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Jeff Liberty is organizing Mardi Gras for MindCare, a New Orleans-style street party on Aug. 12. PHOTO: TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL ARCHIVE

Mardi Gras party marches into uptown for one night only

August event will shut down Prince William Street to traffic

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SAINT JOHN • Jazz and gumbo will be flowing for one night only as the Port City will transform into the Big Easy.

On Aug. 12, Prince William Street will shut down to traffic and turn into a free Mardi Gras-style street party in support of MindCare New Brunswick. Food, drinks, face-painting, vendors and more will flood the street with the night being capped off by a nine-piece band direct from New Orleans to the Bourbon Quarter.

The band, Sweet Crude, which hails from southern Louisiana, is expected to help transform the streets of Saint John into the French Quarter of New Orleans. The Bourbon Quarter Restaurant will reflect New Orleans's Bourbon Street, offering traditional foods like gumbo and oysters for party-goers.

Jeff Liberty, a member of the MindCare committee and mental health advocate, came up with the idea. Through his work as a music promoter he learned Sweet Crude was looking for a show in New Brunswick.

"I just thought, wouldn't this be a great time to do another (MindCare) event?"

Liberty approached Shawn Vernier, owner of Bourbon Quarter, about hosting the party. The Bourbon Quarter takes inspiration from the Louisiana city and the two decided it was just what the city needed.

"I got to travel a lot and I've spent a lot of time in the south, in Memphis and New Orleans," Liberty said. "I love that kind of outdoor community feel with music and barbecue and colour."

He thought it would be nice to transform Prince William Street with the style of the south for one summer night.

Liberty would like to turn it into a huge carnival if he could, saying he'd love parades and floats to take over uptown. He said bringing the fun, carefree

vibe to the area would not only bring a community together but continue to open up dialogue about mental health.

The event, which will run from 5 to 11 p.m., is free and family-friendly. All are invited to dance, eat and celebrate. While there is no admission price, free-will donations will be accepted for MindCare, a major supporter of mental health initiatives in New Brunswick.

"Part of the whole stigma to mental illness is the fact that we never spoke about it or it was in hushed tones. This is kind of a great way not only to engage people, but communicate with each other more and keep this conversation going."

MindCare is a committee made up of the board of directors of the Saint John Regional Hospital Foundation. Jeff McAloon, president and CEO of the foundation, said he was thrilled when Liberty stepped up with the idea.

"He's such a passionate advocate, a passionate fundraiser," he said. "Frankly, we're lucky to have a guy like that in our community that's brave enough to share his personal story in an effort to help improve the situation for others. I'm excited he thought of a fun event."

McAloon said the event won't be run by foundation staff but they support Liberty's team.

Money raised from Mardi Gras for MindCare will go toward research, education, therapeutic programs and transitional projects, he said. Those include things like scholarships for students going into the healthcare field and professional development for those already in the workplace.

McAloon said MindCare is currently in the midst of its annual fundraiser, the Give Campaign, which also supports those programs and projects.

Liberty said the best way to draw crowds is with unique social events like this. He thinks everybody is interested in big block parties, especially when they involve food, live music and a strong theme. Support MindCare is the icing on the cake, he said.

"It's part of getting out there, supporting your community, all while having a lot of fun mid-week in the summer."