

Greenville Journal



The good stuff

2008: Here's how it went

So this week we find ourselves in the midst of Chanukah, Christmas and Kwanzaa, the New Year barreling down on us.

Perhaps some of us are looking back on a tough year even as we relish the holidays.

In 2008, the pages of this newspaper have been filled with all sorts of bad stuff, rape and murder, layoffs and businesses closing



Sense of place

LYN RIDDLE

I'm sure you don't really need a list. But the good has been mixed in as well. I can't count the times I've been asked why newspapers print negative news only. And my response is always that news, by its very definition, is the extraordinary, those people and events far beyond the pale. News knows no positive or negative. It's all just news, but I will acknowledge more often than not the extraordinary is not so happy.

That said, there was lots to boast about in Greenville and the surrounding area this year, lots of that so-called positive news.

Here are a few that came to the minds of the *Journal* news staff.

The environment

Plenty to be said for the advancement of cleaning up and protecting this world we live in. Greenville passed a tree ordinance, and the Nature Conservancy bought a portion of the Nine Times Tract, 560 acres in northern Pickens County that contains five mountains at the spot where the Southern Blue Ridge Mountains and the Piedmont meet.

Two new groups formed: Save Our Saluda, dedicated to protecting the Saluda River

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basin and Green Drinks, a monthly gathering at Coffee Underground of folks who work in the environmental field and those who just want to know more about living green.

The \$18 million Blue Wall Center was formally announced as a place folks can learn and enjoy the Blue Ridge Escarpment. Planned are opportunities to fly fish, kayak, climb, hike trails and hold meetings of small groups. Planners hope to include a lakeside bird aviary, a café and some retail space.

Caesars Head Methodist Camp was protected through a conservation agreement while another agreement - this one with North Carolina - ensures access to Jocassee Gorges, 43,500 acres of untouched land where this year a falcon was found to be nesting.

And then it started raining. Not enough to call the drought over by far. But enough to have hope it could be.

Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever, said there were a number of setbacks - no law on how much water can be taken out of rivers and a tree ordinance that does not protect heritage trees - but there is good news in the fact more attention is being placed on living green.

Good works

Four Greenville County high schools, in the same week, raised \$870,000 for local charities. It was by far the most raised during school spirit weeks, the one week a year when archrivals meet on the football field and the student body reaches out to those in need.

They plan all sorts of fun such as wearing pajamas to school or getting married and divorced, any number of ways to get kids and their parents to part with some money.

This year, J.L. Mann raised \$340,043.60 in honor of three 2006 graduates who died in a house fire in Ocean Isle, N.C., a year ago and a 2007 graduate who died after falling from a dormitory window at the University of South Carolina. Their vibrant lives touched most everyone they met.

Teresa Cochran, whose son Taylor's death at USC is still under investigation, donated all of the money her son had in his name - 40 something dollars and six cents.

The fundraising was helped this year by the ability of people to make online donations.

Jenny and Matt Reeves, too, reach out to others, children whose lives are not anywhere close to the idealized version of a family. They mortgaged their home and sold their landscaping business to buy an abandoned church, which became the Frazee Dream Center.

The center is named for James Frazee, the principal of Providence Christian Academy in Murfreesboro, Tenn., who Matt Reeves met when he was a student at Clemson University and was starting a church. Frazee died from a blood infection at 34.

The after-school program offers a snack, help with homework and time together to discuss the challenges and choices of the day.

"The neat thing for us is you look at a topsy-turvy year touching all aspects of life and we are maintaining and growing as a volunteer base," Matt Reeves said.

Some 54 children are enrolled and he has seen growth in each. "They're becoming young men and women," he said.

Back in May, nearly 100 World War II veterans went to Washington, D.C., to see the \$191 million monument erected to honor those who fought in that war. Betty Waldrop of Simpsonville worked

virtually day and night to raise \$50,000 to charter a U.S. Airways jet for the trip.

The veterans were greeted with a water-cannon salute as the plane taxied to the gate at Washington National airport. The Washington Symphonic Band played the "Armed Forces Medley" as they emerged from the jetway. A police escort ushered them smoothly through the capital's traffic.

And then there was the outpouring of support for a 19-year-old University of South Carolina sophomore who was raped during an early morning run June 8 on Terramont Drive, a bucolic street in an Eastside neighborhood thought to be immune to such a crime.

Friends organized a run/walk to let her know she was loved and to show the rapist, not yet captured or identified, he could not trap them in lives of fear. They fully intended to take back their streets. The Run 2 Overcome brought out 1,000 or so people to tread the route the woman ran that morning.

The American Way

Uniquely American, this voting system of ours has taken a beating in the past decade, but this year, it looked, at least in South Carolina, like the system worked as it should. South Carolina - and the Upstate specifically - offered the presidential candidate a venue to shine in the early days of their campaigns.

The heavily Republican Upstate showered affection on John McCain. Other parts of the state embraced Barack Obama, so much so some pundits wondered whether he could switch the state into the Democratic column. He didn't but the tallies were not as lopsided as some.

A record number of voters turned out for the presidential primaries and in the general election.

On that November morning not many weeks ago, people stood in line for hours, reading, talking to neighbors unseen for some time, reigning in energetic children.

It was a sight to behold. People who cared enough about their country to do their duty, to make their voices heard. And even if you didn't support Obama and still think he's not the man for the job, you cannot deny a sense of awe at seeing him and his young family standing on that stage in Chicago's Grant Park, making history.

The economy

Yes, there are bright spots in this downturn.

BMW, even as it was making cuts elsewhere, invested \$750 million to expand its Spartanburg County plant near Greer.

Bobby Hitt, company spokesman, said the project is on time, on budget and aiming for a start of production in 2010.



A VOICE: A record turnout among Greenville County voters meant long lines, but folks adapted and complaints were rare.

Workers will be able to turn out 240,000 vehicles a year by 2012, from the 160,000 it does now. Some 500 people will be added to the 5,400-person workforce.

There's also a trickle-down effect for BMW suppliers in the area, companies such as Duncan-based Dreaxmaier Automotive of America and Anderson-based Champion Tooling.

Since BMW came to the area 15 years ago, the suppliers have invested \$2.1 billion. BMW has invested about \$5.6 billion.

Meanwhile, a 1,000-employee customer service center for Samsung is being built in Mauldin. The impact of such an employer has been compared to BMW's early days.

Economic development officials would not confirm the spec building on Holland Road is for Samsung, but many folks in the community have called it the worst-kept secret going. An announcement on the tenant should be made after the first of the year.

Smaller expansions of existing businesses brought 500 or so jobs to the region. To be sure, that number is tarnished by the hundreds of people laid off this year in all sorts of businesses, from newspapers to higher education.

The housing business, while suffering here, is not reeling as in other parts of the country. Similarly, our local banks did not risk and lose. Most are sound and their leaders are working hard to keep the economy pumping.

Surely, some homeowners face foreclosure, some investors have lost money, some workers have no jobs and no idea where to look for one.

But analysts still consider this area a good place to invest.

That is our Greenville, our place, our time.

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Photos by Michelle Wojcikowski/Staff

NOT INTIMIDATED: Supporters turned out by the hundreds for a fundraising run after a teenager was raped while jogging in an Eastside neighborhood.