

THE LAND OF oohs and aahs.



The story behind the
Airdrie Festival of Lights is about
heart, brains and courage.

STORY BY ALEX FRAZER-HARRISON | PHOTOS BY KRISTY REIMER



It takes a lot of heart, brains and courage to put on one of Alberta's truly unique events.

For three of the guiding forces behind the Airdrie Festival of Lights, it's as easy as following the Yellow Brick Road.

Each December, thousands of people visit the park alongside Nose Creek for the holiday-themed lights-and-music festival. It is a classic community get-together that last year raised more than \$24,000 for local volunteer groups. Putting on the event requires months of planning and determination.

Rey Rawlins doesn't have a head full of straw like the Scarecrow; what he does have is the experience of having been one of the originators of the event 12 years ago.

"Stan Softley was on City Council, and so was I, he had been down in Utah where he saw a drive-through light display, he thought it would be a great idea to do one here," Rawlins recalls. "We got to talking about the idea ... and brought in other folks [like] Peter Pape and John Whitrick. This was in September and we said there wasn't enough time to organize it [for December]; but the next thing we knew, the lights were on their way."

That first year was an experiment - an example of Airdrie risk-taking at its finest - but despite Mother Nature doing her best Wicked Witch impression, the event was a success.

"It was one of the coldest winters ever. There was so much snow we had to put the displays on snow banks," says Rawlins. "But there was a lot of word of mouth, and we got a lot of corporate support."

Rawlins is still involved - he's sometimes called the brains behind the Festival because of his experience at putting it on each year.

But such an event is not cheap (the first Festival used \$300,000US worth of lights), and it's the support of corporate sponsors each year that keep the event going.



For more information about the
Airdrie Festival of Lights, visit
www.airdriefestivaloflights.com.

For those interested in
volunteering,
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Vesta Properties Ltd. is the title sponsor for the event, and it could be said it provides the Festival with some of its heart.

"We really enjoy the community feel within Airdrie," says Vesta sales and marketing manager Brian Balson, who moved here in 2005. "Lots of places have outdoor Christmas displays, but there's something about Airdrie's Festival that caught our attention. We liked the small-town charm here."

Vesta started out sponsoring a single evening of the Festival, but Balson saw the potential of the event as a place for neighbours to get to know each other and embrace Airdrie's small-town feel.

"The Festival of Lights is something that always jumps out at me and says, this is ideal; a real sense of community," he says. Vesta bumped up its involvement to a \$150,000, five-year presenting sponsorship. The company also sponsors the miniature trains that the Munchkins, er, kids love so much.

"We [signed up as] a train sponsor because it fits in with a new development we're doing called Williamstown, which is named for William McKenzie, the pioneer who named Airdrie," says Balson. "We also redid the [festival] ticket booth in the form of a train station... we had volunteers [from Vesta] and trades volunteers. The excitement of the event is what draws people to it who say, I want to get involved."

It takes courage and the soul of a not-so-cowardly lion to arrange the 7,000 volunteer hours it takes to put the Festival on.

"We start to plan the next Festival on January 1," says volunteer co-ordinator Sheila Bunz. "You start right after the last Festival ends and you just keep going.

"And it's not just during the event ... during the spring and summer we have work bees; lights need to be replaced, arches need painting, sometimes electrical work needs to be done – it all takes a lot of work."

Bunz balances her full-time job as a realtor with her many hours on the telephone, setting up meetings, taking volunteer names and

explaining to potential volunteers and support groups how the Festival supports the community.

"I got involved because it's a true community event ... but there's all this behind-the-scenes work that no one knows about," she says. "I think the only way to get things done in a community is by getting involved. You can't sit back and complain."

Rawlins says the most rewarding part of all the hard work is "watching the little kids seeing the lights and Santa ... their facial expressions are priceless."

No ruby slippers required for creating that magic.

