

Come On In!

Dec. 2 Holiday Tours Offer Inside Look At Towns' Charm

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From youthfulness in Old Town to modern- professional lofts and looks at businesses gone by, Harrisonburg's first Downtown Holiday Tour will follow ghosts of the city's past, present and future Dec. 2 from 1- 5 p. m.

Carolers will wander throughout the afternoon, joined by a roving group of his-toric re- enactors at the Smith House, 311 South Main St. — warming the hands and hearts of visitors with tea, cookies and coffee at the beginning and end of the tour.

Tickets are \$20 through Nov.28; they'll cost \$25 after and at the door. Tickets may be pur-chased at www.downtownhar-risonburg.org, or at the Rock-town Gift Shoppe, 212 S. Main St.

Diversity On Display

Although past tours have featured the segment of Harrisonburg known as Old Town, with its Dickens- esque Victorian homes decked out for the holidays, this year is the first to embrace the rest of downtown, including lofts at Urban Exchange and the Franklin Street Apartments.

Tour guides will also lead guests to the Houck Tannery and Wine Brothers buildings on South Main, as well as a selection of Old Town homes on South Mason, Paul and East Grattan streets. The purpose of the tour is multifaceted, according to Trisha Blosser, Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance program manager. " One of our goals with this event is to highlight historic buildings ... looking at architecture as a preservation technique," she says.

While its facade is focused on decking halls, the tour's real stars are the people who call the destinations home. Blosser calls downtown a " microcosm" of the city: home to students, professionals and retirees alike.

Modern Spaces, Historic Businesses

Organizers hope that offering " sneak peeks" into residential spaces available for rent will attract more young professionals to the area.

According to Mary Messerly, portfolio manager at Matchbox Realty, Urban Exchange's presence on the holiday tour will highlight both its downtown location and diverse population.

" We're an eco- friendly, multi- use property that caters to everyone," she says. " The presumption is that we are a student housing complex, but upon entering the building, it is very noticeable that we have an extremely diverse population."

Contrasting the sleek, saturated vibrancy of Urban Exchange, the Houck Tannery — now housing Stoltzfus Architects and the Stratford Companies at 61 S. Main St. — still boasts the original brick and hooks from the late 1800s. This is a space “ you wouldn’t get to see otherwise,” notes Blosser. Santa plans to take up residence for the afternoon at You Made It! pottery studio at 163 S. Main St.; once a downtown car dealership, the Wine Brothers Building was built in the 20’s.

Old Town Warmth

Kathy Whitten recalls she and her husband’s search for a Harrisonburg home in the late 80’ s: They stepped into the Mims House on South Mason Street and immediately said, “ This is it.”

Built in 1910, if the walls could talk, they’d speak of entertaining and raising families. The Whittens plan to decorate as they do every year, as “ a family Christmas,” featuring boughs of a magnolia tree in the backyard and boxwood hedges. “ I hope that everyone who visits feels the warmth and love that I felt the first time I looked at the house,” Whitten says.

Former owners of the Mims House will also be present to greet guests and answer questions about the property’s past. Around the block on East Grattan Street, Travis Miller and Tim Troyer will also open their Colonial Revival home to tour- goers. Every year, they, too, have decorated with such spirit that the tour’s organizers requested they open their home to the public. Since its construction nearly 100 years ago, it’s housed a variety of occupants, according to Miller. After serving as student housing when they bought it in 2003, he says it was in dire need of repair. They spent five years restoring it. Miller, lifelong Harrisonburg resident and longtime admirer of the Old Town district, says he’d always wanted to live in this slice of downtown.

“ It’s a very eclectic mix of people, and everybody seems to coexist,” he says. Miller and Troyer will have collections of ornaments on display, hanging from several Christmas trees.

Most of all, homeowners want visitors to feel the same sense of holidays past and future, as they do each year. “ It felt warm and homey,” Whitten remembers of her first impression. “ I hope that anyone who visits our home gets that same feeling.”

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