

'The donkey will be fine.' A look at how a living Nativity comes together

Monmouth Worship Center in Marlboro is staging a living nativity this weekend with the help of 130 volunteers and 20 animals. It's a small miracle.



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Asbury Park Press

MARLBORO - The donkey walked into the church sanctuary with Mary and Joseph. It paused after a few steps, then began backing up, then stopped moving altogether.

This wasn't the plan for the inaugural living Nativity at Monmouth Worship Center in Marlboro. Mara Costa, a congregant who'd volunteered to organize the event, learned the hard way just how tricky these things can be.

"The donkey tightened his legs and wouldn't budge," she said. "Then he started pooping. I was like, 'Oh my goodness, I'm fired.' But the kids kept singing. The show went on."

The donkey never did budge.

"Eventually four huge men had to move him out," Costa said.



That was in 2019. In 2020, due to the pandemic, Monmouth Worship Center moved the living Nativity outside and converted it into a drive-through affair. Costa would discover that donkeys were much more amenable to being outside — and that people loved the concept as well. More than 500 cars carrying 1,000-plus people drove through over two nights.

“The positive feedback was just amazing,” Costa said.

So the outdoor living Nativity is back for 2021. Titled, "Jesus, the Light of the World," it takes place this Saturday and Sunday from 5:30-8 p.m. in Monmouth Worship Center's parking lot at 37 Vanderburg Road. Rain dates are Dec. 11-12. The event is free; non-perishable food donations are being collected for the church's community food pantry.

The Nativity takes about 15 minutes to drive through and includes guided audio. There are eight scenes depicting the story of Jesus' birth. About 50 members of the congregation, ages 4 through 70-something, participate as actors. Last year, there was a real baby — well, closer to a 1-year-old — in the manger. This year, there's a life-sized doll.



“At this time there’s no baby available,” Costa sad. “Last year we had a girl, and she was so good. Her mom actually cut her hair just to be in the ativity.”

There will be live animals, supplied for the second straight year by Honky Tonk Ranch, a farm in Jackson. Included in straw-strewn pens will be two alpacas, two zebus (humped cattle), five sheep, four goats, some chickens and yes, a donkey. No, it’s not the same donkey who pooped in the sanctuary.

“The donkey will be fine as long as he’s outside,” Costa said.

Costa has looked into getting a camel for the weekend. At \$2,000, it was cost prohibitive for an operation with a total budget of \$5,000. Instead, a couple of the event’s 130 volunteers built a 7-foot-tall replica camel and a baby camel to boot. The entire set was crafted by in-house volunteers at a theater-quality level.

Preparations began in September. Costa projects more than 800 cars coming through this weekend. She’s excited to see the reactions.

“The highlight is the message we’re trying to convey,” she said. “We’re looking for ways to connect the community, especially in today’s world where a lot of people feel isolated and alone.”