

Behind the scenes at the Grand Illumination parade

- By Joanne Kimberlin
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- Bill Tiernan | The Virginian-Pilot

Helen and George Cox of Virginia Beach have been volunteers for Norfolk's Grand Illumination Parade for nearly 20 years. Photographed along the parade route on Granby St. Wednesday, Nov. 25, 2015.



- Steve Earley | Virginian-Pilot File Photo

Floats head down Main Street during the 30th Annual Grand Illumination Parade on Saturday, Nov. 22, 2014 in downtown Norfolk.

NORFOLK

Santa's lights quit working. A woman went into labor. Expect the unexpected when you're pulling off one of Virginia's biggest parades.

This morning at 9 o'clock, Helen and George Cox will curl up with coffee in their living room in Virginia Beach. They'll flip on the TV to watch a rerun of Saturday's Grand Illumination Parade, a holiday tradition in downtown Norfolk for 31 years.

Sure, it's no Macy's (3.5 million spectators, 10,000 marchers, 4,000 volunteers).

But this is our parade (100,000 spectators, 2,000 marchers, 400 volunteers).

And it's personal for Helen and George (two behind-the-scenes decades, countless miles on their feet).

Turns out that when you run it, you don't get to really see it.

Helen spent Saturday dashing around Harbor Park – The Woman With The Clipboard – marshaling 2 miles' worth of floats, marching bands, balloons, towering horses and tiny cars into order.

George handled the “step-off,” keeping the marchers tight – no gaps, please – as the parade made its entrance onto Waterside Drive.

“Anything could happen after that,” Helen says. “We have to wait to hear about it later or spot it on TV.”

Helen is an administrator at Princess Anne High School in Virginia Beach. George spent 30-plus years repairing Navy ships for the Defense Department.

“Since I retired,” George says, “I've had an even better job: Doing most everything my wife asks me to do.”

Helen chuckles. “I volunteer him.”

The parade is their contribution to community service. “Keeps us young,” George says.

It's also a favorite of Noel Gramlich, special events coordinator for the Downtown Norfolk Council, which oversees the annual procession.

“I just love Christmas,” Gramlich says. “And this makes people feel good.”

Planning goes on year-round. Next year's theme will be decided in January (this year's was “Musical Madness”). By June, a committee will be screening applications for entertainment value and suitability. A record number – over 100 – sent in paperwork this year.

But every parade has a “sweet spot” length. For the Grand Illumination, that’s about an hour, the time WVEC-TV sets aside for its live broadcast.

“We try to make sure everyone in it gets on TV,” Gramlich says.

To manage that, this year’s parade was capped at 73 units. Then the committee – which includes Helen and George – sorts out who goes where.

A military band is always first. Santa is always last. In between, they try to mix it up. Floats, balloons and animals evenly interspersed. No bands playing over top of each other.

“We try not to put the bands behind the horses, either,” Helen says. “You can imagine why.”

End to end, this year’s procession filled the 2-mile route precisely, with the front dipping back into Harbor Park just as the tail was leaving.

Behind the scenes, it’s chaotic. Kids slithering into costumes. Girls applying makeup in car mirrors. Elvis warming up his vocal chords. Chorus lines practicing high kicks.

Something always goes wrong. One year, Booker T. Washington High School’s band arrived late and breathless after bus troubles caused them to run over a mile to reach Harbor Park. Antique fire trucks have refused to start. Balloons have gone limp.

This year, the lights on Santa’s float blinked out just as it was his turn to step off. Someone crawled under, managing to successfully jiggle wires. Fingers stayed crossed the entire route.

And then there was the ambulance, which had to squeeze through twice after a pregnant woman staying at a hotel along the route went into labor.

One thing that’s never happened: rain.

“I’m worried about saying that,” Gramlich said. “Don’t want to jinx it.”

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