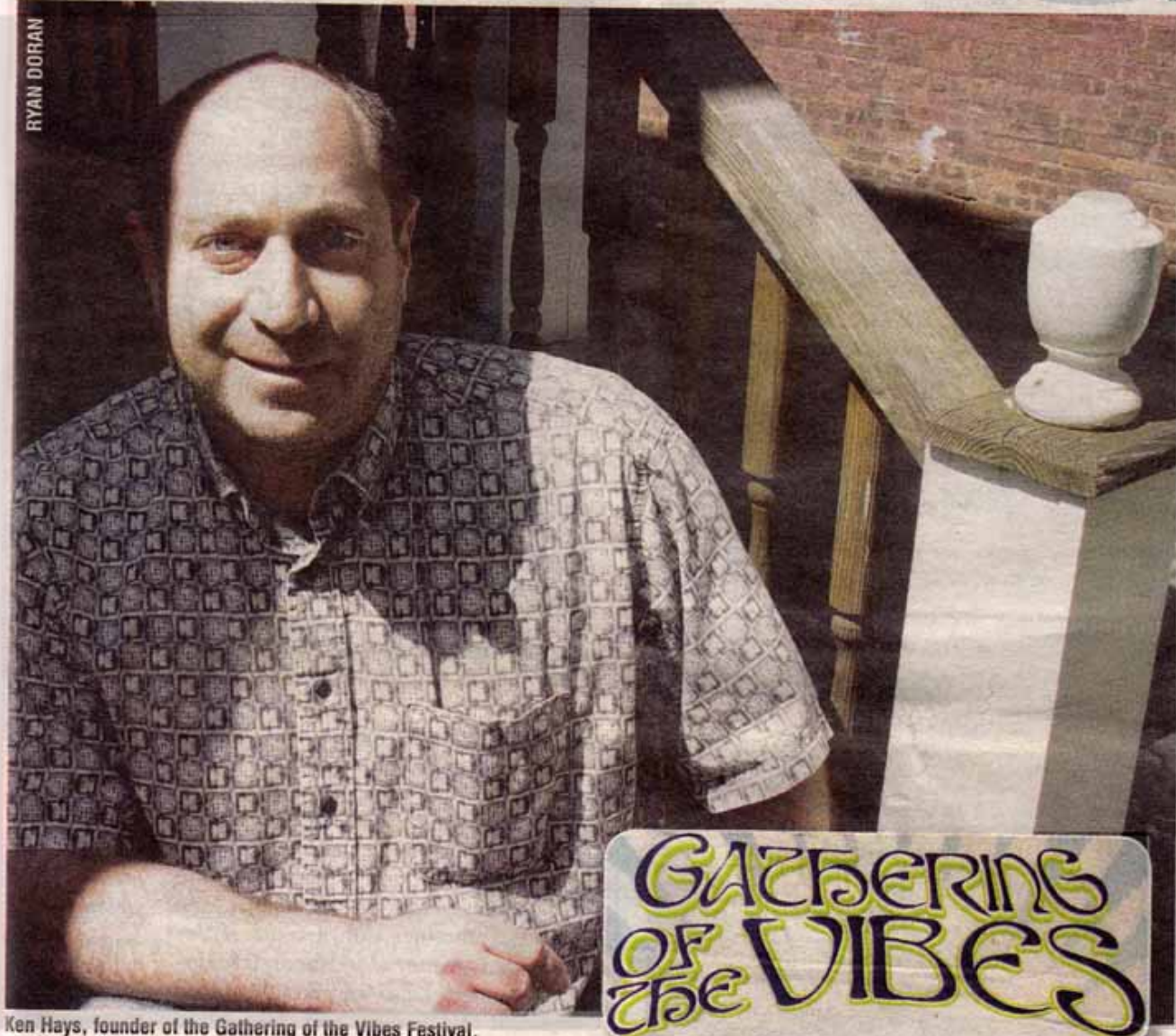


RYAN DORAN



Ken Hays, founder of the Gathering of the Vibes Festival.

Skeleton crew

The Dead live on in Bridgeport

BY RYAN DORAN
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What a long, strange trip it's been when a semi-antique San Francisco jam band has become an economic juggernaut on the Long Island Sound. After 14 years, the Gathering of the Vibes looks yet again to be a major Bridgeport draw and economic boost this July.

Big-name talent includes David Crosby, Stephen Stills and Graham Nash and The Band drummer and

vocalist Levon Helm.

Ken Hays, founder and executive director of the Grateful Dead-themed Gathering of the Vibes Festival, grew up in Greenwich and attended University of Colorado.

Hays founded the festival after Dead guitar player Jerry Garcia died in August 1995.

Hays was a founder of the first efforts in "green bags" to capitalize on New Haven being the first city in the country to make the use of plastic retail bags

illegal.

With the money made from the nylon bag venture, Hays started Terrapin Tapes out of Stamford, selling blank media tapes to recording fans, a trend spawned around the Grateful Dead's music. Hays has attended 370 Grateful Dead shows.

New York's then-Mayor Rudy Giuliani denied a city tribute to Jerry Garcia in Central Park.

Hays took it upon himself to organize an event to supplement the East Coast mourning of the influential artist's passing, then called "Deadhead Heaven, A Gathering of the Tribe," held at SUNY Purchase in Westchester County, N.Y. The festival will be held this year, as it was the last two years, at Bridgeport's Seaside Park, July 23-26.

"It's grown," said Hays. "Last year, we had a little over 20,000 people per day and it's a four-day event. This is our second year into a five-year contract with the city of Bridgeport through summer 2012. I think this is good for Bridgeport; it's good for us. This is an amazing venue, 370 acres with two-and-a-half miles of Long Island Sound waterfront. It's one of Bridgeport's gems."

Kevin O'Brien, media coordinator of Gathering of the Vibes, said last year Gathering of the Vibes alone, "not counting spending from our attendees, spent \$1.1 million in the state of Connecticut and spent \$400,000 within Fairfield County."

"That's inclusive of police contracts, spending on the park and vendors, everything like that," said Kevin O'Brien, media coordinator of Gathering of the Vibes.

Hays said the festival is welcome by the Bridgeport community.

"We offer discounted Bridgeport resident tickets," said Hays. "Unfortunately there's only one big hotel in Bridgeport, the Holiday Inn. But we're selling out a

lot of hotels in Shelton. Bridgeport has seen some very difficult days. I'm optimistic about Bridgeport. The people here care and I think that's exemplified by the parks board of commissioners, headed up by Charlie Carol. I'm very grateful to the Bridgeport people at large."

Hays said he is appreciative of the history of the park, which was donated by to the city in 1875 by Mayor P.T. Barnum.

"It came with a condition that the park land be used to further the arts and creativity within the Bridgeport community," said Hays. "P.T. was all about free arts and creativity. It's a very special piece of land, one that I'm honored to help to take part in keeping a part of the creative world."

At the top of the 2009 set list are Crosby, Stills & Nash, Bob Weir & Ratdog, The Levon Helm Band, State Radio, Buddy Guy, George Clinton & P-Funk and Dark Star Orchestra.

The festival is in its fifth inconsecutive year in Bridgeport.

"We're going into our fourteenth year," said Hays. We have a really built-in client base that is incredibly loyal, they come every year. About 85 percent of all attendees have been with us for five or more years, which is very telling. Not only that, but kids are coming with the concertgoers now; that wasn't the case 10 years ago. We had over 1,200 kids under the age of 12, which are free, that came with their parents to the Vibes last year."

The event also features a stage devoted to youths trying out instruments.

"We had about 600 kids between 10 and 18 years old," said Hays. "We're a little shy of 2,000 kids who came with mom and dad."

Since its inception, Gathering of the Vibes and its fans have made giving back a priority and support numerous social causes. In 2007 and 2008 combined, festival organizers donated more than \$75,000 to Bridgeport charities, Connecticut Special Olympics and other not-for-profits. This year, Hays will donate money to help build a water park in the east end of Bridgeport.