

Nineteen-year-old Billy Foster, the only son of Don and Rita Foster of Emily Street, Belleville, died on cold snowy Christmas evening in 1958. But his death was not in vain. The following year, the grief-stricken Fosters began a special Christmas tradition in his memory. It became a tradition that brought joy not only to the children and adults of the community but to those in the outlying areas, who made special efforts to come and experience the cheer each year.

"That night we thought it was all over for us. We took down the Christmas decorations we had already put up. We couldn't think, we didn't know how we were going to survive without Billy. It was very hard for both Don and I that year.

"When the next Christmas came around we decided we should do something for the neighbourhood kids in Billy's memory," said Rita Foster, now 84.

She recalled that it was a small effort that first year. Her husband, Don, dressed in Santa outfit went out to meet the kids in the neighbourhood.

"He didn't get back till 11:30 p.m. He was exhausted. That's when we decided that for next Christmas we should decorate our home and let the children come and meet Santa at his house. That's what we did.

"That year our nephew gave us a beautiful cutter, you know, like a horse and buggy. We hitched the reindeers to it.

"We had a big rubber Santa in it and we had that up on the roof and it stuck out over the roof," she chuckled. "Actually, in the first few years Don went up on the roof on a ladder in a Santa Claus suit."

The grounds on the Foster's Emily Street property came alive with moving elves, Santa's workshop and trees illuminating the front lawn of their home against the darkness of the night. She laughed recalling the awe in the eyes of the children as they listened to Santa speak to them over the loudspeaker. She estimated that over 500 children and adults visited Santa at their home that first year.

"The kids were so thrilled when they saw Santa, I also made a Santa suit for my

little dog, dressed him in it and the children went wild over the sight of him like that. They loved it."

Each year, the Fosters began their Christmas decorations on Dec. 1.

"We improved each year and added more stuff to the decorations and the number of things we handed out. Our neighbours were very helpful. They would get into clown suits and costumes and dress up for the display. Then, they would get out and direct traffic and so on.

"It was loads of fun. After that first year's success at our home, Don and I realized that we have

started something special for the area children and we kept doing it for many years after that. It was all for Billy. He was a special person to us and many who knew him."

It has been a long time since Billy Foster died but his mother still encounters occasionally people who were close to him.

"My son was very athletic and he was always into ball and hockey, rugby, football. He had so many friends. Even today I would meet someone who says to me "I was one of Billy's best friends," she smiled.

Billy's father, Don, a former RCAF pilot, a railway engineer and Belleville alderman, died in 1994 and Rita, herself, is today at peace with the tragic event that shattered her and her husband's world decades ago.

"We got so many letters from people thanking us for our effort to spread Christmas cheer. It was worth it," she concluded.

Due to Don's failing health, the Fosters were eventually forced to give up the annual display. In 1981, they handed it over to their close friends, Bruce and Marjorie Nickle. The Nickles carried on the tradition at their home on Marsh Drive for many years later until, again due to Bruce Nickle's ill health, they passed it over to the city. Since 1994, the Billy Foster Memorial Christmas Display continues each year at the Alemite Park on Pine Street in Belleville.

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p. 2