

United Nations and East Bay Regional Parks Commemorate International Day of Peace

BY HUGO VERA

Community leaders, volunteers and representatives of local social justice-oriented groups convened at Lake Chabot Regional Park in Castro Valley to commemorate the United Nations' International Day of Peace on Saturday, September 16. The United Nations, first founded in 1945 as the League of Nations, has commemorated September 21st as its International Day of Peace since 1981. At Lake Chabot Regional Park, the East Bay Regional Parks District (EBRPD) collaborated with organizations such as the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Freedom Center, the United Nations East Bay Chapter and GirlTrek (an Oakland-based

organization dedicated to empowering Black female walkers/joggers) to spread messages of peace, unity and tolerance.

The East Bay Regional Park District's choice of venue is no surprise as the Lake Chabot Regional Park was the scene of a hate crime in 2015 when a white California state correctional employee harassed a group of Muslim men socializing in the park. Denise Slader, the correctional employee in question, was later charged with misdemeanor assault and a hate crime when she threw coffee at the Muslim park-goers while victim Rasheed Albeshari recorded the incident and later posted it to social media. In the years that followed, the EBRPD worked to reclaim the site of the crime as one of tolerance and understanding. In 2021, the EBRPD erected a "Peace Pole" in the park. The 12-ft tall spire features the word "Peace" written in 31 languages, including the Chochenyo and Nahuatl languages of the Ohlone tribes that are indigenous to the area.

On Saturday, participants gathered in a clearing next to the Peace Pole as speakers and artists gave speeches, recited poetry and performed music highlighting messages of peace, love and community. There were also various segments in which participants split up into smaller groups to discuss the daily actions that one can take to foster peace.

"Peaceful actions include listening to better understand one another while also rejecting violence, including bullying and racism," says EBRPD Community Relations Manager Mona Koh. "Standing in support of persons being targeted is also a peaceful action, as is protecting and healing our life-giving lands, forests, rivers, oceans, wildlife and habitats."



Participants at the International Day of Peace celebration by Lake Chabot Regional Park's Peace Pole. The monument features the word "Peace" written in 31 languages.

One of the hallmarks of the event was the presence of the local youth. For K-12 student members of the MLK Freedom Center such as Arsema Abera and Coyo Tena, no one is ever too young to start having meaningful discussions about world peace.

"For so many people our age, it's easier to just stay inside but it's not necessarily the right thing to do," says Tena. "To oppose racism and fascism, we have to be conscious of the world around us and work to find common ground."

"Spreading the word of peace is the first step," adds Abera. "We also need to show up at the polls every election, we need to vote in the right people and also hold them accountable."

Toward the end of the event, local musician Joe Ellison debuted his new song, "Choose Love," which focuses on themes of domestic violence, LGBT rights and how "choosing love" is a viable answer. Participants then posed for a group picture in front of the Peace Pole before enjoying a free light lunch and engaging in a "Peace Walk" in which they marched around the perimeter of Lake Chabot Regional Park. For many in attendance, including Karen Bohlke of the



Local musician Joe Ellison performs his song "Choose Love."

MLK Freedom Center, events such as these are just the beginning.

"We're living in a time of so much division and isolation from each other, where our cultural values have shifted to the point that being aggressive with one another is almost like a game," says Bohlke. "What today has shown is that peace is real and when we help each other focus we can find common ground and connect with others to work through our differences and achieve peace."

