



## Township of Belleville *New Jersey*

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### **It's Beginning to Look A Lot Like Christmas as Belleville Celebrates Winter Season**

**BELLEVILLE, NJ – December 11, 2023** – One grinning preschooler asked for a Lego set. Another girl in a pink hoodie wanted something simple, a pen. A tween put in a request for a new laptop, vowing she would only use it for schoolwork.

And a sixth-grader, Sophia, is hoping to find an electric guitar under her Christmas tree.

"It's my biggest dream ever," she wrote in her letter to Santa Claus. "I want to learn to play AC/DC songs. I want to make my own band just like them."

Visions of rock concerts, toys, games and other gifts danced in the heads of an estimated 3,500 children of all ages who enjoyed Belleville's Annual Winter Festival and Christmas Tree Lighting on Dec. 9 at Belleville High School.

The Mayor Michael Melham Civic Association's 'Letters to Santa station' was a popular new addition this year, complementing the food, family and fun for all.

There was Yuletide cheer everywhere you turned, whether you were taking a horse-drawn carriage ride down Passaic Avenue, sampling zeppole, petting baby goats and llamas or getting a picture taken with a very busy Santa and a very patient Mrs. Claus.

Others joined in with carolers, wandered through a candy cane maze, took a ride on a trackless train, sipped hot drinks and ushered in the holiday season with all the magic that Belleville can make.

For the Winter Festival, Belleville rolled out some of the most beloved holiday traditions.

Councilman Thomas Graziano continued his family tradition by passing out heaping servings of chestnuts that had been roasted over an open fire, members of the Police Department were keeping spirits bright with hot chocolate and hot dogs and the members of the Belleville Green Team dutifully distributed reusable tote bags.

One of the new touches was the addition of photo opportunities with Mrs. Claus, who gave a delicious cookie to every person who lined up for a snapshot. Photos with her were so popular that she ended up giving away 12 trays of cookies before rushing back to the North Pole to whip up another batch.

The Letters for Santa station, which was set up a snowball's throw from Mayor Michael Melham's fire pit, was one of the most popular spots in the festive winter wonderland.

Kids sat at tables and, under the glow of lanterns, and wrote Jolly Ol' Saint Nick letters. Each child got a glow stick and a coloring book, as he or she dreamed of what gifts will come down the chimney in just two weeks.

Melham said each child who wrote a letter and dropped it in the mailbox will receive a reply from the North Pole.

"Of course, our Winter Festival has a lot of festivities just for the kids," said Melham, who wore a Christmas sweater inspired by his favorite rapper, Biggie Smalls. "But, looking at the smiles on the faces of all the town's residents, everyone felt like a kid again."

The tree lighting was the pinnacle of the night.

Melham was surrounded by Deputy Mayor Vinny Cozzarelli and Councilmember Graziano, plus Township Manager Anthony Iacono and Belleville Board of Education Trustees, when the mayor pushed the plunger to light up the 60-foot tree.

Residents rushed to take selfies with the glow of the tree in the background.

Dancers then circled the tree, dressed in holiday-themed costumes designed by township artist Athena Zhe.

"I'm so happy to play a part in recreating the same Christmas spirit I felt growing up in Belleville," Melham said. "Living here, it's a wonderful life."

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