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WAUKESHA COUNTY



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‘Waukesha is strong because we are together’



Faith Rae/Freeman Staff

Waukesha community members gather at the Les Paul Performance Center in Cutler Park for the One-Year Remembrance Ceremony on Monday evening.



Quinn-PhotoBank

(From left) Waukesha Mayor Shawn Reilly and Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers before the “Waukesha Strong” plow on Monday.

Remembering the Waukesha Christmas Parade tragedy one year later

By Faith Rae
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WAUKESHA — Blinking blue lights danced among the crowd of Waukesha community members who gathered at Cutler Park Monday night. Residents came dressed in blue to remember the lives lost and the tragedy that took over the community exactly one year ago, on Nov. 21, at the Waukesha Christmas Parade.

One year ago, the Waukesha community experienced fear, heartbreak and the loss of life, said Mayor Shawn Reilly. Reading the names of the six who died in the parade attack, Reilly added that nearly 70 others were physically injured and thousands experienced mental and emotional injuries.

Monday night’s remembrance ceremony gave the community an opportunity to gather in support and resilience.

“We have been Waukesha Strong every day for the past year,” said Reilly after leading the crowd in a moment of silence. “We help those who need healing. We are standing with them, standing by them and praying for their recovery.”

Healing Hearts of Southeast Wisconsin and the Resiliency Center were present at the ceremony for those needing to talk or looking for support.

Governor Tony Evers spoke on behalf of the state of Wisconsin.

“Waukesha has worked to turn an unimaginable tragedy into a powerful source of hope, and love and strength. It’s been breathtaking to watch,” said Evers. “You’ve all reminded all of us what community really means. Through faith, through kindness and compassion, and through empathy and respect for yourself and towards each other. You’ve created a community where people are willing to show up time and time again.”

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WEATHER



Tomorrow:
Mostly sunny
High 46 / Low 32

See complete forecast on Page 8A

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Courtesy of Mike Crowley

Waukesha County Supervisor Mike Crowley snapped pictures of the neon pink stage at Cutler Park on Monday. A ceremony was held to show strength and unity a year after the Waukesha Christmas Parade tragedy.



Bradford Paulson/Special to The Freeman

Carmen De La Paz leads the audience in the song "Lean on Me" during the conclusion of Monday's ceremony.



Faith Rae/Freeman Staff

Waukesha resident and artist Carmen De La Paz (at the podium, right) in Cutler Park singing "Lean on Me" by Bill Withers during Monday night's One-Year Remembrance Ceremony.

Waukesha

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Fire Chief Steve Howard and Police Chief Dan Thompson both emphasized their thankfulness to the community for stepping up on the day of the attack and ever since then.

Howard highlighted how little acts of kindness like holding someone's hand or providing comfort during the traumatic event went a long way on that day, one year ago.

"What that tragedy did do is illustrate through demonstration the strength, perseverance and resiliency of this community," said Thompson. "This city and this community show the power of what united truly means."

Leaning on one another

The Rev. Patrick Heppe of the Catholic Community was injured during the parade attack. He shared his story.

"A year ago, I found myself, or let's say the people around found myself, on the pavement on Main Street," said Heppe. He spent the night in the ICU with a concussion protocol. The strength he saw from the commu-

nity has stuck with him from that point on. "We talk about Waukesha Strong. Waukesha has been strong much before this," said Heppe. "Because if Waukesha wasn't strong a year ago, they could have never done what they did today."

Sisters Sally Bott and Amy Noll attended the ceremony.

"If I ever accept this and don't feel sad, then there's something wrong because how can you ever imagine anything like this," said Bott, who added that she made herself go to the Memorial Day Parade because she's not going to let "him" (Darrell Brooks Jr., convicted of the parade attack) ruin everything.

"I've always said this is why I love Waukesha, even after the attack last year. Waukesha is a city with a small-town feel, and neighbors look out for each other," said Noll. "This is just on a grander scale what Waukesha means to me."

The ceremony ended with a Waukesha resident and artist who is helping design a sculpture as part of the parade memorial, Carmen De La Paz, leading the crowd in singing "Lean on Me" by Bill Withers, a song Reilly said speaks to the Waukesha community.

De La Paz ended the song with "Waukesha is strong because we are strong together!"



Bradford Paulson/Special to The Freeman

The city of Waukesha and Batteries Plus were handing out blue light bulbs and blue light-up bracelets to support Waukesha Strong at the one-year remembrance of the Waukesha Christmas Parade tragedy, held in Cutler Park near downtown Waukesha on Monday night.

'We are Granny Strong'

Dancing Grannies release statement on one-year parade anniversary

By Karen Pilarski
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WAUKESHA — The Milwaukee Dancing Grannies are a symbol of strength and resilience. Monday marked one year since the Waukesha Christmas parade attack, in which four of their members were killed. On Monday, the group reflected on their journey in a Facebook post.

"The day started cold and blustery with cheerful anticipation of the upcoming holiday season. Shortly after the parade began, the unimaginable happened that no one was or could ever be prepared

for. Throughout the evening and following day of the attack, we learned so much sad and life-changing news," the post said.

Four members of the MDG were killed including Tamara Durand, LeAnna Owen, Virginia "Ginny" Sorenson and William Gispel.

"Of the four deceased, Ginny and Lee were the glue that held this group together. Their passion, dedication, commitment, gentleness, caring friendship, and groups history was gone. Tamara's bubbly personality, love of God, family, and friends, and weekly chocolate chip cookies will never be forgotten. Tamara was with the MDGs for a few short months, this being

her first parade which she was not allowed to complete. Bill was our helper while his wife Lola performed. He would help wherever needed, Bill was a quite loving, caring, helpful man," the post said.

A few days later a fellow grannie called and asked what was going to happen to the group.

"Dealing with an array of emotions, I said I didn't know but we are going to try keeping the group together. If we succeed we do, if we don't we can at least say we tried."

Many people near and far, across the world, reached out to us and still do with kind words of sympathy, positivity, helpfulness and so much more," the post said.

After the tragedy, many people called with interest in joining the group.

"These people kept us going, and stoked the fire inside us to continue doing what we love to do: performing, hearing the cheers and applause, seeing smiles, and inter-

acting with the crowds all warm our hearts. Communities near and far wanted us to perform, knowing our fallen four would not want us to give up and disband the group," the post said.

After laying the dead to rest, the group began to pick up the pieces and move forward.

With the blessing of the four families, the group started to practice. The MDG trained all the new grannies at one time, which had never been done before.

"It wasn't easy at times. Some days were challenging dealing with different personalities, thoughts, opinions, why this or that, on top of grief and trauma. It became a fun-filled adventure, at times long and emotional. We stuck together and came out stronger than ever: We now have several new members who have become part of our granny family, dancing, volunteering, and sharing words of advice and creative ideas, while together, we navigate a

whole new world," the post said.

One year later the ladies are in performing mode as they perform in holiday and Christmas parades this year.

"Putting on the trademark Milwaukee Dancing Grannies costume means so much more than ever before. It is truly an honor to wear and perform in our signature blue and white winter costumes. Ginny, Lee, Tamara, and Bill are watching down on us, guiding, pushing, and moving us forward. We know Ginny and Lee are beaming ear to ear as the MDGs were their second family. We have made so many new connections near and far with so many adult dance teams. Continue following us as you never know where or with who we will be performing."

"For everyone, the communities that invite us to parades, new connections locally, throughout the country, and worldwide . . . WE ARE GRANNY STRONG!"