

Candlelight Stroll shines bright despite cold

Evan Loree
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

Thousands of candles cast tiny shadows across Old Town Friday night. As 12-year-old Maya Webster was inside the Court House chatting up the who's who of Niagara-on-the-Lake, a crowd of locals and visitors alike were gathering outside, preparing for the Candlelight Stroll.

And while the Dietsch family, with their 13-year-old son Dylan, were giving a TV interview, the Salvation Army Brass Band was playing Christmas music on the Court House steps, with Deborah Whitehouse providing the vocals.

The crowd was a low hum. Minerva Ward, the president of the Niagara-on-the-Lake Chamber of Commerce, which organizes the event, said she was a little disappointed by the rain and cold, which kept many people at home this year.

In 2022, almost 6,300 people came out, substantially more than the 2,500 a chamber spokesperson estimated turned out this year.

Still, Dylan and Maya, the recipients of the money raised by this year's stroll, are each receiving more than \$2,800 from sale of candles.

Maya said she was excited but also a little nervous, though this was not the first time she had spoken to a crowd about juvenile diabetes.



Kat Forbes and husband Brandon Poirier return to Niagara-on-the-Lake every year for the Candlelight Stroll. EVAN LOREE

Maya has been advocating for research into juvenile diabetes since she was almost seven. "I'm very proud of her," said her dad Jeff Webster. He told The Lake Report that his daughter began her journey as a diabetic when she was two and he never expected she would have the opportunities she's had. "It's like anything. Over the years, it's become just part of your day-to-day life," Webster said. Dylan, who lives with cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, was joined inside the Court House by

his brother, parents and a friend, John Dixon. The family is planning to use their share of the stroll funds to install a lift in their house to help Dylan get up and down the stairs. Dad Matt Dietsch said they gave their son the day off school so he could save his energy for the stroll. Dylan smiled and said he felt "good" about having the day off, while smiling at his friends and family. He and John Dixon have been friends for about four years and John said it was "just fun to be around" Dylan.

Andrew Niven, who chairs the board of the Chamber of Commerce, said the annual stroll was one of his favourite events. "It really defines what community is," he said when the leaders of the stroll walk down the Court House steps and light the first of thousands of candles. Lord Mayor Mayor Gary Zalepa said it was the "authenticity" of the Candlelight Stroll that lit his candle. Zalepa said he's known the Dietsch family for a long time and was inspired by Dylan's grandfather Mi-

chael Dietsch, who served as lord mayor in the 1990s. Tony Baldinelli, NOTL's member of Parliament, was also there. "Dylan speaks to me directly," Baldinelli said, because his son Daniel was born premature and had to spend 136 days in hospital recovering. Knowing the money from the event is helping to support Dylan was, in Baldinelli's words, "fabulous." Meanwhile, Cassandra Stuart from Stevensville was outside with her three children Ellie, Isaac and Lincoln.

Stuart said she has attended the annual stroll for about four years. "I like the carolling, the gathering of everybody. And it's beautiful," she said. As her children, four-year-old Ellie and three-year-old Isaac, smiled in unison over the thought of opening gifts on Christmas day, Stuart said it was their joy that she loved the most about Christmas. Six-year-old Fiona Jaramillo was at the head of the crowd with her parents during the speeches, catching a glimpse of the mysterious Santa Claus as he helped to light candles. Four-year-old Katherine Urquhart was awfully fond of her cat-eared hat while she sat perched atop dad Eddie Urquhart's shoulders. She, too, had a view of the action as the first candles were lit.

On their evening stroll, Brandon Poirier and Kat Forbes took a moment to listen to one of the performing bands.

The couple told The Lake Report they come to Niagara-on-the-Lake every year for their anniversary and stay at the Pillar and Post, where they were married.

They said they just enjoy being together for Christmas. "She kinda saved Christmas for me a long time ago," Poirier said, smiling at his wife. Forbes said there is something magical about the town and the time of year that brings them back every year.

Wayside Chapel's Christmas sing-along returns

Julia Sacco
The Lake Report

The Wayside Chapel's Christmas sing-along may just become a yearly tradition.

The chapel's afternoon of carolling will return for a second year this Saturday after a large turnout in 2022, said Rick Meloen, the sing-along organizer.

"There were about 70 people and I would have been happy with ten,"

Meloen said. "It may turn into an annual tradition." Anyone who wishes to participate can meet outside of the Wayside Chapel on the parkway at 3 p.m. on Saturday. "We just thought it would be an opportunity for people to take some time out of their schedules for carolling," Meloen said. He added that songbooks will be provided, but they are willing to sing whatever the group desires.



Anyone who wishes to join the sing-along can meet outside the chapel at 3 p.m. on Saturday. FILE



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