

First Night needs new hands

Time passes and needs change

By **Natalie Gelb Solfanelli**

Often endings bring new beginnings. It is in that light that I accepted with equanimity the recent news that Scranton Tomorrow will be sponsoring First Night Scranton for the last time this year, despite my personal attachment to the event.

Indeed, First Night is based on the premise that New Year's Eve is not only the end of a year, but also the beginning of a new one!

Sally Bohlin and Monsignor Joseph Quinn, extraordinary community leaders and visionaries, originally introduced the concept of First Night Scranton in 1998 with the intention that our region should start the new century with an exciting and innovative event that would be inclusive and memorable.

When I got an invitation for breakfast from Monsignor Quinn one day in April 1998, I should have suspected that he had more in mind than a morning repast! He and Sally, who was chairing an initiative called "Marking the Millennium," a series of special performances and lectures to celebrate and assess our shared past and future, presented me with their ideas about creating First Night Scranton for Dec. 31, 1999.

Monsignor would be the chair and I was asked to co-chair the non-alcoholic family-oriented downtown celebration of the arts that would provide an affordable event where people of all ages, backgrounds and interests could come together to observe the beginning of the new millennium.

At that time, Scranton Tomorrow was in its adolescence as a grassroots community leadership organization.

Scranton Tomorrow expected to seed the inaugural event with the plan for another entity to adopt it in future years.

Shortly after the initial meeting, Monsignor Quinn's busy schedule precluded him from chairing the event, and John Cosgrove, another Scranton Tomorrow board member, stepped to the plate as the new chair.

It was a lot of work, but what fun it was! For more than 20 months, John, Monsignor and I, worked to plan and raise money for the event.

By mid 1999, the three of us, along with Sally, Matt Reiprich, then executive director of Scranton Tomorrow, and an engaged Steering Committee, met weekly. We did much by trial and error, but it worked and, by New Year's Eve, 1999, there were 15 venues presenting all manner of live, professional entertainment for a variety of audiences.

Not to mention the magnificent fireworks display and ceremony on Courthouse Square at midnight. It was the 21st century!

First Night Scranton 2000 was such a resounding success that it became the signature project of Scranton Tomorrow.

By 2001, when I became chair, First Night Scranton had taken on a life of its own. It became so strongly identified with Scranton Tomorrow that it seemed inappropriate to separate them.

But time passes and needs change. Scranton Tomorrow's focus is now on economic and community development, including the Main Street program, the Downtown Riverfront, ArtSpace, the Downtown Business Association and a proposed Community Land Trust.

The staff and financial demands of First Night are beyond the resources that are required for the projects that fit with the organization's current priorities. It needs a home of its own.

Ten years ago, Scranton was struggling to revitalize itself and to recapture its historical significance. Today, as the sign on the venerable DL&W Station proclaims, "Scranton is Back!"

In 1999, the Downtown Business Association was struggling for breath.

Today it is a vibrant organization, under the auspices of Scranton Tomorrow, with an active program of special events to attract people to the downtown during the holidays.

Heritage is more than history. Rather, it is history in the context of stories and traditions that define who we are and that create a unique culture and a sense of place. It is created by special people who represent our best selves.

I sincerely hope that another entity continues the First Night Scranton tradition, because it is now part of our heritage. It is the legacy of Monsignor Joseph Quinn, whose fingerprints are everywhere in Scranton, not only in programs he initiated and implemented, but also in the lives he nurtured.

Today, he is creating footprints in Carbondale, where he leads the people to recapture their heritage at the new YMCA as well as in many other significant ways. And First Night Scranton is also the legacy of Sally Bohlin who continues to devote herself to the creation of ArtSpace at the Scranton Laceworks, another remarkable development that will enrich the life of the area for years to come.

So, let us be proud that First Night Scranton has taken wing and let us hope it will find a place to land safely. In the meantime, enjoy this busy holiday season by supporting your friends and local businesses, and appreciating the wonderful heritage we all share.

Happy Holidays!

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