

NINA MOINI: One of Saint Paul's longest-running community celebrations returns this weekend. Rondo Days began in the '80s as a way to celebrate the historic Rondo neighborhood, honor the families who built it, and preserve the community's history after residents were displaced by the construction of Interstate 94. Saturday's celebration at Martin Luther King Jr. Recreation Center in Saint Paul will feature live music, local food, arts, sports, and much more.

Merina Neal and Gayle Smaller are organizing the event. They're here to talk about what it means to them. Welcome back to the program, both of you. Thanks so much for your time.

MERINA NEAL: Thanks for having us.

NINA MOINI: Gayle, for people who've never been to Rondo Days, can you talk about why it was started, and what it's all about, what the mission is?

**GAYLE
SMALLER:** Yes. So Rondo Days was started in 1983. My father and a group of his friends, called the [? Krazy ?] Eight Gang that grew up in Rondo, they all grew up, went away to college, and then when they came back, their community was gone. It was decimated. And so, the people were spread out all throughout the metro. And so, Rondo Days was started as a way to bring those families back together, to keep the community alive.

So even though they weren't in the same geographical area, it was really about maintaining the spirit of Rondo, as being a community that created leaders, Hall of Fame coaches, internationally-renowned activists and lawyers, photographers and artists. So it was really about maintaining that spirit and giving the offspring of those people who were that founding Rondo community an opportunity to meet the relatives and the family members of their ancestors and some of their elders. And so it's really about maintaining that spirit of Rondo and incorporating the aspects that built the community.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. Merina, I bet you think every year, what am I going to do next year? What can we add next year? Is there anything you're especially excited about this year or any highlights you want to share?

MERINA NEAL: I mean, we're just all super excited. It's been-- when you do an annual event, you literally start the day after and keep going. The last nine months, we've been burning the midnight oil, but definitely the last nine weeks. I'm really excited, too. We have over 18 food trucks and 30-plus vendors to just see the space activated with families. People call it the big family reunion of Minnesota.

And of course, excited for the entertainment. We have a youth zone this year, instead of a kids zone, so just different things. And of course, our national acts, international acts, Kwamé and Bahamadia. It's been-- when you're sitting in the thick of things and 4:00 hits and you just look over at the sea of people and you see all the businesses and all the tables and vendors activated with making revenue, because remember Rondo Days, when they split it, it was a loss of placement for homes and revenue for a lot of Black businesses. So us bringing that back, to me, just brings a huge sense of joy. And I'm just so elated to be part of the team again. It's an honor.

NINA MOINI: And so, Gayle, Merina was talking about the youth-oriented programming that's going on. But I understand, you also have a seniors brunch in the morning. Can you tell me a little bit about why-- you mentioned just the different generations and keeping history alive and telling those stories, but why it's so important to honor these seniors?

GAYLE Well, it is, because it was a traumatic event. And I think a lot of people who didn't experience that don't really understand what that's like to be a part of this really strong community and then overnight have it disappear. And so it's really about providing that multi-generational connection because the youth need to hear these stories. They need to converse with the elders. And so it's really about making sure that we're pulling them out, putting them in a space where they're warm when it's hot, and making them as comfortable as possible, feeding them really good food, and just really continue to honor our elders, because they are the holders of the story. They are the history.

And so being able to bring them out to the park and have them be able to communicate with each other and reminisce and tell stories, and then after the brunch is over, they flood out into the park. So when everyone comes to the park to enjoy themselves, they're being greeted by the elders from the brunch. And so it was kind of a way to ensure that the elders would be present. And then as the day goes on, you see so many young people engaging with the elders, and it's just really keeping those generational connections alive.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, and I know I don't need to explain to you all, but for people who may not be as familiar, the state of Minnesota decided, oh, we're going to build an interstate right through this Black community that was thriving at the time, meaning a lot of people were displaced. They lost access to generational wealth, whether it be businesses or property or homes.

Merina, what do you want the younger generation to understand? Because you can talk about these things, but Gayle's right. This was a traumatic time with impacts still. What do you want younger people to about Rondo?

MERINA NEAL: Yeah. So I have sons that are what we call Rondo legacy babies. Their great-grandfathers and grandmothers and great aunts and uncles and dad and cousins and everybody is from Rondo. And so what I just keep on reiterating to them, that they need to feel like they belong here. This is theirs. There is ways to continue to keep the legacy and hope alive and be proud of everything that we've been through and what's to come.

We're a resilient community, and I think what's really amazing about Rondo right now is everybody, from the people in city council come right back down to our volunteers and community members, really want to do a revival, especially focusing on the young people and the first-time home buyers and all of that. So, I mean, even with the businesses, the vendors and the food vendors that are going to be there, they have a connection.

And for the younger people, even with our youth zone, it's connection with our Saint Paul rec centers and our schools and Central and all of that, just that connection of family and knowing that this is their village, it's a safe place, and to lean in on different areas when they need to. Whether it's starting a business or doing arts and culture or becoming a part of our team. You know what I mean? So, yeah.

NINA MOINI: While I have you both, Merina, do you have any tips for folks on getting out there, parking types of stuff? We're still going to be unfortunately, in the middle of this heat wave, as I'm sure you know, during the celebration. So what are you doing for heat, and what could help people out when they're coming out?

MERINA NEAL: Super great question. So starting with the youth zone, we've worked with the Saint Paul Fire Department will be up there making sure they're spraying. Like, they've been going around a couple of the rec centers this week and just showing up and spraying the fire truck. They're also going to be there to be visible to interact with the kids. So it's kind of a two-for-one.

We're working with the Rondo Education Center to make sure if it's too hot, there's a cooling zone. And then coming around on the other side, the King Center will be open, of course. Hallie Q will be open for that. Plenty of water.

I recommend for our vendors, paying attention. I'm sending out my email today, as far as the logistics and parking, We all know the price of gas is expensive so people can definitely get on the train. They can definitely ride an electric scooter, carpool. But, get there, get there early, and just think about it. Plan ahead, and make sure they're hydrating, bringing their own handheld fans and misting.

We're also going to be telling the vendors to make sure they have a lot of drinks for sale because we want to be that good partner. We don't want anybody passing out or getting heatstroke. And of course, we'll have EMS on site. We'll have a lot of the Ramsey County support from the Saint Paul Public Police.

So my job is to work with them. Gayle's job is to work with them. Our fabulous five team is to make sure we're paying attention to what's happening, and when it's happening, and how to keep everybody safe. So, yeah, our tent will be tent number one, if anybody needs anything, and right next to the stage. And every year so far, the last three years, it's been nice and toasty.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, you have it together. You all know what you're doing, and you're going to make sure folks are taken care of. Thank you, Merina and Gayle, for joining the show again. Thank you, both. Have a great time.

MERINA NEAL: Thank you. Appreciate you so much for the support.

NINA MOINI: Absolutely. That was Merina Neal and Gayle Smaller, organizers of Rondo Days, which will take place again this Saturday from noon to 7:00, at the Martin Luther King Jr. Recreation Center in Saint Paul.