

Maynooth-Madawaska Pastoral Charge hosts third annual live Nativity



By Mike Riley Local Journalism Initiative Reporter The Maynooth-Madawaska Pastoral Charge of the United Church is hosting their third annual live Nativity where attendees can "Walk with Mary and Joseph as [they] hear the story of Jesus' birth" event in Hastings Highlands on Dec. 17 and 18. It is being held at the Rise Above Guest House and the Rise Above Cathedral of the Trees at 470 East Loop Road in Hastings Highlands. Reverend Marilyn Zehr, who is co-hosting the weekend with her wife Reverend Svinda Heinrichs, comments on this upcoming event. This third annual live Nativity, where attendees can "Walk with Mary and Joseph as [they] hear the story of Jesus' birth" is happening on the weekend of Dec. 17 and 18 at the Rise Above Guest House and the Rise Above Cathedral of the Trees which is owned by Zehr and Heinrichs and is located at 470 East Loop Road in Hastings Highlands. For more information or to sign up for the event, please call Zehr at 613-334-0668. Zehr says that this is the third year in a row they've had this event, and they were inspired to do it as it was a COVID-19 safe way to experience the Christmas story. "It was entirely outdoors and people needed to sign up in family or social bubble groups to walk through the story with the characters and animals in 30-minute time slots. We never exceeded the outdoor gathering limits at the time and there was no opportunity for any points of contact," she says. Zehr says that she and her wife Heinrichs have a few goats and a couple of miniature donkeys and they thought it would be fun to host a live Nativity. She said that her parents were key planners of a live Nativity in their little town of Millbank, Ontario for many years, so she experienced it first-hand and she loved how it brought a diversity of community members together. "I am the United Church minister serving the Maynooth-Madawaska Pastoral Charge and members of the church are supportive of and are regularly part of the event in indispensable ways. However, the story requires more assistance than the church members can manage on their own. This year, members of St. Paul's United Church in Bancroft are helping out and every year there are different shepherds and wise guys who are members of the community at large, usually young people or children, who enjoy helping and interacting with the animals," she says. Casting for the live Nativity begins in early November, according to Zehr, and usually finishes by the end of that month. She says there is only one afternoon of rehearsals ahead of time, and the donkeys remember their parts from year to year, which makes things easier. Although she mentions they need to keep the scripts out of their way or they may eat them! Overall, she says everyone is pretty relaxed about learning lines, as it's all about telling the story and letting people experience it. "The first two years, we filled our eight time slots to their capacity of a COVID-19 safe 10 persons, which means about 80 people experienced the story each year, besides the approximately 20 people making it happen. If there are no major restrictions this year, we might increase the spaces available to 15 per time slot, but we want to maintain the intimacy that smaller groups allow," she says. Zehr told Bancroft This Week on Dec. 3 that the cast will start rehearsing the weekend of Dec. 10 and 11 and people have already started signing up to attend. She emphasizes that it isn't a huge time commitment and it's free, although they welcome donations to the Maynooth and Area Food Bank. She encourages attendees to dress warmly and says there is parking at the top of the driveway where the story begins. "It isn't a long walk through the story and it is manageable for most. If you have mobility challenges, just call and we will see if we can sort them out," she says. "It's a great event for little ones and families, though I think the appeal of the timeless story is for everyone."