

# Lighting up the night

Clarendon Hills Infant Welfare continues the luminaria tradition this Christmas Eve

BY MIKE ELLIS



Front row: Amy Ponto, Jennifer Van Zant and Krystyn Thomas  
 Back row: Kim Peterson, Jen Alsmann, Janice Monahan, Elizabeth Laurence, Rachel Murphy, Suzanne Austin and Anne Marie Bodrozic

If you've ever passed through Clarendon Hills after the sun has dipped beneath the horizon on Christmas Eve, you probably witnessed a scene you will not soon forget.

The streets are aglow with candlelight—and not just at churches, or in front-yards adorned with traditional manger scenes. The light emanates from more than 20,000 brown paper bags that align the sidewalks and driveways along the streets of Clarendon Hills, from Walker Elementary School and the downtown, to Prospect Park and Blackhawk Heights.

It is known as the luminaria tradition, and has added a unique and picturesque flair to the village since 1965. Vi Humphreys, then a Clarendon Hills resident and chapter member, officially started the tradition that year, (although a single block in Clarendon Hills was illuminated with luminaria the year before.) Each year, a considerable percentage of village residents purchase luminaria from the Clarendon Hills chapter of the Infant Welfare Society auxiliary (CHIW), which donates the proceeds from its sales to the Angel Harvey Family Health Center on the northwest side of Chicago.

Chapter president Elizabeth Laurence, who grew up in Clarendon Hills and Hinsdale, recalled the tradition being as strong when she was a child as it continues to be today.

"I remember always doing luminaria," Laurence said. ... "My grandparents lived in Clarendon Hills my whole life, and they always did it. It's just a very special and different Christmas tradition."

Laurence said the beautiful vista is one that attracts new residents and individuals from surrounding communities, who drive around the village to observe the remarkable coalescence of lanterns.

"On the news, they'll have the blocks that are decorated with the more modern decorations," she said, "and I think that this is just a lasting and charming tradition that our community takes part in."

On Christmas Eve, residents light their luminaria at dusk. Those who leave town for the holidays, cognizant of the tradition, often ask their neighbors to lay their luminaria out as well to blend in with the scene.

"We moved here four or five years ago, and I remember our neighbors, right away, the first thing they told us was about it, because it was such a big tradition, and you don't want to be that person who doesn't light up their sidewalk," said Jen Van Zant, who is co-chairing the CHIW benefit in January.

CHIW chapter members sell luminaria between Black Friday and Christmas Eve at the Lions Park Pool, Clarendon Hills Bank

and Kramer Foods. But this year, residents will also have the option of purchasing their luminaria online on the chapter website.

According to Ann Marie Bodrozic, who coordinates out-of-town luminaria sales for the chapter, CHIW will deliver the lanterns to the homes of online buyers.

"We think it will be really easy and streamlined," Bodrozic said.

Beyond the village limits, the luminaria tradition has extended in pockets. Bodrozic said the Wheaton and Naperville Infant Welfare auxiliary chapters purchase kits from CHIW for use in their communities, as do Rotary clubs and neighborhood associations in towns such as Downers Grove and Western Springs.

Benefit co-chair Amy Ponto said in addition to infusing beauty into the village on one special night each year, the tradition also enhances the sense of community.

"Along with it being so beautiful and charming, it also brings everybody together,"

*"I remember always doing luminaria. ... My grandparents lived in Clarendon Hills my whole life, and they always did it. It's just a very special and different Christmas tradition."*

—ELIZABETH LAURENCE

Ponto said. "We go and sell [the luminaria]; we get to see a lot of the local residents."

Luminaria sales account for roughly 25 percent of the proceeds the Clarendon Hills chapter donates to the Infant Welfare Society on an annual basis.

The chapter itself is comprised of approximately 50 members, all of whom reside in Clarendon Hills, who volunteer to support the Chicago-based non-profit organization, which provides a range of healthcare services to uninsured or underinsured men, women and children in Logan Square and surrounding neighborhoods.

"Many women in town get involved when they're new residents," Laurence said. "We have a lot of young members who are very enthusiastic and excited to devote their time to this great cause, and also to form friendships within the community."

Chapter vice president Jen Alsmann, who is in her seventh year with the group, said she has observed an increase in membership and interest in recent years.

"There's a new excitement that's building with Infant Welfare," Alsmann said.

While CHIW is best known for its signature luminaria, its largest annual fundraiser is the benefit, usually held at the

end of January. This year's benefit, themed "light up the night" in conjunction with the luminaria tradition, will take place on Jan. 25 at Butterfield Country Club in Oak Brook. The event will feature live and silent auctions, while welcoming a new band, Maggie Speaks, to provide live musical entertainment.

"It's a really great night where you can get out and see all of your friends and neighbors, and it's really well-attended," Laurence said. "We've been lucky that people continue to be enthusiastic and support it every year."

The capacity at Butterfield is slightly more than 300 guests, and Laurence said the benefit has sold out at least the past two years, encouraging individuals interested in attending to visit their newly-updated website.

Laurence said CHIW has also stepped up its social media presence on Facebook and Instagram, now highlighting a "member of the month" to introduce community members to the volunteers behind the scenes.

"The amount of talented people in this organization just blows your mind," she said, "and it's really amazing to see everyone give their talents to all these things."

In addition to their local volunteer work, chapter members are encouraged to visit the Angel Harvey Family Health Center. Bodrozic visited the clinic during the Infant Welfare Society's annual coat-drive last year, and said it left a lasting impression.

"It's just an amazing experience, because the clinic is so modern, and you see all the different practitioners walking around—and some of them are at the top of the field, and wanted to do this wonderful service as well," she said. ... "We got to hand coats out to the families, and to see, from our coat collection, down to handing them out to these different families, it was wonderful to see the full circle. It's a great resource for everyone in that area."

After more than seven decades of service, Laurence said CHIW continues to thrive.

"This organization has a tradition from its very inception of women donating their time and their talents," she said, "and it continues to be an organization that brings women together to do the same thing and to donate their talents. Even though times have changed, it's really about women volunteering and empowering and helping other women in ways that we can." ■

The Clarendon Hills chapter of the Infant Welfare Society auxiliary will present its annual benefit, "Light Up the Night," on Jan. 25 from 6:30 p.m. to midnight at Butterfield Country Club in Oak Brook. Tickets are available online at [www.clarendonhillsinfantwelfare.org](http://www.clarendonhillsinfantwelfare.org).