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Linemen vigil, rodeo to bring hundreds to area; raise funds for families

By Kelly Monitz Staff Writer

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The National Sisterhood United for Journeymen Linemen have hosted Climbing for Lost Linemen events since 2011, for fallen lineworkers. The next event will be held Friday at City View Park in Hazleton.

SUBMITTED PHOTO

Electrical linemen from throughout the country will remember those lost in service with a vigil Friday night at Hazleton's City View Park and return for the following morning for a rodeo fundraiser for the fallen's families.

The National Sisterhood United for Journeymen Linemen, which is building a permanent memorial to the fallen in Foster Twp., is hosting the event and plans to open offices locally within the month.

More than 1,000 members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and their families will descend on area for 10th annual Climbing for Lost Linemen and lantern lighting on Friday, and ninth annual Lineworkers Benefit Rodeo.

Rachel Johnson, organizer and founder, said the nonprofit sisterhood partnered with the City of Hazleton for this year's event, as work on their 11-acre tract along Route 940 near the former Popular Drive-in continues.

Hazleton Mayor Jeff Cusat said the city has been working with the nonprofit, which raises more than \$100,000 each year to support the families of injured and fallen linemen, for several months on the event.

Johnson, who lives in Dennison Twp., knows firsthand how devastating an on-the-job injury or death can be for a family, and she and other wives sought to find a way to help families in need.

They started the NSUJL in 2012 when, after a series of accidents the previous year, the women learned there was no national charity dedicated to helping these families, she said.

Hundreds of families have been assisted since, and the group plans to put down roots in Foster Twp., where people from through the country will be able to come and remember those lost, Johnson said.

This year's vigil and rodeo — that's a pole climbing rodeo, not the kind with horses — is in Hazleton, while previous events have been held on the new grounds and across the state in Clearfield.

Johnson believes this year will be bigger than ever, bringing people from California, Texas, Florida, Arizona and through the Northeast United States.

"This thing exploded this year," she said. "We usually get 1,000 people through the whole thing, but this is looking like 1,000 on Saturday alone."

The Climbing for Lost Linemen vigil and lantern lighting on Friday night is not open to the public, but the Lineworkers Benefit Rodeo is, Johnson said.

Fifteen lanterns will be hung for each of the lost members of the IBEW in the past year, and an additional 30 will be hung to remember others who have been lost, she said. The additional lanterns are often from those families whose loved one had not been memorialized in the past, Johnson said.

The families come together to remember those lost, and members support each other in their grief, she said. Each lantern is hung individually and then all are lit at the end of the somber vigil, Johnson said.

The following morning, people roll in for the rodeo, which starts with registrations at 8 a.m.

Speed climbing and the hurt-man rescue are two of the competitions, which simulate actions these professionals do every day. The events are judged on skill and time, but all safety requirements are also followed, she said.

Safety is paramount in a field that sees a lineman lost every 10 days, Johnson said. Families worry most when loved ones are called to help in emergencies, such as hurricanes when 16 to 20 hours days are the norm, and mistakes can be deadly, she said.

Donations toward this year's rodeo have already topped \$80,000, with the hope of raising \$150,000 this year. The funds provide financial assistance, counseling, empowerment and scholarships, Johnson said.

Families also get the emotional support from the sisterhood, which includes visiting families, providing meals, childcare and any other assistance needed. Johnson said she still gets calls from people she reached out to support at the beginning of the mission.

"The sisterhood supports the brotherhood, and the brotherhood supports the sisterhood," Johnson said, noting that numerous donations come from union members and locals.

This event is open to the public, as numerous food, craft and other vendors — including national tool companies — will be on hand, she said.

Area young people who are interested in the profession are encouraged to attend to learn more, Johnson said.

"It's a great trade for people who are not afraid of heights," she said, noting that linemen make a respectable income. "We'd love local area kids to come because there is a shortage of linemen in the country."

People should bring lawn chairs to view the competition, which runs through 3 p.m.

A catered awards ceremony for competitors takes place in the evening, after the public festivities have concluded.

Jim Laputka, who serves as the organization's community relations adviser, said businesses throughout the region will benefit from the event.

Blocks of rooms have been booked in area hotels and participants and their families will be frequenting area restaurants and shops, he said. Some three hotels would be sold out when the event was in Clearfield, which does not have the amenities of the Pocono Mountains, Johnson said.

Some participants plan to bring their motorhomes and campers, staying in area state parks and campgrounds. Others have booked area resorts, Johnson said, and plan to stay for a week or more.

Johnson anticipates more visitors annually once the memorial is completed in Foster Twp., and becomes a year-round attraction.

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