

Suffolk house continues to brighten the holidays



BY RACHEL WARTIAN
STAFF WRITER

A family in Suffolk wants to shine a bright light at the end of this dark year.

Keith Mitchell lives at 80 Baron Blvd. The home is tucked into the Suffolk Meadows neighborhood, off Nansemond Parkway, and currently is covered in 12

million Christmas lights.

Mitchell starts decorating every year on Sept. 1. He spends three months planning how to top his previous year. Luckily, friends, neigh-

bors and even strangers have happily pitched in to create this winter wonderland.

"It started out as just me

See LIGHTS, 9

Lights: Bringing the community together

Continued from page 1

but became a community project," said Mitchell. "I'll be unloading lights, and people I've never seen before come and offer to help. It's crazy. Couldn't do it by myself."

Mitchell has a group of kids and other members of the neighborhood that regularly come to help. Not only do they help with lights, but they come up with new ideas to keep the property looking better each year. The youngest of all the helpers is Mitchell's granddaughter, Samaria Johnson, who is 5 years old. She asked her "Pop-Pop" for a hundred lights, so he gave her \$2 million.

"Some of these are the kids' ideas," said Tammi Mitchell, Keith's wife. "They love coming over to help out. They are so proud of what they do, and video what they did and post it on social media."

This year, Keith Mitchell wanted to make his lights special due to the challenging year everyone has faced. Being an outside display, families can come to view the lights and enjoy despite the pandemic and gathering restrictions.

"We wanted to go this big this year, because COVID has hit us so hard. We want to put smiles on faces this year," said Keith Mitchell.

"If it gives them a moment of joy, I'm glad to do it," added Tammi Mitchell.

The display has brought smiles throughout the years and helped produce special moments. In the first year of the tunnel in 2016 a young man took the opportunity to propose to his girlfriend. This year, a mother had lost her daughter and wanted

to find purple Christmas lights to look at since that was the daughter's favorite color. Out of all the colors, Keith Mitchell just so happened to put purple lights around the bushes at the tunnel's entrance, fulfilling the mom's wish.

"It really makes his day, and it's been really fun and neat to see people's response," said Tammi Mitchell. "He does it because he likes seeing people enjoy it."

Along with lights, life-size, handmade characters are found across the property. Classic December characters like the snowman and gingerbread man are out front. Being a Disney fan, Mitchell has Winnie the Pooh, Tigger, Mickey and Minnie in the front to greet those who come. Olaf, his granddaughter's favorite, has his special spot with twinkling lights. Last but not least is Mr. Grinch trying to steal lights off the shed with his song "You're a Mean One Mr.

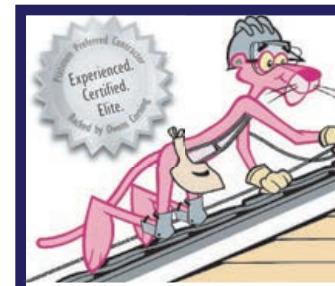


Grinch," playing in the background.

"We just do it for the kids," said Tammi Mitchell. "Ours are grown now, and families love to come out to see and help. It really brings the community together."

The lights first turn on Thanksgiving weekend. This year, more than 400 people came the first night to see the lights. According to Keith Mitchell, around 250 come every night. Mitchell enjoys staying outside to operate the snow machine and talk to visitors who come to enjoy his three months of work.

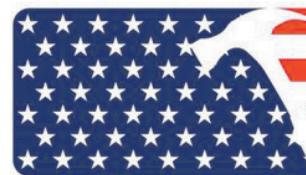
"It's a lot of fun, but a lot of work," said Mitchell.



Roofing • Wind

VA CLASS A CONTRACTOR
License # 27052705

- Locally Owned and Operated
- Fully Licensed and Insured
- Senior & Veterans Discount



MAJOR L
BUILD

We Build: Garage



JANA BOYD DDS

Family Dentistry

Smiling is Contagious



**2900 Goodwin Street
P 757-542-1234
WWW.janaboydd.com**

Remembering an old friend

BY RACHEL WARTIAN
STAFF WRITER

Laughs and memories were shared on Wednesday as old classmates gathered at a new memorial for their friend.

Four former athletes from Suffolk High School's class of 1963 met with their old coach in front of their former high school to admire the new memorial bench for their friend Otha Rountree.

"Otha died in the time of COVID and a time with no funerals," said Sandy Tucker, a friend of Rountree's. "We decided he deserved more than that."

Rountree passed away in May. Tucker called up the rest of the group to see what they could do to honor this gem to the community. After contacting the Suffolk Center for Cultural Arts, the friends decided out of the many options available to have a granite bench in the front garden. It was

installed on Sept. 29.

"Suffolk Center is honored these gentlemen wanted to honor their friend with this memorial bench," said Susan Stone, the development director at the Center. "It adds to the gardens where many people come to sit and relax. We are really happy it's here."

Tucker, Billy Hill, Andy Dunn, Jim Hill and Buster Hawkins were part of Suffolk High School's class of '63. All but Jim Hill played basketball for Bill Peachy, who was also in attendance to remember Rountree. They reflected on Rountree's love for Suffolk, the high school, and their adventures together.

"If he had a choice, he'd be buried right here," said Dunn. "We had our best times with him."

According to Billy Hill, Rountree was a few years older and was the only one who had a car. They would go in his car on nights when no events were planned and drive

around the neighborhoods and honk the horn to see if anything was happening they did not know.

"He corralled us and kept us in tow," said Hill. "We were full of ourselves and wanted to have fun. He took care of us, well, not just us but the thousands of men and women he came across. Otha was always looking at how he could bring help or pleasure to people. He brought many hours of pleasure to our lives, and what better tribute than this bench his friends and acquaintances can visit."

Rountree volunteered with the Suffolk High School basketball team after he graduated. He also was a member of the Suffolk Lions Club and The Jolly Boys. No conversation about Rountree's community involvement would be complete without mention of his time at Obici Hospital.

"Many recognize Otha for volunteering at Obici's



RACHEL WARTIAN/SUFFOLK NEWS-HERALD

Sandy Tucker, Andy Dunn, Billy Hill, Buster Hawkins, and Jim Hill stand in front of their alma mater, the Suffolk High School, to remember their friend Otha Rountree who passed away in May 2020.

front desk with his crazy hats," said Peachy. "He spent so much of his time there."

Now, community members can come to remem-

ber the man who touched so many lives in Suffolk in a central and public location.

"I know he's looking down and smiling," said Jim Hill.

and take time to sit and remember Otha," said Tucker.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Breanna Bradshaw has found a passion for artwork while being stuck at home during virtual learning. Her art includes dresses, landscapes, animals, and "The Nightmare Before Christmas" characters.

Creating positive outlets

BY RACHEL WARTIAN
STAFF WRITER

A local elementary school student is taking advantage of the pandemic to find creative outlets.

Breanna Bradshaw is a 9-year-old fourth-grader at Pioneer Elementary School and has found her love for art as she spends more time at home than she is used to due to virtual learning.

"I like to draw people, animals, backgrounds, and dresses," said Breanna. "My favorite thing to draw is dresses. I'd like to be a fashion designer one day."

According to Breanna, she does not know when exactly she started draw-

ing or why. She just knows she has found something to help calm and inspire her.

"We sent a drawing to her art teacher, Mrs. Morrison, and she was in awe," said Breanna's mother, Heather Howell.

Using paints, colored pencils or pencils, Breanna has made drawings for friends who have requested her work. For a friend of her mother's, Breanna drew characters from the movie "The Nightmare Before Christmas," including Jack Skellington, Sally and Zero. Currently, Breanna is working on a cardinal.

Breanna enjoys other creative outlets, including

singing and baking, but she has found a passion for artwork.

"She's a very happy child, but this virtual learning has been rough on her," said Howell. "She just sits down and draws her quiet time, and it really helps with her anxiety."

According to Howell, drawing has helped give a creative outlet and help Breanna, who misses those one-on-one interactions with her friends and teachers. Her school art teacher even encouraged Breanna to draw simple shapes like in "Tetris" to help calm her.

"Even if it is just a hybrid situation, the kids really need to go back

to school," said Howell. "This virtual learning has been really hard on her. I respect everyone's opinions and know some are scared, but most of us want them to go back."

Howell tries to stay positive in the situation while helping Breanna find fun ways to be creative.

"I would love for other people to hear about Breanna and be inspired to find their hidden talents during this time," said Howell.