

Salvation Army celebrates community as it lights its star

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - This year's Red Kettle Drive went down to the wire, but the star will be lit, Alton Salvation Army Kettle Coordinator Greg Gelzinnis announced Tuesday afternoon.

With an original goal at a lofty \$90,000, the Christmas kettle rush with the signature bell-ringers ended just before Christmas, and left more than \$1,000 needed to reach that goal and light the star atop the evergreen outside the corps's booth house on Alby in Alton. The Red Kettle Campaign continues until the end of January, however, even sans bell-ringers, so Gelzinnis did not give up hope.

The team decided to launch a "Counter Kettle Blitz" to raise enough to light the iconic star, and Gelzinnis was proud to announce that blitz served its purpose. At the end of that drive, the Alton Corps of the Salvation Army was able to announce it had collected as much as \$95,089.05.

"I couldn't be more proud of the community coming together with the team to make this year's goal a reality," Gelzinnis said in a release. "When our Counter Kettle Blitz ended, along with additional community contributions, our total had reached \$95,089.05."

At a luncheon Tuesday afternoon to celebrate that original goal being met and exceeded, Gelzinnis said the contributions from the community were going toward helping as many as 1,900 families in the Riverbend who utilize the Salvation Army's social programs to aid with bills, homelessness and keeping food on the table.

Gelzinnis was joined by this year's Tree of Lights Co-Chairs, Mark and Mary Cousley as awards were given to community members and organizations who played key essential roles in this year's campaign drive.



Perhaps the most unique award given this year was given to dedicated bell-ringer Dane Rockafellow who has been dedicating his time to ringing bells for the Salvation Army since 1997. In previous interviews with Riverbender.com, Rockafellow said he utilized the Salvation Army's programs after moving to Alton in the 1990s and finding himself homeless.

This year, Rockafellow covered 35 shifts, and spent 72 hours ringing bells. For that volunteerism - as bell-ringers at the Alton Corps of the Salvation Army are no longer paid - a special "Bell-Ringer Anniversary Award" was presented to him during Tuesday's luncheon.

Roxana High School was also a recipient of two awards at the event, after winning the Bi-State Red Kettle Challenge in December. Gelzinnis said those students were able to collect the most donations in the St. Louis Metro Area, dethroning another high school's three-year streak.

Those students were also able to usurp the Alton-Godfrey Rotary Club, which Gelzinnis said had raised those most money for the kettle drive for the better part of 50 years, that rotary club had raised nearly \$7,000. Students from Roxana High School were able to raise \$7,238.49.

Other Red Kettle award winners included:

- Large business - Alton Memorial Hospital
- Small business - Landmark Real Estate
- Faith-based - East Alton First United Methodist Church
- First responders - Roxana Police and Fire Departments
- Banks and credit union - Liberty Bank
- Service club - Alton/Godfrey Rotary Club

The following bell-ringers were also awarded All-Star aprons featuring their names: Tommy Cahill, Kathy Wittich, Carl Becker and Julie Ohley.

Social Service Awards were also given by Emergency Social Services Director Holly Allen. Allen said she and her staff of committed volunteers are available day and night to deal with any issues in immediate need. Those awards included:

- Volunteers - Alton Middle School Student Council and Argosy Casino
- Toy Donation Superstars - United Way Community Christmas, Menasha Corporation and Mungenast Toyota
- Food Donation Superstars - Dream Home Reality, Jimmy Johns and Simmons, Hanley Conroy Law Firm
- Social Service Partners - Centerstone and Molina Health Care
- Volunteer of the Year - Virginia Bell
- Christmas Volunteer of the Year - Carolyn Denton



