

# Friday Friends Festival Celebrates Friendships Across Boundaries

By Ken Garfield

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More than 300 people came together Thursday in Charlotte to change the world, one friendship at a time.

Amid an outpouring of fellowship, with a taste of Creole shrimp as a bonus, the fourth annual Friday Friends Festival celebrated one of the city's most delicious ministries: Pairing people of different faiths, cultures and backgrounds and asking them to share at least one lunch a month. It could be on a Friday, as the late bank executive Joe Martin envisioned when he hatched the idea years ago. Or it could be any meal on any day of the week, as co-sponsors Mecklenburg Ministries and Crossroads Charlotte now suggest. Turn to [www.meckmin.org](http://www.meckmin.org) for more.

Whenever and whatever, the notion of expanding comfort zones is catching on: More than 1,400 people have been a Friday Friend. In challenging the uninitiated to step up and make a match, Willie Ratchford of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Community Relations Committee told the festival crowd that the best way to break down society's barriers is to start talking with someone new and different.

"To know each other," Ratchford said. "To like each other."

The annual festival is equal parts schmoozefest and rally.

As program promoters challenged the uninitiated to join the program – Mecklenburg Ministries' Maria Hanlin joked that you can even make friends with someone from another political party – friends and strangers chattered over appetizers and desserts.

Janice Blakeney, 56, and Ray Atkinson, 20, didn't know each other when they sat down near the fresh veggies and dip. But you couldn't tell it from their animated conversation – even if Blakeney laughed while sharing that they talked about their ages, and her gray hair.

Jeannette Hickman reunited with her Friday Friends – actually five Friday Friends because what could be more fun than a half-dozen friends sharing a meal or outing. At Thursday's festival, they crowded around to look at photos from their Friday Friends trip to El Salvador to build a Habitat for Humanity house.

"We're like family now," Hickman said.

Sylvia Ponce, a hair stylist and spa owner originally from Ecuador, came to the festival after receiving an e-mail invitation from a friend. She said she knew nothing about the program. But as Ponce talked about Friday Friends, she knew a lot more than she thought:

"It's about meeting a person from a different culture and a different religion and communicating better."

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