



## The Skanner: MacLaren Celebrates Juneteenth

By Arashi Young, The Skanner  
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White lines on the concrete carve pathways to direct foot traffic.

Vending machines hum in the background of the visitor’s center, and the signs flanking them say only guests of the inmates may use them.

Symbols of restriction can be found everywhere at the MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility.

Immense stretches of chain-link fence bend in towards the grounds and mark the line between the incarcerated and the free.

It seems an improbable backdrop for a celebration of freedom, but also an appropriate one.

On Sunday, more than 100 incarcerated youth celebrated Juneteenth at the Oregon Youth Authority facility. The commemoration brought together youth offenders, family members and community supporters to celebrate cultural pride.

Juneteenth, also known as Emancipation Day, celebrates the freeing of the last Confederate slaves after the Civil War. This year marks Juneteenth’s 150th anniversary.

Roderick Edwards, the multicultural coordinator for the Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Relations with the OYA, said the event gives the youth a sense of pride in their history.

“They feel very enlightened, they feel a sense of freedom although they are still incarcerated,” Edwards says. “They have more of history base for where African-Americans have come since that day.”

The event started with a rendition of “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” sung by a young inmate. Despite an audio



Youth perform Dizzy Wright's "Maintain" at the MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility Juneteenth celebration. Photo by Roderick Edwards

malfunction and being unsure how to sing the tune, he finished with the applause and support of his friends.

Perry Lambert, who goes by the stage name Roulette Del’gato, talked to the crowd about the history of Juneteenth as well as his personal redemption story.

Lambert was born in prison while his mother was serving time for a drug-related offense. He described his life of rebellion, running away, selling drugs and being shuffled around the foster system. He was able to turn his life around, graduate from high school and devote his life to music and caregiving.

He told The Skanner News it was important to come out the facility to show the inmates someone who can relate to their stories and believes in them.

“For me, it’s being able to show those young men that there is life beyond this, there is life beyond being incarcerated, you can do better, it’s never too late,” Lambert says. “I want to be able to share my story with them, encourage them to do better, so it means a great deal to me.”

The thread of mentorship and encouragement was woven through many parts of the evening. In addition

to the musical works by professionals such as Lambert from the Up and Over Tour, the celebration included hip-hop performances from the inmates.

The professional rappers sat in the front row of the audience for the inmate performances. Later, they went up on stage and invited any youth to freestyle rap on an open mic.

Justin and two other inmates performed a remix of Dizzy Wright's "Maintain." Justin said he didn't know the history behind Juneteenth, but rapping helps him keep a sense of normalcy.

"I just love performing, it makes me feel like I am back out again," he says. "Everyone on the outs knew me as a rapper, knew me as a positive guy that you could come to any time you needed anything."

Justin was supported by his mother and sister, who had come to visit. Many inmates had siblings, parents and children at the event. At the end of the night, family members had brought food for a potluck-style dinner.

Instead of home-baked goods, families had to purchase foods from MacLaren-approved vendors such as Safeway. Still, the inmates eagerly lined up for a dinner of fried chicken, pizza, chips and fruit salad.

Justin's sister Bryona said these family visits are an important reminder for the inmates who have lost contact with much of the outside world.

"It's nice for him to know that he still has support outside because this is all he has now, is just inside this place."

As the families broke bread and shared time together, The Skanner News talked with event organizer Maria Chavez-Haroldson, the director of the Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Relations. The Juneteenth event had followed other recent celebrations such as a Pride day and Cinco de Mayo.

Chavez-Haroldson said that each of these events were community building events, not just for the group being celebrated but for the whole populace.

"It's learning about different populations, different groups of people that we share the world and the space with," she says. "It's real life happening, in their presence as they are in custody."