Behind the Magic of Christmas Prelude

BY KATELYN MICHAUD

Every December, thousands of people from across the country come to the seaside village of Kennebunkport to watch the lobster-topped Christmas tree light up in celebration of the festive holiday season.

The 36th annual Christmas Prelude kicks off on Dec. 1. For 12 days, the towns of Kennebunkport, Kennebunk, and Cape Porpoise become decked out in colorful lights, red bows and fresh pine boughs like an old Norman Rockwell scene. Kennebunkport has hosted Christmas Prelude since 1982. But without the benefit of a full-time staff of people to stage this amazing holiday extravaganza each year, how in the world does it come together?

It literally takes an army of volunteers from nearly every corner of the community to make it so with the Kennebunkport Business Association leading the way. The KBA works with hundreds of volunteers from churches, schools and civic and community groups who all contribute a piece to the Prelude holiday puzzle.

For the past 11 years, Sheila Matthews-Bull of the Rhumb Line Resort has served as the chair of the Christmas Prelude Committee. Matthews-Bull became involved with the Prelude preparations over 20 years ago when she complained to Jackie Kellett about decorating for Prelude before Thanksgiving. Jackie told Matthews-Bull, "If you complain then you're going to work." Matthews-Bull has been running to show ever since.

Ashley Padget, the general manager of Alisson's Restaurant in Kennebunkport, is the President of the KBA. She said, "I got involved because I love what Prelude represents – a traditional New England Christmas with free family friendly events that are open and welcoming for everyone." Christmas Prelude is orchestrated by Matthews-Bull, Padget and their team of over 50 volunteers.

Planning for Prelude begins about three weeks after the previous year's event ends. The committee meets to review how things went, what they can do better, and changes they might make for the coming year. Matthews-Bull said most of the planning occurs over the summer months and the scheduling occurs in September, but the committee meets monthly throughout the year.

Prepping for Christmas Prelude takes a team of volunteers hundreds of hours to do every year. There are multiple committees, like the Tree Committee, the Decorating Committee and more. Matthews-Bull said, "scheduling is definitely the most challenging task. I'm glad Ashley handles most of that." Padget said, "One of the most challenging aspects is that we are all just volunteers, so we rely on people to pitch in."

Every year the Christmas Prelude event gets bigger and better. This year, Prelude has a lot of new business members joining in on the festivities, like Honeymaker Mead Works, which will be hosting special tastings throughout the week. Ink & Thistle Press in Union Square is holding a "Make Your Own Holiday Cards" workshop. Many local schools, fire departments, churches and other nonprofits use Christmas Prelude to raise money, like the Kennebunkport Fire Department, which is serving Chili for the second year in a row at the fire station.

Christmas Prelude started from humble beginnings 36 years ago in a small community business meeting hosted by Henry Pasco. Pasco suggested a community Christmas festival, and the rest is history. Over the past three decades, Christmas Prelude has grown into three tree-lighting ceremonies, art and...
craft fairs, a Fire & Ice Bar hosted by the Nonantum Resort, 12 music programs and much more. In 2009, Kennebunkport’s Christmas Prelude was named the “#2 Christmas Town in America” by HGTV.

The KBA is always looking for more volunteers to help with Christmas Prelude. As Padget put it, “It literally takes a village!” There are many volunteer roles open to anyone from decorating the tree to the pooch parade to the clean-up crew.

So, this year as you’re watching Santa and his “lobster elves” arrive by boat or shop until you drop during one of the many arts and crafts fair, remember to thank all the volunteers. Thanks to them, Christmas Prelude is truly a holiday festival not to be missed!

To learn more about Christmas Prelude and see the full schedule of events, visit www.kennebunkportmainelodging.com/christmas-prelude.

For more information about the Kennebunkport Business Association, visit www.christmasprelude.com.

Katelyn Michaud is a Portland-based freelance writer. She recently traveled to over 38 countries and has returned home to Maine. You can follow her adventures around Maine and the world at diariesofawanderinglobster.com.