Our labor, portapotties, electrical work, staging, lights, sound, video, hotel rooms etc. all were donated by the providers.

### Organization

An oversight committee was created with the Mayor's office. A name was created, "Chattanooga Unite, A Tribute on the River." Many artists offered to help such as Harry Connick, Jr., Trace Adkins, and Colt Ford. Chattanooga's native son and prolific actor, Samuel L. Jackson, agreed to be our emcee. Transportation had to be arranged with private jets, ground transportation, nearly 200 room nights, and catering for over 1500 people. All free.

A difficult task, but one that had to be made was asking the families of the fallen if they would attend. They had been through so much and this event was within 2 months of when they had lost their loved ones. They graciously agreed to be our guests. They understood that this event was not just about their healing but also the healing of our community.

### The Event

One of our committee members was a retired Navy Lieutenant Commander. He invited the Navy Blue Angels to do a flyover on their way from Pensacola, Florida to Naval Air Station Oceana, Virginia Beach, Virginia. They did the flyover, complete with the missing man formation. It was spectacular.

Before we started the concert, the Veteran's Association organized a parade, similar to the one they do every year for the Armed Forces Day Parade, the longest running parade of its type in the United States. The Chattanooga Unite parade was larger than any previous parades, was very well attended by our community and beyond, and finished on the concert site. Once the parade was completed, the concert began. Once the concert was completed, a large fireworks show was the finale.

Though the parade and shows were free, we did take a break in the middle of the event to pass around 120/ 5 gallon buckets with circular holes cut in the top. These were passed through the crowd by many different churches, just like passing the plate at church on Sunday. People gave whatever offering they wanted. The National Guard assisted the process which added a level of security as well as meaning.

Between the love offering, the website, and the check presentations, Chattanooga Unite raised more than \$463,000 for the families of the fallen.

### Lessons Learned

The goodness of humanity is evident when a tragedy occurs. We were fortunate that, when this occurred in our community, we were the IFEA organization that was ready to respond. Through our training, we were ready on a moment's notice to facilitate everyone's willingness to turn this horrible event into something positive. We, as an industry, have heard it time and again, events bring people together and make our community a better place to live. That's what we do year in and year out as part of our jobs.

In this situation, we were needed to help our community heal from this senseless act of violence. We had the skills, as do you, to make a difference through what we do as an everyday occupation.

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