Luminaria Night's glow is expanding
Annual Bethlehem event expected to raise $46,000 this year.
By Chris Pollock
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Joanne Anderson is glad she was wrong.

Ten years ago, Anderson was one of three people who pooled their efforts to put on the very first Luminaria Night in Bethlehem, with several dozen kits of candles, sand and paper bags assembled in Anderson's garage.

"I have to say, out of the three of us, I was the one who never thought it would get this big," she said Saturday, as hundreds of candles flickered along the street in front of her home on Powder Mill Road.

Saturday's Luminaria Night was the biggest one ever, with an estimated 55,000 candles burning in front of more than 2,200 homes and businesses.

The local tradition started by Anderson and her neighbors has come a long way from its humble start in 1997, when the illuminated bags were placed on just five blocks in north Bethlehem.

Anderson said the tradition is similar to one in Mexico and the American Southwest, where Mexican families place bags with candles outside on Christmas Eve. In Bethlehem, the $10 kits have always been sold in bundles of 10 bags, 10 candles and about eight pounds of sand to steady the bags. Anderson said the first year, the project raised about $300, which the group donated to a needy family chosen at random.

In 2002, the proceeds from the event were permanently designated to benefit New Bethany Ministries, a nonprofit based in Bethlehem. New Bethany began running Luminaria Night in 2003, when it finally outgrew Anderson's garage.

A complex, yet organized system has evolved to distribute the thousands of bags all over town, said Debbie Delgrosso, head volunteer in charge of the event.

In early December about 100 volunteers -- mostly high school and college students -- gather to assemble the kits. This year, they used about 23.5 tons of sand.

Once the kits are assembled, they are distributed to a network of block captains and their assistants, about 220 people in total, who give out the kits and sometimes light the candles in their neighborhoods. From about five blocks in its first year, the lighted streets are now all over Bethlehem and the surrounding townships, even into areas with Easton mailing addresses.

The whole operation is run without paid staff of any kind.
"The people who do this are people who, one, want to do something nice for their neighbors," said the Rev. William Kuntze, executive director of New Bethany Ministries. "And, two, [they] really want to help needy people."

Kuntze said New Bethany applied to the federal government in November to trademark the term "Luminaria Night." The organization also has developed a logo to signify the event. Kuntze said the sky is, literally, the limit.

"I'm looking forward to the day when a flight into Lehigh Valley Airport can come in and see the whole area illuminated on this night," he said.

This year, Luminaria Night will raise about $46,000 for New Bethany before costs of materials are subtracted, Kuntze said. But more than that, it is expected it will bring people together.

"Many of the block captains say, 'I met my neighbors [because of this], and I didn't even know them before,'" Delgrosso said.