

Sparkle in the Streets

Thousands will roll through Old Town for the BeLighted Bike Ride

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Photographer Virginia Wark parades her custom design. -LARRY BLACKBURN / COURTESY PHOTO

In a town that never really takes its tinsel down, and can't quite seem to ever put its costumes away, the holiday season brings yet another twinkling swirl of lights, laughter, and festive flair. Soon, glittering bikes and trikes will roll through the streets, spreading a little extra Key West winter wonder.

The Annual Holiday Village and BeLighted Bike Ride, put on by Wesley House Family Services, is one such exceptionally well-attended tribute to the holiday season. A starting line, comprising a "village," is located at the Coffee Butler Amphitheater in Truman Waterfront, where hundreds of costumed riders take to Whitehead and Duval Streets for one of the merriest and most colorful displays of the year. It sees the sidewalks, bars, and restaurants teeming with festive onlookers.

The Holiday Village serves as a ticketed, family-friendly pre-party on December 5 to the BeLighted Bike Ride, featuring carnival rides, bounce houses, food vendors, community booths with free games and activities, a "snowstorm," pony rides, and, of course, photos with Santa Claus. The CoffeeMill Dance Studio and Bahama Village Music groups will perform live in addition to the ongoing Christmas music.

In putting this together, Wesley House, which provides support, education, and foster care in Monroe County and South Miami-Dade, aims to create a true little holiday village for families to get into the spirit of the season.

The main show, just outside the village and gathering for the 8:00 p.m. start, remains the swarms of lighted participants who are encouraged to transform their self-powered modes of transportation with festive and cleverly crafted group efforts. This year, the route will take a right on Southard just after exiting the Waterfront, and proceed all the way down Whitehead Street, before turning onto Duval and concluding at the Hank's Hair of the Dog Saloon official afterparty on Caroline Street.

Around two decades ago, earlier versions of the BeLighted Bike Ride started at Bay View Park. They took an increasingly growing number of riders through the streets of Old Town, with various contributions made to the community, including a toy drive for Wesley House.



Riders go past festive Angela and Duval Streets. -LARRY BLACKBURN / COURTESY PHOTO



A local rider on a tricycle outfitted with a unicorn, pedals down Duval. -LARRY BLACKBURN / COURTESY PHOTO

When development coordinator Grace Epperly started working for Wesley House, there was a push to expand the idea of the Holiday Village, which has since grown.

"It's amazing," she said. "It's so much fun. I mean for me and my staff, seeing the smiles on these kids' faces makes it all worth it. It's so much fun."

The goal of the event is to wow attending children with great memories in the Florida Keys. The event, which is not the organization's largest annual fundraiser, is viewed more as a gift to Keys members. Sponsors like Hank's, The Cheryl Gates Memorial Foundation, and Mount Sinai Medical Center, among others, help offset the expenses. Last year, around 2,000 people attended the Holiday Village, and as many as 3,000 participated in the bike parade. While a ticket is not required to participate in the actual ride, Wesley House appreciates donations from participants.

The spectacle of it all attracts many creatives who live in the Lower Keys and who participate in Key West's many other festivals. Epperly thought entrants really stepped it up with the designs and pageantry last year.

"I was impressed with how many people really got into the costume aspect of it. I thought it was really just going to be more about decorating the bikes," Epperly said.

She is increasingly seeing more groups of friends get together to do a whole theme. One example included a customized four-seater "bike" featuring dressed-up presents and a live Christmas tree above the riders.

A couple of years ago, when the event featured a "best bike" contest inside the amphitheater, one man created a lit-up rooster on his bike that was made almost entirely out of palm fronds. Other memorable creations include bikes made up like reindeer pulling a sleigh with a live Santa.

Wesley House remains one of the most visible and recognized nonprofits in the county. It is no surprise that, ahead of a season where countless families are brought closer together, the agency also runs its "Adopt-a-Family" gift-giving campaign.

This sees interested members of the public matched with family wish lists. Donors inform the organization as to the size of the family they want to sponsor before being connected with a list of requested items. The response reflects an excellent level of local interest.



Rides and attractions at the Holiday Village. -WESLEY HOUSE / COURTESY PHOTO

"It's really great and blown up in the last five years for sure. And it's really special," Epperly remarked. It provides a personal way to get involved and feel connected, particularly for people who may have children of their own and want to involve them in selecting gifts for families that could use some holiday cheer.

The development coordinator credits social media with helping the nonprofit's campaigns achieve high visibility. Add to that the fact that social media is often filled with photos of happy participants and their merry designs following the lighted ride.

This year, Wesley House's caseload doubled as the group expanded into the South Miami area. Wesley House maintains offices in Key West and Key Largo, serving all of Monroe County. The organization is a comprehensive case management agency with programs that cater to many aspects of the dependency care system, including family support and prevention services.

The BeLighted Bike Ride ultimately remains open to all: families with kids, couples, neighbors, singles dressed as Christmas presents, and groups of friends. One tip Epperly pointed out is that if you are attending with children in tow, you should consider your method of transportation back home, as biking might not be the best option after the parade.

Regardless of whether you are attending as a bicyclist, visiting the village, or spectating on Duval, Epperly encourages everyone to show up. "Just line the streets of Whitehead and Duval to cheer everybody on because it's a lot of fun."

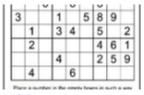
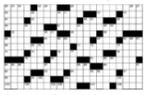


An aerial view of the Holiday Village. -WESLEY HOUSE / COURTESY PHOTO

In The KNOW:

WHAT: Holiday Village & BeLighted Bike Ride
WHEN: December 5, 5:00-9:00 p.m.
INFO: Tickets \$20, wesleyhouse.org/events/belighted2025

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