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Moraga's Luminarias, a Bright Christmas Tradition

By Sophie Braccini



Photo Mike Wilson

Six years ago on Christmas Eve, new Moraga resident Cathy Schultheis was coming back from Mass around midnight to her Tharp home and lost her way. Then from Camino Pablo, she spotted the luminarias on Rimer Drive, rows of lights shining through paper bags on both sides of the street, "one after the other, the little lights led me to my home," she remembers. She following year, she decided to join the Rimer group and added the Tharp/Deerfield loop to the display. That's how a tradition that was born many years ago, south of the border, has expanded in our suburb.

According to Michelle Wilson, who lives on Rimer, the Moraga tradition started at the very end of Rimer, past Tharp, in the area nicknamed 'Rimer Court.' When she arrived in Moraga seven years ago, Wilson wanted to create a 'giving tradition' for her family to celebrate Christmas. She had read an article about the Old Town Albuquerque luminarias in Sunset magazine and had heard of the Rimer Court tradition, though she thought it was extinct. The Wilson family decided to order the small candles, the paper bags and the sand used to weight the bags down, and to deliver supplies for 10 bags with instructions to each of their neighbors along Rimer. "It was our gift to the neighborhood," explains Wilson.

Mike Wilson remembers the first night of the luminarias. "It was a bit foggy that night, the display was truly magical." The next morning the Wilsons found, on their doorstep, little thank you gifts from their neighbors.

This year's luminaria lighting will be the 7th for the Wilsons; they will supply 80 homes with luminarias. Many other streets have joined them, not only the Tharp area, but also Oxford Dr., Greenfield Dr., Sanders and Carr Dr.

"It's become a tradition for people to come out around 6:00 p.m. to light their candles, walk up and down the street, meet and greet," says Wilson, "almost everyone participates, even if they do not belong to the Christian religion. Only one resident has asked us not to deliver candles any more."

As the popularity of the display grows, more residents from outside of the area come to enjoy it. "It's nice that people come," says Mike Wilson, "but may be they could park (near Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School on Camino Pablo) and walk our street, otherwise, too many headlights are not very good for the charm of the display."

"This is a real Christmas feeling," says Schultheis, "something that can't be bought in a store."

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