



## **Creating cultural connections at the Ashland World Music Festival**

By Megan Danforth and Irene Kai – June 3, 2019

This is Irene Kai, Co-Founder of the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission. I heard about the Ashland World Music Festival and decided to go to the "Heart Beat Stories" program Thursday, May 16. I had no expectations, nor could I have guessed that when I arrived there would be an exceptionally talented man playing an intricate Arabian rhythm on a hand drum while engaging the audience with a beautiful story. The artistry of Karim Nagi blew us away. I had traveled to the Arab world in the past and instantly connected to the sound of this culture. I was so impressed and inspired; this world-class performance was happening in Ashland! I decided to ask Megan Danforth, founder of Rogue World Music, to share her vision and work with us.

It is so thrilling to hear from people like Irene that this growing festival is having a deep impact at a heart level. The Ashland World Music Festival is a program that is co-produced by our organization, Rogue World Music, and the Ashland Parks and Recreation Commission. It's a wonderful public/private partnership that we're nurturing in order to develop a festival that engages deeply with the real work of creating cross-cultural connections in our community. And this work is happening right at the core of leadership.

Last year we brought together a steering committee of 10 people of different cultural backgrounds — a passionate and brave group of individuals who spent many hours considering the purpose of the Ashland World Music Festival. Our discussions required vulnerability and courage, honesty and open minds. While some of our meetings needed to be held in the city offices, our favorites centered around sharing food and stories and creating space for conversations and ideas to move organically. Remaining fluid in the process of festival development is key to achieving a successful result, and also to incorporate the influence of other cultural modes of getting things done.

For the past three years the AWMF has been a one-day event in Lithia Park at the Butler Bandshell. These first years showcased a wonderful selection of local performers who

specialize in world music traditions. The 2019 Festival season greatly expanded its programming to include seven different events at five locations over four days!

We began the festival with HeartBeats, an evening of stories on the theme of "home." Propolis set the mood with ancient women's hand drumming, Sophia Blanton took us from her Macedonian childhood to her home in "the dance." Lito Ozaeta and Grandma Sky shared heart, home, and wisdom with flute music of the Navajo (Diné) nation. The Liberation Poets Circle delivered multiple finely crafted, diverse perspectives on home, Laz Ayala told his story of escape from El Salvador, and Karim Nagi brought the "Arabic spring" uprisings to life with his dynamic vocals and percussion.

We partnered with Science Works this season in thematic resonance with their new Wild Music exhibit, and held a couple events there, including a house music dance night on Friday, DJ'd by Leo Anifowose, who lives here in Ashland and is originally from Nigeria.

The main event, The Park Performances, took place on Saturday with seven local, regional, and national performers sharing their art with our community. Several artists were thrilled with how engaged the crowd was! Our community eagerly joined in on Arabic and Congolese dance steps, an Aztec ritual dance, and couldn't resist Caribbean, Reggae, and Salsa grooves.

One of the artists sent this lovely note: "Thank you for giving us the opportunity to be part of such a beautiful festival and to share our music with such an amazing community. We felt welcomed, loved, and included by all of you helping us at the venue and also by the loving hosts who opened their homes to us."

The Ashland World Music Festival is truly a celebration of life, music, cultural diversity, and our community. Our vision is to create opportunities where people can express themselves and connect with each other through global music traditions. We invite the Rogue Valley community to connect with us at [rogueworldmusic.org](http://rogueworldmusic.org).

*Megan Danforth is the founder and Board President of Rogue World Music, a non-profit organization founded in 2009 with the mission to build community and cultural awareness through world music performance, education, and participation. She is also a vocalist in the folk music trio, Wild Honey.*