

Tree of Lights Ceremonies Help Those Who've Lost Remember

By Jennifer Wake

Tiny lights now twinkle on small trees along the center isle of Mt. Diablo Boulevard in Lafayette, but one tree shines tall above the rest.

On Nov. 11, in the parking lot across from La Fiesta Square on Lafayette Circle next to the Hen House, people from throughout Lamorinda gathered with candles in hand to listen to poetry, songs by the Springhill School Children's Choir, and to see the lighting of the giant oak at one of 16 Hospice Foundation of the East Bay's Tree of Lights Ceremonies – each light a symbol of the life of a donor's friend or family member.

Each year donations are collected for each light lit as a way to raise much needed funds for the Foundation which supports Hospice of the East Bay (Hospice). Funds raised help the organization care for all medically qualified patients without regard for their insurance status.

"The Foundation works to raise funds to pay for patients who are not fully covered," said Hospice Community Education Director Robin Jones. "While most Hospice patients have either private or public insurance such as Medicare or Medi-Cal, others are uninsured or underinsured. Even patients who are 'fully insured' benefit from the efforts of the Foundation when they receive services that are essential, but not covered by insurance."

Since 1995, the Hospice Tree of Lights has helped raise nearly \$900,000. Last year nearly \$90,000 was raised from more than 1,200 donors throughout the East Bay. These much needed funds also help to offset additional services that may not be covered by insurance such as frequent or lengthy visits, cost of gas to travel to patients' homes, in-home, pre-admission consults with a hospice nurse or medical social worker, and in-person bereavement support and counseling.

"We understand that death is both a spiritual and physical experience and that emotional, psychological and spiritual pain is as significant as physical pain," Jones said. "Patients, their families and loved ones are the unit of care. And bereavement care is critical to supporting surviving family members and friends. We are with the patient and family every step of the way."

Because Hospice of the East Bay is independently operated, and not part of a large for-profit corporate or a government entity, Jones said the organization can establish policies locally to meet the needs of the communities it serves.

"We determined that specialized programs were needed in the East Bay for in-home pediatric hospice care (Comfort for Kids program), for women with recurrent breast cancer (Anna's Program), and for perinatal hospice care (Skye's Angels)," she said.

Each of these programs is unique to Northern California, and approximately 10 percent of those helped by Hospice of the East Bay are Lamorinda residents.

Two more events are scheduled in Lamorinda. The Moraga Community Chorus is scheduled to sing at upcoming Tree of Lights Ceremony on Dec. 2 at the Moraga Commons. The Orinda ceremony on Dec. 8 (at Orinda Village by Bank of America) will feature the Children's Chorus from Del Rey, Glorietta, Sleepy Hollow, Wagner Ranch, and Orinda Intermediate schools, directed by



Hospice staff member Robin Jones introduces the Springhill School Children's Choir at the Lafayette Tree of Lights Ceremony
Photo Jennifer Wake

Harmony Murphy, Colleen Sipich and Ron Pickett.

At each of the Tree of Lights Ceremonies, individuals, merchants and community groups have shown their support by donating goods and services. Starbucks in Lafayette donated hot chocolate and coffee at the Nov. 11 event; Safeway in Orinda plans to donate cookies and drinks and the Orinda Fire Department plans to bring Santa to the festivity on their fire truck; and Moraga's Troop 212 will build a bonfire to warm all attendees while girl scout troops hand out cookies.

"The tree lightings are a tradition for family and friends to gather together to honor and remember their friends and family members," Jones said. "People look forward to their community's tree lighting and return year after year."

For more information about upcoming ceremonies or to make a donation, contact Hospice of the East Bay at 925-887-5678.



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