

CELEBRATION | BETHLEHEM ON BROAD

# 'Rare gem' leads others to care



CHRIS RUSSELL | DISPATCH PHOTO

Arlene Reynolds, 86, is the longtime coordinator of the Bethlehem on Broad Street event on Christmas Day at the First Congregational Church, 444 E. Broad St.

By [JoAnne Viviano](#)

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Some call her the Mother Teresa of Broad Street.

Arlene Reynolds, who has spent nearly 30 years helping the needy and lonely on Christmas, will again be a fixture at today's Bethlehem on Broad Street event, refusing to let her wheelchair or deteriorating eyesight keep her away.

More than 900 people are expected to partake in the festivities that run from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. at First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, at 444 E. Broad St.

Along with a sit-down dinner served on china, the event offers music, prayer, cookies, free telephone calls, gifts and a visit from Santa Claus. A family movie with popcorn follows at Trinity Episcopal Church, 125 E. Broad St.

At 86, Reynolds maintains her role of project coordinator, but said she's "trying very hard to give everything over." The years have left her unable to do everything she once did, she said, holding back tears.

Volunteers and others say she remains the mind, memory and spiritual leader of the event.

"She's a rare gem," said the Rev. Tim Ahrens, senior minister at First Congregational, where Reynolds is a member. "So how do you replace a rare gem? It's nearly impossible, but what I see that the church brings to this is many hands and many hearts that can step in for the one.

"That's what it takes. It takes a team to replace someone like Arlene."

The event dates to 1980 when 50 people were given Christmas dinner at

The event dates to 1962 when 50 people were given Christmas dinner at St. Lawrence Haven at Holy Cross Catholic Church on S. 5th Street. Attendance soon doubled, and the program moved to First Congregational in 1985 for more space.

That's when Reynolds began volunteering at what she calls "Jesus' birthday party." She has seen Bethlehem on Broad Street grow from just a meal to an event that includes a pre-Christmas clothing giveaway that serves at least 250 families and a program that distributes 1,200 boxes of food.

More than 20 churches pitch in, as do about 500 people of various faiths, including Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and people who claim no religion.

Widowed in 1957 with four children ages 15 months to

11 years, Reynolds said others helped her when she directed her church preschool, earned education degrees at Capital University, worked at the Children's Mental Health Center and contributed to various social causes.

"I really do believe that God gave me these gifts that I can use to be generous and hospitable and kind and loving and treat all people equally and fairly — knowing for one day of the year that they can find some joy and happiness in seeing how Christians and interfaith people can surround them with love," she said.

Reynolds is the go-to person to link those in need with the right people or agencies and knows which family in which neighborhood might need a box of food, said volunteer Bob Fulford, who attends Broad Street Presbyterian Church.

She teaches others how to pay it forward, said volunteer Colleen Barta, who attends Livingston United Methodist Church. "She has taught us well, and she's been a great leader. She's taught us all to put Christmas in every day."

Reynolds' commitment serves as an inspiration to young people, said Ellen O'Shaughnessy, executive director and campus minister at the Downtowners, which serves college students.

"She has a gift for caring and a gift for celebration,"

O'Shaughnessy said. "She's not the kind who thinks it's an obligation to give to others; she gives it from a spirit of joy."

Ahrens said Reynolds also has a gift for taking time to "see people that others don't see."

"When she looks out on Christmas, she sees those who are outside — outside of family, outside of church, outside of celebration — and she has a heart to bring them in," he said.

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