



Lighting Up BALTIMORE

*How Light City provided a much-needed boost
for the Inner Harbor and beyond*

By Alyssa Hurst

"I mean, look at all these people! They are so happy. That's the whole point, right?"

Brooke Hall, founder and CEO of What Works Studio, marveled at Baltimore's first Light City festival, but she wasn't just one of the 400,000 visitors who took in the interactive light and art installations. Along with her husband and co-founder Justin Allen, she dreamed up the Light City idea, and used it to illuminate Baltimore.

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Yes, the festival was full of show-stopping sights, like a 20-foot-tall glowing peacock and 300 colorfully lit, floating paper boats, but its grander goal wasn't just spectacle; it was about bringing Baltimore out to experience something inspiring together, as one community.

Nearly a year ago, Baltimore's Inner Harbor was lined with something a

lot less warm and inviting: the National Guard. While last year's riots, and the resulting curfew, took a significant toll on both the reputation and the spirit of Baltimore, they also had a major impact on local businesses; one that Light City just may have helped overcome.

'A SHOT IN THE ARM'

"Every night, starting Monday night with the kickoff parade, the promenade was packed with all kinds of people: young, old, white, black, singles, families," says Laurie Schwartz, president of the Waterfront Partnership of Baltimore. Schwartz says that an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 people came out each night, and for area restaurants and businesses, it felt like it.

In addition to long lines, Schwartz says

some local restaurants reported running out of food, while others were only able to accept credit cards because they ran out of cash. "It was certainly a shot in the arm," she says.

Hilda Staples, co-owner of the Inner Harbor's Family Meal restaurant, says the event may have tripled revenue. But profits aside, she's just pleased to see crowds returning to the area: "Last summer, after the Freddie Gray riots, it really slowed down business. I think people were just scared of coming into downtown Baltimore." Indeed, Schwartz says that while most local Baltimoreans have re-warmed to all the Inner Harbor has to offer, the same can't be said for their county counterparts. "The curfew had a major negative impact on business at the harbor, and to this day, we have not seen county residents return in the numbers that they used to."

Still basking in the afterglow of a successful first run, festival creators Hall and Allen plan to make Light City an annual event, and that could help Baltimore's businesses thrive. "We certainly hope for that," says Schwartz. "All of the people that were on the promenade were not just from Baltimore City. It was clear that people came from all over the region."

In fact, Light City may have cast an even wider net than anyone thought possible. Julien Carralero, general manager of Four Seasons Hotel Baltimore in the Harbor East neighborhood, noted that festivalgoers visited the hotel and its bar, Wit & Wisdom, all the way from Pennsylvania, Virginia and Washington, DC. Carralero and some of his Harbor East colleagues from Cinghiale and Baltimore Marriott Waterfront are excited about the event, and about the prospect of people from all over experiencing Baltimore. "They can travel from 20, 30, 40, 50 miles away and have some good fun, and continue to anchor Baltimore and Harbor East into what we believe it is: an upcoming, growing city that is going to continue to be dynamic," he says.

A CHANCE TO GIVE BACK

"For a long time now, our personal mission has been to sort of expand the narrative of Baltimore, because in mainstream media, it's always portrayed in one way, and a lot of us in the city experience it in a different way," says What Works Studio's Allen.

This is a mission that Baltimore businesses, like Four Seasons Hotel Baltimore, believe in. "It's not just business driven. ... We can give more to the community," says Carralero. He offered this call to action: "I think now we owe [the festival] to continue that support through different channels and different means as we organize the next round." He says, "A lot of community people gave their time ... because they are proud of what they do for the city. And I think it's something we all should do."

"Many of the large corporations in town stepped up to become sponsors, ranging from BGE to Brown Advisory to Harbor East, Kaiser Permanente. Many area businesses participated in ways big and small," says Schwartz.

SHINING A LIGHT

While the festival's art walk and events primarily took place along the Inner Harbor, several of Baltimore's other neighborhoods, like Coldstream-Homestead-Montebello and Greater Mondawmin, brought the festival to their residents as well. "We ... wanted to offer this opportunity to community members who may not [have been] able to visit the

downtown area for the featured events," says Romaine Smallwood-Smoot, general manager of Mondawmin Mall.

During last year's riots, the mall was hit hard, perhaps harder than many businesses in the Inner Harbor. During Light City, however, Mondawmin Mall served as the backdrop for "Open Beats," an "interactive projection mapping and audio control hybrid installation" that gave people the ability to control sound and color, and gave anyone with a voice a platform to freestyle and speak their minds.

For businesses in neighborhoods like these, Light City's Neighborhood Lights brought welcome exposure. "We are just looking for the opportunity to get more community members involved with the work that we do," says Chrissy Goldberg, food and farm director at Civic Works in the Clifton Park area of Coldstream-Homestead-Montebello. Civic Works runs Real Food Farm, which is located in Clifton Park and provides discounted fresh food to local residents. "We are really

excited that folks are going to be literally right across the street from the farm."

Local artist Isaac Ewart is one of the artists who created the Coldstream-Homestead-Montebello installation, titled "Back in Our Minds." Ewart took elements of stories told by community members at a workshop and animated them. As those stories were told at the event on April 2, Ewart's animations served as the backdrop. "Every story was about what we were trying to do at Clifton Park, which is to reinvest in Clifton Park," he says.

"One of the things [local residents] really appreciated was bringing a festival like Light City that's down in the harbor — and the harbor is sort of an expected place to have an event — to bring that to Clifton Park. I think that was one of the most special things," says Ewart. Indeed, without the idea of Neighborhood Lights, some of Baltimore's most important and underserved communities and businesses might have missed out on both the benefits and the fun.

In Coldstream-Homestead-Montebello, Ewart says, "just the amount of collaboration that went into this was amazing." Businesses and organizations like Speak Life Tour, St. Veronica's Steel Youth Orchestra, Revolution Event Productions and Baltimore Energy Challenge worked with artists, law enforcement and community organizers to bring the event to life for residents.

As the event continues to change Baltimore as the rest of the world knows it, and to shine a light on the innovative, inspiring and interesting minds the city has to offer, Hall has a vision: "I feel like the city and the people in the city should just own this thing." **CEO**

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Photos by
Mark Dennis,
Ben Struble and
Isaac Ewart



Installations featuring floating paper boats, a giant peacock and a glowing Ferris wheel brought 400,000 visitors to the city.



Artists perform at the Clifton Park band shell as part of a Neighborhood Lights event April 2.