



CULTURE FESTIVAL

SET FOR APRIL 29

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In many ways, the world is a drastically different place than the one Robert S. Abbott was born into in 1868. Unfortunately, in some ways, it hasn't changed enough. Abbott was born on St. Simons Island in the years following the Civil War. And as a Black man with deep Gullah Geechee roots, he faced an unending stream of hatred and racism — "... despite being educated as a lawyer," says LaTanya Abbott-Austin, Robert's sixth great-niece on her father's side.

But the hard hearts and small minds of the late 19th century proved no match for her ancestor's tenacity. Robert Abbott's dedication and determination led him to found a newspaper, the Chicago Defender, in 1905.

"He used the weekly newspaper as a vehicle to speak out against racism and the mistreatment of Americans of African descent. The Chicago Defender was used as a beacon of light to encourage southern African Americans to move Northward to seek broader economic opportunities," Abbott-Austin explained.

"Many historians credit the Chicago Defender as the greatest single force behind the Great Northern migration when millions of Black people migrated from the South to Northern cities such as Chicago and New York and out West to seek a better life with more opportunities to provide for their families."

The ideals behind the publication and its dramatic impact led to the establishment of the Robert S. Abbott Race Unity Institute. The 501c3 organization was founded locally by the Bahais of Glynn County in 2008. The group's goal is to share his vision to "live in a world where the word racism is unknown to its citizens."

And Abbott-Austin says that mission is alive and well today.

"The Robert S. Abbott Race Unity Institute was also founded on the principles of educating not only African Americans, but also all races of Abbott's belief that we all races are created equal and given the opportunity each race would contribute to the American dream to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," she said.

The organization hosts a number of talks and meetings throughout the year. But one of their most popular outreach programs has been co-hosting the annual International Food and Culture Festival each spring at College of Coastal Georgia (CCGA). Of course, the event had to endure change and transformation, particularly during the pandemic.

"For eight consecutive years prior to the pandemic, it was known as the International Food and Culture Festival and was held each April as a joint event between College of Coastal Georgia and the Robert S. Abbott Race Unity Institute. In the early years of our organization (2008-2011), we started our monthly Unity in Diversity luncheons, which continue to this day. Then we had the idea to launch a big annual event that would celebrate the racial, ethnic, religious and cultural diversity that exists in our community," Abbott-Austin said.

"CCGA was beginning to attract a more internationally diverse faculty and student body, and began to consider holding an International Festival on their Brunswick Campus for CCGA students and faculty. Someone on the early Abbott Institute Board got wind of that, and we approached CCGA about joining them in this effort, suggesting that we make it a community-wide event. Abbott would focus on bringing in the wider community, and the college on involving their student body. Our first festival took place in April of 2012."

Now, the festival set to return under the title, Coastal Georgia CultureFest. It will be held from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. April 29 in the Southeast Georgia Conference Center at the college. There will be a global food bazaar marketplace, music, a culture expo and kids' zone. The rain or shine event is free and open to all.

"We are beyond excited to bring CultureFest back to life. CCGA and the Abbott Institute decided that 2023



IF YOU GO

The Robert S. Abbott Unity Institute and College of Coastal Georgia will host its Coastal Georgia Culture Fest from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. April 29 on the campus. There will be a global food bazaar marketplace, music, a culture expo and kids' fest. It will be held rain or shine. It is free and open to all.

would be a good time to revive the festival, altering its name and focus somewhat. The focus will be on celebrating the various cultures that presently call the Golden Isles home. One such culture that is unique to our coastal location is the people of Gullah Geechee heritage whose forebears made myriad contributions that enrich our community to this day," she said.

"At CultureFest, you'll notice this heritage expressed through art, music and food. Among the cultures represented here are those of various Asian, Latino, Eastern and Western European, and African descent. We have long believed that we are all enriched by knowing about, and learning from, people of other cultures. CultureFest is a team effort. We secured a generous grant from Hello Goodbuy to help with festival costs."

The event is truly a community effort. The Glynn County Board of Education has endorsed the festival, allowing the organizers to tap into local art and music programs to generate student involvement.

"We asked the art classes of elementary, middle and high school (contests separate) to have their students depict a piece of art that showcases their culture — however they want to interpret that. The 'art culture' competition will have a first, second and third place cash prize for each level. The artwork will be judged by an independent panel from Glynn Visual Arts. We will display the participating art at the festival," Abbott-Austin said. "There will be musical performances by Golden Isles Elementary students and the Brunswick High Social Justice Club. In addition, there will be performances by Asamba Dance Troupe, Phil Morrison Trio and the Geechee Gullah Shouters."

But that's not all. There will also be a marketplace featuring essential oils, soaps and lotions; handcrafted jewelry; uniquely designed clothes; pottery; photography and African American paintings and art; books; paintings, photography, metal art and more. And, of course, there will be food.

"In our Global Food Bazaar, there will be a variety of cuisines from Gullah Geechee, Jamaican, Filipino, soul food, barbecue, seafood and many sweet treats," she said. "Several community partners will join us on site to offer information on everything from lifestyle and wellness options, healthcare screenings, city and county community services, education services, environmental, historical organizations and much more."

While the event has thrived in the spirit of Robert S. Abbott, it's longevity has been continuously fostered by dozens of like-minded locals committed to the cause.

"The Coastal Georgia CultureFest is a gigantic team effort. I would be remiss not to mention the hard work of the Abbott Race Unity Institute Planning team: Andrea Lawson, Audrey Gibbons, Carolyn Carver, Diane Knight, Donna Bassett, Donte Nunnally, Melinda Ennis-Roughton, Sandy Gamble and an enormous appreciation to our College of Coastal Georgia connection, director of diversity initiatives, director of minority outreach programs, J. Quinton Staples, II, M.Ed.," Abbott-Austin said.