



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

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## **Umoja Festival Celebrates Cultures and Unity in Johnson City**

JOHNSON CITY, Tenn.—With an annual attendance of more than 30,000 people, the Umoja Festival brings in people from East Tennessee and across the region to celebrate African American culture, diversity and the acceptance and education of other cultures. The East Tennessee State University (ETSU) Umoja/Unity Festival is held annually in August on the grounds of the Freedom Hall Civic Center in Johnson City, Tennessee, and it will include storytelling, food, cultural merchandise, music, information booths, medical screenings and games.

“The word Umoja means unity in Swahili, and that’s exactly what this festival is about—unity. Besides being a family friendly weekend event, the festival provides an exceptional educational experience. It represents various cultures and their traditions through an entertaining storytelling experience,” said Brenda Whitson, executive director of the Johnson City Convention and Visitors Bureau. “It’s very interesting to see the cultures and traditions celebrated at this festival, which truly brings together a wide range of ethnicities to celebrate their differences.”

The Umoja Festival, created by Umoja, a community organization of Johnson City whose goal is to promote ethnic diversity and the “universal love of life,” is held in conjunction with the ETSU Storytelling Department, which sponsors seminars, discussions, workshops and performances by

leading storytellers from around the country to educate students at the university, along with the community.

The festival began as Unity Day in 1978 when the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Concerned Citizens Group and other local community residents joined together to create a picnic that included food representing several different cultures. After several years, the picnic stopped being organized for unknown reasons. Then in 1997, the previous founders decided to breathe new life into the community with a new Umoja festival. This regional event was created to continue to break down the walls of race, age, culture and faith prejudice.

The Umoja Festival opens with a grand opening event that features a call of the drums, along with Shaka Zulu, which is an African stilt walker, a diversified dance company and of course, story telling. Throughout the festival, visitors can enjoy a parade, storytelling, a children's carnival and dancing. The Umoja festival also features church services presented by local religious establishments and choir groups, storytelling and the closing ceremonies. The free children's carnival includes rides and karaoke singing. There will also be free health screening with Mountain States Health Alliance and the Regional Health Center.

The Umoja Festival began with a spotlight on African-American culture, but also began to incorporate other groups as well, including Native American, Cuban-American and Irish American cultures, in an attempt to create awareness about different traditions.

“The Umoja Festival has a consistent focus on African-American culture and arts; however in 2007, organizers focused on African-American culture along with Cuban-American and Irish-American cultures,” said Joseph Sobol, director of the storytelling program and associate professor at ETSU.

With the focus of diversity and unity at the heart of the event, past events have included well-known storytelling groups, including the 2007 storytelling feature, Tribes and Bridges, sharing stories about social forces and pressures, as well as their own personal battles with racism and diversity. Tribes and Bridges is made up of storytellers from different cultures, including an Irish American, Cuban American and African American.

“We bring in outstanding storytellers from distinct traditions, highlighting different and common threads that each group has experienced,” said Sobol. “Storytellers discuss how they were raised and educated about other cultures, and what they did to overcome cultural prejudices.”

Umoja is a community organization that wishes to institute a sense of community that is united in every way. Their main goal strives to help people understand other cultures, races and traditions in order to reduce violence with knowledge, and is especially instilled through the school systems of the Johnson City region. Umoja attempts to focus on African American culture, while also bringing in different cultures. Leading the region as the area's award-winning ethnic diversity festival, the Umoja organization hosts the event annually. For more information, please visit [www.umojajc.com](http://www.umojajc.com) or call (423) 943-9162 or (423) 426-2851.

Johnson City is located in Northeast Tennessee and is the fourth largest metropolitan city in the state. Set in a region known as America's First Frontier, Johnson City is “Where the Pioneer Spirit Began”—a historically significant and culturally rich community surrounded by an abundance of unspoiled natural beauty. Johnson City has a history, which dates back more than 200 years, and its culture embraces individual creativity and encourages innovation through expression. The area is world-renowned for its modern and traditional Appalachian and bluegrass music, art and cuisine, and outdoor recreation for the whole family throughout all four seasons.

For more information on events or attractions in Johnson City, please visit [www.visitjohnsoncitytn.com](http://www.visitjohnsoncitytn.com) or call (423) 461-8000 or (800) 852-3392.

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