

HOLIDAY MAGIC: A DICKENS CHRISTMAS

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The scent of hot chocolate and evergreen hangs heavy in the air, blanketing Burlington's downtown district with holiday warmth, despite the chill. It is the second Friday in December, when everyone is rushing around to finish holiday shopping and decorate their Christmas trees. Children laugh and dart around the snow machine, giggling as it comes to rest on their eyelashes and clothes. Santa lets out a deep belly rumble and waves to onlookers while Elsa from "Frozen" poses for pictures with squealing little girls and boys. Nostalgia invades every corner of the festival, taking participants back to times gone by.

This is "A Dickens Christmas," a Burlington tradition that has become an integral part of the holiday season in this small, tightly knit community. People set aside their work and the stress of holiday shopping to spend a few hours enjoying each other's company, supporting local vendors and artists and spreading holiday cheer! This is a community that welcomes in people from all walks of life and backgrounds - there will be something for everyone. "A Dickens Christmas" is an event you don't want to miss this holiday season.

The Ghost of Christmas Past

The event began back in 2010 as an initiative for the City of Burlington to increase the number of events as well as to raise awareness of the Burlington Downtown District. That same year, a woman named Mary Faucette - a mother of two young girls, co-owner of Om Shanti Yoga and part-time YBAC Hurricanes Age Group swim team coach - was promoted to Special Event Supervisor and became the coordinator for the festival. She was joined by Morgan Lasater, the Assistant Supervisor of Special Events for the City of Burlington, and they got the ball rolling. The first meeting takes place as early as July 25, and most of the work is done between September and December, so they had a lot of work to do in a short amount of time. They not only contacted and booked vendors, but also live music, participating restaurants and caterers, people to wear holiday costumes and, undeniably, a few more helping hands!

While Lasater and Faucette do the bulk of the planning - booking bands and vendors and securing features - the execution falls heavily on city staff. People from all divisions lend a hand to bring the community together and to see their vision come to fruition. Recreation Maintenance, the Burlington Police, Burlington Fire and all divisions in the recreation department that share part-time employees with Special Events are called out on the day of "A Dickens Christmas." Overall, about 45 employees from the Parks and Recreation department plus the police and fire department pitch in at some

point before or during the festival. It is a true example of a loving community coming together in the spirit of the holidays to make some magic happen.

In the past, companies like LabCorps have sponsored the event and provided funding, but there is no guarantee that they will return this year. The City of Burlington carries most of the budget and the Burlington Downtown Corporation provides support through advertisements. In total, this event costs the city about \$20,000. It began as an effort to bring new life into this very interesting, but often overlooked, area of town.

“Throughout our Department, it is truly our goal to provide a recreational experience that focuses and impacts the quality of life across the entire community,” says Lisa Wolff, the superintendent of recreation programming for the City of Burlington. She believes downtown events “have become attractive to many as they offer a comfortable setting in a quaint environment giving visitors the opportunity to discover an ever-changing atmosphere of activity.”

Channeling Charles Dickens

“A Dickens Christmas” wasn’t always what it is today. It transformed in 2011 thanks to a man named Dennis Littell and his wife, the co-owners of a downtown glass arts store, *The Glass Angel*, along with other steering committee members. They proposed a vision of the holidays that corresponded with that of “A Christmas Carol,” a novella created by Charles Dickens, a time “where dresses were handmade and men wore three piece suits with top hats,” according to Faucette. Along with the name change, the date was also tweaked, so the festival now takes place each year on the second Friday in December.

“The event has had several names through the years,” Faucette says. “Holiday Magic, Light Up Downtown, Downtown Lights Up and to present its name of Holiday Magic: A Dickens Christmas. To me this is what sets the tone for the event. It clearly states that there will be magic! Walking the streets during the event I feel the magic, excitement, joy and spirit of christmas. No other event feels the way this event does.”

Lasater felt that magic during the festival as well. “Although I worked the event and didn’t have enough time to enjoy it, my husband and daughters came. I did stop for a minute and look at their eyes when they walked under the snow machine - it really was magical. It was one of those moments made for Instagram slow-mo camera,” says Lasater.

Great Expectations:

Though it began as a street festival of sorts with hayrides, games and children’s activities, the festival has exploded over the years into a unique, one-of-a-kind Christmas experience. Not only is it modeled after the classic white Christmas of

19th-century London, complete with costumes, but it brings the community together in a way no other event does.

“Holiday Magic is a very popular event that provides family fun to our existing community and welcomes newcomers to discover downtown,” says Wolff. “The event provides an opportunity for merchants to garner additional business and to cultivate customer relationships. Holiday Magic results in community building and increases the quality of life for residents of Burlington.”

According to Faucette, “the features have grown, the bands have become more numerous and the Christmas spirit has exploded as the streets of downtown are filled with this amazing event.” There are dancers performing, men juggling on stilts, bands in Santa hats singing Christmas carols and neighbors and friends embracing each other to stay warm and spread holiday cheer.

The festival now includes a snow play area with sledding tracks, train and carriage rides, a giant snow globe, a selfie booth and fake snow falling all around, creating a very magical environment. There will also be a craft market at the Company Shops market, planned by the Burlington Co-op. There will be scarves and pottery for sale, and according to Lasater, “Company Shops will also have a beer garden with a local craft brew. They usually pick a holiday brew.”

After walking around for a while and working up an appetite, patrons can stop and get food from any of the various food trucks, similar to those that visit Elon’s campus each year. They will be serving food of a great variety, ranging from Greek to Mexican and many others. To fight the cold and warm patrons up a little, there will be all kinds of decadent, warm drinks.

“There will be a row of non-profit organizations that will be selling things from cookies to hot chocolate,” Lasater says. “It is a great opportunity to give back to Burlington non-profits too! There will be a canned food drive going on at the event.”

Current sophomore Annie Kang attended this event last year, and really enjoyed it. “It was such a cute little occasion where the townspeople came out to decorate downtown Burlington and the atmosphere was really quaint. I think everyone forgets about small towns but they are very much thriving and filled with life,” Kang says warmly.

She did notice one thing, though. “There were a bunch of people there were there but it was mostly families from around the area and not that many people from our age group. I thought that the people that were there for the occasion were just the townspeople, and I just think that it would be so much more poppin’ but people think it will be boring since it is a sleepy town event.”

A bigger turnout from Elon students won’t only bring more excitement, it will provide more support and exposure to the local merchants. It is small businesses like The Glass Angel and The Rusted Bucket that give Burlington its character - similar to

what Acorn or Smitty's do for Elon. These local businesses depend on our support to thrive, and offer a valuable contribution to their communities; most vendors offer special skills or talents that you wouldn't find in mainstream department stores, creating unique art and household decorations.

Wolff insists that "downtowns are critical to vibrant cities, and the events hosted by Burlington Recreation & Parks are contributing to the ongoing revitalization of Burlington's Downtown district."

In the spirit of revitalization, Elon students not only provide support to the local vendors but bring youth and life to the community, and are strongly encouraged to attend the event.

How do we fit in?:

Before Faucette took over as a coordinator, she had not participated in the event, but she had been in meetings where her co-workers discussed "the lack of attendance, the effort and the problems from the past with the event," she says. Over the years it has grown significantly, and attendance is up to around 5,000 people. Faucette and Lasater have put in a lot of work to make the event friendly and exciting for all ages--especially college students.

Faucette says college students in particular are great supporters of the bands and music features. Usually the students in attendance grab food from the food trucks and then stroll around the streets until they find a good place to view the band from.

"They tap into their inner kid as they stand among the kiddos with their hands up reaching for the falling snow on Front Street at Danny's Cafe," Faucette recalls. "Many of the students wander the streets floating in and out of the Rusted Bucket and the Public House, and typically end up at Company Shops Market taking in roasted chestnuts, beer and wine, and enjoying the entertainment along the way."

There are many more aspects of the festival to check out, however, and the students don't stop there. "As they continue their evening, they shop at the downtown boutiques, antique stores and support the local non-profits through the purchase of baked goods, hot chocolate and more yummy tasty treats. The fun continues as they snap a picture at our selfie booths on their way to take a ride in our horse-drawn carriages. Often times they continue the fun well beyond the end of the event as they return back to The Rusted Bucket or The Public House," Faucette says.

There is something for everyone at the festival. Faucette says, "the aroma of fresh baked goods fills the air and warms your heart. Then the music starts and the streets are filled with smiles, glee and wonder. This special event offers an evening of live entertainment and fun attractions for the entire community!"

“It is a place to feel good holiday cheer with your community,” Lasater adds.
“People are walking around with hot chocolate and a smile on their faces. There is joy to be found at ‘Holiday Magic: A Dickens Christmas.’ Come ready to find it!”

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