I wish the NCAA had come to Greensboro last weekend for the National Folk Festival.

Freddy Nyembwe performs with Samba Mapangala & Orchestra Virunga during the National Folk Festival in Greensboro Sept. 10.

Roger Sommer/Special to the News & Record
It would have seen a city create exactly the kind of atmosphere it wants.

“We believe in providing a safe and respectful environment at our events and are committed to providing the best experience possible for college athletes, fans and everyone taking part in our championships,” NCAA President Mark Emmert’s statement Monday said.

That was on display here Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Greensboro’s city center was a multicultural feast of music, entertainment, food and drink.

More than 100,000 people saw top-notch performers present music and dance from all over the world and country.

I found it all absolutely delightful. ArtsGreensboro President Tom Philion spoke for me when he told the N&R’s Dawn DeCwikiel-Kane, “We are just blown away.”

Festival organizers bring in the best talent you’ve never heard of. I knew nothing about Portuguese fado singing, but after hearing Nathalie Pires, I love it.

And where else can you listen to a terrific Irish group, then stroll a couple of blocks for stirring French-Canadian tunes? Or jump from Andean dancing to East African rhythms? All for free!

But there was more going on. I agree with Greensboro resident Kim Gatling, who told DeCwikiel-Kane:

“It has been so unifying, with so many different races and ethnicities. It’s been a phenomenal weekend for our city.”

I had similar thoughts Saturday — not listening to music but walking through the crowds and watching the people who’d come to take part in an amazing event.

It wasn’t just the same-sex pairs strolling hand-in-hand, or the inter-racial couples with mixed-race kids, or women wearing head scarves, or the ubiquitous tattoos, or
people with multiple piercings, brightly colored hair or unusual clothing, or individuals whose gender wasn’t easily discernible, or the many languages spoken ...

It was all of that and more. It was how natural it all was. How enjoyable.

Wow, I told my wife. I am changing.

In my own life, I’m as conservative as it gets. White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant. Married to the same woman for 39 years. Go to work every day. Go to church every week, usually twice. Two grown kids. A granddaughter. A house, all paid for. A dog. I’ve voted for many Republicans over the years.

Once, I might have thought that promoting diversity was “politically correct” nonsense. I might have looked disapprovingly at people who stood out as odd or weird.

Now, I see there’s something very positive and healthy about this idea.

If there’s one thing we need to build a better future in a fast-changing world, it’s creativity. And that requires difference because conformity is the antithesis of innovation.

The beauty of the National Folk Festival, despite its moorings in traditional arts, is that it offers something different for most of us. It invites us to see and hear the world as other people express their experiences and emotions — their humanity.

It attracts people who are open to that, who celebrate it and who express themselves in creative ways unbound by strict social norms.

And Greensboro makes them feel at home.

I would say the same for Asheville, Charlotte, Raleigh, Durham, Winston-Salem, Chapel Hill, Wilmington and a few other towns and cities in North Carolina. But not all.
I’ll add High Point because it hosts the largest multicultural business and artistic event in the state — the furniture market — twice a year. Believe me, furniture and showroom designers are artists, with all the personal style you see in other creative people. That’s why we heard so many voices of concern from the furniture market in April about North Carolina politics.

That’s why so many banks and businesses, entertainers and sports associations have put North Carolina into a new category — as a state that is hostile to people they accept and embrace.

House Bill 2, the anti-LGBT legislation enacted in March, has divided our state. The split may be drawn between progressive urban culture and the conservative rural or small-town “values” of a fading era, or it may be more complex. But Gov. Pat McCrory and Republican legislative leaders have driven a wedge that is pulling the state apart. The result is a disaster.

Greensboro doesn’t deserve to pay the price. We saw what Greensboro is like last weekend. I wish the NCAA had seen. More importantly, I wish McCrory and his allies could have seen what a rich and vibrant future our state could have if they stop holding it back.

Come on. We really can change. And sooner is better.

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