

‘The Backbone Brothers’ work annual Oktoberfest every year from start to finish

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Three diehard volunteers for St. Mary's Oktoberfest since the festival started in 2008 have been Phil Berger, John Schwegel and Jim Keenan.

The three are affectionately nicknamed "The Backbone Brothers." They take part in everything from festival setup on Thursday to the final minute of cleanup each year of the event. Monday, the trio was there until the final items were packed and the area was spotless again.

Carolyn Simansky, public relations coordinator for the Oktoberfest, described the three men as the model volunteers.

“They come in and do what needs to be done and make sure they are there Monday morning to tear things down when everybody else is exhausted and make sure school is ready for the kids on Tuesday,” Simansky said. “The three men do a lot of setting up and background work. Those signs you see all around town, that's their handiwork, too.”

John Schwegel also helps his brother, Ed, some with producing and selling kettle corn once the Oktoberfest opens. Jim Keenan said he, John and Phil do a lot of the Oktoberfest logistics, from ordering ice, soda, getting tables and chairs moved on Thursday and set up. Monday, he said they return the chairs and clean the place.

“We are there on Saturday and Sunday from 7:30 a.m. until it closes,” Keenan said. “We are always running to get things, pick things up and take care of issues that pop up.”

Jim Keenan's wife, Mary Jo, also helps him with Oktoberfest, scheduling booths and organizing different components of the event. The two also distribute the Eucharist with St. Mary's and also help take care of the church.

“We will be married 50 years next July and we were married at St. Mary's,” Jim Keenan said. “It has been a lifelong deal for us. All three of our boys went to St. Mary's and Marquette. It is a stewardship we love to do. St. Mary's is a place we go for peace and backing you up and renewing your efforts in life that you can't do without God.”

For John Schwegel's family, St. Mary's has also been a family affair, like the Keenans.

“Since I have been working on Oktoberfest, I have so many new friends and also the people I have hung out with my whole life,” he said. “To me the church is how you relate in a Christian manner to your neighbors, your friends and your community.”

Keenan and John Schwegel have been friends for 40 years. Both of them had three sons and all went through St. Mary's and Cub Scouts.

“We even put together Halloween floats together,” he said. “We sort of went our separate ways, but the Oktoberfest brought us back together. The three of us – me, Jim and Phil – work very well together. I won't say we have it down to an art form, but we know what we have to do. We do get new volunteers participating every year.”

John's wife, Margaret, also helps the Oktoberfest each year with her efforts.

Phil Berger and his wife, Mary, both handle many of the functions of the Oktoberfest. Mary Berger works extensively with the volunteers.

Phil is glad that the fund-raiser each year helps keep tuition costs down at St. Mary's.

“It is totally a fun time,” Phil Berger said. “I don’t know if I would have ever become as good a friends with Jim Keenan and John Schwegel without Oktoberfest.”

Phil has been active in St. Mary’s for many years and is following in the footsteps of his father, Wally. Phil said his childbirth was difficult and that moved Wally to become Catholic. Priests and St. Mary’s prayed with Wally and he was so inspired that he joined the church.

“There are a lot of families that have been devoted to St. Mary’s for years and are very loyal,” Phil said. “It is a great community. When you walk in that church it feels like a church. It looks like the old-time churches in Italy.”

Phil Berger said he tries to do whatever needs to be done during Oktoberfest.

“I am just a small part of it,” he said. “There are a lot of people that work extremely hard during Oktoberfest. I feel we are supposed to share the faith.”

John Schwegel is motivated to devote much of himself to the St. Mary’s event because of what he sees it doing for the school and the kids.

“The money that we raise helped put a new gym floor on the old St. Matthew’s campus of St. Mary’s and we now have super good computer classes, Smart Boards in all the rooms at the middle school and elementary school,” he said. “It also paid for new windows. We average a little over \$100,000 each year. It has helped the school and helped our church grow. It also helps keep tuition costs lower.”

One of John Schwegel’s favorite parts of the Oktoberfest is having a taste of the various German beers.

“I really like it,” he said of the Oktoberfest beer.

All three men encouraged others to join them in volunteering for the Oktoberfest. The three agreed that most who devote their time to the cause always have a smile on their face, knowing they are doing something that benefits the children and parish of St. Mary’s.