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Councilman hosts 'Day in the Park'

There's nothing like pushing all your worries to the side, packing up the family and partaking in a good, old-fashioned day in the park.

Families in Hattiesburg were given that opportunity when Ward 4 Councilman Dave Ware set aside his council hat, for a moment, to host "A Day in the Park" at Kamper Park and Hattiesburg Zoo on Saturday.

For three hours families invaded one of the city's jewels to enjoy some carefree frolicking, juicy watermelons and a hearty buffet of food.

"This is a concept that I came up with after serving on the City Council for the last couple of years," Ware said. "I thought it would be nice to have a day where we weren't concentrating on our problems. We're concentrating on our positive aspects and the things that make Hattiesburg special."

All who attended the festivities Saturday were treated to free hamburgers and hot dogs, and every child received a complimentary pass to the Hattiesburg Zoo.

"The passes for the zoo are not free from the city of Hattiesburg," Ware pointed out. "I'm paying for every child in the city of Hattiesburg who wants to go to the zoo today."

Ware said he felt it would give many children who may not normally come to the zoo the chance to see what it had to offer.

Zoo officials said the "Day in the Park" attracted a healthy crowd for most of the day Saturday.

"This zoo and this staff have worked so diligently to acquire accreditation," Ware said. "There's less than 250 zoos in the nation that are accredited. This zoo is trying to make that leap."

"I'm a tremendous supporter of the zoo - to the point that I went to the state Legislature this year and lobbied for some state assistance to help us expand the zoo and improve the resources we had."

Exotic animals weren't the only entertainment offered up to the spirited youngsters.

"We're offering face-painting, balloons and some pencils for kids," said University of Southern Mississippi graduate student Brian Crosby.

Crosby and several of his colleagues from the Southern Miss Children's Sleep Research Laboratory used Ware's event to meet face-to-face with some Hattiesburg families to gain volunteers for their cause.

"We're doing research with preschool children and sleep and how sleep is important to their daytime behavior," Crosby said. "We found out about the event, (and) we assumed there would be a lot of families here so we thought we'd come out."

Ware said Saturday's turnout far exceeded his expectations - which could mean more sponsored family days in the park in Hattiesburg's future.

"I really thought we'd have a concentration Ward 4 contingence here today, but indeed what we have are individuals from all over the city here," he said. "Indeed, we will do this in the future; I just don't know when."