



A woman who did not want to be identified looks at the flowers, clothing, toys and pictures left at Veterans Park by community members and loved-ones to commemorate those killed in the Waukesha Christmas Parade tragedy Sunday, Nov. 21, 2021 in Waukesha, Wis. EBONY COX/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

Waukesha Strong epitomizes response to parade tragedy

City, businesses, strangers offer help and services to victims

Samantha Hendrickson Now News Group

When Reverend David Simmons led a prayer vigil Monday night for the victims in the Waukesha Christmas Parade tragedy, he reminded the hundreds of people filling Cutler Park to “look for the helpers.”

Quoting beloved children’s television icon Fred Rogers, Simmons praised the community’s outpouring of support, both in the terrible moment, and in the hours after the chaos.

That outpouring has only continued in subsequent days, as communities within Waukesha and far outside it donate and provide services for those affected by Sunday’s senseless violence.

The city of Waukesha has set up a fund for the victims. Businesses around southeastern Wisconsin are donating sales directly to victims and their families. Strangers are offering services like fixing snow blowers, cleaning houses and building wheelchair ramps for victims’ homes — all for free.

Though these stories just scratch the surface, here are some of the ways this community in mourning is staying “Waukesha Strong.”

‘In the moment’ goodness

Businesses and off-duty first responders immediately took action amid the chaos, sheltering families inside buildings and helping strangers in the streets.

Lauren Janke and her partner, Robin Frievalt sat on the sidewalk outside Realty Executives on Main Street with their blankets, hot chocolate and Janke’s two young sons on Sunday. They commented on a cute pickup truck that resembled Mater from the Pixar movie Cars, before hearing the screams.

“It all happened so fast. I remember seeing the car flying down. I remember all of a sudden people flying in the air after being hit. Oh my God, it was just horrible, like, I can’t even describe it,” Janke said.

In an instant, she and her partner both dropped everything and ran — Janke, with her two sons into the realty building to take shelter, and Frievalt, who has a nursing background, to the victims she saw strewn across the street.



People gather in Waukesha’s Cutler Park for a candlelight vigil on Monday for those affected by the Waukesha Christmas Parade tragedy. The event was hosted by the Association of Waukesha Congregations with participation by the Brookfield - Elm Grove Interfaith Network (BEGIN) and the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee. SCOTT ASH / NOW NEWS GROUP

Along with dozens of high school students, Janke said the realty building employees acted quickly to shelter them from the violence and chaos ensuing outside.

Businesses, churches and other buildings all down Waukesha’s main strip did the same, taking in parade-goers fleeing the scene.

According to social media posts, Evangelical and Reform Church provided food and gave children toys to play with from their nursery while families hid in their building. Various bars and restaurants, such as Boscoe’s Social Club and the Craft Lounge, sheltered kids in the basement to protect them from seeing the bodies littering the streets.

Josh Larson, a board member of the Waukesha Lacrosse Club, was marching in the parade with his wife and two young children when they heard loud noises and screams, then police shouting for everyone to run toward the Waukesha Public Library.

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Once they'd taken shelter, Larson said, library workers immediately provided books and coloring pages for children. Parents emptied out the vending machines to get snacks for kids, stranded high school students and the elderly. Many set aside their own trauma to comfort others.

"In that moment in that library, I didn't know what I needed," Larson said. "But I look at it afterwards and I think that yeah, my kids did need the coloring sheets and the books and the safety and the compassion of the staff."

"This is the goodness of 'in the moment' ... the good that comes out. And the good that comes afterward is just as important," Larson said.

Volunteers join in quickly

When Khanthaly Sama sat down to write her Thanksgiving grocery list, she immediately thought of the victims of the Waukesha Christmas Parade.

"Some of these families will not have a Thanksgiving meal with everything going on in their lives," said Sama. "My heart goes out to the moms, and I wanted to do something for the moms, kids and families."

Sama made a Facebook post offering to cook a holiday meal for any victims. After making the post, more than a dozen volunteers lined up to also donate time and money to help provide food.

"I wasn't expecting it, but we now have all these volunteers on standby who are willing to donate hours of labor in the kitchen," Sama said Wednesday.

Waukesha Pizza Ranch had meals to provide for the Waukesha Police and Fire Departments, who had been working tirelessly since Sunday's tragedy, in just an hour.

After posting their need for help on Facebook, 20 volunteers, including families with children, showed up at their restaurant within 30 minutes, general manager Jake Zappa said.

Volunteers not only showed up, but also gave out of their own pockets to offset the costs. They brought soda, forks, knives, napkins and other supplies. They drove their own cars to deliver the food.

In the end, Zappa's employees and



Jim Janz, with People's Park restaurant, works on putting up Christmas lights across from the restaurant near a makeshift memorial in Waukesha on Tuesday.

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Josh Larson was marching in parade with family, sheltered in library

the volunteers were able to provide more than 300 hot meals to first responders and 230 additional hot meals for those at Monday night's Cutler Park vigil.

"The love was so overwhelming," Zappa said.

Making life easier for the hurting

Brock Held, a downtown Waukesha resident, spent a "frantic" 15 minutes on Sunday making sure his stepsister and her daughter were safe after attending the Christmas parade.

"But that was nothing compared to what those people are going through in the hospital," Held said.

The next day, the idea to build wheel-

chair ramps for the victims came to his mind. Held said people shouldn't have to worry about how they're getting their families home from the hospital. "They can keep their insurance checks, and they need the ramps," said Held.

After he posted his plans to build the ramps Monday night on Facebook, he was inundated with messages — of people offering donations, supplies and free labor.

To help or make a donation, email Held at brockandathena@email.com.

"This is my way of giving back," he said. "I care about everyone."

Registered nurse Amber Schuenemann was decorating her Christmas tree with her husband and two sons when she heard about the horrific incident.

"I immediately felt sick to my stomach and overwhelmed with the need to help," she said. A few minutes later, she called her friends Alisha and Aaron Spencer, who were at the parade. After finding out they were safe, the Spencers agreed to help Schuenemann create and collect items for care packages for the victims and their families.

"General toiletries and gift cards are always helpful and appreciated for patient care packages, as the families may be spending a significant amount of time at the hospital," Schuenemann said.

Schuenemann already has enough items for five care packages, but is hoping to gather much more and deliver them to families or Children's Wisconsin by Christmas.

For those who wish to donate items, Schuenemann is asking for snacks, toiletries, small travel activities like games and coloring supplies, child-size fleece throw blankets, gift cards, and written words of encouragement or any other items that may bring families comfort. These items can be dropped off at 630 West College Ave.

If you want to donate funds for items, you can send funds to @Alisha-Spencer-12 on Venmo.

"The road ahead will not be short or easy, emotionally and potentially physically. These families need to be lifted up and supported by their community," Schuenemann said. "They need to know there is still good in this world"

Alexandria Groth and Cathy Kozlowicz contributed to this report.