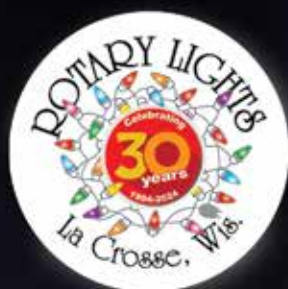


ROTARY LIGHTS AT 30

*The history that has shaped one of
La Crosse's most important events*



By Noah Nelson



1995 to 2024

Comments from President Pat Stephens

None of us that got Rotary Lights rolling in 1995 envisioned what it has grown to in 2024. The purpose of this book is to try to capture some of those memories and special moments that have made Rotary Lights what it is today.

A special thank you goes out to Noah Nelson. Noah, from Westby, and at the time a senior at Viterbo University took on the challenge of trying to capture what has kept Rotary Lights alive for 30 years. Noah personally interviewed countless folks and read through our archives to get a historical background and real feel for the Rotary Lights Project. We are grateful for his involvement.

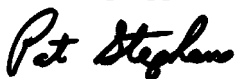
Having led Rotary Lights for 30 years means I spent a lot of time away from family and friends. I thank them for their support and understanding. My wife Joanne, has been a true partner with the project. After 54 years of togetherness, we try to tackle numerous involvements as a team. Without Joanne, Rotary Lights would not be celebrating 30 years,

I salute the Rotary Clubs of our district. From the very beginning all of the clubs contributed financially and physically. They laid the foundation for success.

A huge thank you to all present and past staff of the La Crosse Park Department. There have been a lot of faces over the years, but all have been supportive and engaged.

We all know we live in a very special place. Rotary Lights is but one of the major activities that makes our area so special. Please enjoy Rotary Lights 2024.

With Deep Appreciation,



Pat Stephens-President





Rotary Clubs – An Introduction

In 1994, nine local Rotary clubs collaborated to host Coulee Jubilee, a light show at Riverside Park, from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day. "Feed the Hungry of the Coulee Region" was their mission, and they have done just that. The event, you may know better as Rotary Lights, has become a staple of La Crosse's culture, and it has become much more than just a light show. It has collected millions of food items for local food pantries over its 30-year history. In 2024, Rotary Lights celebrates its 30th year in the park. The once small light show has grown far beyond what many thought it would and it is proof of what groups can do when they come together for the betterment of many.

Rotary International, the overarching entity that the lights are part of, is a non-political, non-religious multinational organization which prides itself on providing humanitarian aid, fostering high ethical standards, and promoting peace and goodwill throughout the world. Rotary International has a strong presence, with over 46,000 member clubs and 1.4 million members worldwide. They provide several services which promote their goals, from exchange programs for high school students, polio vaccinations in the Middle East, and any number of service-based projects around the globe. In the La Crosse community, Rotary Clubs are particularly active and have become a key part of many people's holiday season.

Rotary Lights embodies the mission of Rotary International, and the service they provide every year is greatly appreciated throughout the Coulee Region. From the mouths that they feed to the children they make smile, La Crosse would not be the same without



2017-photo Dave Larsen

Rotary Lights. It is a defining example of the positive community impact that an event spearheaded by caring volunteers can have.



The Early Years

Origin Story

What has now become a long-standing tradition in La Crosse began with humble beginnings 30 years ago when, in 1994, Duane Moore, incoming president of Rotary East, was inspired with an idea for a community project. On a Thanksgiving visit to his daughter's house in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, he saw a Christmas light show at Rhema Bible Church that caught his eye. He was impressed enough with the display that he wanted to meet with the organizers for details about how they did it. Moore wanted to do something like that in La Crosse, and, given his new position with Rotary East, he was in the position to do just so.

Moore brought the idea home and proposed it at Rotary's 'Pitch Conference' in Oshkosh where all incoming presidents gather to form positive action plans within their cities. He gathered the presidents for a breakfast meeting and told them about his idea. They loved it, but several hurdles had to be leaped over before the display could happen in La Crosse that following year. But the seed had been planted, and several meetings were held to determine the feasibility and methodology for successfully hosting such a project.

Despite seeing the light show in Oklahoma, the local Rotary clubs had never put on an event like this. Duane said, "Nobody [in our group] had ever done anything like this ever. So, who do you go to for advice?" His wife, Jan, spoke of these difficulties, saying, "The right hand didn't know what the left hand was doing." John Wettstein is Rotary Lights Vice President, and he has been there since the first year. He added, "Like any business or project that you take on, when you start from zero it's very rough. A lot of it is crude. A lot of it is unplanned."

As talks moved past the proposal stage, several questions had to be answered before the event could *really* take shape. Once it was determined that they would be moving forward with a light display, decisions had to be made for construction, storage, insurance, etc. Initially most pressing was: where would the event take place? The original plan was to have the lights at Myrick Park, but due to traffic routes it wouldn't logistically work. That's when Pat Stephens really got



involved. Jan recalls Pat's proposal, "What about Riverside Park?"

This speaking up led to Stephens' longtime leadership of Rotary Lights. A UW-La Crosse graduate and the university's director of collegiate gifts, Pat started out as chairman of the project in 1995, and he has been Rotary Lights' President since. Further discussions made the event philanthropic with the goal of collecting food for hunger agencies and money for participating nonprofits. Duane said, "The whole thing was done for the public and it wasn't to make money." Moore continued to say, "The biggest decision they ever made was, 'Do we charge admission, or do we have it for free?'"



A photo of Rotary Lights first year display – 1995

Doing it for free would pose some financial risks of course, namely bankruptcy, but if they planned on working for lower income communities it would feel hypocritical to charge an entry fee. So, in continuing that public service mission, they made the event free, opting instead to request an *optional donation* from visitors. That 'optional donation' became a cornerstone of the event, and many believe that it inspired far more donations than a set cost would have.

Rotary members were determined to make the event more than just a



light display; they wanted it to have impact in the community. Before the first lights were ever raised, high expectations were set. In an Aug. 5, 1995, feature in the La Crosse Tribune, Duane said, “We hope this would become a community project with involvement from organizations, then it would be more than just a light show.” At that time, he was unaware of how right his prediction would be.

With some seed money from some of the area’s Rotary Clubs, they were able to buy 250,000 lights from a Westinghouse Warehouse in Illinois. All of those lights had to be opened, taken out of their packages, tested and spooled. The first lights were turned on November 24, 1995, in front of about 500 spectators. The event was billed as the Coulee Jubilee and it was open from the day after Thanksgiving until just after midnight on January 1st, a total of 38 nights. The food and monetary donations were collected, with the food distributed that year went to the Salvation Army and the money they collected went to the nonprofit groups assisting with the event. The group collected 13,010 canned goods in the first year, despite the donation being optional.

Struggles and Establishment

In the early years, there was not the same quality of equipment as today, and the event was at constant risk of failure. Wettstein said, “It was crude.” Even though the event wasn’t held at Myrick Park, it still had several storage areas that the lights were kept in for the first few years. Pat said, “We made arrangements with the Park Department to use the old shelter at Myrick Park... [There was] limited electrical outlets and no heat, [but] a brave group of volunteers got the job done.” The first animated displays were built in the Myrick Park shelter, too. Wettstein said. “In that first year... there was no warming house, and there was no volunteer trailer. Early volunteers like Elmer Grassman and Basil Martin kept us all going

The core volunteer group was small, and many groups manned the stations for multiple days. Joanne remembered, “[In the first year] they had nobody to work on Christmas Eve, so Pat said, ‘My family will do it.’” What they hadn’t planned on was that Christmas Eve that year was 20 below zero, and, unlike today, there weren’t many options for cold volunteers. The Stephens’ kept their car running the entire time they



volunteered, and Joanne said, “None of us could feel our faces. We were pretty much worn out from that night.” Every year since then, they have worked Christmas Day instead, keeping Christmas Eve for their annual family meal.



Volunteers Shelter in Trailer - 1999

Joanne further described the work required to operate the event, saying, “I don’t think people even realize what it takes to put that up... it’s not just a holiday project it’s a year-round project.” And during the holidays it only becomes more intense. She said, “When it first started, [Pat] would take vacation days from his job during setup so that he could [do Rotary Lights work].” During those years, Pat and Joanne were dedicated to growing and improving the lights. Joanne described how she and Pat would take weekend trips to other cities to see their light shows, hoping to be inspired with new ideas. But what they continually noticed was what made Rotary Lights different than the rest. Joanne said, “There wasn’t one lights display that was free. The majority of them were anywhere from \$20 to \$30.”

In the next few years, there were some necessary additions. They added a trailer for shelter, a gas stove for heat, and the collection area for when people left the park. Despite the vision, it was not perfect right away. Wettstein said, “[It] was very crude at that time. It was cold. It was drafty.



One year early on, there was an issue with the wiring due to excessive rain at the park. Jan said, “That was terrible. There was water all over and these cords were laying there [in the rain]. It was bad.” They realized that the current infrastructure could no longer support the needs of the park, and new plans were laid out for in park electrical work. Jan credits Andy Wettstein for building the electrical infrastructure in the park. She said, “Andy spearheaded that... He’s very instrumental because he was the first electrician that helped put the lighting, the conduits, and all of the electrical boxes in the park

While the park developed, it wasn’t all completely redone, and a few pieces of infrastructure remain from the original developments, including the light tunnel and Christmas Tree. The tunnel has received updates in its lights’ coding, but the core structure remains the same. John Leinfelder was an active member in Rotary East with Duane, and he created the tunnel. Duane said, “When John built it, he built it so strong that it could blow every night for a month, and it wouldn’t move an inch.”

The show grew in donations and sponsorships annually, from 13,010 food items in 1995 to 66,211 in 1999. Despite that success, there were constant battles to remain functional within management circles. Wettstein said, “For years we needed money. We just scratched by every year, and I thought people would start to give food and money.” Pat recalled the growth of the event, “I remember in the early years we were lucky if we got anything but coins in the basket.” Early in the display’s history, it was challenging to solidify the event as valuable to the community. Joanne said, “You have to prove to people what a benefit it will be to the community and to the food pantries that were benefiting from it.”

Storage of the lights needed to expand as well. Originally, NSP, now Xcel, allowed them to use one-half of their warehouse on Second St. and Jay, which is now a parking ramp for LHI. They had built a new warehouse out in the Industrial Park and only used their downtown building to shelter their truck fleet that were prepped for winter emergencies. Pat said, “It was a great set-up for us. We had half the warehouse to store our inventory, only a few blocks from Riverside Park, and NSP covered the utility costs.”



The Light House

The Lighthouse

Everything was sweet until they received a letter from NSP on Dec. 1st 1998 indicating that the building was being sold and we had to vacate by the end of the month.

“What were we going to do with all of our items that were being displayed in the park?” Pat worried. He sent a call for “help” out to all the Rotary Clubs asking for suggestions.

HABCO, now Hawkins Ash, responded that they owned the building next to their Headquarters on Milwaukee St. Half of the building was used for classrooms and the other half was available for storage. The warehouse had been advertised for rent for some time with no takers, and as Pat said, “It seemed like we had a home.” Everything was taken out of the park in January, and it all fit nicely in the HABCO warehouse. Unfortunately, just 60 days later they received a call that the warehouse space had been rented and they must vacate.

They found a pole shed just a few blocks from HABCO on the Causeway which had been empty for many years which gave them storage space but did not have enough room to build or repair the displays. Pat said, “Murphy’s Law kicked in once again. We got the call that the building was being sold and we had to vacate.” (*The building*



was turned into a nightclub highlighting many local bands. It only lasted about 18 months)

Pat said, “We got our key volunteers together and realized if we did not find a home, the project was not going to last.” The wear and tear on the equipment was taking a toll on the displays and the volunteers were getting tired of the musical warehouses. They got a call from Randy Smith who was the interim head of Heileman at the time. The then current owners that bought the brewery were anxious to get some of their properties on the market. Randy said the owners were putting the old Heileman Keg House up for sale. The entire block was being listed for over \$1 million dollars and the Real Estate people told Randy it would be a few years before anything would be finalized. Randy said he would allow us to use it until it was sold.

It was perfect for what Rotary Lights needed. Fenced in property, loading dock, zoned heating and still only a few blocks from Riverside Park. Stephens said, “I remember calling our volunteers and letting them know we had found at least a temporary home for Rotary Lights. Everyone was excited. The project was saved.”

Before they moved their equipment into the Keg House, Randy called and said “you’re not going to believe this, but the property is being sold, going on to become the Toyota Dealership. Pat expressed his disappointment to Randy and asked if there were any other brewery properties that he was going to sell. He said the only other property he was authorized to sell was the building at 27 Market St. It was used for storage and at one time was the print shop for the brewery.

Pat toured it with Randy that same day and said he’d take it. He said, “We had barely enough in the Rotary Lights checkbook for the down payment but launched a campaign through the area Rotary Clubs to raise the necessary funds.” The Rotary clubs were generous, and the names of those donors remain on the donor wall in the main meeting room.

The building that they now call “The Lighthouse” is used by many organizations. Downtown Rotary assembles their annual fruit baskets in the building and some of the storage space is used for Rotary East, After Hours, Riverfest, Irishfest, Lobsterfest, Memorial Day items, Rotary Gift Shop and others.



The Supporting Cast

But how would Rotary Lights be able to host the event for free and stay operational? And how did they grow to what we know today? As is the case in almost every organization, Rotary Lights has had an extremely strong supporting cast. Their steering committee has connections and talents across a variety of skill-sets, and their volunteer staff has been continually excellent.

One of the earliest members of this supporting cast is Jim Moe. “Jim Moe was our first Santa, and he really felt he *was* Santa,” Jan Moore said. Moe became devoted to the success of the lights, and during the



Jan Moore sits with Jim Moe as Santa

time he was at the park, he gave his all. Duane Moore continued, “Jim got involved in this and his personality was such that when he got into it, he really got into it.” Duane credits Moe with many different innovations in the park. He said, “Jim was the one who got the idea of candy canes... he was responsible for getting the live reindeer to the park.”

Jan chimed in, “And boy was he fussy.” She described a time when Moe redid all of the candy cane props meticulously because the other workers hadn’t done it to his high standards. Despite his eccentricities,



Moe was essential in the early years of Rotary Lights. He was instrumental in the creation of the centerpiece which is still in use at the park, and he brought an energy to the event that remains present today. Duane said, “Without Jim Moe, we would never have had the reindeer, we would have never had the tree with the antennae on it, and we would never have had mobile moving parts displays.”

Duane and Jan recognize Moe’s importance in Rotary Lights’ history, but unfortunately, Jan had to become ‘the woman who fired Santa’. She said, “One night it was cold. And [Jim] called me and said the kids shouldn’t be out anyways it’s too cold.” She responded, “If you’re not coming down, I’m going to give your job to somebody else.” Moe became angry with Moore, and she remembers, “He wouldn’t even look at me he was so furious... So, the joke was Jan Moore fired Santa.” Duane further credited Moe following his death in 2020, saying in an article he wrote for the La Crosse Tribune, “La Crosse just celebrated its 25th anniversary of Rotary Lights. Jim Moe wasn’t present, but his ideas were visible.”

Pat Stephens

Of the thousands of volunteers that have served Rotary Lights, none are more important than ‘Positive Pat’ Stephens.

The president of and longtime advocate for the event, Stephens has always supported and inspired volunteers, pulling the best out of people for decades.

A UW-La Crosse graduate and fraternity member, Stephens began working for his alma mater in 1978 as the UW-L Foundation Director of Collegiate Gifts and he retired after 35 years in 2013. During his tenure, he raised millions of dollars for student scholarships and developed key relationships that paid dividends in his many other projects.

Pat is the glue that holds the event together – anyone who’s worked on the project will tell you that. With a keen memory for faces and a community of connections, Pat’s greatest talent may be his ability to ‘set the hook’ for volunteers. He’s brought in dozens of incredibly skilled and dedicated workers to Rotary Lights, and many of them were convinced





over a meeting as simple as a breakfast.

Stephens' legacy extends far beyond Rotary Lights, and he is a central figure in many of the city's biggest events. His family in Milwaukee was involved in their Irishfest celebration, one of the largest in the country, which served as inspiration for him and a group of locals to start one in La Crosse. As with many of Pat's projects, it started with a simple conversation, "We said, you know, we could do that right here in La Crosse." 2024 is the 19th year of Irishfest in La Crosse, and, similarly to Rotary Lights, it has exceeded expectations. Pat said, "We never would have thought that [it would be as successful as it is]. We thought that it could run for two or three years and be just fine."

He has also been closely tied with the Freedom Honor Flight which takes veterans to see the monuments in Washington D.C. Pat said, "We've now done 31 flights from La Crosse and a little over 3,000 veterans that we've taken there." They've taken World War II veterans, Korean War veterans, and are now taking Vietnam War veterans to D.C. He said of the Vietnam vets: "That is one group that never got a welcome home at the time and so when they have the red carpet laid out for them for the Freedom Honor Flight, they are really appreciative."

Pat has served the community in the public sector, too, serving as a Chamber of Commerce Ambassador since 1971. He said, "You never get tired of that because you do a lot of ribbon cuttings and groundbreaking and stuff for all sorts of things, [giving] me the opportunity to meet new people." Being an ambassador for the Chamber of Commerce, he can build the community from within, talking with people about their projects and his, promoting the events in an organic way. He was also instrumental in helping the Freedom Honor Flights get organized, has served on the Boys/Girls Club Board, the Y Board, helped with numerous Capital Campaigns.



2016-photo Dave Larsen



Becoming a City Staple

The Lights

Everyone who's heard of them knows that the lights at Rotary Lights are the main attraction – it's in the name – but few fully appreciate what they represent. Taken directly from their website, “The purpose of Rotary Lights, Inc. is to ‘Feed the Hungry of the Coulee Region’.” The purpose isn’t, “Give the community a beautiful light show for free,” yet Rotary Lights offers both. And the more they offer, the more they receive. And more lights at the park means more resources that Rotary Lights is (likely) receiving and therefore more opportunities for them to donate – it’s a positive feedback loop which benefits both itself and the city it supports. The ‘beauty’ of the lights is proportionate to the fulfillment of their purpose, and the combination of visual and spiritual beauty merge to craft the peaceful, joyous atmosphere that participants of all ages can experience.

Throughout their history, Rotary Lights has purchased 6 million lights including those which have burnt out. Over three million lights now make up the display, up exponentially from their ‘humble’ beginnings with ‘only’ 250 thousand lights. The displays now move, the Christmas tree in the middle is 140-foot tall, and the main sign can be seen from streets away – it’s almost demanding to be viewed. And people have done just that; over 130,000 attended the lights in some capacity in 2023. Visitors can either walk or drive themselves through Riverside Park, though most say the experience is better walking.

Leo Chaput is credited with developing many displays in the park, and he has been awarded heavily for his service to the project. John Wettstein said, “Oh, it’s unbelievable. He’s made displays for the cost of



Fireworks at the light show in 2007



materials that would have cost us 30 to 40 thousand.” Chaput’s talents were recognized at the national Jefferson Awards, and he has taken a key position in the development of Rotary Lights.

Chaput has been with the organization since the week after he retired in 2002, and he developed many of the most iconic animatronics in the park. Chaput first started at the lights as a Board of Directors member, which, while still a time commitment, is a far cry from what his role with the lights became. Pat approached Chaput looking for members from each Rotary Club to join the team, and after hearing that it would only be two meetings of 45 minutes every year, he said, “Well, I’ll volunteer for that... that’s easy.” What started as just two meetings a year turned into over 9,000 hours of volunteer work spanning over 20 years with the project.

He worked as a boilermaker his whole life, so Chaput had a background with steel, welding, etc., making his skills especially valuable to Rotary Lights. At his first meeting, Chaput looked at some of the current animatronics and he figured they were simple enough to make, so when Andy Wettstein was saying a former display had to be retired, Chaput was the first to step in with new ideas. “Well, I can draw one of the floor of the building there and if you like it then I can make it come alive,” Leo said. So, they gave him a key to the building, and he went there at night, drawing out a 12 feet tall and 32 feet long dragon on the floor. When the blueprint was done, he called Pat and that same night a group came down to see it. They loved it and the build phase was a go. Chaput was provided with all the materials, and he got to work. It took him about three weeks of 40-hour a week labor – a bit more than the ‘easy’ two meetings it had initially been described as. Once the build was complete, he showed Pat and said, “We’ve got the dragon done now but I said we should really have it spit some fire... Otherwise it’s not a real dragon.”

Since then, Chaput makes it his goal to enliven three more displays per year. Two of them are suggestions from the board of directors or steering committee and the third is a personal choice. Chaput always made his pick cater to the youth, saying, “My choice was always to please the little kids. I figured if I could make an animation that the little kids will look at it and their jaw is going to drop, then I know I succeeded.” He gave



some examples of some of those projects like the squirrels climbing on the trees or the bears throwing snowballs at each other, but he said, “I hear tons of parents saying [that one] is my favorite.” So, while they’re made with the kids in mind, the displays bring out the childlike wonder in many adults.



Bears throwing snowballs

Another project he mentioned as a favorite was the alien spaceship; he recalls, “I really liked that one because it was a little more complicated than the others.” However, none of the displays can top the fire-breathing dragon for Chaput, there’s just too much sentimentality.

For his work with the lights, Chaput was nominated for a Jefferson Award by Pat Stephens. Chaput said, “That’s a really humbling situation because you’re with a group of volunteers. They’re all good volunteers and in my opinion, any one of them would have deserved recognition.” He was flown to New York City in October 2022 and was amongst around 140 other recipients of the award. Chaput gave a speech recalling his time with Rotary Lights and he credited the many people who supported him along the way. He was also the recipient of a 2023 Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Award for outstanding public service benefiting local communities.

Of course, being recognized for hard work is always great, but Chaput understands that the mission extends far beyond the confines of Riverside Park. He said, “If the people going to the park and they don’t really like the animations that I made, but they like the atmosphere and the came



with a few bags of groceries for the food shelves... that's the main purpose...Everybody benefits, not only Rotary Lights, the food shelves, the hotels, the restaurants, the bars, the shops...They all inherit benefits from Rotary Lights.”

The Nativity Scene

While originally starting as only a light show, Rotary Lights has many other events within the event which also contribute to their mission. There were eleven ‘events’ other than the lights offered in 2023: a parade, a live nativity scene, an ecumenical service, Santa with reindeer, an ice castle, carriage rides, hayrides, helicopter rides, ice skating, an ugly sweater 5k, and a New Year’s Eve countdown. Each of these events



Singers at the Diorama

has their own separate team supporting it and they have brought in thousands of donations to Rotary Lights.

Despite the non-religious aspect of Rotary International, there are still several Christmas-themed events as listed above. The live nativity scene is one of the longest running and biggest events held at the park, and over 700 volunteers contribute to its yearly operation. Created by La Crosse’s Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) church in 1992, the event has been at Rotary Lights since 1997. The ‘live’ nativity is true



to its name, bringing live animals to add an authentic feel to the event. Officially called the Diorama, the nativity was first at the lights in 1997 and it has been there ever since.

Loren Molling is one of the organizers from WELS, and the event has become so large that it has its own steering committee to make it happen, much like the lights themselves. Similarly, to the lights, they have two required meetings annually as well, spring and fall, so that the group can organize and plan for their display. The display's steering committee is comprised of at least one member from every church participating in the live nativity. There are 22 churches and over 30 members at the meetings. Molling said about the groups combined efforts, "As far as our working relationship I couldn't ask for a better one."



Live Nativity

There have been some dissenting voices about the nativity scene, however, with people arguing that religion does not belong at the light show, but Molling argued against this point, saying, "We're just the ones that do a live nativity, that's just the display." Since the nativity is not operated by Rotary Lights, it is a separate entity, meaning they are free to express their religious beliefs. Molling also believes that the demographics of the La Crosse area make the nativity scene appropriate, saying, "For the people who are Christians, they love it, and there's a lot of Christianity in the area."

Religion is always a touchy subject legally when operating such large events, but Molling credits Stephens for handling it well. "[Someone] even said, 'Well, then could we put a statue of Satan down there?' and Pat's like, 'You want to pay for it? Go for it.'" Of course, bringing Satanism to a Christmastime event would seem rather odd, but Pat is principled, allowing freedom of religious expression for any group that is willing to pay for a display and promote the mission.

Molling is part of the Rotary Lights steering committee, too, and he



gives them the utmost credit, saying, “We’ve got one of the best steering committees for anything going on in the world... and they’re all doing it to make their community a little nicer.” He went on to describe the familial ties that many of the members have formed, saying, “Whenever we have a meeting its just like a bunch of family members getting together and trying to figure out what we need to do.”

Molling recalls his most touching memory with the event – just a man with his kids, watching the Diorama. The man, a downtrodden fellow as Molling remembers, was standing in the street with his kids, showing them the scene. “And he said, ‘Look, this is why we have Christmas. Nothing else.’ And I thought about that one guy and his kids; they verified all of our work that we’re doing.” Despite the hardships they may have been going through, they recognized the nativity first; they were not consumed by the grandeur and opulence of the lights, but they were content with the humble scene; ‘the true meaning of Christmas’. Molling emphasized this message, saying, “We’re there to show Christ’s love. That’s all.”



An ecstatic runner at the 2014 Ugly Sweater 5k

Other Events

Many groups take part in hosting their own events under the Rotary Lights umbrella, too. For example, Rotary Lights promotes The Ugly Sweater 5k on their website despite Rotary After Hours being the events main sponsor. Cinderella Carriage is another one of these companies,



Cinderella Carriage, providing horse-pulled carriage rides-photo Dave Larsen

providing horse-pulled carriage rides every weekend that the park is open. Hayrides are offered on select nights during the Rotary Lights season, but they're free to those who go.

Every year since 2005, there has been a parade to open up the lights on the first night, and they have a similar celebratory Countdown to New Year's which partners with the La Crosse Skyrockers. One of the newer and more unique offerings is the helicopter rides. They had been offered at Riverfest for a number of years before the Rotary Lights team decided to invest in 2022. Flights were completely sold out both years they were offered and will be making a return for year 30.



La Crosse Skyrockers display, 2022-photo Dave Larsen



Snowman display2017-photo Dave Larsen



Donation Drop-off Volunteers, 2020 -photo Dave Larsen



The Volunteers

Volunteer Coordination

At the absolute heart of Rotary Lights is service, and that theme is visualized through the active volunteer groups that they have built and sustained. In 2023, 104 volunteer groups and over 3000 volunteers assembled to completely operate everything Rotary Lights offers. Stephens said, “From myself on down nobody gets a paycheck, it is all volunteer.” And if the moral ‘payment’ of volunteering for a good cause wasn’t convincing enough, volunteers are also treated to meals from local restaurants and homemade cookies.

Jan Moore organized the non-profits for 18 years. She was in charge of sending invitations and providing each organization with a tree for them to decorate for display during park hours. In 2008, Sarah Dahlke took over her role. She first became involved in the project because her husband was fraternity brothers with Pat, and he suggested they come help. Over the years, they continued adding to their responsibilities, and they have become indispensable to the ongoing effort of maintaining Rotary Lights. Dahlke said that their family has grown alongside the lights, saying, “When we first started, we didn’t have children and now we have four.” They have been able to enjoy the lights and now volunteer together, carrying down the family’s annual tradition. She said, “It’s been so fun to be able to experience Rotary Lights with them while they were young and now being able to volunteer with them side by side as they’re older.”

In 2014 Dahlke helped bring the volunteer sign ups online. Previously, sponsors had been contacted through the mail, making communication take longer, but with Dahlke, everything has been done electronically. Dahlke said, “There was a lag in time and this way, we’re able to retrieve more organization in the greater community because they can simply click on a link and fill out an application.”

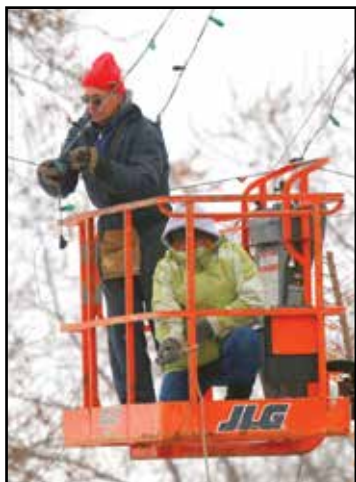
The volunteer season runs primarily from October 15 to January 7 – set up to clean up, but there is work needed elsewhere during the year. She clarified the extent of volunteer work, saying, “That’s just the logistics of making the display happen in that moment. In the preparation, which is a



full year job, we have welders, electricians, handymen.”

Rotary Lights has an uncanny ability for finding volunteers, and they have become an ultra-desirable spot for families and organizations to serve during the holidays. Dahlke said, “We’ve been blessed with an abundance of people interested and willing to help.” But of course, help is always needed somewhere.

“Our biggest area of need would be high lift operators; individuals who are comfortable being in the air and having availability any of the seven days a week to throw lights up in the treetops,” said Dahlke. The lift workers would take the lights from the spools and throw them down into individual trees – as long as they weren’t afraid of heights. Tom Svec was a long volunteer in the high lift, and he never let the heights get to him. He started two years after the lights did working in general



Braving the heights during set up and take down

volunteering – setup and the like. After completing a few projects on the ground, he asked what was next, and as Svec recalls, “[Pat] said, ‘Well, just putting lights in the trees up in the air,’ so I said, ‘How do you do that?’ I’ve been up there ever since.”

Groups would start putting lights up in October with the hope of having everything up by Thanksgiving. The deadline was fluid, but



they almost always had everything done by opening night. Svec said, “Depending upon how [many lights you put up], it might get done or it might not.” He said that there were some struggles, but they were rare. For example, Svec mentioned, “When the group that wound the lights didn’t do it properly and they did it backwards, you’d be pulling one string off at a time and that wasn’t fun.” When asked about the most rewarding parts of volunteering, Svec said simply, “Finishing your tree.”

Another key volunteer at Rotary Lights is Tom Hundt. Tom uses the high lifts but additionally is our “go to person” for arranging the warehouse, building what needs to be done, and helping whenever called upon.

What’s perhaps the most impressive part of the project is how it is continuously able to bring people together to serve. When asked how to inspire workers, she said, “If you’re volunteering and you’re doing something that you’re having fun at, it doesn’t seem like work.” Now, groups don’t just reluctantly volunteer, they fight for a spot to. “It has become extremely competitive for them to sign up and grab those so I can help with that part,” said Dahlke.

The local universities account for 40% of the volunteer organizations at the lights. Dahlke credits the universities, saying, “UWL in particular [provides] us a lot of their student organizations to volunteer.” Having the colleges become involved is a win for both the lights and the universities – Rotary Lights needs strong labor, and the students need to complete volunteer hours. Dahlke says of the student work force, “They tend to be full of energy and they can lift a good amount and they’re not afraid to work in the cold.” Dahlke knows about how crucial it is to bring in young workers, saying, “I’ve made sure to include as many high school groups as possible to show younger generations that volunteering can be fun.”

“I think definitely including younger individuals to help early in age will help them see the benefits of volunteering both for themselves and others,” she hopes. And she believes that if they see the value, they will continue the tradition as they begin to have families of their own, saying, “Hopefully [volunteering at Rotary Lights] is something that they continue to do once they graduate and start their own careers and families.”



Work in the Lighthouse

Mike Diveley is one of the volunteers who works in the Lighthouse. He was an electrician for many years, and he first started working with Rotary Lights like many others: Pat Stephens took him out for breakfast. He wanted Diveley to come and help Andy Wettstein, who at the time was the only electrician doing work on the project. “But at that time, I was still working myself, so I didn’t have the time that I have now,” Diveley said.

Now that he’s retired, Diveley spends most mornings at the Lighthouse amongst rows of cables and electrical equipment. He’s found his role with Rotary Lights, and he says that it is more relaxed than his career was. He said, “It’s good. I get my afternoons and then my wife and I can do stuff around the house, we can travel, that kind of stuff. [There’s] a lot of freedom.”

Over the last few years Mike has gotten valuable help from Terry Sloane and Dan Mutch. Both are excellent electricians and have hearts of gold.

While he’s free to work now during the day, he acknowledges his mortality and realizes that the event needs youth to continue developing. He said, “I think we’re all struggling with that because we’re getting older, and we need some new blood.” Part of the way that they’ve recruited younger workers is through Western TC and the IBEW electrical union. Diveley said, “I met with those guys and said ‘let’s get some of your students. We can show them some of the stuff we do, and they can help with certain things.’”

Efficiency Improvements

“When you get a volunteer, you want to throw them a hook, and then you wait and when he swallows it, then you set the hook,” said Terry Slaback, recalling his time with Rotary Lights.

He first joined Rotary Lights in 2007 and he came in with another longtime volunteer, Butch Rogowski. Dave Thurston is the man who threw them the hook.



Thurston was an Electrician Apprenticeship Instructor at Western Technical College, and he has been crucial in bringing younger workers to help since he started in 1998 as a member of the Steering Committee,. He first became involved with Rotary Lights through Andy Wettstein, who at the time was finishing up his electrician apprenticeship. He contacted Thurston for help on Rotary Lights projects and ever since,



Fire Breathing Dragon, 2023 -Photo Trinity Rietmann

Thurston has been actively involved in the operation.

The value of trade workers is significantly increased at Rotary Lights for two reasons. First, an infrastructure dependent project, for example, a light show, will naturally require more maintenance and upgrades, making a great trade worker invaluable. The second reason, as Slaback points out, is, “Rotarians are pretty much businesspeople, office workers... they own businesses. But they don’t know how to do the welding and do the ‘grunt’ work.”

The first ‘grunt work’ project for Rotary Lights that Thurston worked on was a collaborative effort with several other skilled workers and apprentices. They were tasked with bringing the drive through tunnel onto an electric controller, which would regulate the speed of the motor. He said, “It was a good project... All of the apprentices learned a lot.”

He went on to mention a story about the fire breathing dragon display,



“They were talking about having a lighted kind of sequence to make it look like a flame, and I suggested, ‘Well, why don’t we put a real flame?’” After contacting a local company for the torch head, they had a new display. Well, that’s after a few trial runs and redesigns. In fact, there was an update to the design in 2023 made by Steve Klankowski, demonstrating the fluidity of the work.

As previously mentioned, Slaback and Rogowski joined the team in the same year. Frederick “Butch” Rogowski owned a painting company for over 30 years, and he had skills in a broad range of technical jobs. He was a long-time steering committee member and, although Rogowski passed away in August 2023, his memory lives on at the park and in the people whose lives he influenced. “[Rogowski] was probably the most talented person I’ve ever met as far as overall, doing everything,” said Slaback.

The two joined the organization and were initially critical of Rotary Lights processes, eager to implement changes. Slaback said, “We noticed that there were so many things that needed improvements on. There were just numerous things that were wasting a lot of time.” One of these projects was the innovation of a ‘Tunnel Trailer’ to transport the tunnel. Slaback said, “So, between the two of us, we kind of designed that trailer.” Before the implementation, the tunnel disassembly group had eight of their volunteers committed all day to complete the task, and after, they were able to transport the tunnel in under three hours.

They also built a new trailer designed to hold displays safely and more efficiently. Thurston came up with the initial idea for the storage trailer, and through some discussions with Slaback, the final idea was formed. “The nice part is you take the display down and you [just] hang it on the trailer. It’s handled twice a year instead of six or eight times.”

Slaback also served the benefit of the lights by improving the assembly method for the main entrance sign. They had initially been using a lift to connect the four pieces of the sign, but Slaback simply proposed to connect the pieces on the ground, and it worked. He said, “It would take them five, six, seven hours to put that sign up, and now that we put the thing together on the ground it’s hanging in 20 minutes.”

The operation had become so smooth that volunteers were running out of tasks. Slaback recalls, “One time, Pat Stephens said, ‘My God, we’re



The Santa House in 2012

getting so efficient that we don't need as much help,' and I said, 'that's good, you can expand the park.'" Expansions came naturally for the park: more light displays, more events, and more donations. But one of the most crucial expansions was the addition to the Santa House, turning it into a heated gift shop.

The Santa House

In 2014, the Santa House was upgraded, and it is now home to Just Believe: Santa's Gift Shop.

Contractor Jon Olson coordinated the construction of the Santa House along with help from many other volunteers.

The shop is open from the day after Thanksgiving to Dec. 23 from 5-8 p.m. every year and it offers hats, scarves, light-up toys, children's books, and more, much of which is American made or locally sourced. There is also a variety of Rotary Lights themed goods like magnets, prints, clothing, and a unique annual ornament to commemorate the lights. They pride themselves on having reasonable prices for their goods, offering a variety of goods for people of all price ranges. Teresa Peters is one of the founders of the shop and, unsurprisingly, her involvement started over coffee with Pat.

Teresa said, "Pat kind of just set the hook and said, 'Hey, do you want to do this?' and [we] started doing it." Teresa Peters and her husband



2016-photo Dave Larsen



Bill have been working in the park for the last 10 years, Bill starting in 2013 and his wife in 2014. They have become crucial members of the project, serving across many different parts of the project. Teresa works alongside Rita Connors and Lynn Dolezel in the gift shop. While the gift shop is in a room no larger than a standard office that doesn't mean the influence is also small. To get to the gift shop, kids and adults alike enter Santa's house, enjoy an HO train display, then visit Santa and walk through the Gift Shop as they exit. Teresa said, "So kind of like museums and everything else you have to go through the gift shop to get out."

All of the Rotary Lights branded apparel is locally made, and the wealth is spread. Teresa said, "We try to use a local [company] as much as we can, and we don't stick with the same one. I mean, they all share their things with Rotary Lights, so we try to share it with what we need to buy." It works as guerrilla marketing, too, Teresa believes. "If we can get more people wearing Rotary Lights t shirts and sweatshirts, that's advertisement for us too. So, we don't really make [much] money on that."

The shop sells goods at discounted prices which inspires philanthropy from shoppers. Teresa said, "We get a lot of pay it forward". People put money in our little till and they say "pay it forward." Bill recalled a time when a young boy wanted to buy something from the gift shop, but the family couldn't afford anything. The boy's brother had some money in his wallet, so he bought something for himself, but he also bought a gift for his brother. Bill said that was especially powerful for him because it demonstrated the compassion that so many feel when at Rotary Lights.



2015-photo Dave Larsen

Festivities are also held in the Ice Castle. Annually, the building hosts a breakfast with Santa that they host with the Boys and Girls Club. This is in cooperation with the Hilltopper Rotary Club ((initially the Onalaska Rotary Club) The kids are fed a great breakfast and are given a gift specially bought for them. Bill said that is one of his favorite moments every year, highlighting, "Seeing Santa and the smile on their faces is pretty neat."



Santa's Help

Santa and his reindeer show up to the park for most of the event, but he is of course busy on the 24th and 25th of December.

Gary Brauer is one of the ten Santas at the lights every year, and he started in 2013, the year he retired. He said, "I got involved with Rotary Lights through Art Fahey at the La Crosse Center... His daughter and my son went to high school together, and Art knew I did Santa, so he tried to get me to do Rotary Lights." However, Brauer started work at 4 a.m. and doing the nights at Rotary Lights wouldn't work with his schedule. But he told Art, "When I retire, I'll check it out... Well, Art found out I retired, and the next day Pat Stephens called me."

Brauer has also been essential in crafting some of the decorations in the park. The Santa chair currently sitting in the Santa house was a project designated to Brauer. He said his pitch went along the lines of, "I don't know what one of these cost, but I said we could probably make one for a couple hundred bucks." The leadership groups agreed, and sponsoring companies were contacted. Brauer recalled, "Wisconsin Building Center donated all the wood. [Terry Slaback... I drew up the plans and he's a machinist, so he did some of the fancy cutting and then we put it together in my garage." The project took a few months, starting in March and being complete in June, and it's been in the Santa House ever since.

Another project Brauer headed was the creation of a new sleigh. The former sleigh was a donation from the Valley View Mall, but over time it had deteriorated, so Brauer was tasked with creating a new one. After a "...year or two," a design idea came to him, and he pitched it to the guys at the lighthouse. Badger Corrugating donated all of the wood for the project, and alongside Terry Slaback, Santa's new sleigh was created. Brauer said, "He built the trailer that the sleigh sits on, and it was a big project. We got a lot of help from the other people down here." Several people helped with the final touches. They would drive in screws, spread glue, and eventually paint the sleigh before eventually sending it to receive finishing fiberglass touches. The sleigh was featured in several 2020 local news stories, and it is predicted to last another 25 years.



Food for the Volunteers

Like all the other projects Rotary Lights puts on, a small army of dedicated volunteers is required, but Rotary Lights has never struggled with finding soldiers. Teresa said, “Some places have to pay them to do it, but we have so many people sometimes we have too many.” But the question remains: what inspires the droves of volunteers to Rotary Lights? It’s clear that positively impacting the community plays a role, as does obligatory holiday service, but there may be a simpler answer just as important: food.

So, what makes food such a positive motivator for volunteers?

At the very least, it keeps them present. Bill said, “They used to tell [volunteers] to go have lunch and come back and people would go buy their own lunch... He found out real early in the game that especially when it’s cold out, they leave to go to lunch, and they don’t come back.”

That clearly was not sustainable, so they began offering pizza for those who stayed. “In the old days when they first started, they just got pizza every day and then more restaurants started getting involved,” said Teresa. Bill said, “And now restaurants are clamoring to be a part of it. They want to be known for it because they get their name listed in the brochures.”

Each day for lunch, signs are on the table showing which restaurant is sponsoring, and it is no longer the nightly pizza party that it once was. Restaurants like 4 Sisters, Ciatti’s, Pickerman’s, Piggy’s, Culver’s, Tom Sawyers, Dairy Queen, Kramer’s, Marge’s, Howie’s, and Pogy’s are just a few of the over 30 food providers for the event.

Sue Crothers is the main organizer of the volunteer food, and she commissions many local restaurants and food providers throughout the year.

Every year, a group of volunteers, Patty Fitzpatrick, Teresa and Bill Peters, Joanne Stephens, Joe La Mere, and UW-La Crosse’s Alpha Phi Sorority, makes 400 dozen cookies, and the system has become ultra-efficient. First, they receive donations, one of which is from Festival, and buy the ingredients. Next, they mix the dough and portion it out into balls. They freeze the balls of dough and bring it to a large freezer in the Rotary Light’s building. Then, they make the cookies at the volunteer trailer – a perfect treat after a long day of volunteering in the cold.



Greater Impact

Sponsorships

Free cookies and food were the hook for many to start volunteering, but there's more to sponsorship than just volunteering.

John Wettstein credits Pat's position at UWL with sparking several ideas for gaining sponsors, saying, "He came up with the idea that he would provide a Christmas tree in Rotary Lights with the sign highlighting that particular organization." With those trees, Rotary Lights gives back 35% of the revenue split among each organization, relative to the hours they worked.

The idea went further when Stephens proposed company involvement, offering companies the option to sponsor nights at the park. He said, "We started out with five [nights] and then we went to eleven." There continued to be room for more, and companies kept calling, 95% of the nights are corporately sponsored. The drive for company involvement shows the enthusiasm that the community has for the event, as does this quote from Stephens: "We used to solicit sponsorships in September, and now they call us in January saying, 'this is the date we want next year'."

Norskedalen was the first tree sponsor of the first year and since, hundreds of groups have joined them. There are several sponsorship tiers ranging from \$5,000 + to gifts in kind, and each sponsored donation goes into the upkeep of the lights and the support of the mission. The sponsorship tiers are the Super Star Level, which is \$5,000 or more, the Frosty Level, which is \$2,500 or more, the Galaxy Level, which is \$1,000 or more, the Caroler Level, which is \$500 or more, Reindeer Level at \$100+ and gifts in kind. In 2023, there were 16 members of the



Sponsorship trees-photo Dave Larsen



Super Star Level, 23 at the Frosty Level, 51 at the Galaxy Level, 34 at the Caroler Level, and 129 giving gifts in kind.

To list and describe each member of each tier would be its own separate book, but each donation from each year is important, and the people and organizations who donate exemplify the philanthropic spirit which makes La Crosse so special.

Donations – Food Pantries

“A lot of people think, ‘well it’s just a light display’,” Pat Stephens said, but for the people that receive the food Rotary Lights collects, that couldn’t be further from the truth. Since the start of Rotary Lights, Feeding the Hungry has been the driving force.

Over the years, the number of recipient pantries has grown from two to eight, with other organizations added as supplements outside the park. There are now eight food pantries partnered with the lights in the park and six other organizations outside of the park which all receive food donations during the year. Each of the participating food pantries is assigned nights on which all collected food goes to that agency. The number of nights assigned to a particular pantry is primarily based on the pantry’s client size.

One of those organizations is Place of Grace. Started around the same time as Rotary Lights, the two organizations have similar hunger focused purposes and missions. However, the two are at opposite ends of the economic cycle: Rotary Lights is collecting the food that Place of Grace is directly providing to people. Place of Grace has two Mondays every year at Rotary Lights, and all the donations received on that day go to the house. They offer a bag of groceries per person, per week and they host meals every Thursday for any and all community members. “People in this country of ours are still hungry. 1/5 children are food insecure.”

Place of Grace had similar origins to the lights, being that the inspiration for the project was found out of state. Tom Thibodeau, a founding member of Place of Grace and a professor at Viterbo University, annually brought his students to Omaha to a Catholic worker hall called the Dorothy Day Center. He was always inspired by the group, and after he came back in 1996, he told students that there should



be a Catholic worker house in La Crosse within five years. A student chimed in, “Why do you have to wait five years?” Thibodeau figured that was a pretty good point and set plans in motion to open a house in La Crosse.

On Christmas Eve, 1996, Thibodeau received a phone call telling him that they had received the house, and two women moved in to work on January 1st, 1997. Again, like Rotary Lights, there were financial worries early. Within a month of operation, they were in debt, but they have remained open since. Thibodeau said, “So, we just prayed, and the money has come, and everything we receive we give away as a gift.”

The seven other organizations that host nights in the park are the Caledonia Food Shelf, La Crescent Food Basket, New Horizons, Onalaska Food Basket, Salvation Army, Holmen St. Elizabeth, and WAFER. The six out of park recipients are Cashton Cupboard, Coulee Cap, UW-L Food Pantry, West Salem Food Basket, Galesville Food Basket, and Hunger Task Force.

Donations – Food Banks

While Rotary Lights’ food is generally distributed to clients by late winter, the impact is felt year-round, helping clients have variety and saving food pantries the cost of purchasing items. The Hunger Task Force is a local food bank and close partner with Rotary Lights. Differentiating from food pantries, a food bank is where the pantries receive their stock. It can be thought of like a wholesaler compared to a local grocery store.

Shelly Fortner, the Executive Director of Hunger Task Force says the Task Force and Rotary Lights have been connected for many years.

Despite the organizations’ shared history, Shelley says





the organizations have been able to connect for good in other ways. Fortner said, “Pat and I came up with an idea... Why don’t we have out of the park food drives and then all of that food can come to [Hunger Task Force].” They called it ‘Food Drive Fridays’ and it was a huge boost to their supply

Following the success of Food Drive Fridays, Rotary Lights expanded its mission within the community. In 2023, the event partnered with Great Rivers United Way to offer more satellite sites for food donations. There were 32 partners and drop-off sites at each, and they have shown interest in expanding that program in future years. Pat said, “We were getting calls from people who were having Christmas parties and they called and said we always exchange gifts, and we really don’t need the things we’re getting, and we’d really like to give some food. Would you have a way to pick it up and bring it back to the park?” Stephens couldn’t say ‘yes’ fast enough.

They’re also closely tied with the Rotary Youth programs, which aren’t directly tied to the lights, but they demonstrate common Rotary values. Every year, they put on a community-wide food drive called ‘iFeed’ and all of the food go to the Hunger Task Force.

During COVID, the two connected again to help the ailing La Crosse citizens. Fortner said, “We didn’t know what to expect, and it turned out to be pretty bad.” They were running low on stock and were worried that they would run out. However, she said, “I’ll talked to Pat Stephens again and in an instant, he got all of the Rotary groups together.” They put on ‘Food Drive Fridays’ for six weeks and supplemented their supply during those crucial months, “We got in about 70,000 pounds of food... it definitely filled the gap.” “That was a gift that we’re still benefiting from.”

On top of just food donations, Fortner credits Rotary Lights, saying, “They do give us a monetary donation. So, they’re a huge partner and they’re huge in the community.” She continued, “Rotary Lights has been one of the most amazing things that’s ever been in La Crosse.” Maintaining their philanthropic spirit, they’ve begun finding other creative ways to support the members of their cause.



Paddy 2022



Buddy 2023



Puddin 2024

Exclusive Bears

In 2022, they continued doing so and they added another project to their arsenal specifically for the WAFER food pantry, who was raising capital to renovate a grocery store on the north side of La Crosse. WAFER, being both a long-time partner with Rotary Lights and the largest food pantry in the area, was the perfect candidate for donation. They produced an exclusive Build-A-Bear, ‘Paddy’, to be sold specifically for WAFER. The bears were stocked in several locally partnered businesses, and they were also sold online. Following several weeks of sales, over 3,100 Paddy the Bears were sold, and \$33,500 was raised for WAFER.

Following the success of the first bear, they decided to do something similar in 2023. Buddy the Bear was introduced the following year to help the Boys and Girls Club. The teddy bears contributed \$28,400 to their mission where they were able to purchase a new refrigerator. Rotary Lights also bought a new refrigerator for the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program and a walk in cooler for the Y to help with their nutrition program. Stephens said, “[So], we try to be good neighbors as well.”

For 2024, the new bear will be a cute little Panda that will be available in November, 100% of the proceeds will go to the Hunger Task Force.



Light Donation

Throughout the years, Rotary Lights has found so many great ways to creatively involve the community, but maybe none more so than in their Light String Recycling program. Anyone can drop off a string of lights at the Light House with the hope of them being re-purposed and shown in the park. Wettstein said, “So, it’s all going back. We’re going back to the community.”

Volunteers work tirelessly to fix them for the next year’s show, and most of them can be used.

With this program, Rotary Lights not only saves money and reduce waste, but they form a deeper connection with the person donating. Any lights they walk by at the park could be theirs, so they’re more present when walking through them.



Eagle Roundabout, 2015



Space ship, 2023-photo Dave Larsen



Influence and Future

2021 Incident(s)

The impact of Rotary Lights can be clearly felt through several stories, but arguably none of which are as strong as the 2021 light show. There were multiple setbacks which jeopardized the lights, but the community rallied together around the tradition they had come to know and love every Christmas.

At the end of October, about \$10,000 worth of cables were stolen from the park, marking the first theft in Rotary Lights' history. After the theft, local electrical supply houses called and pitched in. Diveley recalls, "It was thousands and thousands of dollars' worth of donated stuff, and since that time, now we're on their list every year." The show would be able to start on time, but it wasn't exactly a great omen.

To intensify the issue, tens of thousands of dollars more in damages



Destruction in the park in 2021

were sustained due to a windstorm during the middle of December. Zach Tudahl works on the electronics at the park, and he has been there since he graduated college. He said, "That windstorm came through and took out a lot of things during the display. We all went down there that day after, and some people just looked devastated like there was no way we were going to reopen."

It was the first time the lights had ever closed, and the scene was somber; several light displays were torn, and shelters were ripped across the park. There were fears that they would have to close for the rest



of the season, so they were forced to consult the community for help. Stephens said, “We put out a call for help at that point and the next day in La Crosse we had over 100 volunteers dressed, they had brought tools and they were ready to go.” Diveley said, “We were wondering could we get it done and get it fixed, get it all repaired? [Then] a bunch of electricians locally showed up and even more called and said they would help. One great find from the storm incident was volunteer Terry Sloane. Electrical background, “one of the most creative individuals I’ve ever worked with” said Mike Diveley.

Gary Brauer was there, and he remembered the day well, “All of a sudden there’s hundreds of people here... It’s just amazing.” There was an intensive cleanup effort and before the end of the week, the lights reopened. Tudahl recalled, “I think it was a day and a half later, everything was setup and ready to go.” Chaput’s favorite design, the dragon, was nearly destroyed, and many thought it would need to be thrown out. He was out of town during the storm, but several other metalworkers stepped in to make it functional. Chaput said, “Three days later it went back up in the park.”

Stephens felt that moment was fulfilling and reflective of Rotary Lights position in La Crosse. “It has been adopted by the community at that point, and the cultural part of it is I think La Crosse has a tremendous history of being very philanthropic,” Stephens said. Diveley said, “Good things came from it and improvements were made and the community really pulled together.” Stephens said, “I don’t think I realized how important it was to the community until that storm.” He continued, “I was really amazed at that. It was very satisfying knowing we meant that much to the community.”

Future of the Event

The 2021 show confirmed what many have known: La Crosse needs Rotary Lights. But as the founding members age out of the event, the future rests in the younger members of the community to keep it going.

Scott Lundeen is one of those community members and he is poised to take over as president when Pat is done. Lundeen has been actively



involved in the community for decades. He has served as a schoolteacher, has been involved with Irishfest, and was a railroad conductor, among other jobs. Lundeen started with Rotary Lights in 2020, individually packing S'mores because of Covid restrictions. He then fittingly became one of the conductors of the kiddy train, taking it to several events throughout the year. Overall, work with the lights has been fitting for Lundeen, and he said, "I thought what better way to start than to give back to the community that I lived in for 30 plus years." Lundeen admitted that he has no mechanical skills, but he said, "Just having a willing heart and willing hands makes it. That's how we do Rotary Lights."

Lundeen is very aware of the big shoes he has to fill. He said, "I have had a lot of different circles of people, but I don't have necessarily the community [rapport of Pat]."

To build that rapport, Lundeen has been acting as Pat's assistant in the past few years. "It's really a neat fit for me because when Pat asked me to become his assistant, you don't say no, but I didn't feel pressure to say yes," he said. He originally thought that being Pat's assistant and potential successor meant that he would have to follow him around and take notes of everything Pat did, but that was not the case. "Where we're going is, as he has stuff that comes up, I learn that way. He has me go do this [or that] ... He's just been assigning me work." Lundeen's dedication to the project is clear and he credits Pat with catering to his skills, saying, "It was quite humbling to know that he saw my desire to just come out where I can."

He continued developing his skill set by assisting in writing a manual for future volunteers and leaders of the project. Lundeen said, "So the idea is to have a manual so somebody can come in and know what's going on." Much like Lundeen's manual, Mike Diveley has been assembling data for the next generation of electricians in the Light House. He said, "We've got maps showing where everything goes in the park. We're trying to create it so that when we're long gone, there's a road map for the next electricians to come in... We just love it so much and we want to make sure that it never ends."

While the timeline for succession is not concrete, Lundeen has set goals for the project during his tenure. He said, "We're at five and a half million food items now, in ten years, maybe we have ten million." But in growing the event, there needs to be some elements that remain the same. Lundeen said, "I think it'll be bigger, there'll still be donations accepted, but



nothing required to come [in].” He continued, “The wheels are turning; my job is just [to] keep it turning.” He said, “It’s already there. It’s not something that I have to create. I just hope to be able to find the younger volunteers to replenish and keep spinning.”

Expansion

To grow the donations, expansion of the show must come with. Tudahl said, “One thing we’re trying to do is just expand further the south end of the park.” He said, “[We have] lots of ideas, we just need to refine those a little bit to figure out a plan going forward.” He alluded to future expansion but as of July 2024, there have been no plans announced. “We’ve got a team of six to eight people that are meeting pretty much monthly to get new ideas, get everything setup,” Tudahl said.

But they cannot expand without an influx of youth leadership and volunteers. “Every year Rotary Lights just gets bigger and bigger, unfortunately a lot of the guys that started out are gone.” Brauer said. “There’s a lot of people in here I worked with that aren’t here anymore, and this is the history we all had,” Jan lamented. “If more people were involved and

understood that they’re not going to have the people to be doing this, maybe there would be people [taking initiative],”

said Slaback. *Cannon, 2016*



“La Crosse

is a great community. It’s really quite diverse. I think all you have to do is get the word out; I think the skills are there,” said Thurston. “Every year you just keep adding and you learn how to do it better, and you get more people involved... You just keep trying to improve.” Wettstein said.



“I think that people would like the opportunity to volunteer and give their time, and as long as that’s part of having these events, people can get out, get to know people, and help their community,” said Lundeen.

Tudahl emphasized the appeal of Rotary Lights from his perspective, saying, “When I got more involved in it being fresh out of college... The people have become like another family.” Bill Peters emphasized the importance of youth involvement, saying, “We’re starting to get enough young people involved that are going to help and someday take over.” “I do believe that Rotary Lights will continue to attract people who want to work there,” said Wettstein.

The idea for a philanthropic lights show has grown outside of La Crosse into 16 other communities in Wisconsin and Minnesota. “We brought them down here and shared all the positives and all the things that went into it,” said Pat. They have even had seminars teaching people about the importance of such community events. He went on to say, “Some people think we give them too much information as they’re actually competition but as long as you’re a non-profit and as long as they have feeding the hungry as their main criteria for their light show, we open up the books.”



The full lights show in 2018-photo Dave Larsen



Community Value and Connection

Discover Wisconsin said it best when they featured the lights in 2015: “La Crosse Rotary Lights is basically the king of holiday light shows.” It’s not surprising, then, that those who have long been involved with the lights feel a profound sense of wonder when at the park. Jan Moore aptly



Lighted Gazebo, 2016 -photo Dave Larsen

said, “It’s like you died and went to heaven because everybody’s happy.”

Rotary Lights has long been a place associated with love and several couples became engaged and married at the lights. Many couples met at, were married at, or engaged at Rotary Lights – so many in fact that they had a social gathering for all of them at the Radisson.

The project has gone beyond just marriage, becoming a family affair for several families, and it has transcended generations, blossoming into an event for everyone. What started as just Pat, Joanne, and their kids became generational, and their grandchildren have taken an interest in the lights, too. “So many families do it as a family function,” Joanne said. The same feelings persist in Lundeen. He said his work helps connect him to his late wife, “That’s one way of honoring her,” said



Lundeen. He and his kids do; he said, “We always make it a plan to walk through one night and drive through another night every year.”

When asked about the importance of having events like Rotary Lights, beyond fulfilling the mission of feeding the hungry, Lundeen believes that it is a great event for bringing people together. “I think there’s a sense that there’s a time when even though we disagree on things, we can agree at certain times.” He elaborated, “I think we need things like that in the community to [build] community spirit for friendliness and kindness.”

“I can’t speak volumes enough about what the mission of Rotary Lights has accomplished for this area,” Sarah Dahlke said. “To have something that’s so pure and just special is what Rotary Lights really means.” “It’s just I think one of the biggest benefits for the La Crosse community.” Dahlke said, “You may have festivals and other things, but I think it is the number one event in the City of La Crosse.”

Mike Diveley mentioned the generosity of community members, especially with their time, saying, “It’s amazing all the time to me. The generosity and the willingness to help, it’s mind boggling.”

Legacy

Though it has grown, it has stayed relatively the same throughout its storied past. Rotary Lights could be very, profitable if they charged, say, \$5 an entry to the park. But what makes Rotary Lights so great is the community driven focus – they would never sell out despite the financial motives to do so.

Pat said, “I am continually surprised by the volume of food that we’re able to collect at the end of the year.” He went on to describe the uniqueness of La Crosse further, saying “I love the La Crosse community and the community has been very generous not just with Rotary Lights... I don’t know another community that has a response [like] we get when there’s a major cause.”

“As long as Pat Stephens is there, Rotary Lights will continue. I hope the person who takes over for him will have some of those same talents,” Wettstein said. “Pat Stephens, I mean, you can’t replace a person like that. He is such a promoter, he’s unbelievable as far as raising money,



and it takes a lot of money to run that,” Slaback said. “I will say, Pat Stephens is the one person who saw this thing through right from the beginning... He has a talent of asking for help,” said Wettstein. Rotary Lights has become part of Pat, and for that matter all of the volunteers. And when something is a part of you fight for it.

And when you have a hard-working team, it becomes easier. “It’s just all teamwork,” Brauer said. “Another important factor that I think is true to the success of Rotary Lights is talent,” said Jan. “Pat has assembled this group of retired people... he takes them out for breakfast... he makes sure restaurants bring in food for them,” Wettstein described. So, the people want to work and they treat the project with respect, developing relationships with the like-minded people they work with. Thibodeau said, “It becomes as much social as it is work.” And when groups socialize, they form connections. And when they form connections, they share ideas. And when they share ideas, we all benefit. Thibodeau described it as, “All of a sudden it becomes, ‘Who can I call? Who do I know?’ And so how do we broaden that circle?”

The service Rotary Lights provides feeds the soul of society, and while it may not be profitable in a traditional sense, the person whose soul is full can never be poor. Duane said, “The most important part is that people took ownership. “If you’re out there in the cold and you’re wet, and you wonder why you’re doing it, you’ve got to remember the mission. We’re here to feed the hungry of the Coulee Region.” Lundeen said.

Once Rotary Lights’ place in La Crosse became established it became as if it had always been there. Rotary Lights can be best summarized by a story from Jan Moore. “This car came through; I didn’t know how the car was going to make it around the circle, it was such a beat-up old thing. A little girl, in a little pink jacket, reached out and gave me one can of tomato soup. It was so precious, the smile on her face. She was able to give. She was so proud to hand that can of soup.” Thibodeau said, “All of this stuff, it’s all connected. And justice is seeing the connection.” To see justice and connection in the community – is there much more valuable than that? Maybe to find justice, we just need to look inside a soup can.



The good folks that have allowed Rotary Lights to survive for 30 years

Kenny Ahern	Leo Chaput	Mike Fell
Florence Aliesch	Mike Christ	Tom Fell
Mike Aliesch	Kenna Christians	Hank Fillner
Bob Allen	Ken Christiansen	Patty Fitzpatrick
Steve Ambrose	Tony Ciano	Dick Foss
Dustin Ammerman	Kelly Cleary	Doug Fox
Gar Amunson	Andy Clements	Herb French
Don Anthony	Matt Clements	Willis Fritz
Linda Bechly	John Clough	Hayden Full
Kurt Bendel	Jim Cody	Chris Gardner
Tim Benson	Judy Collins	Mark Gilbertstadt
Peter Bentz	Joe Connell	Amy Gleason
Jeff Bertram	Mick Connors	Scott Gleason
Alyssa Bishop	Rita Connors	Elmer Grassman
Kay Bjorge	Jodi Cook	Trish Grathen
Roger Bjorge	John Corems	Brittany Guillaume
Scott Bjorge	Dan Cox	Jerome Gundersen
Heidi Blanke	Gary Cox	Tim Hammes
Patty Boge	Brian Crocker	Al Hanson
Hugh Boschert	Jim Crothers	Jim Hanson
Gary Brauer	Sue Crothers	John Hanson
Tom Bracken	Greg Curti	Karen Hanson
Andy Brannon	Mark Dahlke	Mike Hartigan
Deb Brannon	Sarah Dahlke	Richard Hass
Bill Bray	Joyce Diveley	Jerry Hatlevig
Becky Brockman	Mike Diveley	Nancy Hatlevig
Al Brott	Barb Dolato	Murphy Hayes
Mary Brott	Lynn Dolezel	Shirley Hayes
Jennifer Brown	Ruth Dunn	Shannon Hedin
Penny Brueggen	Steve Dunn	Dan Heintz
Ryan Bruesewitz	Jamie Durocher	Florence Heintz
Renee Buchner	Sharon Earp	Bill Heinz
Brucie Bumchuckles	Steve Earp	John Helfrich
Dave Burgess	Tim Ehler	Brad Helstad
Gordy Buros	Dave Eilertson	Mike Hessler
Derek Buschman	Sue Elsen	Colleen Heye
Judy Carpenter	Morrie Enders	Jake Hillestad
Bob Cary	Mark Etrheim	Bill Hoel
Pat Cavadini	Tyler Everson	Steve Holman



Mike Hoppens
 Marshall Horne
 Dakota Horstman
 Tom Hundt
 Markus Hutnik
 Dar Isaacson
 George Italiano
 Rick Jackson
 Ryan Jenkins
 Kathy Jirsa
 Brad Johnson
 Charlie Johnson
 Jerry Johnson
 Joanne Johnson
 Rob Johnson
 Robert Johnson
 Travis Judell
 Kyle Jumbeck
 Art Karbowski
 Pat Kerrigan
 Nikki Kimball
 Angie Kingsley
 Don Kirby
 Steve Klankowski
 Easton Klebke
 Bill Klein
 Gary Klein
 Colin Klos
 Chuck Kolkind
 Drew Kozicki
 Jim Krueger
 Don Lake
 Joe LaMere
 Nikolas Lanaski
 Dave Larsen
 Gary Lass
 Paula Laufenberg
 Scott Laufenberg

Dan Leis
 Steve Link
 Bud Loomis
 Sharon Loomis
 Kathy Lucey
 Gary Luecke
 Annie Lundeen
 Ryan Lundeen
 Scott Lundeen
 Tracy Machtan
 Basil Martin
 Karla Martin
 Mike Martino
 Curt Marx
 Marty Matchey
 Bonnie McAlear
 Dean McHugh
 Mary Catherine
 McLoone
 Kim McMahon
 Pat McMahon
 Michelle Metz
 Doug Michel
 Robert Mickelson
 Aaron Miller
 Terry Miller
 Bud Miyamoto
 Jim Moe
 Marge Moe
 Dan Moen
 Loren Molling
 Pat Molling
 Phil Molling
 Dave Mooco
 Chuck Moore
 Duane Moore
 Ed Moore
 Jan Moore

Burt Morris
 Dan Mutch
 Bill Napier
 Bret Nelson
 Spencer Niebuhr
 Dave Novak
 Linda O'Connor
 Arien O'Heron
 Dirk Olson
 Jon Olson
 George Osterhout
 Anne Paape
 Jack Papenfuss
 Laurie Parlow
 Lyle Peacock
 Bill Pedace
 Bill Peters
 Teresa Peters
 Kimi Petersen
 Larry Peterson
 Mariann Peterson
 Marion Peterson
 Brandon Pinsen
 Arnold Pinski
 Janet Mattison-Prise
 Nancy Proctor
 Dan Puckhaber
 Larry Pupp
 Brad Quarberg
 Gary Range
 Diane Rauch
 Tom Reinert
 Alex Remen
 Lynn Reynolds
 Wolf Rittgers
 Kathy Roberg
 Stephanie Roberson
 Zach Roberson



Heather Rogers
 Butch Rogowski
 Taylor Ronne
 Korey Rossman
 David Rudolph
 Ryan Rykal
 Cody Sanderson
 Joann Sandvick
 Peg Sannerud
 Mimi Saterbak
 Isaiah Schaller
 Noah Schaller
 Dave Schendel
 Myrna Schmidt
 Chris Schneider
 Pete Schreier
 Gwen Schroeder
 Ryan Seems
 Chris Sheehan
 Alex Shupe
 Cathryn Shupe
 Chrys Shupe
 Doug Shupe
 Merri Shupe
 Nick Shupe
 Sherry Sime
 George Skemp
 Terry Slaback
 Terry Sloane
 Jessie Smith
 Mark Smith Family
 Pat Smith
 Tyler Smith
 Joe Soellner
 Ken Soerens
 Jim Spencer
 Tim Sprester
 Steve Stach
 Karla Stanek
 Dave Steinberg

Beth Stempinski
 Joanne Stephens
 Pat Stephens
 Ben Storlie
 Mary Lou Stuenzi
 Mr & Mrs Mark Stuhr
 Joe Svec
 Pat Svec
 Tom Svec
 Bob Swanson
 Mr & Mrs Deke Swanson
 Dirk Swanson
 Steve Swanson
 Sharon Swenson
 Ed Tanke
 Steve Tanke
 Mark Teronde
 Greg Theres
 Joe Thesing
 Dan Thompson
 Leon Thompson
 Cathy Thurston
 Dave Thurston
 Bryan Tillman
 Steve Topel
 Tim Tracy
 Dave Trapp
 Eric Tschumper
 Frank Tudahl
 Pat Tudahl
 Zach Tudahl
 Del Tuschal
 Jim Tuschal
 Laurie Tweten
 Donna Vance
 Vere Vance
 Dan Vogelsberg
 Mr & Mrs Ed Warner
 Jim Warren
 Ben Wedro

Sue Weidemann
 Wade Welper
 Mick Welty
 Clayton Wenzel
 Kyle Westbrook
 Amy Wettstein
 Andy Wettstein
 John Wettstein
 Ruth Wettstein
 Megan Whitehead
 Jeff Wiedman
 Neil Wieser
 Bill Wiesjahn
 Wilbur Wilhelm
 Ken Wing
 Bob Wingate
 Mike Wintheiser
 Jacob Woods
 Pat Woodworth
 Ray Wu
 Bob Wuensch
 Brad Wuensch
 Paul Wuske
 Duane Yachwak
 Shannon Yachwak
 Pat Young
 Gail Zahn
 Duane Zenke
 Chuck Zimmer
 Sharon Zimmer
 Carolyn Zimmerman
 Matt Zimmerman
 John Zoerb



photos - Dave Larsen



The Mission of Rotary Lights

“To Help Feed the Hungry
of the Coulee Region”