

LOCAL

Luminaries

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Jim Belt said that this Christmas Eve's luminary service was the best one yet at Mountain Rest Cemetery. "More people came through this year than they did last year," he said. "Next year we will have a counter on the gates to tell us how many actually come through. But it was a continuous flow this year. For four hours it was bumper to bumper."

Church buses from Cherryville and Gastonia rolled through the luminary along with a man on a tractor, pulling a trailer of hay-riders singing Christmas carols. Other carols rang beautifully from the new bells on the new bell tower at the cemetery. "STAR IN THE EAST" was spelled out with glowing lights on the hill, now referred to as the "marquee." The base of the tower was accented with about 100 radiating milk jugs.

"When you're so tired and you think you can't take another step that energy comes back to you doing this," Belt said. "That is our Christmas. Just as much as it is giving to others, it gives to us." Just like most of the visitors, he finds the feelings generated by the magnificence of these simple lights as heartwarming and overwhelming. So much so he said, "that you just start to cry and you don't really even know why you're crying it just stirs within you that much."

He said that the new route they set up ran great and all of the cars seemed to travel smoothly through the winding course of the cemetery. "There were a lot of good drivers this year because there were hardly any jugs crushed," he said with a laugh. In past years there have been rows of almost 50 jugs at a time that were accidentally crushed by motorists. But the course this Christmas Eve glowed with the intense luminescence of 6,000 candles, lighting the way, brightening the spirits and warming the hearts of hundreds of travelers.

Danny Clark, a volunteer that has come to help out for the past five years, traveled all the way from his home in Myrtle Beach, SC, to once again lend a helping hand. KMPD Ofc. Todd McDougal and the Police Explorers also volunteered for three days. Belt said that his wife and himself were very pleased with the turn-out and the amount of community support they received.

Eight of the lighted milk jugs at the front of the entrance to Mountain Rest Cemetery had significant meaning to the Belts this year. They were to honor Mrs. Brenda Belt's best friend, Rachel Long, who recently passed away. "She was really one of the inspirers of this service," Mr. Belt said. Thirteen years ago it was Long who encouraged Mrs. Belt to visit a luminary service in Gastonia, an inspiration which would kick off an annual Kings Mountain Christmas Eve vigil.

Long had always donated and cut up milk jugs for the luminary to contribute to her best friend's cause. This year she wasn't able to do so, rendered with an illness that would take her life before Christmas. The Belts felt the sadness of her passing and were determined to reserve some of the candle-lit milk jugs in her honor. Almost as if from the grave, Long helped her friends one more time.

While going through some things and getting his jugs ready he said, "I found a black plastic bag with 8 cut jugs that she had cut for me last year. We put them at the entrance to the cemetery." Others may not have known that those eight jugs were displayed in remembrance of Long. No sign marked the heartfelt story of why eight simple lights glow bright for a friend who has passed. But the Belts knew it and they take comfort in knowing that somewhere, smiling down on them Long knows it too. Belt said that they plan to keep those eight to use every year.

Collections have already begun for next year's Christmas Eve Luminary service. "We need milk jugs. Save them all year for us and we will come and collect them for next year," Belt said. A collection bin has been set up behind 101 N. Carpenter Street (behind the New China Restaurant). The milk jugs need to be either clear or frosty in transparency, one-gallon size, and clean.



Photos by
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