

Alleghany, Bath students dance, delight in glitzy night

BY DAVID S. CROSIER • STAFF WRITER

COVINGTON — A blown transformer and a darkened dance floor couldn't dampen the excitement and buzz at the inaugural "Glitz & Glamour" prom Saturday evening.

Sponsored by Area 18 Special Olympics, "Glitz & Glamour" is the area's first prom dedicated solely to individuals with special needs in Alleghany and Bath counties.

More than 150 participants, parents, providers and volunteers turned out for the event, which began at the Covington Moose Lodge with hair, makeup and nail stations to pamper the ladies, followed by a meal, which was donated and served by members of the lodge.

Festivities then moved to the First Christian Church Family Life Center in Covington. Kimberly Dritto of Sound Wave Entertainment donated her DJ skills to help bring the dance floor to life.

When attendees arrived at First Christian Church and the doors were thrown open, they were greeted by a throng of well-wishers who cheered them on as they made their way down the red carpet and onto the dance floor.

Even an electrical transformer blowing almost half-way through the dance couldn't stop the fun, as dancers continued to sing "I Love Rock & Roll" while dancing in the darkened hall.

At the conclusion of the prom, which was cut short due to the power outage, each guy was crowned "King of the Prom" and each lady was crowned "Queen of the Prom." Each received their own crown and tiara to commemorate the evening.

Holding such an event locally was an idea that originated in March with Area 18 Special Olympics Coordinator Ruth Britt and is similar to an event held each February in the Roanoke Valley called "Night to Shine."

Many from the Allegheny Highlands have attended "Night to Shine," until the COVID-19 pandemic forced the event to be scaled back in 2021 and 2022.

"Our guys and girls really missed going to 'Night to Shine,' so I reached out to some of my Special Olympics volunteers to see if we could do a similar event here to give our folks the same experience," Britt said. "They really missed seeing their friends and dancing and having such a good time and 'Glitz & Glamour' gave us a chance to fill that void and provide an event locally."

With only two months to prepare and plan, Britt and her volunteers pulled off the event, with plans already under way for next year's "Glitz & Glamour."

"This could not have been done without a lot of help from a lot of people," Britt said.

“So many people reached out to us and volunteered to help in any way they could. Members of the First Christian Church Youth Group helped decorate and clean up afterward.

“The church donated the use of the facility for the evening. Dawn Lewis coordinated and designed the decorations. The members of the Moose were so good to allow us to use their building and provide dinner. Kristen Garten of Kristen Garten Photography took photos of the evening and shared them with us.

“Many people prepared and donated snacks for the dance. There were just so many people involved and I’m afraid I may have missed someone. If I did, please know that without your help, this couldn’t have gone as great as it did.”

Donations and in-kind services were also provided by Loving Funeral Home, The Recorder, Cucci’s Pizzeria, Covington Farm and Fuel, Trani’s Grille, Rustic Elegance Salon-Spa, Miranda Smithers at SmartStyle, Jessie Gadd, Renae Burks, Bubba Wolfe, Alexis Crowder and Hope Napier of The Studio in Lewisburg, W.Va., Heather Chenault, Samantha Hubbard, Scarlett Crowder, David Vance, Justin Plauger, Chris Hamilton, Kyla and Zoe Crosier and Samantha Gravette.

Spreading kindness: Bella brings joy to senior residents

BY DAVID S. CROSIER • STAFF WRITER

COVINGTON — Bella Roark keeps pretty busy.

There are pageants and modeling, and birthday bags for local nursing home residents — all the while traveling to a wide variety of events, serving as a local business ambassador, and still finding time to be with her friends and family, swim and even taking up soccer.

Bella does all that at the age of 9.

With a simple mantra, “Spreading kindness doesn’t cost a thing,” Bella has been doing just that — spreading kindness to area nursing home residents through an initiative she created called “Bella’s Birthday Bags.”

Bella is spreading kindness in the form of gift bags presented to nursing home residents on their birthdays, which contain a large selection of items. To date, Bella and her mom, Emily Roark, have collected almost 4,000 items which have been, and will continue to be, given to residents at the Brian Center in Low Moor and The Woodlands and Alleghany Health and Rehab in Clifton Forge.

Birthday bags contain a coloring book, crossword puzzle book, journal, body soap, pens, socks, a hairbrush and toothbrush, toothpaste, hand wipes and a stuffed animal. Birthday bags also come with a balloon for each resident celebrating a birthday.

“When I thought of the birthday bags, I realized they don’t have anywhere to go to on their birthday,” Bella said. “And I feel bad for those people, and I want to be there for them, like they’d be there for me.”

Bella began her birthday bag program in February at the Brian Center.

“When Bella first brought the idea to me, she wanted to do all nursing homes,” Emily said. “I’m going to be honest, that was pretty ambitious, and it isn’t cheap. So I told her to raise the funds or products and we’d do it. This month, we started at The Woodlands, and we’ll go from there.”

She did her first distribution of birthday bags at The Woodlands on June 15.

Last week, while Bella and Emily were attending Miss Tennessee pageant week activities in Memphis, Tenn., they received confirmation from Alleghany Health and Rehab that Bella could begin distributing birthday bags for residents there as well.

“In the beginning, we had some very generous people donate to help her get this off the ground,” Emily said. “Bella knew that every time she picked up another nursing home, it would be a year’s commitment. You can’t do it for one resident and not do the rest. You have to be fully committed to this.”

Bella, who is the reigning 2022 America’s Elegant Miss National Preteen, began participating in pageants at the age of five.

She’s modeled at New York Fashion Week three times, in Disney Fashion parades, and will participate in the upcoming Miami Fashion Week in July. She’s also recently participated in a modeling shoot for Gladys Magazine.

“She wanted to do a pageant with a friend, and I agreed,” Emily said. “It’s turned into such a journey, the things she’s been able to do. I never thought I’d have a child walking the runway at New York Fashion Week. From the mountains of Virginia? Come on! Bella really keeps us on our toes.”

Bella attends Jeter-Watson Intermediate School in Covington.

“The next thing I want to do is get more nursing homes and help more people,” Bella said. “I also want to start ‘Bella’s Birthday Buddies,’ which can help other people do birthday bags for people in nursing homes where they live.”

Bella’s Birthday Buddies will be a program that can help Bella’s pageant friends create similar programs in their home regions.

“If Bella had her way, we’d be doing this everywhere,” Emily added.

Bella also recently announced she has been asked to be an ambassador for a new dance studio opening this fall in Covington — A1 Studios.

Bella has created a Facebook blog — “Bella Roark” — to chronicle her pageant and birthday bag activities. Bella also has a page on Instagram, “Bella_J_Roark.”

Those interested in contributing to Bella’s Birthday Bag program can contact Emily Roark at 540-958-1234.

Family, friends honor missing Alleghany man on his birthday

BY DAVID S. CROSIER • STAFF WRITER

COVINGTON — Family and friends of a missing Alleghany County man continue to search for answers almost five months after he disappeared.

A hard rain and thunderstorm didn’t deter about 75 family members, friends, and well-wishers of Donald Kelley, who gathered Friday at the Dressler Memorial Wayside Park in Covington to celebrate and remember him on his 57th birthday.

Kelley was last seen March 26 at his home in eastern Alleghany County. The father of four was reported missing to the Alleghany County Sheriff’s Office on April 8, after family members had not received any response to numerous calls and texts to him throughout the previous week.

At the time of his disappearance, witnesses told local law enforcement he may have been driving a dark red or burgundy Kia Sportage. The vehicle has not been recovered.

Friday’s vigil not only celebrated the father, brother and friend, but also served as a time of prayer that he would soon be found and his family would be given a final resolution in his case.

Kelley’s sister, Missy Kelley, began the vigil with opening remarks and thanked those who participated. Those in attendance were given an opportunity to introduce themselves and reminisce on their relationship to Kelley.

The vigil included the leading of the Lord’s Prayer by his father, Howard Jenkins, and his aunt, Sue Wolfe, sang the hymn “Amazing Grace.” A closing prayer was given by his brother, Troy Jenkins, and was followed by cupcakes, the singing of “Happy Birthday” and a time of fellowship. A memorial table was also set up that included pictures of Kelley, along with his Harley-Davidson jacket.

“He is loved. He is missed. I am thankful for the words that were spoken and I believe they were heard,” said Kelley’s cousin, Shannon Morgan. “I’m thankful for all the people who came and showed their love and stories. I’m thankful for his sister, Missy, and how well she has handled everything. Donnie, I’d like to think that thunder was your laugh booming, so we knew you’d heard us.”

Earlier in the day, a memorial motorcycle ride was held, led by his long-time friend, John Schaffer.

“If someone could just let us have closure so we can give him the proper burial he deserves, that would be a true blessing,” said family member Amanda Bartley. “We want him home. Memory after memory, story after story, everyone has spoken of how Donnie was a true friend who would give you the shirt off his back or be there for anything. Now we need someone to be that friend to him and step forward with information to break this case. No family deserves this.”

Donald Wayne Kelley is six-foot, three-inches tall, has brown hair, blue/gray eyes and weighs about 150 pounds.

In addition to the investigation ongoing by the Alleghany County Sheriff’s Office, the Roanoke Valley-based Aware Foundation also issued an alert on Kelley’s disappearance on Facebook, which was posted on April 11. The foundation posts nationwide missing-person alerts once families have made initial contact with their local law enforcement agencies.

Anyone with information which may assist in locating Kelley is asked to contact the Alleghany County Sheriff’s Office, 540-965-1770.