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Mississippi Society of New York hosts 38th annual Mississippi in the Park picnic

By Hallie Wooley
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This image, provided by Mississippi native Emmalee Rainey, shows people attending the 2024 Mississippi in the Park. The event celebrates Mississippi culture in New York City, is set for June.

COURTESY

TUPELO — Following the event’s revival in 2024, the Mississippi Society of New York will host this year’s Mississippi in The Park picnic, the 38th, with an expected rise in attendance.

If You Go

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The Mississippi in the Park picnic is a free event open to anyone with an interest in the history and culture of Mississippi. The event will be held at Hudson River Park: Pier 84 in New York City on June 14 from 12 p.m. to 4 p.m.

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From 1980 to 2015, the New York Society for the Preservation of Mississippi Heritage hosted the Mississippi Picnic in Central Park, a New York City-based event that welcomed anyone who wanted to celebrate the Magnolia State.

After almost four decades, the 2016 picnic was cancelled in a show of support for Mississippians who felt discriminated against with the passage of HB 1523, known as the Religious Liberty Accommodations Act, which allowed businesses with “deeply held religious beliefs or moral convictions” to withhold services from same-sex couples.

Years later, while reminiscing with friends about attending the 2015 Mississippi Picnic in Central Park, Emmalee Rainey turned small talk of bringing the event back into a reality. The Jackson native serves as the president of the Ole Miss Alumni club of NYC, while also taking on the role of networking for the Mississippi Society of New York.

Rainey said for her, the first step in reviving the picnic in 2024 was to reach out to every organization that had been involved in the past to regain sponsorships.

“Once we found the original founders of the New York Society for the Preservation of Mississippi Heritage, we were able to talk about the event's purpose as well as finding out everyone who used to be involved in the event and reach out to them,” Rainey said.

With the 2024 picnic having to come together quickly, the society members' respective universities — the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and the University of Southern Mississippi — were the event's sole sponsors.

This year, the picnic has 20 sponsors. They include both businesses local to Mississippi and Mississippi schools.

The current Mississippi Society of New York is a collaborative effort between 10 board members, and tasks are assigned based on who has a connection to that certain task to ensure it comes to fruition.

Mississippi Society of New York member and Mooreville native Kristin Shumpert hopes that the event's continuing revival restores the original mission of preserving the culture and heritage of Mississippi by showing support and promoting talented artists, authors, musicians and culinary artists.

“The event is important because it provides a space where New Yorkers with Mississippi roots and ties can come together and fellowship around our shared heritage.” Shumpert said.

The Southern dessert contest will be judged by one of the society's original members, Vicki Carter.

Rainey said while contacting Carter to gain insight on what had worked well about the picnic in the past, she was shown the first ever invitation that was sent out for the event. On the bottom of that invite, the words “best southern dessert contest” caught her eye as something that would be fun to bring back.

Feedback was an important part of the 2024 picnic and shaped a lot of the decisions made for this year.

Rainey explained that while the society members enjoyed the 2024 picnic in all of its glory, they also went around and asked attendees what they wanted to see in the future. While not every request they received was made possible, they took that feedback and strengthened the presence of Mississippi through sponsors and performers.

The 2025 musical line up for the picnic includes opening act Thompson Newkirk and headlining acts Alex Cano and Social Creatures.

Merch will also be sold to represent both sponsors and this year's theme which is "I love New York, but Mississippi is always in our hearts" giving a nod to the city's classic tourist symbol while also emphasizing the picnic's purpose.

"There's really something to be said about people who have moved from Mississippi to New York," Rainey said. "They may want new experiences and to branch out but, in our hearts, we're all from Mississippi. Fundamentally, this event is to welcome all who call themselves Mississippians to come together and celebrate what that looks like."