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Winter Wonderland: The making of a magical holiday tradition in the Brainerd Lakes Area

Sertoma presents Winter Wonderland at the Northland Arboretum grew from a single point of light – an idea developed by a handful of people – into a magical holiday lighting experience in the Brainerd Lakes Area.

Now celebrating its fourth season, Winter Wonderland provides another reason why visitors seek out the Brainerd Lakes Area as a regional destination during the holidays. But Winter Wonderland didn't magically come to be. It was carefully created by a dedicated core of Sertoma Club volunteers.

Creating the magic – The early concept develops

Steve Mau, owner of Brainerd General Rental, and Steve "Gus" Augustinack, representative of LAKES Media Collaborative, both Sertomans, wanted to create a magnificent holiday attraction to draw families to the Brainerd Lakes Area.

"We want people to come through and be awed by the experience," Mau said of the creation of Winter Wonderland.

Mau and Augustinack discussed how the Northland Arboretum was identified as the perfect partner in this endeavor – as the physical location to annually host Winter Wonderland, which runs from Thanksgiving through New Year's Day. The Sertoma Club wanted to create an opportunity for the two nonprofit organizations to partner in such a way that both organizations could benefit and give back to the community.

Nestled in the heart of Brainerd and Baxter, the Northland Arboretum, 14250 Conservation Drive, is an outdoor nature conservatory with more than 500 acres.

"It worked out really well, it's secluded but yet we're right in the heart of town – right between Brainerd, Baxter and Nisswa," Augustinack said of the Northland Arboretum location.

The work was just beginning in the creation of Winter Wonderland but now a big hurdle – finding a location – had been cleared.

Meeting the challenges

Many other early obstacles created challenges for the Sertoma Club as the members tried to create this brilliant light display. How would they create the electrical infrastructure to support it? How would they raise funds to help finance the project? How would they gain enough volunteer support to build and sustain this effort?

Led by the countless hours of dedication by Mau, Augustinack and fellow Sertoman Lori Rubin, who helped sell the concept to community groups, the Sertoma Club met and exceeded every hurdle furling its way.

“Partnerships were such a key,” Augustinack said, noting the support of Brainerd Public Utilities and Jim’s Electric in building the electrical infrastructure, as just two examples of the tremendous community support for this daunting task.

Rubin agreed partnerships among community and business groups and faith in the Sertoma Club helped launch this undertaking, which took more than two years to coordinate.

“It was a huge undertaking,” Rubin said. She recalled the tremendous leap of faith made by the first business sponsors in making a financial commitment to this cause based on the vision of the Sertoma Club.

Making it happen – Fall 2007

By 2007, support for the project had swelled to the point that the dream was now becoming a reality. The final push was on to tie up all the loose ends and kick off this event by Thanksgiving weekend.

Mau, Augustinack, Rubin and countless others worked round the clock many days working to meet the opening day deadline. They ordered more than 40 light displays and organized the layout within the Arboretum. Others worked to bring children’s art, through a lighting contest, to life. Six children’s sketches were developed into light displays. It’s a tradition that continues today.

“We spent many hours out here,” Augustinack said of their home away from home – the Arboretum in the Fall 2007.

Augustinack remembers they weren’t alone.

“The power of volunteerism is just amazing,” Augustinack said. “And it takes that. We had some quality, quality resources. People stepped up. ... It was an amazing fall.”

“We didn’t know what we didn’t know,” Mau said of that fluid first year with many decisions having to be made on the spot. “Literally, each day was bringing new opportunities – to spin it like Gus,” Mau said with a chuckle.

Just checking the bulbs alone – thousands of thousands of them – to see that all were in working order was a monumental task.

The countless hours of work resulted in an amazing holiday lighting display that went beyond the imaginations of those who had worked so many years to bring the idea to life.

The wonder makes it worthwhile

Augustinack recalled the personal rewards that made all the time and effort meaningful.

“Think back to one of those first times when someone you watched (saw Winter Wonderland for the first time) ... how magical it felt,” Augustinack said to Mau and Rubin.

Mau picked up on Augustinack’s comment, how magical it felt “when they actually saw the vision that we had been trying to paint for so many months – so many years. And they go through it and say, ‘Wow, this is really cool’”.

“That first year it was just, it was magical,” Mau said.

On opening night, vehicles were lined up for two miles as people awaited the opportunity to view Winter Wonderland.

Augustinack remembered revealing the light display to his 3-year-old nephew. “Just the oohs, ahhs and giggles ...” Augustinack said, “That was special.”

Winter Wonderland is a holiday experience like no other in the region.

“It was like a warm, fuzzy feeling,” Mau said. “People coming out of here just glowing, saying they had been to other places but this place was the best.”

“It became something fun ... really for the whole family, that was special,” Mau said.

“It was meant to be a family tradition that would start and so far we’ve heard a lot of families say that it’s become a tradition for them,” Augustinack said.

But it’s not just the enjoyment by visitors that makes Winter Wonderland magical, the Sertomans said. It’s also the opportunity to monetarily give back to the community and the ability to bring groups of volunteers together.

The Sertoma Club, given the startup costs associated with Winter Wonderland, didn’t expect to be able to start giving back to the community through donations within the first three years. However, the community interest and support was underestimated. To date, the Brainerd Area Sertoma Club has awarded \$60,000 through grants and donations to Brainerd area charitable organizations.

And each year, hundreds of volunteers – other service club members, youth groups, individuals -- make Winter Wonderland happen.

“There are thousands of hours that go into making this possible,” Mau said.

Winter Wonderland today

Now entering its fourth year, Winter Wonderland draws more than 25,000 visitors to the Brainerd Lakes Area each holiday season. Visitors have represented more than 500 communities, 37 states, and nine countries. This year more than 80 light displays will be available for viewing in an expanded route through the Northland Arboretum, 14260 Conservation Drive Day in the heart of the Brainerd Lakes Area. Winter Wonderland hours are 5:30-8:30 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays beginning Thanksgiving Day and concluding on New Year’s Day. The Holiday Village, home to Santa Claus, will be open Friday and Saturday nights.

Many of the displays, which each contain hundreds of light bulbs, are animated. The holiday light display follows themed areas, as displays similar in nature, are grouped together. For instance, this year’s themes include up north woodland, custom children’s, toyland and Joy to the World sections. The sizes of the individual displays range from a small 9-foot by 7-foot deer to a 30-foot by 25-foot poinsettia to a 16-foot by 98-foot belly-flopping Frosty the Snowman.

In keeping with the international mission of this service organization to improve hearing health, a special aspect of Winter Wonderland has been the recent addition of two special nights with Signing Santa, where jolly old St. Nick communicates with children through American Sign Language. This year those nights will be Dec. 10-11.

Opportunities to enjoy Winter Wonderland other than in the comfort of your own vehicle also have been key components of this holiday experience. This year, walking tours are planned the nights of Dec. 5 and Dec. 19 while horse-drawn wagon rides will be available Dec. 12 and Dec. 26.

Tickets are \$10 per vehicle, with \$3 off coupons available throughout the community. All proceeds benefit Brainerd area charities. Make the Brainerd Lakes Area your holiday getaway for a night or weekend of holiday shopping and entertainment during your visit here for Winter Wonderland. For more information about lodging and events, visit explorebrainerdlakes.com.

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Brainerd Area Sertoma Club members Steve Mau, Steve “Gus” Augustinack and Lori Rubin sat down and shared their memories of Winter Wonderland in a series of YouTube interviews that can be viewed at youtube.com/user/TheChamber4.

The Brainerd Lakes Chamber represents more than 1,100 businesses and operates offices in Brainerd, Crosslake, Pequot Lakes, and the Welcome Center on Highway 371 south of Brainerd. The Chamber is the organization that connects businesses and leads the drive for responsible and profitable growth in the Brainerd Lakes region.

