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A taste of home

By Justin Cox - 06/14/10 06:51 PM ET

Crawfish, sweet tea and musicians — hauled hundreds of miles from Mississippi — will transform the National Mall into the Magnolia State for an estimated 500 celebrants later this month.

And, just a few weeks back, the Mall was the Pelican State, when Louisianans gathered to enjoy 2,500 pounds of boiled crawfish, barbecued cuisine and live Cajun music.

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“People love to experience the culture we bring here,” said Kim Allen, an organizer of the Louisiana event. “It’s just a nice little taste of home.”

These events, known as Mississippi on the Mall and Mudbugs on the Mall, come thanks to Washington’s network of state societies — civic associations focused on

bringing together the scores of people who move to Washington every year. The highly active organizations — many of them holding multiple events and boasting memberships of around 500 to 1,000 people — have thus far bucked the national trend of declining membership in civic groups.

According to their many members, state societies serve a distinct purpose in cities like D.C.

“This town tends to be very transient,” said Allen, president of the Louisiana State Society. State societies provide a way for people to get engaged socially and develop networks when arriving in D.C., she said.

The menu of events these societies offer covers a broad spectrum, furnishing members with a variety of opportunities to get involved.

Some functions are smaller, like the happy hours and Atlantic Coast Conference college sporting event watch parties the North Carolina Society often hosts.

Others have a more charitable bent, such as the Tennessee State Society’s

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recent happy-hour fundraiser for victims of the Nashville flood. And still others are flat-out stately — take, for example, last year’s Black Tie and Boots Inaugural Ball, compliments of the Texas State Society.

Thrown at the Gaylord National Hotel, the multimillion-dollar affair showcased musical acts including Neal McCoy, Racy Byrd and Jack Ingram, performing on five separate stages simultaneously throughout the Gaylord’s three-story convention center. At \$150 a head, nearly 12,000 guests showed to rattle their spurs on the dance floor and enjoy Gaylord-catered Tex-Mex cuisine.

Averaging around just \$25 per annual membership, state societies finance their operations through a combination of fundraisers, corporate sponsorships and all-volunteer boards. The smaller events frequently cost members \$10 or less, if there’s a charge at all.

Boards typically seat 15 members, who are responsible for virtually every aspect of keeping their organizations running. And when it comes to planning some of the larger events, finding time can be a challenge, numerous state society board members said.

“We spend a considerable amount of our free time on nights and weekends” doing work for the society, Louisiana’s Allen said. Of the effort it took to orchestrate Mudbugs on the Mall — “More than you can imagine,” she said.

And as for June’s Mississippi on the Mall, foundations were being laid as far back as January, Emily Penn, social chairwoman for the Mississippi State Society, said.

The boards’ members, like many in state societies, are mostly working professionals. Indeed, while state society representatives will often point to their organization’s occupational diversity, a sizable chunk of members seem to come from Capitol Hill.

Capitol Hill provides a pipeline of young staffers into his organization, said Bill Christian, a past president of the Texas State Society. Mississippi’s Penn and Louisiana’s Allen noted that most of their society’s board members are or were congressional staffers. Penn is an executive assistant to Rep. Gregg Harper (R-Miss.), and Allen worked for a freshman lawmaker in 2005.



Yet these staffers’ bosses, the members of Congress, aren’t heavily involved with the organizations, several state society representatives said. While most societies honor them with free memberships, few can make it to more than a handful of events each year, society representatives said.

Texas is an exception.

Congressional members are “key contributors” to the Texas State Society, Christian said. In fact, the presidential gavel rotates between civilians and Congress members every year, he said, and Lyndon B. Johnson, as a senator, held the position twice.

Rep. Silvestre Reyes (D) is the society’s current president and Rep. Gene Green (D) is the vice president, meaning he’s in line to be nominated for the

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presidency in 2012, Christian said.

Reps. Charles Gonzalez (D) and Pete Olson (R) currently serve among the 12-member board of directors.

Sen. John Cornyn (R) was president during the 2009 Black Tie and Boots Inaugural Ball, while Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R) and Rep. Kay Granger (R) presided over the 2001 and 2005 balls, respectively. Under Hutchison's leadership, the society amassed a significant endowment to help underwrite society activities, Christian said.

And when they served as presidents, Granger and Rep. John Carter (R) helped raise funds for a building in Washington that will serve as a venue for Texas-related events and visiting Texans. Additionally, Rep. Kevin Brady (R) and then-Rep. Charlie Stenholm (D) recently served as presidents, Christian said.

"Mostly it's about building a community in D.C.," Green said in a phone interview with The Hill. "It helps Texans who work in D.C. build camaraderie."

But even without much direct congressional support, most state societies seem to be thriving because they help fill the social gap people feel when moving to a city as busy and professionally oriented as D.C., various state society members said.

Civic organizations "serve very important functions in integrating people into local communities, in making communities the kinds of places where people have a sense that they belong, that they have friends and associations," said Kristen Gronjberg, a professor of governance and management at Indiana University.

The number of socially driven civic associations and their members has been falling in recent decades, said Gronjberg, who conducted a massive 2002 study of traditional membership organizations.

State societies' ability to provide a social network to the multitudes of out-of-towners D.C. attracts is probably why the organizations are bucking the downward trend, some state society members said.

"I have a ton of friends up here that I met through the state society," Louisiana's Allen said. "We have a lot of shared backgrounds and shared experiences, which is really nice to have in a place like this."

Even Mississippi's Penn, harried by the countless responsibilities of organizing Mississippi on the Mall, her biggest project since taking on the role of social chairwoman, doesn't forget the important service offered by her state society.

"It gives you a sense of community in D.C., when you're 1,000 miles away from home," Penn said. "It gives people a sense of belonging and identity."

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