
Cops grab Mama Donna at solstice ritual on S.I.

By **Matthew Sweeney**
The Brooklyn Papers

For almost 25 years, Mama Donna of Prospect Heights and her friends have celebrated the ancient rite of the Winter Solstice.

For years, everything went without a hitch, — a bonfire on Staten Island's South Beach, drumming, dancing, chanting and singing in a modern amalgam of tradition from Native American to Hindu to Catholic. This year there was trouble.

Mama Donna, whose real name is Donna Henes, and 33 other celebrants were arrested and issued summonses as they welcomed the return of the sun.

Henes is the owner of Mama Donna's Tea Garden and Healing Haven, where she holds ceremonies to coincide with the celestial calendar.

The fire, according to Captain Thomas Russo, executive commanding officer of the 122nd Precinct, was their downfall.

Officers on a routine patrol saw the fire, he said, and "it appeared that the boardwalk was burning." They broke up the ceremony and ordered the bonfire put out.

"We complied," Henes said. "Everybody circled the fire and kicked sand on it. As we were getting onto the bus they decided to detain us. I don't think they knew what to do with us really."

They arrested the revelers, who ranged in age from 21 to 74 years. They were issued summonses for "unauthorized presence" — trespassing.

Henes was stunned when the police wrote her three additional summonses for organizing the event.

"The whole thing was totally absurd — they just had to come up with something after going this far. I call it a circle and a ceremony; they called me a ring leader," she said.

"It was pretty high-handed and out of control on their part."

Norman Siegel, director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, described the ticket blitz as another example of the Giuliani administration's "anti-fun" agenda.

"Anyone who appears to be weird or strange, they don't want them," he said. "New York City is a place that has spontaneity and zaniness. We should be encouraging groups like Donna's rather than giving them summonses."

Siegel said he hopes to convince Parks Commissioner Henry Stern and the Police Department to drop the charges against the revelers, but targeted his criticism squarely on the mayor.

The arrests are another sign of that mayor's attention to quality of life crimes is "out of control," he said.

"In [Dyker Park] they are threatening people with jail if they fly their kite," Siegel continued. "People in Brooklyn have been arrested and kept in jail for 48 hours for riding a bike without a bell."

According to Parks Department spokesman Edward Skyler, there is little chance the agency will drop any of the charges.

"There wasn't even the most superficial attempt to follow the rules," Skyler said.

Not only did the 34 people trespass on a closed area of the beach, he said, but by holding a gathering of more than 20 people they also "held a special event without a permit."

Because she charged money — \$28 to pay for a chartered bus — Henes held a "commercial event without a permit," Skyler said.

Anyone who drove to Staten Island did not have to pay, Henes said.

"They didn't pay to get on the beach," she added.

Henes and the others also lit a bonfire without a permit and within 50 feet of the boardwalk, according to Skyler.

"Every time they issue a statement it's another lie," said Henes. "We were right by the shore [and more than 50 feet from the boardwalk]."

The celebration of the winter solstice may have fallen out of favor in recent centuries, but it is "the oldest holiday known to human kind," Henes said, and the foundation of winter religious holidays around the world. It is the day with the shortest amount of daylight and the longest night of the year.

From that day forward the daylight lasts longer and the significance, Henes said, is "that's the day that the son is born."

In years past bonfires on South Beach have been a common ritual not only for the Winter Solstice but for local teenagers. According to Henes and one Staten Island resident who attended numerous high school bonfires on the beach, police never interrupted.

"They probably didn't draw attention to themselves by lighting a seven foot fire," Skyler suggested.

"You had an egregious lack of any sort of regulation in this gathering."