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Strip away the buzz, SXSW is about connections with friends

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Posted: 12:51 p.m. Wednesday, March 19, 2014

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By Anna Hanks - Special to the American-Statesman

I usually love the cultural circus of the South By Southwest festival, but I'm having a hard time reconciling the party atmosphere of the event with the tragic incident on Red River Street that left three people dead and 22 injured.

Just before SXSW, I was still getting well from having had an inconvenient set of stitches in my chest from a visit to a dermatologist. I didn't plan on running around the festival like a maniac as I have done in years past.

Given my own health concerns, I decided to mostly ignore the outsize buzz and clatter of this year's highly branded festival. Instead I chose to seek out cultural sustenance by focusing not on the biggest, buzziest panels – or the biggest celebrities – but on the panels and showcases presented by my friends and acquaintances. It's was my own festival-within-a-festival that I called "Friend By Friend West."

So this year, I prioritized the chance meetings of SXSW and the experiences I could have with friends and acquaintances who aren't often in Austin.

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Making friends the focus of my festival meant that I ended up in places where there weren't a lot of people. I sat with my friend Tracy Everbach, a journalism professor at the University of North Texas, as we watched her husband Jake Batsell's SXSW Interactive panel on "Non-Profit Journalism: Monetize Mission, Not Memes."

During the music portion of the festival, I spent part of one evening hanging out in a stinky alley with my vet and his wife, talking about both their recent visit to Norway and the capacity show we couldn't get into. I forced everyone to pose for pictures with the stethoscope that my vet had retrieved from a client earlier that day at SXSW. Later that night several members of our podcasting crew went to see two former members of the podcasting crew in their grooveadelic band J. Greene & the Steady.

At a chill eastside afternoon benefit for Austin Bat Cave/ Smart Girls on Wednesday afternoon, I saw local musician Thor Harris playing drums with visiting Lawrence, Kan., band Hospital Ships. Afterward, I asked bicycle enthusiast Harris to join me in another alley to eyeball my broken bike brake. While he couldn't fix my problem without a crescent wrench, I couldn't help thinking, as I watched a musician who had just played a show leaning over my bike with his long, hippie hair, that I was having a very Austin, very real, very SXSW moment.

Later, I caught up with a friend who was visiting from Latvia, and we had a chance to talk about the Russian invasion of the Ukraine and Latvian politics as I walked with her down Fourth Street. (Given the 40 percent Russian population of Latvia, the Russian troops in Ukraine were making my friend very nervous about the future!)

On the last night of the festival, I went to see my pal Drew Patrizi (formerly of the Austin band What Made Milwaukee Famous) playing with his new band Trumpeter Swan at their official showcase. Afterward, Patrizi's mother told me that she was very impressed with the energy of me running around taking pictures of the band during the show. How often do you get a chance to impress the mother of one of your friends at SXSW?

Maybe it was due to the fact that I was already immersing myself in a friend-centered festival when the incident on Red River happened, but I couldn't help noticing that afterward the biggest group of messages on social media was people telling their friends that they were OK, and asking about the well-being of other friends and family members. I even got texts and phone calls from people who knew I had been at the festival, asking if I was all right.

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Even in a giant festival with Lady Gaga and free pizza on every corner, I think it's our connection with other people that really matters. Especially in a time of crisis and tragedy.

Hanks is an Austin writer and photographer. She blogs about pop culture at www.anna-hanks.com.

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