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Frostburg, Maryland, affectionately known to many as the Mountain City, is a little college town on “the Mountain Side of Maryland.” That means it’s in Allegany County, on the westernmost side of the state of Maryland. It’s about three hours from Washington and Baltimore and two hours from Pittsburgh, but during the month of December, one may easily mistake this community and its glowing holiday spirit as the gateway city to the North Pole.

About 7,000 people live in Frostburg year-round, but the population increases from September to May when students move in to attend Frostburg State University (FSU), a four-year institution that is part of the University System of Maryland. But unlike some college towns across the United States, the gift that keeps on giving in Frostburg may just be the synergy between the city and campus communities. It is a partnership that has spanned generations, engaged many events and programming, and spurred city-wide development, but never is the magical harmony between



Elf-in-training “Elfonzon”
 (aka Jake Nowaczyk)

the two more apparent than it is during the holiday season.

And while Frostburg is a super-festive town from Thanksgiving weekend through New Year’s Day, there’s one particular day when the town takes it totally over the top... and that’s the first Saturday of December, when the community and the University show up in full Christmas spirit for the annual “Storybook Holiday.”

The event, which will celebrate 20 years in 2023, was created two decades ago by Dr. Bill Bingman and Dr. Barbara Ornstein of Frostburg State University’s Children’s Literature Centre, after being inspired by their annual travels to the West Virginia Reading Association conference in White Sulphur Springs. “Nearby Lewisburg, WV, held a holiday festival to showcase their businesses and town, and each year we would begin our annual conversation



on the return trip home to Frostburg,” said Barb. “We were inspired to create a children’s holiday event in our city, which would revolve around children’s literature.”

You could say the event was drawn up, because it was at the Princess Restaurant, one of the most recognizable establishments in Frostburg’s downtown, famous for its old fashion sodas, burgers, and homemade pies, that Bill and Barb sat down for lunch and began putting ideas to paper on the back of the restaurant’s placemat.

“We had absolutely no money the first year,” said Barb. “We began with a tiny craft and gift workshop, a ‘letters to Santa’ station, and a few other hands-on activities. With no budget, we charged \$1 to make a craft.” Barb recalls how in that very first year, they crossed their fingers for just 50 people to show, but when the doors opened, hundreds lined up to enter the event space. “Near the end of the day, a father approached us and thanked us for providing an event for his children. He explained that both he and his wife had recently lost their jobs, and that Storybook Holiday was essentially going to be their kids’ Christmas,” shared Bill. “We knew then and there that we had to find a way to ensure that we could create an annual event that was free to all families.”

Twenty years later, Storybook Holiday is not only the largest annual awareness campaign for the University’s Children’s Literature Centre, but it is also a major holiday event for



Top: A highlight of Storybook Holiday is the Christmas parade on Main Street, Frostburg.

Middle: Dr. Barb Ornstein, FSU Children’s Literature Centre and one of the creators of Storybook Holiday.

Bottom: The Community Model Railroad Club display brings joy to children and adults alike.



the city of Frostburg and the Mountain Maryland region. As the single-biggest business day for shops and restaurants in downtown Frostburg, the event attracts thousands of people – both locals and visitors – to the town for festivities. It is also a picturesque example of collaboration between the Children’s Literature Centre, Frostburg State University students, the City of Frostburg, the Frostburg business community, Allegany County schools, students and families, and generous donors that continue to support, fund, and build the longevity of this special event.

And the magic will return for the 20th anniversary on **Saturday, December 2, 2023**. Here’s what you can expect to see in Frostburg this time of year:

Elves!

As you might have guessed, elves may just be the most important part of Christmas. According to holiday folklore – real elves keep a low profile, so the students at FSU transform into “elves-in-training” to spread joy throughout



Top left: Introducing one of the Elf teams.

Top right and above: The Elf Olympics, always a crowd pleaser, includes package wrapping, cookie tossing and much more...

the town and earn a spot as one of Santa’s elves at the North Pole. During the day, children can have **Breakfast with the Elves** at the historic Hotel Gunter or join them in the **Elves’ Secret Workshop** at City Place to create a



Author Deborah Wagner-Brenneman, presents her book *The Perfect Tree for Mrs. B.*, at Main Street Books along with bookstore owner Fred Powell.



Featured author/illustrator, Will Hillenbrand (left) and Dr. Bill Bingman, FSU Children's Literature Centre and one of the creators of Storybook Holiday, at the 2022 book reading presentation and autograph session.

special holiday craft. They can also write a letter to Santa (and receive a personalized answer back from the North Pole), get their photo with an elf, and vote for the Best Elf. Picking your favorite may be the challenge, because the town is filled with over 200 elf 'volunteers' (each with their very own elf name) buzzing around spreading holiday cheer, assisting with visitor needs, and putting on all the event festivities. But one of the very, very best parts of the day has to be the annual Elf Olympics. Contests include cookie tossing, package wrapping, tree decorating, toy creating and even song serenading. It is a proven crowd favorite: take our word for it – these elves are highly competitive.

Books!

The fact that an entire town comes out to celebrate books and reading would just about warm even the Grinch's cold heart, and that is the very foundation of this event. The mission of the Children's

A child mails her letter to Santa with help from an elf-in-training at City Place during Storybook Holiday.



Literature Centre at FSU is to promote literacy and cultivate awareness and understanding on the importance of reading. There are storybook readings and author/illustrator presentations at the Frostburg Community Library, Hotel Gunter, and Frostburg's independent bookshop, Main Street Books. For its 20th anniversary, Storybook Holiday will welcome back author and illustrator, Will Hillenbrand, who will read, present, and sign copies of his latest children's holiday-themed book – *Little Red* (which also happens to feature a special dedication to the town of Frostburg).



Jack Frost!

When Frostburg's Christmas parade winds its way down Main Street, also known as the historic National Road, it is led by none other than the town's very own holiday mascot – Jack Frost. Contrary to what you may think, Frostburg is not named for the icy guy. There is no Storybook Holiday without Jack Frost, portrayed by Frostburg local and educator – Rick Stevenson. But how Jack came to be may not be so obvious. It actually started very early in the history of the event, when, at the last minute, the event organizers needed someone to portray Santa. That is where Rick stepped in. After the event, Rick was asked to join the event the following year. He obliged, but under one condition... he would not be Santa. Instead, he suggested that he return the next year as Jack Frost.

It may even surprise Rick that nearly 15 years later, the popularity of this character still has an impact on the event. And it has become a family affair, as his wife Jackie portrays (you guessed it) Jackie Frost, and their three children – Lakyn, Brooks, and Reid, dress as Suzy Snowflake, Jack Frost Jr, and Jack-Jack Frost. You can catch the family as Jack emcees Elf Olympics, makes a snowy appearance in the parade, welcomes children to Santa's House (oh – did we mention that Rick's Mom is the town's Mrs. Claus?), and provides merriment and glee when Jack comes back at the end of the day – riding a fire truck – and starts the annual town-wide snow-ball fight.

Decked Halls!

Since its inception, Storybook Holiday has involved elementary schools throughout the region by having classrooms create window displays revolving around a holiday picture book for participating businesses. Frostburg businesses benefit greatly from the event's growing success too. In 2022, the City of Frostburg provided a "Holly Jolly Hometown Mini-Grant" to assist businesses with investing in their exterior décor to assist in transforming the Mountain City into the Magical City. From Thanksgiving through New Year's, just walking the streets downtown is enough to feel the spirit of Christmas. Storefronts are painted, large, live greenery adorns every lit downtown lamppost, and lights and trees are hung from every window and corner.



Top: Jack Frost (local educator, Rick Stevenson) entertains the crowd.

Middle and Bottom: Inside City Place children can experience writing a letter to Santa, making a special holiday craft, and getting their photo taken with an elf.



Students from Frostburg's Mountain City Center for the Arts perform during Storybook Holiday.

Community Support!

One of the original purposes of Storybook Holiday was to showcase the town of Frostburg and its businesses. This led to the creation of "Sticker Stops," where children and families visited participating businesses to collect special holiday stickers on a Storybook Holiday bookmark.

During the height of COVID, the event was heavily scaled back to accommodate the unknowns of the pandemic. Hundreds of visitors to each business could not occur, and the Storybook planning team sought an alternative. With inspiration from the town of Berkeley Springs, WV, an idea, and now a new tradition was born. 'Frostburg Decks the Meters' was introduced to the event as a contest to create a safe outdoor experience for the community, which welcomed businesses, organizations and families to adopt a parking meter to decorate for a community-wide contest. From

that year on, all 75 city parking meters continue to be adopted and decorated, with a committee determining the winners. A decorated meter also means no need to pay to park during the holiday season, which encourages the community to mingle and support Frostburg downtown retailers.

In 2022, Frostburg's holiday season shined a little brighter when the town and its signature event were chosen to be featured on UPtv's reality series "Small Town Christmas." The docuseries pays tribute to small towns that celebrate the holidays in big ways, and is hosted and executive-produced by Megan Alexander, a national correspondent for "Inside Edition" and best-selling author of the children's book, *Small Town Christmas*. "Small Town Christmas" decided to film in Frostburg not only because of the town's



Some samples of the 75 parking meters adopted and decorated by businesses, families, and community organizations.



Preparing for the Elf Olympics at a recent Storybook Holiday event.

“cool” name but also for its over-the-top Christmas celebration and support of literature. With Alexander’s background as an author and her interest in promoting Christmas traditions, Frostburg was a natural fit. Filming last year paid off with Frostburg featured as Season Two’s final episode. Viewers can catch Frostburg’s episode again when season three resumes on UPtv this upcoming November.

As evening approaches everyone turns out at City Place for the Festival of Trees. Each tree has been decorated by a different community group and Christmas carols are sung while Santa comes to check everything out.

The event wraps up with a classic holiday movie at the historic Frostburg Palace Theatre (minimal cost, advance ticket purchase suggested).

When asked how Storybook Holiday’s longevity and success continues, Dr. Ornstein credits it all to the serendipitous nature of Frostburg itself. “We truly do not think this event could be so successful in any other city in the country. Without the constant support of the City of Frostburg, Brian Vought – Director of Parks & Recreation, and community and business members on our event planning committee, we are encouraged to try new components each year.” Dr. Ornstein added, “We also have a phenomenal group of FSU and area students who volunteer as elves-in-training to create the magic. And of course, we couldn’t do it without the help of the City, our CLC graduate assistants, dedicated EDUC alumni, and the generous donors and sponsors we’ve had over the past 20 years.”

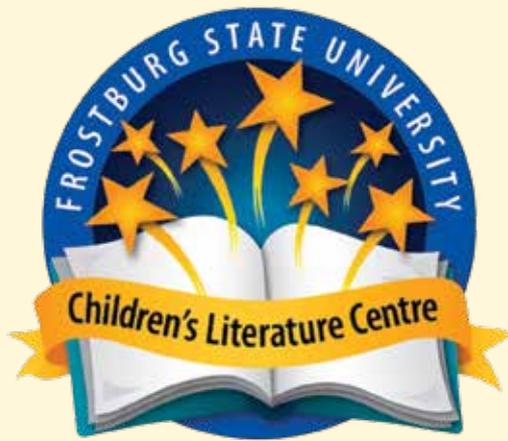
What started as a children’s event to showcase children’s literature has morphed into a huge opportunity to create holiday magic for everyone in attendance and everyone involved. “We had hoped that the event would be a success, but could not have envisioned its constant growth and impact on the local businesses,” added Dr. Bingman.

Around here, they like to say, “Frostburg: It’s just cooler here,” and they are not kidding. The enchanting magic of this town and this event can only be compared to the final scene from the classic cartoon version of the Grinch, when all the Whos in Whoville gather, clasping hands and singing in unison ‘Welcome Christmas’ while swaying under the glistening snow. As the Grinch watches high from the mountaintop, the narrator reads, “Maybe Christmas, he thought ... doesn’t come from a store. Maybe Christmas, perhaps ... means a little bit more!”

And it means more in Frostburg.

It’s the magic. The sea of smiling faces from people far and wide decked out in their Christmas best. The simplistic sound of sleigh bells mixed with children’s laughter. It’s the hospitality of a small town during the holidays. It is slowing down, during what can be the most hectic time of the year, to enjoy the heart of the season. It is seeing a community really embrace each other and work together to bring magic to families.

The heart of Frostburg shines during Storybook Holiday, and maybe that is the reason why 20 years later, Storybook Holiday is not slowing down.



Upcoming Community Events *for 2023-2024*

CLC Book Award — Saturday, October 7, 2023

Created in 2012, this annual award honors a children's picture book that embodies the attributes of Compassion, Love, and Courage. An award banquet is held each fall to honor the recipient. To nominate a book, please review the criteria on our webpage – www.frostburg.edu/clcbookaward

Storybook Holiday — Saturday, December 2, 2023

Celebrating its 20th year, this day-long family event features: Author/Illustrator presentation, Breakfast with the Elves, Elf Olympics, Storybook Holiday parade, Elves' Secret Workshop, Letters to Santa, Storybook Readings, Sticker Collecting at participating businesses, Santa's House, Miniature Railroad Display, Craft Vendors, Jack Frost Community Snowball Toss, Festival of Trees, and a classic movie at our town theatre.

Harry Potter Book Night — Saturday, February 3, 2024

This Hogwarts-themed event (in association with *Bloomsbury Press*) in February is held within the Lewis J. Ort Library and Lane Center on the FSU campus. Children participate in various Harry Potter activities such as: House sorting, Hogwarts classes, costume contest, and other magical fun.

Spring Festival of Children's Literature — Friday & Saturday, April 26 & 27, 2024

Founded in 1982, the Festival is a two-day professional conference at the end of April, which brings children's literature advocates to Frostburg. It offers an opportunity for librarians, educators, future educators, families, students, and others to interact with celebrated authors and illustrators, as well as attend teacher workshops that apply current theory and ideas to the classroom.

Pirates Ahoy! — Wednesday, July 10, 2024

In this July community event, children participate in various pirate-themed activities, including an author/illustrator presentation, treasure hunt, creating pirate crafts, and costume contest.

Adopt-a-School — ongoing

CLC Staff make monthly visits to a designated school to share and read aloud the most current children's books. Students also attend age-specific author/illustrator presentations each semester, and school staff is encouraged to participate in Centre professional events throughout the year.

Super Sleuth Podcast — ongoing

Geared for upper elementary students, the podcast focuses on figures throughout history. Each episode features a different mystery historical figure. Students determine the person featured, based on clues and vocabulary that accompany each mystery "guest." Every episode features a children's book that students can find at their local library, to learn more about the featured person. The podcast concludes with one clue about the next episode's mystery figure.

Children's Literature Centre Review Collection

Our growing collection of more than 15,000 children's books is housed in the new Education and Health Science Center on the FSU campus, serving FSU students and faculty, area educators, and the community.

