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Shadowlawn party shuffles into oblivion, victim of own success

BY RICHARD QUINN THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

VIRGINIA BEACH — Like all good stories, this one starts with a shot and a beer.

One spring day in 1985, two dozen friends got together for some drinks and a few hours of parody.

Their chosen site was Shadowlawn, an Old Beach enclave of summer bungalows that transitioned over the years into a neighborhood of homes. Their chosen spoof was the Shamrock Marathon run just a few miles away on the Oceanfront.

Joe Thatcher and a bunch of his friends would run from house to house — the “Shadowlawn Shuffle,” it came to be called — stopping at each for a cold brew and a halfounce of peppermint Schnapps.

Over time, the party blossomed, even if the racing part faded away. T-shirts were sold as admission tickets, and Shufflers walked the streets with Dixie cups of freshly poured alcohol. Tens of thousands of dollars were raised to buy dictionaries for students.

A neighborhood tradition was born and nurtured. This spring, it died, a casualty of its success and

a recent effort by Virginia Beach leaders to curtail what some consider a drinking culture at the Oceanfront.

Essentially, the Shuffle got too big, too fun, too illegal.

“It has had its life and it was a good life,” said Thatcher, a North End resident and one of the Shuffle’s founders. “But yeah, it’s finished.”

Police Capt. Tony Zucaro feels bad the event is over, but he said it was a decision made amicably by police, residents and party organizers.

“It died an agreed death,” he said.

Zucaro, the Oceanfront precinct’s commanding officer since September, said the party violated alcohol laws. In recent years, arrests were made for public intoxication and disorderly conduct.

So Zucaro tried to stop this year’s event before it began. He suggested alternative approaches that could legalize the party. A Shadowlawn pub crawl, maybe?

Nope. The Shuffle wasn’t about ordering shots from some barkeep. It was started, its backers say, to forge a communal feeling among residents, guests, even strangers.

And for years, it worked.

Seniors set up folding chairs on their lawns, as if to keep tabs on a parade route. Kids erected impromptu hot dog stands to give revelers side dishes for their drinks. People happily plucked booze from picnic tables set up on the sidewalk.

But the Shuffle had a dark side.

Drinking in public is illegal. Men urinating on houses they don’t own is illegal. Women flashing their breasts is illegal.

Police knew about the Shuffle for years, but when it was a small affair, authorities paid little mind. Then, more people showed up every spring. Streets had to be closed. Officers were posted for crowd control. Arrests were made.

Diane Gillespie, a former Shadowlawn civic league president, said that during last year’s Shuffle — with an estimated crowd of 1,000-plus — she could barely maneuver her car through the crowd to drive her daughter to a band concert.

"People arrived with the intent of getting smashed," Gillespie said. "It was no longer a little neighborhood social thing."

How did the event grow so unwieldy? First, The Noblemen got involved about five years ago. A wild man's club, the Noblemen raise money for charitable causes by throwing parties.

Then, the Internet took over. Bill Spangler, an Old Beach resident and longtime Shuffler, started www.partyreptile.com three years ago to celebrate neighborhood parties around the country.

"The Shadowlawn Shuffle was one of my top ten," Spangler said. "And I've been to a lot of events."

Spangler's site posted pictures of the Irish-themed party, highlighting oversized green-and-white top hats, wigs and Mardi Gras-like beads. Other snapshots showed people dragging ice wagons for their beverages.

All the pictures showed people having a good time. That drew more people who wanted to have a good time, most of whom weren't from Shadowlawn.

When too many people showed up, police got involved. Zucaro met with organizers last year to try to compromise. When it was clear that wasn't going to work, the 2007 Shuffle, scheduled for March 10, was unceremoniously canceled.

A letter went out to residents and that was that.

"Everybody looked the other way for a long time," said Al Midgett, founder of the Noblemen. "Time ran out, basically."



PHOTO COURTESY OF WWW.PARTYREPTILE.COM



Revelers mill about during a recent Shadowlawn Shuffle. The large crowds and illegal drinking the party attracted

prompted police and organizers to cancel the event this year. **PHOTO COURTESY OF WWW.PARTYREPTILE.COM**

