

Local History: First Night Scranton shone for 17 years

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The city of Scranton was off to a bang with fireworks that welcomed the new millennium early Saturday morning at Courthouse Square in 1999.



A large puppet is led along Spruce Street during the First Night parade in 1999.

FIRST NIGHT CELEBRATION Erica Serine, 23, of Clarks Summit, displays her Y2K glasses near Courthouse Square during First Night in Scranton in 1999.

Carl Leyh of South Scranton reads the Bible during a New Year's Eve service held at the Elm Park United Methodist Church in Scranton as part of First Night festivities in 1999.

Donna Freeman, left, and her daughters Valerie Irene, 20 months, and Brittany Joy, 7, don Mardi Gras masks at a First Night celebration.

As a new millennium dawned, a new event put Scranton in the spotlight.

First Night Scranton, an alcohol-free bash celebrating New Year's Eve in the Electric City, launched in 1999 thanks mainly to efforts of Scranton Tomorrow.

"A millennium brings anticipation, and the reality is we are celebrating it in Scranton in high style," First Night Executive Director Kathleen Kern told The Times-Tribune in September 1999. "First Night is a chance for all of us to come together and celebrate our past and plan for our future."

Scranton was the 16th city in Pennsylvania to add a First Night celebration to its roster; the event had roots in Boston going back to the mid-1970s.

At that inaugural event, participants bought a button — starting at \$5 in advance and rising to \$7 as the event approached — for admission to a slate of events across downtown Scranton. Festivities included performances by John Stanky and the Coal Miners, the Poets, Big Daddy Dex and the Mere Mortals, Doug Smith's Dixieland All-Stars, the Alliance String Quartet, Ballet Theater of Scranton and more.

Elm Park United Methodist Church hosted a potluck supper, followed by games and an 11 p.m. service. Bethel AME and Shiloh Baptist also held an 11 p.m. service. St. Peter's Cathedral hosted a millennium Mass at 12:30 a.m. Jan. 1. Fireworks rang in the new year.

By 2003, First Night Scranton had found its footing.

“We have really fine-tuned the program,” First Night co-chair Frank DiPaolo told The Times-Tribune on Dec. 28, 2003. “We’ve done a good job covering all areas.”

That year, organizers focused on bringing in more programming for kids, including life-size board games, clowns, magicians, storytellers, jugglers and face painters at the Mall at Steamtown and Elm Park UMC.

There was also a procession of pint-size First Night attendees from Elm Park to Courthouse Square at 7:45 p.m. The parade was led by 9-year-old Rachel Fitz of Scranton; she won the honor by entering a First Night essay contest.

The setup was much the same as years past. Attendees bought a button that allowed them access to a variety of First Night venues to watch bands and other performers. From polka to country, jazz to modern rock, there was something for everyone.

For the next decade-plus, First Night continued to be a beloved tradition that brought locals downtown, capped with a fireworks display to ring in the new year.

But in 2016, First Night would not go on as planned.

“Citing economic challenges, a dwindling volunteer base and declining attendance, the First Night Scranton Committee has decided not to hold its annual New Year’s Eve celebration this year,” an Oct. 23, 2016, Times-Tribune story reported.

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