

New Event Name, But Buffalo Crusade Still Rocks

Something familiar is brewing in Buffalo. Yes, the names have changed: Pilot Field is now known as Coca Cola Field. Franklin Graham will preach instead of Billy Graham. And the event is called Rock the Lakes, not the Greater Buffalo-Niagara Crusade.

But when people fill the stands the weekend of Sept. 22-23, they will hear the same gospel and have the same opportunity to respond to Christ as thousands did a generation ago.

More than 600 churches partnered in August 1988 for the Greater Buffalo-Niagara Billy Graham Crusade, only a few months after the new home of the Buffalo Bisons minor league baseball team opened.

“The 1988 Crusade really had an impact on the Buffalo area,” said Rock the Lakes Director Sherman Barnette. “There are a number of people involved on our team who were involved then—many who served as counselors. I’ve talked to a lot of people who came to Christ during that Crusade.”

According to Barnette, the sense of connection with the past has generated palpable excitement in the final months leading up to Rock the Lakes. “People are looking forward to this Festival because they still remember the 1988 Crusade and what took place there.

“We are praying that God is going to move again and have a wonderful impact in Buffalo,” Barnette said.

For the last several years, area pastors and churches have sought God in prayer for their region. Now approximately 170 churches are involved and participating in Rock the Lakes. “There is a strong evangelical church base here and that has

been encouraging,” Barnette said.

Buffalo, the second largest city in New York, is located in the western part of the state, on the eastern shores of Lake Erie and at the head of the Niagara River.

In the early 1900s, Buffalo was the eighth largest city in the nation and the largest grain-milling center in the country. The latter part of the 20th century saw a reversal of fortunes: shipping in the Great Lakes was rerouted by the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway, and steel mills and other heavy industry relocated to other places.

Today, the region’s largest economic sectors are health care and education. Retail remained strong throughout the economic downturn due to additional revenue from Canadian shoppers taking advantage of lower prices and taxes on the American side of the border. And, in 2010, *Forbes* magazine rated Buffalo the 10th best place to raise a family in America.

But in spite of the good news, the need for the Gospel in the area is still great.

Barnette explained that spiritual issues in Buffalo are basically the same as in most U.S. cities: “Young people are looking for some direction in life. They’re looking for purpose. They’re looking for meaning.”

Drugs and violence are an issue as in many cities. “Parents and adults are concerned that we do what we can do to reach young people so they can come to Christ and their lives can be changed—that they’ll find a new direction,” said Barnette.

And so the prayer team is hard at work. “We have a very strong prayer team in Buffalo,” Barnette continued. “What we’ve been able to do is work with the prayer movement that is already happening here. We’ve seen some great things happening.”

More than 3,000 came out for the Christian Life and Witness

class and leaders expect a great turnout for the FM419 class for youth Aug. 17-18.

Pastors have told Barnette they like how Rock the Lakes is uniting the Christian community.

"I have heard a number of comments about the training that's available," he said. "As people from their churches attend, they realize that this is a long-term investment. It is not just something that will take place and then it's over with. They will have the opportunity to use what they learned from the Christian Life and Witness classes in future years.

"The biggest thing, the greatest thing about Rock the Lakes is that it is search and rescue—that is what we do. All of us need to identify the people around us who do not know the Lord and make sure we pray for them."

As the Festival gets closer, the team in Buffalo is praying that Christians will get to know the unsaved in their communities and bring them to one or both of the events on Sept. 22 and 23.

"What happens so much of the time is that people in churches get excited about a Festival," Barnette said. "But, if we fill the seats at Coca-Cola Field with just Christians, we will miss our whole reason for Rock the Lakes."

That reason, Barnette pointed out, is to see people come to Christ.

"It has been 24 years since Mr. Graham was here, so we need to maximize this opportunity. We need you to pray for the churches, the pastors and the people to embrace this idea of search and rescue, pray that they will bring people who are not Christians to the Festival—that is at the top of our prayer list."