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Clowns, county kick off centennial and Independence Day at depot

By KIM COOL Our Town Editor

Jul 8, 2021



Retired clowns Bill Griffin and Eugene Piggeon — holding a picture of the two of them in their working days — ChuckO, for the Fourth of July show at the Venice Historical Railway Depot.

PHOTO BY MEREDITH W. NICHOLSON

VENICE — Serendipity reigned Sunday at the Historic Venice Train Depot with circus clowns and Sarasota County centennial celebrants.

Chuck Sidlow put together the entertaining afternoon at the Historic Venice Train Depot site on the Fourth of July.

He is one of the Ringling Circus superstars who will be honored in a former Ringling Circus train car at the Historic Venice Train Depot which is expected to open in the coming tourist season.

Featuring performers from The World of ChuckO, the All American Clown, and representatives of the Sarasota County Centennial Committee, the event kicked off Sarasota County's centennial celebration which began July 2 and the return to live programs by The World of ChuckO.

As the pandemic grew, residents of skilled nursing homes were shut off from their families and also any outside visitors or entertainment that might stimulate their cloistered lives.

Missing his visits to those patients – as much as they missed him and his entourage – Sidlow wasted no time in uniting some fellow clowns with wife Noriko as pianist and more in the creation of monthly online specials on the YouTube channel and the Facebook pages of Sidlow and Patron.

County Centennial Committee board member Frank Cassell addressed the packed crowd that enjoyed perfect weather at the depot Sunday afternoon. He spoke of additional centennial events coming up in the next several months as the county's birthday party rolls on until July 2, 2022.

Formerly known as Laughter Unlimited, The World of ChuckO is a 501 (c)(3) not-for-profit organization that brings a program of “history, mystery, magic, music mirth” and more to residents of nursing facilities and special needs group homes in the

community. As many of those residents have no local relatives, the monthly visits of the clowns was a life-altering and enhancing portion of their lives. When visits to these residents were halted by COVID-19, so was a bit of joy in their lives.

The Centennial Committee had been planning events for some three years, only to watch them be canceled by the pandemic.

On Sunday, not only was the weather perfect but so was the entertainment by singer and washboard musician Betty, Trumpet player Joe Bruno, 94, and his son, jazz musician Joe Jr. and all those wonderful clowns.

After graduating from the Ringling Circus Clown College at the age of 17 in 1977, Sidlow began a 20-year career with the Greatest Show on Earth, ending in Japan where he stayed for some 10 years as an entertainer. There, he met and married Noriko, who is a big part of this new enterprise. She plays piano and organ, is a gourmet cook and publicist.

Sharing the depot events with Sarasota County's centennial celebration was a natural that came together literally at the last minute but served to be a fine beginning for the centennial year and America's 245th birthday. That the afternoon weather was picture-postcard perfect made for a great event.

Sadly missing was the late Rollins Coakley, for whom the depot area was named Rollins Coakley Park. He also was a member of the Gunther Gebel-Williams statute committee and put together the original committees to save the depot and then to create a circus train car museum which is finally nearing completion after nearly 20 years and three committees, all under the Venice Area Historical Society.



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