

Sun shines on annual Columbus Day parade

Procession in honor of explorer started in 1890

By Chris Emery
Sun Reporter

October 9, 2006

Donald Castronova's long journey got off to a rocky start. The first year, his ship snagged on a traffic light. "I had to send a kid up to cut off the main mast," he said.

Five years later, the ship caught on a pedestrian bridge and his crew had to tear down the rigging a second time. The same day, a rainstorm left him drenched. "The boat was all torn apart, the sails were down and I was soaked" he said. "All I could do was wave to people."

Despite the adversity, Castronova has persevered for 37 years in his role as Christopher Columbus in Baltimore's annual Columbus Day parade.

This year, he received an award for his efforts and continued the tradition amid smooth sailing. After two days of rain, the sun came out yesterday for the parade, which dates back to 1890.

The parade began on Charles Street, wound through downtown and ended on Fleet Street in Little Italy.

Spectators lined the route to take in a spectacle that included marching bands, beauty queens, jugglers, stilt walkers, mounted police, waving politicians, fire trucks and unicycles.

"It's too nice to stay inside," said Dick Renner of Lutherville, sitting in a folding chair on Charles Street with his wife, Sue. A Philadelphia native, Renner said his favorite part of yesterday's parade were the Mummers, garishly costumed groups for which that city is famous.

Across the street, Wanda Wilson of Lakeland sat with two friends on the stairs of a building. "It brings people out and brings them together," she said of the parade, trying to speak over the booming bass drums of the marching bands. "It reminds them of history and how it all got started."

As she watched, a line of antique cars drove by with candy spraying from their windows into the crowd of onlookers. Children ran around frantically collecting loot off the asphalt.

"You have to catch it before it hits the ground and breaks," said Caroline Hill, 11, of Timonium, who had amassed a small pile of candy on the sidewalk.

Another 11-year-old, Shawondra Young-Scott of Baltimore, had a different trick. "You've got to wave a lot," she said, a white-and-blue balloon hat resting on her head. A Mummers band came by in green-and-purple outfits, wearing tall hats with fake flowers growing out of the top. The Bombshells, an all-female European scooter club rode behind them.

Helium balloons shaped like stars and a two-story inflated Statue of Liberty passed by, as did a float with an authentic Venetian gondola complete with singing gondoliers in red and white striped shirts. The Italian national boxing team waved from inside the ropes of a float shaped like a boxing ring.

The parade was rich in Italian flavor, but included floats and music from a variety of cultures, including, for the first time this year, Mexican mariachi bands. "It is truly a multicultural event," said parade chairman Vince Piscopo.

He said the event has grown every year since the nonprofit Columbus Celebrations Inc. formed to promote and organize it several years ago. "This year's participation will be the biggest we've ever had," he said.

Jazz musician Chuck Mangione, this year's grand marshal, was scheduled to play an outdoor concert in Little Italy last night.

Castronova, who received the 2006 Columbus Celebrations Award yesterday for his long run as Columbus, rode along the parade route on a float painted red, green and white, the colors of the Italian flag.

His previous float, featuring the ship that kept snagging parts of city's infrastructure, wore out a few years ago and had to be retired. Castronova grew up in Highlandtown and now lives in Jarrettsville with his wife.

He said he has always had a fascination with Christopher Columbus. His grandfather, an Italian immigrant, caught his imagination when he was child by telling him tales of the explorer.

In 1975, Castronova painted a 20-foot-tall mural -- depicting Columbus in the court of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella -- on the wall of the old Sons of Italy hall on Fayette and Paca streets.

"I take pride in my Italian heritage and this is the one day we can strut our stuff," he said.

He said he carefully researched the costume he wears each year and made it himself. But when he took over from the previous Columbus impersonator, there was a disagreement over one detail.

The other man knew of a painting of the explorer with no beard, but Castronova had seen another picture in Washington, D.C., where he had one.

"That argument has been going on for 37 years," said a bearded Castronova yesterday just before boarding his float.