

From the Inkwell

Creative Writing from Writers Ink



A Christmas Story

by Byron Jeffrey

Our family lived in Bryant, Arkansas about twenty miles southwest of Little Rock when I was six and seven. My brother was 18 months older. My father had a job for the nearby Aluminum Corporation of America. We built a tiny, two-room house on a small lot owned by Mr. Johnson who lived next door. Our sleeping areas were separated by curtains. My brother and I had military-style cots with thin mattresses. The house was heated with a potbellied stove. We had a large water barrel on the roof of the bathroom which supplied water to a flushable toilet and a faucet at the sink in the kitchen area. Indoor plumbing was rare in Bryant. The flushable toilet, septic tank, and indoor water at the sink made quite a stir in this community of only 58 residents. Water to fill the barrel came from Mr. Johnson's well and was carried up a ladder to the barrel on the roof. That's how I learned the relationship of work to reward. The greater the number of buckets brought to the surface, the more water we had for the bathroom water tank. We were really poor, but I didn't realize that we were.

Neither of my parents were churchgoers. We didn't even have a Bible in the house. At seven years old I had heard little about Christmas, and we'd never had a Christmas tree in the house. To my brother and me, Christmas was just December 25th on the calendar.

Bryant was so small that the bus station, grocery, hard goods, and post office were all in the same building. All incoming mail for the town came to a post office box. No one sent a Christmas card or Christmas letter to us. The word "Christmas" was not heard in our house. I grew up not celebrating Christmas at all. My mother had grown up in a Lutheran household, and my father in an Episcopal household.

When I was ten years old, my family sent my brother and me to the Morris Boarding School for Boys, located in Searcy, Arkansas, which was run by Franciscan Brothers. That experience was truly an eye-opener. In December of 1945, when I was in the fifth grade, the school went full bore on Christmas. We learned some very religious Christmas songs. Christmas trees decorated by the students were in every classroom. Christmas songs were played over the loudspeakers on campus. Joy and happiness could be felt everywhere. It was almost magical.

I wondered why we had never had a Christmas in our home. I wrote to my parents about the holiday festivities at school and asked why. My mother wrote back and said we were too poor to have the ability to exchange presents, buy decorations, and make a big deal out of the 25th of December. On Christmas morning I sat on the corner of my bed and cried while the other children were opening gifts sent to them by their families.

KEOWEE KEY COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP (KKCP)

BASF Supports KKCP Partner Purple Heart Homes

One of the other aspects of the Keowee Key Community Partnership is our outreach to local businesses, to ask for their support for our partners. Usually, this takes the form of donations. However, sometimes there can be a synergy where the business leaders be-

come aware of a charity brought to their attention by KKCPA that may be "below the radar." One such example is the relationship between BASF in Seneca and Purple Heart Homes. KKCP Board member David Eldridge helped introduce BASF to Purple Heart Homes and along with Keowee Key member Larry Druffel, Purple Heart Homes Chapter President acted as a catalyst to what is described in the following taken from BASF's internal newsletter.

SENECA, SC, October 27, 2022 – BASF in Seneca was recently recognized for its strong support of area veterans and their families with the Hammer Award, a national honor distributed by Purple Heart Homes, which provides housing solutions for disabled and aging veterans. The Hammer Award recognizes organizations for their commitment and dedication to helping veterans and their families with projects that allow them to safely remain in their homes.

On October 3, Purple Heart Homes Golden Corner Chapter President Larry Druffel presented the prestigious award to leaders of the Veterans Employee Team (VETS), BASF in Seneca's employee resource group made up of team members who are active service members, former service members and those who support veterans. The team offers opportunities for employees to connect with veterans, both internally and externally to BASF, and to support the local community. Over the past two years, the VETS team has spent more than 560 hours and more than 10 weekends making home repairs and improvements in and around Seneca to improve the quality of life for veterans and their families, in addition to 135 volunteer hours for other organizations.

This spring, BASF's VETS volunteers rebuilt a safer and easier-to-access wheelchair ramp for the widow of a local Korean War veteran. The VETS team improved another home's masonry and built a new deck for a former United States Marine Corp diesel mechanic who now lives in Iva, South Carolina, among nearly ten projects they completed for local veterans in 2022.

"It is an honor to spend our weekends recognizing fellow veterans for the priceless work they've done and volunteering to provide safer ways for them to access their homes," said Todd Alexander, co-chair of the BASF Seneca Veterans Employee Team, which is chaired by Adam LeRoy.

More projects are forthcoming for the VETS team at BASF in Seneca.

"BASF is a wonderful place to work for veterans, those transitioning from the military to civilian life, or people who are still in the reserves," said Adam LeRoy. "We have such strong support from leadership for veterans. In fact, BASF's site director, Elba, saw the work we'd been doing with Purple Heart Homes and decided to purchase and donate an



BASF donated the trailer and tools for the renovation project, Member Larry Druffel, is fourth from the left.

KEOWEE KEY COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP (KKCP)

entire trailer full of tools, so our team didn't have to borrow and bring our own tools to projects."

"BASF really values the skills you build in the military, like discipline, teamwork, perseverance, problem-solving, and we reward you with great pay and benefits for these important abilities," Site Director Elba Lizardi said.

December is for Christmas and Christmas is for Kids

Over half of the Keowee Key Community Partner Charities focus on families and children. Some of them may be familiar to you, others less so. And, if you are one of the hundreds of new residents that have moved into Keowee Key over the past few years, many or most may be unfamiliar to you.

What we can say is they do an incredible job of assisting our less fortunate neighbors in Oconee County. We wanted to highlight a few of them and how you can make a tremendous impact with your year-end giving plans. You can also read more about them, and the other Keowee Key Community Partnership partners, by visiting our website at www.kkcommunitypartnership.com, or by visiting Member Central, Philanthropy.



Fostering Faithfully

Fostering Faithfully's mission is to "Encourage and equip foster families and the children they love." They provide material and support services for Foster Families that have taken in children assigned to them by the Department of Social Services (DSS). Fostering Faithfully helps foster parents that are new to the role, assists the foster parent to adjust to the needs of children that may be different ages than they have been accustomed to housing, and sometimes, just provides a helping hand.

Fostering faithfully helps in other ways. From clothing and children's furniture (beds, cribs, high chairs, etc.), to providing babysitting so foster families can attend the accreditation courses required by DSS, or babysitting to allow some needed alone time. They also provide scholarships for recreation camps, school field trips, birthday sponsorships, meals, as well as new shoes for the start of school, and support programs for the foster children. Each child receives a new duffel bag with their name embroidered providing them with a personalized place for their things.

Another key role is their work with Kinship Caregivers. Kinship Caregivers are people who have connections to a foster child through work, school, church, or family who step up to provide foster care during times of family crisis. Unfortunately, the number of Kinship Caregivers has grown greater than ever.

Interested in helping? You can volunteer at their resource center, make a financial donation, or donate fast-food restaurant gift cards. The gift cards are given to families and caseworkers who often must travel long distances to hospitals for visits or therapies. Please contact them at www.fosteringfaithfully.org or by emailing them at fosteringfaithfully@gmail.com.

Grace's Closet

Grace's Closet's mission is "To help Oconee County students build self-confidence as they seek stability attending school by providing immediate access to needed resources, such as



clothing, school supplies, hygiene items, and weekend food."

Grace's Closet provides a welcoming room, a "closet" in all 18 Oconee County schools. Students can "shop" at Grace's Closet and take anything they need, at no cost to them. Access to these items helps build self-confidence and improves the students' lives. Even formal wear is available for middle and high school dances, something that many of these students are unable to afford.

Over 400 students take advantage of this assistance each week. Year over year there has been an increase in Closet usage, particularly this year. Shoes are especially important since many students come to school with worn-out shoes or a size too small. Imagine the joy and excitement of the students who receive a new pair of shoes that fit! Please consider a financial donation or simply donating new shoes this holiday season. Donate online at www.gracescloset.org. New shoes can be dropped off at any Oconee Federal or Blue Ridge Bank location.

As one Ravenel Elementary School student said: "Thank you for my new shoes, my feet don't hurt anymore!!"

BabyRead

BabyRead's Mission is "To raise literacy levels of children from low-income families in Oconee County by encouraging mothers and caregivers to read every day to their babies and toddlers, and to raise awareness of the importance of doing so."



This is a big step towards reducing the cycle of poverty for these families and the need is immense. There are close to 4,000 preschoolers in Oconee County, 57 percent from families living below the poverty line, and as many as 70 percent of preschoolers enter kindergarten not ready for school.

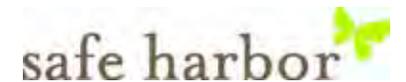
Seventy volunteers freely give their time and talents to serve as family readers or provide organizational support functions. At any one time, over 30 families participate in the one-on-one BabyRead Family Reading Program. These in-person sessions are BabyRead's "secret sauce." Readers build long-lasting relationships with moms and caregivers, practicing techniques for reading, singing, reciting nursery rhymes, doing finger play, and playing with instructional toys. Meetings are twice a month in a public place. A free book is given to the family for their baby, as well as some age-appropriate books for their older siblings. A storage box is also provided to help families build a small library of books at home.

Testimonials from BabyRead families highlight the impact the program is having. Moms acknowledge that their babies have become more expressive and attentive. These babies become more excited when read to and associate reading with comfort and attention from their families. Through being read to, these babies are learning a wide array of sounds and grammatical structures, as well as words not encountered in daily family conversations.

BabyRead has an active partnership with Seneca Early Head Start and Head Start. Every month books and instructional magazines like *Baby Bug* and *Highlights High Five* are provided to 104 babies and toddlers in these low-income programs. BabyRead raises funds in three primary ways: individual donations, grants, and local community support, like the Belk's Charity Day event. If you want more information, go to www.babyread.org.

Safe Harbor

Safe Harbor: The Seneca chapter of Safe Harbor has a simple mission: "To provide a continuum of services to victims of domestic violence and their children and to eliminate the cultural acceptance of domestic violence through a coordinated



KEOWEE KEY COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP (KKCP)

community response, education, and prevention.”

Safe Harbor is the only domestic violence shelter in Oconee County and can house up to 16 “clients” at any one time, which is not many for a county our size. In a typical year, they serve about 120 clients. Usually, the Seneca shelter houses Oconee County residents, however, if either the Anderson or Greenville County shelters are full, or a victim needs to stay outside of her home for safety reasons, clients from those counties can stay in Seneca. A typical length of stay is about 30 days.

We think of domestic violence as being against a woman. However, many of these women are also mothers, so the shelter needs to house a family unit, not just an individual.

Safe Harbor receives about 60 percent of its funding from federal and state-level grants with the remainder from foundations, faith communities, special events, and personal donations. Year-end fundraising is crucial for Safe Harbor with about 30 percent of their donations from individuals arriving in the last few months of the year. To learn more about Safe Harbor and ways in which you can help, please visit www.safeharborsc.org.

Wild Hearts Equine Therapy

Wild Hearts Equine Therapy’s mission is to: “Provide a safe and compassionate environment of the highest possible quality for people to develop physical, emotional, and behavior growth through the intuitive nature of the horse.”



Providing approximately 100 individual sessions a week, 42 weeks a year, Wild Hearts has a marked impact on the lives of its clients. Of these clients, approximately 90 are children and since the pandemic, they are seeing a marked increase in the number of children who need their help. Being open and listening to the horse activates life-changing bonds of trust and helps forge better relationships. Results from equine-assisted learning and therapy programs are tangible; sometimes results come from simply being in the presence of a horse’s unconditional acceptance and innate sensitivity.

In 2021 they conducted over 3,000 individual sessions. Their 55 to 60 volunteers help with client sessions, fundraising, administrative work, farm maintenance, and other tasks.

You can assist financially by choosing to sponsor a child for a session or even a season cycle which is usually six to eight weeks long. One session is just \$40; an entire cycle would be between \$240 and \$320 and would mean the world to so many of their clients. 30 percent of the sessions offered were supported in this manner and were free to the client.

Information on both financial donations and volunteer opportunities can be found at info@wildheartsequinetherapy.org.

Friends of the Guardians ad Litem

Friends of the Guardians ad Litem’s mission is to: “To make available to the children of Oconee County who are in the care of the Department of Social Services, materials and programs that are not covered by DSS or Medicaid.”

In an earlier *Scuttlebutt* article, we mentioned the unmet needs of these children in foster care and the inability of the court-appointed Guardian to finance any of these needs. This is where the Friends of the Guardians step in. While the Guardian can’t assist, the Friends of the Guardians can. They can provide an extra pair of glasses, or special clothing, cover the cost of summer camps, help with special needs, and even babysitting fees so the foster parents can step out



to take courses to maintain their accreditation. In a year, they provide funding for approximately 20 children. Last year they were able to give every child in the county who was under the care of DHS (about 160 children) a \$10 gift card to Walmart. A very well-received gift.

Their funding is mostly through individual donations so as the season of giving approaches, think about the Friends of the Guardians ad Litem and all the good they are doing for those less fortunate children in foster care. Contact them at kstimart@gmail.com.

Keowee Key Community Partnership (KKCP) partners with deserving, effective, nonprofit organizations that make a difference in Oconee County. These Partners record those donations from Keowee Key but report only cumulative results back to KKCP, enabling KKCP to seek matching funds. No individual donor names or donation amounts are ever shared with KKCP by Partners, and no money passes to or through KKCP.

Thank You Keowee Key!

What a year this has been and we at the Keowee Key Community Partnership want to express our thanks to all of you that have so generously supported our 22 Partner Charities. We started the year by announcing that three-and-a-half year cumulative donations by Keowee Key members, and a dozen local businesses that have joined us in this initiative, had reached over \$1M.

Imagine the impact that you have made on these organizations that provide help and support to those less fortunate in Oconee County. For the larger charities, it has been a nice addition to their fundraising activities, for the smaller charities, it has been a lifeline during the past two years made even more difficult by COVID. To that, we say Thank You!

In 2022 we also added two additional Partner Charities, Christ Central Ministries Oconee which deals with substance and alcohol addiction, and Foothills Care Center which provides support to pregnant women and new moms. We believe it is important to stress that all our 22 Partners have signed a memorandum of understanding with us whereby every dollar donated to them from you, our Keowee Key members, will be spent exclusively in Oconee County.

In the spring, we held a forum with guest speakers Phil Shirley, Director of Oconee Parks and Recreation and Tourism, and Ken Sloan, CEO of Visit Oconee South Carolina, talking about the outdoor opportunities in Oconee County as well as providing a meet and greet opportunity for our members to talk with our Partner charities. Articles about us appeared in the *Seneca Journal*, *Lake Living* magazine, and of course in the *Keowee Key 50th Anniversary* magazine. And, if all goes well, we hope to finish 2022 with cumulative donations reported by our Partner charities approaching \$1.5M! It took us three and a half years to reach the \$1M mark and we’re hopeful that we can top \$2M by the end of 2023. The snowball of your generosity is gaining unstoppable momentum. Thank you, Keowee Key; it’s been another great year.

Lastly, the Keowee Key Community Partnership wants to extend holiday wishes to all. Have a joyous and safe holiday season. If you plan on any year-end giving to our Partner Charities or have some of your IRA Required Minimum Distributions directed to them, please remember to write, or have written, Keowee Key or KKCP on the memo line. This identifies the gift as coming from a Keowee Key member which our Partners report back to the KKCP quarterly. They do not report who donated, but how much and from how many sources.

Thank you.