



Lighting up the holidays . . .

The suburbs of Clarendon Hills and Wheaton have much in common – they're both great communities in which to live, work and raise a family; each has lovely residential and thriving business areas; both have great schools. And importantly for IWS, they share something else as well – a tradition of “lighting up the holidays” in their towns through their Chapters’ luminaria sales.

The lighting of luminaria is a custom that dates back to the 16th century. It began as a Spanish practice of lighting bonfires along the roads and churchyards to guide people to Midnight Mass on the final night of the celebration of Los Posadas. Los Posadas (a Spanish word meaning lodging or inn) is a festive celebration that was first introduced to the native people of Mexico by European missionaries. It is the reenactment of the story of Mary’s and Joseph’s search for lodging in Bethlehem. The tradition continues to this very day with the lighting of candles in small, brown, sand-filled bags to line streets and neighborhoods on Christmas Eve -- seemingly guiding travelers to their own holiday destinations.

It is a time-honored ritual with our Clarendon Hills and Wheaton Chapters, and it’s safe to say that each has “spread the light” with each passing year. Like so many other aspects of the Auxiliary, this one, too, is steeped in tradition.

For four decades now, both Chapters have been sponsoring these sales. Clarendon Hills’ involvement began in 1965, and Wheaton began to sell luminaria four years later in 1969. Both Chapters have sponsored the fundraiser every year since, and along the way about eight other Auxiliary Chapters were involved for a time as well.

Clarendon Hills Chapter President Anne Malcolm says that the sale started in her Chapter with Vi Humphreys, a former member who wanted to share this marvelous tradition with her own community. So when Vi moved to Clarendon Hills, she suggested the Chapter consider this as an IWS fundraiser and the rest, as they say, is history!

“It’s become more than merely a fundraiser for our members,” says Wheaton Chapter President Elaine Luse. “We’ve been doing this special project for 40 years now, and I know how much it has done to bring our members -- and our entire town, for that matter -- together at this special time of year.”

Diane Grundberg, Chairman of the Clarendon Hills Chapter’s sale, echoes those sentiments. She says that luminaria have become so much a part of the holiday decor in Clarendon Hills that



This year, the Wheaton Chapter celebrated the 40th anniversary of its Luminaria Sale.

residents look forward to purchasing them every year – lighting up their homes during the holidays and taking satisfaction in the knowledge that their purchase is supporting a wonderful cause. It’s definitely a win/win situation. Each Chapter raises about \$20,000 each year from their sales.

Wheaton Chapter members Celine Lillie, Cathy McLaughlin and Karen Patton have chaired their Chapter’s sale for the past two years. Celine talks about the importance of this fundraiser – and not only in terms of its profits. Equally important, to her way of thinking, is the light it sheds upon the cause her Chapter espouses



Lighting up the holidays . . . continued



Clarendon Hills Chapter members gather at the Community Pool parking lot to distribute luminaria to their customers.



Dena Arendt of the Clarendon Hills Chapter places luminaria in the Village.

– the Infant Welfare Society of Chicago. She adds, “I think because IWS is located in the city and supports a Clinic in Logan Square, many people in the suburbs simply don’t know about its work or the services it provides for so many women and children in need. The sale has allowed us to spread the word about IWS, and that’s been an important outgrowth of the fundraiser itself.”

Each Chapter’s over four decades of history with luminaria work in their favor in terms of publicizing their sales. Wheaton relies on a network of coordinators within the Chapter who sell the kits throughout the neighborhoods. The Chapter also posts signs around the town advertising sales sites at Cosley Zoo, Jewel and French Market. For its part, the Clarendon Hills Chapter relies on coverage in the local media and signage around town. Both Chapters also stress the importance of corporate and business support to their success.

Obviously, work on the sale begins well in advance of the holiday season -- in July, in fact -- when orders for candles and bags are placed. The Wheaton Chapter purchases their components from the Clarendon Hills Chapter that serves as a sort of “central clearing house” for the sale. The Chapter has a bulk provider for the candles and bags, and Clarendon Hills distributes over 30,000 candles each year. In October, supplies arrive and are stored at a parking lot in Clarendon Hills until December when both Chapters’ members pick up their

orders and distribute them to their customers. Importantly, both Chapters’ efforts involve almost their entire memberships. Celine gets specific about what is involved. She says, “Each year, our 35 members divide 20,000 paper bags into sets of 5, sit in the cold to sell luminaria, walk through neighborhoods delivering order forms and filled orders, deliver orders to block captains and proudly light their own luminaria on Christmas Eve – all for the benefit of the Infant Welfare Society!”

That work ethic and commitment are also evident among members of the Clarendon Hills Chapter. Diane Grundberg says that her Chapter looks forward to the fundraiser from year to year. “There’s so much history associated with our sale – this past year was our 44th, and it’s inspiring to be a part of this time-honored Clarendon Hills tradition.”

Anne says that the custom has become so popular and pervasive in Clarendon Hills that almost everyone is participating by now. “It’s such a joy to drive down the streets of our Village on Christmas Eve and see all the homes and businesses alight with our luminaria. It’s very gratifying, and it makes me appreciate this wonderful town in which we live.”

Her comments are reminiscent of those voiced 44 years ago by then Auxiliary President Marty Rentschler. She noted the following in an article that appeared in a 1972 edition of the Auxiliary newsletter: “From a small start of a few hundred candles in Clarendon Hills only seven years

ago (1965), a feeling of tremendous community involvement in lighting the pathways on Christmas Eve in west suburban Chicagoland has grown. This year, Clarendon Hills Infant Welfare members placed over 50,000 candles and have been responsible for the purchase of many more in neighboring communities. Not only is the sight of over 50,000 lights impressive, but the villagers' cooperation in lighting them makes Clarendon Hills and other towns following their example wonderful places to live," Rentschler said.

From that time to this, the impact of luminaria on Christmas Eve continues to be felt. Celine recounts a story of a Wheaton customer who came to Cosley Zoo to purchase luminaria. He said that he had driven his mother around the village the previous year to show her the lights, and she was so moved by the sight that she began to cry -- so he said it was imperative that he purchase them this year. The gentleman said he was looking forward to seeing his mother's reaction when she saw his driveway lined with luminaria on Christmas Eve.

Certainly, there is that "feel good" sense associated with those seemingly endless rows of brown paper bags in Clarendon Hills and Wheaton -- each alight with a single flickering candle. It's a sight that calls to mind the charity behind it all that "lights a candle" (in the words of the Wheaton Chapter) for the many children we serve at the IWS Clinic each year.

We encourage other Chapters to consider "spreading the light" during the 2010 holiday season. It is a tradition in which the Auxiliary rightfully takes great pride and enormous satisfaction. We thank the Clarendon Hills and Wheaton Chapters for their longstanding commitment to this marvelous holiday tradition!



Luminaria sales by our Clarendon Hills and Wheaton Chapters light up homes like this one during the holiday season.



Wheaton Chapter members gather at a bagging party to assemble luminaria kits.