



Mike Hoffman, president of Hoffman Landscapes, has been helping out with the Center for Hope luminary event for the past eight years. Two years ago Mr. Hoffman took over the coordination of the event in Wilton, growing total sales in town to more than 3,000 luminary kits. —Bryan Haeffele photos

## CENTER FOR HOPE ‘ANGEL’

# *Mike Hoffman helps light up town*

BY JEFF YATES

More than 3,000 luminaries will light up the night across Wilton on Sunday, Dec. 12, starting at 5 p.m. as entire neighborhoods show their support for the Center for Hope.

The center, in Darien, provides counseling for families coping with life-threatening illnesses or death. It relies on the luminary sales each year to serve those who cannot afford to pay.

Organizing the event and coordinating

the lighting with six other towns in Fairfield County falls on the shoulders of Mike Hoffman, president of Hoffman Landscapes, who for the second year in a row is running the show here in Wilton. Although he now runs the event for Wilton, Mr. Hoffman has been providing space for the assembly of the luminaries for the past eight years.

The former Wilton resident, who last year moved to Redding, has thrown himself into

the project, looking to expand participation in Wilton and bring his new hometown into the night.

In the days before the lighting, Mr. Hoffman's garage bays at his company's headquarters on Route 7 are transformed. Once filled with vehicles and equipment, the space becomes a staging area where each of the luminary kits is assembled and readied for delivery by volunteers and more than

160 block captains throughout town.

The luminaries are a cost-effective way for the Center for Hope to raise money. Consisting of a white paper bag, a plastic container filled with water and a candle, the luminaries are easy to set up, and give off light for hours. With such a simple design, the effect of a street lined with these bags is quite amazing, said Mr. Hoffman.

"When you have a high participation rate the view is just extraordinary," he said. For weeks and months beforehand, Mr. Hoffman and his staff work coordinating the effort, assigning residents to different "blocks" around town to sell the luminary kits (12 luminaries for \$20) and making sure everything is in order for the big night.

It's a lot of manpower to spend for just one night, but Mr. Hoffman says the Center for Hope and the holiday spirit the event ushers in are well worth the effort.

"We like to do things for the community, and rather than just write a check, we like to jump in feet first," he said.

That attitude has made the luminary event, called Hope Lights Lives, a remarkable success in Wilton. With more than 3,000 kits sold last year, and growth expected this season, Mr. Hoffman is hopeful that one day every street in town will participate.

"Wilton seems to be expanding at about 10% per year, which is great, but the long-range plan is to try to get Redding involved," said Mr. Hoffman.

In 1987 Mr. Hoffman started his company as a way to pay his way through college. Each year he found himself devoting more time to the company, spending each vacation expanding the business, until he went fulltime after graduation. He built his client base up from there, and now offers a full range of services from landscape design and installation to property maintenance.

It was through clients that Mr. Hoffman first heard of the Center for Hope and decided to help out. The services offered by the center, and its mission of helping everyone, even if they could not pay, appealed to Mr. Hoffman.

The Center for Hope was founded in 1982 and has become the only agency of its type in Fairfield County. Each year roughly 1,000 clients, about 14% of whom are children, are served by the center.

When a family member becomes gravely ill, or passes away, the Center for Hope offers counseling services to help the family members deal with the trauma. Services such as individual counseling and play therapy for children, home and hospital visits, support groups, educational programs and a lending library help family members begin to heal and cope with the new reality they are facing. Additionally, the center's volunteer network offers some practical support for parents with cancer, providing transportation for treatment, delivering meals to their families on treatment days and driving

children to play dates.

Those who can afford to pay for the services are charged on a sliding scale, but the Center for Hope never turns anyone away.

"People who can't afford to pay don't have to, and that's what we're raising money for," said Mr. Hoffman.

This mission of helping everyone, and offering free services, is what particularly struck Mr. Hoffman as he learned more about the Center for Hope. The luminary event is the primary fund-raiser for the group, said Mr. Hoffman, and helping make it an even greater success is his goal.

While this year's luminary lighting is well under way, Mr. Hoffman hopes to build up his network of block captains, aiming to have one captain for each road in town next year. With an army of volunteers out on the streets he will expand the event, bringing a little light into the lives of many more.

For information, call 834-9656.

