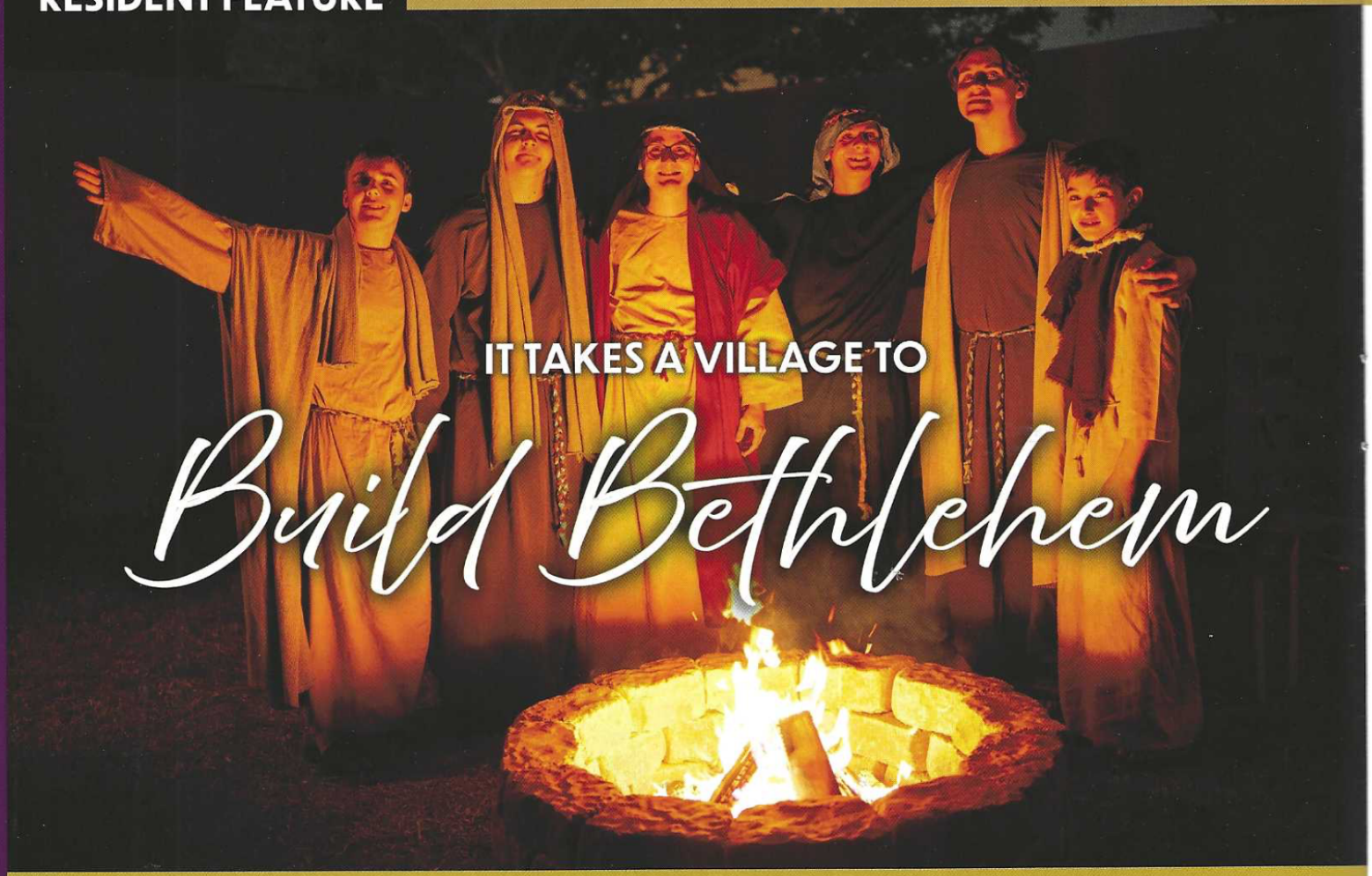
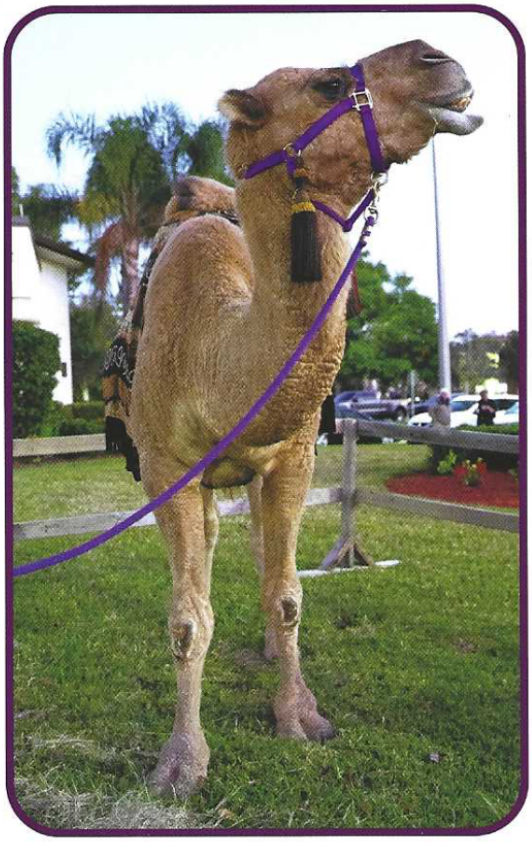


IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO Build Bethlehem

By Meeka Cook | Photos provided by CrossRoads Church



For months, volunteers at CrossRoads Church work to build a city that will welcome visitors for just five days.

Planning begins in early summer. Construction starts in October. Hundreds of costumes are sorted and fitted. Scripts are rehearsed, volunteers assigned, animals coordinated, pathways lit, and an entire first-century marketplace rises from a field.

Then, for two weekends in December, the gates open.

Walk Through Bethlehem has become a Port Orange Christmas tradition spanning more than two decades, drawing thousands of visitors who step out of the modern world and into a bustling recreation of Bethlehem. But behind the Roman soldiers, marketplace vendors, live animals, towering city gates, and familiar Christmas story is another story altogether. It is the hundreds of people it takes to bring the event to life.

It truly takes a village to build Bethlehem.

PASTOR RICH COSTANZA: THE VISION

CrossRoads first presented Walk Through Bethlehem in 2003, but Pastor Rich Costanza says another church inspired the original idea.

"My wife Cathy and I went to visit a church in South Georgia that was successfully doing it," he said. "We were so impressed and impacted by their ministry presentation, through the passionate acting of their volunteers and the environment that they created."

Bringing the concept home to CrossRoads was no small undertaking.

"It was a monumental task," Costanza said. "But through the excitement, unity, and passion of our people, everything came together as it should."

Roughly 4,000 people attended that first year. Today, attendance often reaches 8,000 to 10,000, with newcomers and families making it an annual tradition.

"We view it as more than just a Christmas program," Costanza said. "It is our free Christmas gift to our community."

Keeping it free has remained important to the church from the beginning.

"One of our philosophies is, 'We are blessed to be a blessing,'" Costanza said. "This is a fantastic church that has been abundantly blessed in so many ways, so we use this church essentially as a conduit of that blessing to others."

Costanza has been part of CrossRoads since 1996 and has served during Walk Through Bethlehem since its first year. For many years, his primary role was in the final Cross & Tomb scene. Although his responsibilities as pastor now often place him at the beginning of the experience, welcoming visitors before they enter Bethlehem, he still makes his way back to that final scene each year.

"That is what still moves me about Walk Through Bethlehem," he said. "To look at each group when they've made it to that final scene and they hear about what happened after that baby was born."

For Costanza, those reactions, whether quiet reflection, tears, smiles, or prayer, are reminders of why hundreds of people continue investing so much effort into an event that lasts only a few nights.

RICK SITA: BUILDING THE CITY

Long before visitors reach that final scene, Bethlehem must be built. Architect and general contractor Rick Sita has taken on the challenge of overseeing construction.

His work begins around the second week of October, nearly two months before the public arrives. In recent years, Sita has brought in a professional framing crew for several days at the beginning of the project to tackle some of the heaviest work before church volunteers arrive.

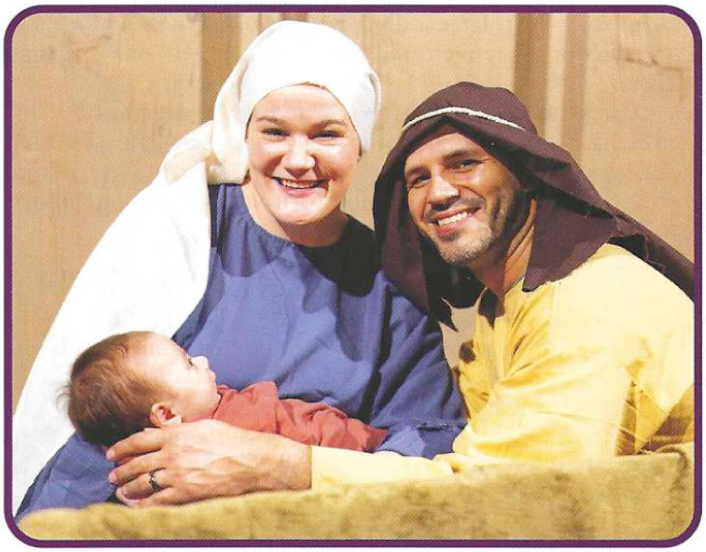
In earlier years, he said, construction was essentially "all hands on deck," which could make the sheer scale of the project intimidating.

"If we want to do this right, bringing a professional crew to get a chunk of it up makes it easier for volunteers to get excited about it versus taking on such a daunting task," he said.

Once the major framing is underway, volunteers arrive to add what Sita calls "the icing on the cake": the finishes and details that transform construction panels into another time and place.

The city itself has also evolved.

Several years ago, Sita helped redesign the layout, making it smaller and more efficient while leaving part of the church's sports field available for other programs. The redesign also addressed another problem: visitors could sometimes hear scenes happening ahead of them.



"We sat down and said, 'How can we make this so that you feel like you're really just an intimate group?'" he recalled.

The answer was a switchback design that separates groups and preserves the element of surprise.

The physical construction also became more efficient. Old panels had previously been stored outdoors, where Florida humidity, rain, and occasionally wildlife took their toll.

"You would have bees that would start making nests over the year, rotted wood, a lot of refinishing, sanding, painting, rebuilding," Sita said.

The church eventually built a dedicated storage building, and the church volunteers redesigned the panels from scratch to be smaller, lighter, and easier to assemble.

"Every year we're constantly trying to build a better mousetrap," he said.

The goal is for visitors to forget they are looking at a constructed set and instead feel as though they have stepped into another time.

Guests leave the church through a darkened passageway and emerge before a 14-foot city entry wall with 8-foot gates lit by torches. Roman guards call out to them. A tax collector waits at the entrance. Beyond the gates, the marketplace comes alive with people offering bread, fish, tapestries, and other wares as visitors move through the story.

Sita knows the experience from both sides. Years before joining CrossRoads, he attended Walk Through Bethlehem with his son. He still has a 2010 photograph of the two of them with one of the Roman soldiers.



Pastor Rich, our Lead Pastor, holds 2 Masters' degrees and a Ph.D. Rich and his wife Cathy have made CrossRoads their church home since 1996! They are blessed to have 4 married children, a few grandkids, and one son still at home, Elijah. Rich and Cathy love to see people learn, grow, and connect both with God and with each other.





CrossRoads is dedicated to presenting the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Port Orange/South Daytona/Daytona Beach area and the world. Our goal is to help others learn the Bible so they can live the Bible.



- Kids Ministry
- Youth Ministry
- Adult Groups
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- Deaf Ministry
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Fourteen years later, after getting involved in the church and its production, they recreated the photo with the same Roman soldier.

"That's the way it goes, evolving," he said. "It's very cool."

Perhaps no illustration of the enormous effort behind Bethlehem is better than the calendar itself. The city takes weeks to erect and stands for nearly two months, from construction through teardown.

The public sees it for five days.

"Everybody says the same thing every year," Sita said. "'You do all that for two weekends?'"

And yet, once those weekends arrive, he understands the answer.

"You finish, and then you're like, 'Oh. That's why.'"

CODY HOLLAND: MAKING IT ALL WORK

While Sita makes sure the city stands, Pastor Cody Holland makes sure hundreds of people know where they are supposed to stand inside it. Holland oversees Walk Through Bethlehem, and he begins planning long before construction.

"For me, the planning and recruitment begins in June," he said.

Leadership recruitment and decisions about scripts and city layout begin in June and July. In August and September, organizers reconnect with previous volunteers.

Recruitment continues through church services in October and November, followed by rehearsals and final preparation. The production is divided into roughly two dozen areas, each with a leader responsible for it.

"By far, one of the greatest challenges is making sure all of these areas are working together and pulling in the same direction," Holland said.

Then there are the costumes.

Hundreds of them must be checked out, returned, sized, mended, organized and, when necessary, created. Holland credits a dedicated costume team with maintaining a system that keeps everything packed away and ready for the following year. Of course, even the best planning cannot prevent everything.

"A volunteer gets a flat tire on their way there. Another person's costume rips. We have tech issues in the sanctuary while people wait," Holland said. "There's always something."

Perhaps the biggest challenge came when Walk Through Bethlehem returned after a four-year hiatus. Materials stored outside had deteriorated and attracted unexpected tenants.

"We had to remove around five different hives," Holland said. "Needless to say, we were on a first-name basis with our local beekeeper that year."



The hiatus also meant some institutional knowledge normally passed from one volunteer to another was lost. Holland himself was new to leading the production.

Since then, the church has improved its storage system, redesigned construction methods and condensed the city layout.

This year, organizers are also introducing preregistration with designated arrival times to reduce waits. Yet with all the spreadsheets, schedules, and logistics, Holland says visitors rarely see something he wishes they could.

"The camaraderie and unity that Walk Through Bethlehem develops in our church," he said. "It's the kind of thing that can only develop when people work together for something bigger than themselves."

DEBBIE KEESEE: BETHLEHEM'S TOWN GOSSIP



And then there is Phoebe.

Debbie Keesee has played Bethlehem's resident town gossip since the very beginning, and she has her mother to thank for it.

Back in 2003, when Walk Through Bethlehem was still only an idea, Keesee's mother approached the people organizing the actors.

"She told them, 'If you don't have a Phoebe, Debbie would be perfect for the role,'" Keesee recalled. "And I've been Phoebe ever since!"

She still isn't entirely sure what her mother saw in her. "Apparently, she saw something I didn't," she joked.

Four women now rotate through the role as groups arrive, saving their voices while ensuring that tour guides never quite know which Phoebe they will meet.

Phoebe arrives as visitors become immersed in the busy streets of Bethlehem, eager to hear the latest gossip about a young couple staying in a stable and a baby about to be born.

"I absolutely LOVE my part," Keesee said. She especially loves watching children figure out what the adults in the scene supposedly do not yet know.

"There are moments when Phoebe is questioning who this couple could possibly be and what all the fuss is about," she said. "And suddenly, a little voice from the crowd will interrupt us, excitedly telling us EXACTLY who is in that stable and who that baby is."

After more than two decades, those children are no longer necessarily children.

Keesee regularly encounters families who have attended Walk Through Bethlehem year after year. Earlier this year, while visiting her mother at a rehabilitation facility, she met a woman who told her she had first brought her daughter to Bethlehem at about age three. The daughter is now well into her teens, and the family still returns. Stories like that have become part of the event itself.

"Children who once walked through Bethlehem holding their parents' hands are growing up, and some are now bringing

children of their own," Keesee said.

The relationships volunteers form have grown alongside those family traditions.

"From the construction and preparations to the rehearsals and the actual event nights, it brings people together who might otherwise never cross paths," she said. "Before you know it, you're sharing laughs, making memories, and building friendships."

Then the final visitors leave. The costumes are returned. The marketplace grows quiet. Eventually, the panels come down, and Bethlehem disappears from the field.

Until next year.

When it begins again.

Months of preparation for five days.

Hundreds of volunteers for one shared experience.

And somehow, year after year, an empty field becomes a village again.

One built not just with lumber and fabric, but with memory, tradition, and community.

WALK THROUGH BETHLEHEM — KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

DATES: December 4–5 and December 11–13
HOURS: Arrive anytime between 5:30 and 8:30 p.m.
LOCATION: CrossRoads Church, 1851 S. Clyde Morris Blvd., Daytona Beach

Walk Through Bethlehem is a 45-minute outdoor guided tour through a recreated first-century city. Because the route includes uneven terrain and low-light areas, guests who use walkers, wheelchairs, or scooters may want to consider the conditions before attending. Pre-registration is available and recommended to help reduce wait times.

For more information or to pre-register, visit crbible.com/WTB or call 386-760-4806.





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