

## Living

## LUNARFEST BRINGS SIGHTS, SOUNDS, AND TASTES OF NEW YEAR TO PARK CITIES



Guests rang in the Lunar New Year on Feb. 21 with mahjong lessons, red envelope crafts, and performers including tiny Korean fan dancers, oversized, fluffy lions, and a spellbinding face-changer. CHRIS MCGATHEY AND SARAH HODGES

By Sarah Hodges

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About 2 billion people around the world celebrated the arrival of the Year of the Fire Horse in February. But when organizers began planning Lunar New Year festivities for the Park Cities community, they never expected the event to be this big.

The second annual LunarFest on Feb. 21 attracted about 500 celebrants to the Moody Family YMCA for a festival that was overflowing with mouthwatering Lunar New Year treats, showstopping performances, crafts, and games.

The entertainment ended with a Lion Dance, a traditional Chinese performance featuring oversized, furry lions that were each controlled by two artists who caused them to jump, dance, and even chase a toddler or two around the gymnasium.

But the lions' dramatic performance was only a small piece of

the Park Cities' festivities, which combined elements of the Chinese New Year, Korean Seollal, and Vietnamese Tết in a single, joyful spring festival.

"We're incorporating all the festivals into one," said Cristina Samson, who co-chaired the event with Angie Nouanesengsy. "We created LunarFest to celebrate different cultures and to spread joy and love and prosperity to everyone in the community."

Organizers started preparing for this year's LunarFest immediately after last year's celebration at the University Park Public Library, which Samson said filled to capacity less than a week after registration opened.

More than 100 volunteers helped out on the day of the event in its new, more spacious venue at the YMCA.

Uyen Pham and other volunteers shared Vietnamese Lunar New Year favorites, including egg rolls, sweet, sticky rice covered

with peanuts and sugar, and traditional Vietnamese Lunar New Year rice cakes, which are filled with pork belly and mung beans and wrapped in banana leaves.

"We want our kids to be able to be proud of their culture and to be able to share their culture with the community," Pham said. "Lunar New Year is the biggest holiday for us, the Vietnamese people."

Caroline Annette Liu, a sixth grader at McCulloch Intermediate School, kicked off the afternoon's entertainment with a Chinese New Year song. Her performance was followed by a group of tiny Korean fan dancers and Nanta Korean Drummers whose pieces included a version of "Soda Pop" from the Netflix hit *KPop Demon Hunters*.

The audience gasped with surprise during *Bian Lian*, a face-changing act featuring a dancer who seemed to instantly shift from one brightly-colored mask to another.

Highland Park High School

freshman Campbell Phan, who came to the celebration as a volunteer, said her favorite activity was *Bài cúa cá chép*, a Vietnamese game played with animal-sided dice and a matching, brightly colored game board. Phan's family also plays the game of luck at their Lunar New Year gatherings.

"If it's fun for us, then it's probably fun for other people," she said. "We just want to share that as a community."

The event was cosponsored by the Moody Family YMCA and HP CultureFest, a nonprofit organization that celebrates the rich traditions and cultures of Park Cities families. The LunarFest Committee partnered with the University Park Public Library and Highland Park Library to bring the event to fruition.

LunarFest's many sponsors included the He Family Foundation, Xumath.org, award-winning Indonesian restaurant Bali Street Cafe, and University Park favorite Chip's.

## LOVED LUNARFEST?

Save the date for LunarFest 2027 on Feb. 7 at the Moody Family YMCA. (Please do your ticket early! This year's LunarFest filled to capacity.)

Organizers want to know how to make next year's celebration even better. If you attended LunarFest 2023, scan the QR code below to access a feedback form.



The festival's organizers hope that the event continues to grow. As it came to a close, volunteers circulated the QR code for a LunarFest feedback form.

"Our foundation is our family, and we want to extend that to our bigger family, which is the Park Cities community," co-chair Samson said. "It's a celebration of everyone in the community, because we are one big family."

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