

★★ FIRST NIGHT ★★ SARATOGA

Running Strong



PHOTO COURTESY OF JEFFREY ALLEN

by Amy E. Tucker



▲ Maureen Duda, First Night coordinator, with the prestigious Prism Award for best First Night poster or button design.

◀ Runners compete in the 2006 First Night Road Race.

First Night Saratoga celebrates its 12th year this New Year's Eve even as larger cities like Albany are abandoning the annual tradition. Organizers tout the strength of volunteerism in the community for transforming Saratoga Springs from "the August place to be" to the "always place to be."

"Everyone loves Saratoga," said Maureen Duda, First Night Saratoga coordinator for the YMCA of Saratoga, which sponsors the annual First Night celebration. "It's gaining in popularity every year. We see tourists visiting the city all year 'round and we're happy to have the influx."

A Loudonville resident, Duda has 21 years of experience planning the city-wide celebrations, having organized 13 First Nights for the city of Albany before switching to Saratoga Springs in 2000 when Albany began scaling back its productions.

"We're fortunate that Saratoga Springs has a very compact downtown," Duda explained. "It's walk-able with places very close together, which makes it perfect for a First Night celebration." She added that Saratoga Springs, which last year drew 14,000 revelers, is now the largest New Year's Eve celebration in Upstate New York. "We expect at least that many to attend this year," she said.

.. ORIGINS OF FIRST NIGHT ..

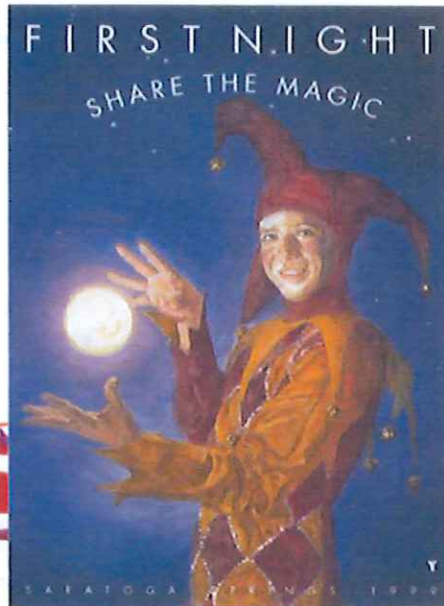
The idea of "First Night" originated in Boston, where a group of civic-minded artists created the celebration as the finale to their Bicentennial events of 1976. The alternative to traditional New Year's Eve revelry rapidly became adopted by cities

nationwide. In 1993, First Night International became a stand-alone, non-profit entity charged with licensing the events worldwide and regulating a uniform set of standards.

First Night International seeks to foster the public's appreciation of visual and performing arts through an affordable New Year's Eve program which provides a shared cultural experience. First Night celebrations in Saratoga Springs, like those in other cities, have traditionally featured a wide variety of artists with broad appeal. The evening offers both indoor and outdoor venues, most within walking distance of one another, with "admission buttons" providing entry to all performances.

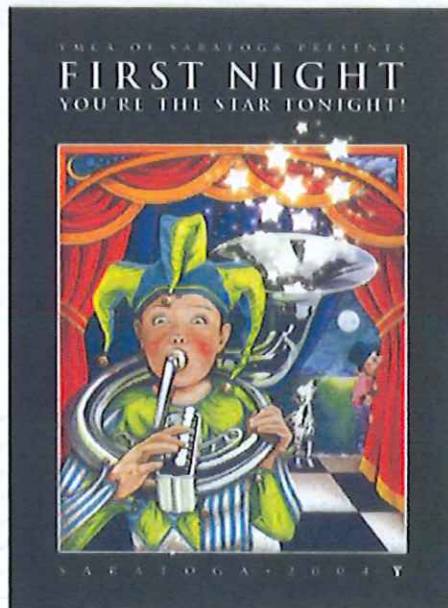
First Night buttons, which cost \$13 apiece, will go on sale around Dec. 1. They will be available at Price Chopper supermarkets, area Stewart's stores, the YMCA of Saratoga, Adirondack Trust branches, the Saratoga Visitors Center, Boscov's stores, Wilton Mall and on the Y's website: www.ymcasaratoga.org. Children under 5 can attend First Night events free.

Duda's responsibilities include scouting out the more than 40 venues to participate in the First Night events, determining their technical capabilities, and securing window locations for featured perfor-



▲ 1998 First Night poster: Ambrosino Design, Dahl Taylor, illustrator

mances on Broadway. She prepares the call for artists and reviews hundreds of portfolios and videos that arrive from performers all over the country. First Night is also a fund-raiser for the YMCA, so she also works with the Y's development staff to solicit sponsors. The money raised pays for the First Night production and helps support YMCA of Saratoga programs that assist the needy in the community



▲ 2003 First Night poster: Ambrosino Design, Sharon Bolton, illustrator

But Duda credits the camaraderie and tradition surrounding First Night Saratoga as the catalyst that sparks individuals to volunteer en masse, contributing to the night's success.

"The volunteerism and support is spectacular," said Duda. "We have more than 250 volunteers who return every year. Couples volunteer with other couples

and entire families come out, creating an annual tradition."

"We've been fortunate to have Jeffrey Allen volunteer to take over as director of the First Night Saratoga 5K Run," she continued. "We set a record First Night attendance in 2007 of 14,000 people. The run greatly impacts our attendance because people will come out to race or volunteer, then they'll participate in other First Night activities."

.. THE 5K ROAD RACE ..

Like many Saratoga Springs residents, Allen's involvement with First Night started when he and his wife volunteered. He suggested adding the race to the festivities in the third year and became the race director, a position he has held since. One of his biggest contributions was the idea of staging it from the Skidmore College campus, just north of the downtown area. "Runs have been a part of other First Night celebrations for years," Allen explained, "so we decided to try it (in Saratoga Springs) and see what happened." The experiment has turned into a huge success.

Saratoga Springs resident Maureen Roberts started distance running ▶▶▶

in her forties and heard about the race through word-of-mouth.

"A group of neighbors was having a New Year's party and running the 5K beforehand," she said. "I couldn't think of a better blend of healthy and fun festivities to celebrate the New Year."

The course, which Allen had certified in its second year, is one of the toughest 5K races around.



▲ Jeffrey Allen, 5K Race coordinator

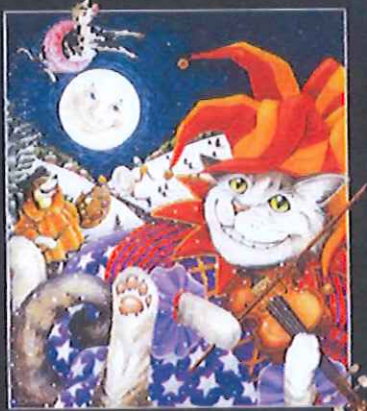
"You never know what the weather is going to be like," said Allen. "Plus, it's dark outside when the race starts at 5:30 p.m. What makes the race work

so well is having use of the Skidmore athletic complex. If it's cold, people can go inside, stretch out and keep warm until the race starts, and also warm up after the race while waiting for the awards."

Runners aren't seeded, but casually align according to their ability level, with elite runners in the front and recreational runners in the back. The start proves challenging as 1,000 runners pack the two-lane road in front of the athletic center.

"When the gun goes off you're jogging in place trying to find a rhythm," said Roberts, a competitive multi-sport athlete. "You have 1,000 people in a big pack running down a hill in the pitch black dark; then you hit one speed bump and then another! It's exciting and you have to stay on your toes. It's a blast!"

FIRST NIGHT
A CELEBRATION OF
IMAGINATION



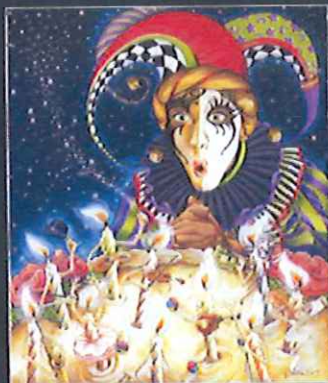
SARATOGA • 2005

▲ 2004 First Night poster: Ambrosino Design, Sharon Bolton, illustrator

Allen added 12 nighttime construction lights to the start and finish lines and to dark corners along the route, and every corner has traffic marshals.

The key to the race, he said, is the more than 85 volunteers who help with registration, hand out shirts, assist along the route and retrieve the microchip timers from the finished racers. About 90 percent of the volunteers return every

YMCA OF SARATOGA PRESENTS
FIRST NIGHT
A DECADE OF
SARATOGA BY STARLIGHT!



SARATOGA 1996-2006

▲ 2005 First Night poster: Ambrosino Design, Sharon Bolton, illustrator

year, including 30 or 40 from the Saratoga Lions club and the Saratoga Stryders.

"Volunteers arrive at 3:30 p.m. and by 7:30 they're done and have the rest of the night to celebrate," said Allen. "We wanted the race completed before the main part of First Night kicks off."

The early time has proved perfect for both volunteers and runners alike.

"We got tired of the New Year's party circuit," said Mike Carney, who together with his wife, Barbara, has volunteered for the road race since its inception. "We finish up about 7:30 p.m., head to Pennell's Restaurant for dinner, and are home by 10 or 10:30 p.m."

"Jeff is a tremendous organizer and motivator, and Skidmore is great to us," said Barbara Carney.

"You're so tired when you come into the finish line that the volunteers literally take the timing chips off for you," said Roberts. "Adding the chips moved this race up into the class of a high-end road race, but my goal is just to stay together as a family. My husband and I run at my daughter's slower pace so we can chat and be social. It's just a total fun run."

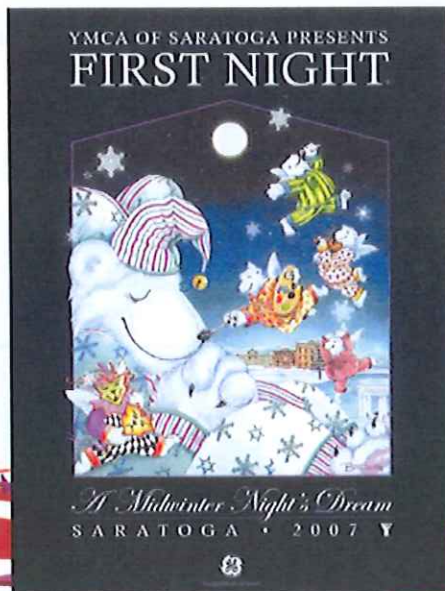
"Runners are sort of a group unto themselves," Mike Carney explained. "Some are pace setters, but it's not so much about winning. They encourage each other to finish and are so grateful to the volunteers."

Registration for the race has sold out for five years in a row and is capped at 1,000 runners.

..THIS YEAR'S THEME..

The secrecy surrounding this year's First Night Saratoga theme resembles the Oscar Hype each February, with Duda carefully guarding the highlights for official release in mid-November.

"I can tell you it will be focused on 'The Revelers,'" Duda said, referring to First



▲ 2006 First Night poster: Ambrosino Design, Sharon Bolton, illustrator

Night attendees themselves. "We'll feature interactive art installations and murals that the public can participate in producing throughout the evening."

Ambrosino Design of Saratoga Springs has donated design of the poster, button and graphics for the event every year except for one, when a contest was held for the public to design the poster. The

company, owned by Larry Ambrosino, has won the prestigious Prism award from First Night International four times in 11 years for the best First Night poster or button design.

Sharon Dwyer Bolton, an RIT graduate, joined the design firm in 2000 and has

been charged with the project since.

"Every year they've become more involved and we try to come up with something more creative," said Dwyer Bolton. "I'm a great pair of hands and can paint pretty pictures, but Larry Ambrosino is the man behind the curtain. He's the wizard responsible for the consistency of the posters throughout the years and the behind-the-scenes work that we do."

Saratoga Springs will join more than 114 First Night celebrations around the world this year with events in the United States, Canada and New Zealand. ■ ■ ■

Amy E. Tucker is a freelance writer based in Clifton Park, N.Y.

▶ FOR THE LATEST FIRST NIGHT SARATOGA INFORMATION

To volunteer or get the latest program information about the 2008 First Night Saratoga celebration:

- Visit <http://www.ymcasaratoga.org/firstnight/>.
- Send an e-mail to: info@firstnightsaratoga.org, or
- Contact the YMCA Development Office at (518) 583-9622, ext. 131

▶ TO REGISTER FOR THE FIRST NIGHT RUN

Registration for the First Night 5K Run is now open at www.ymcasaratoga.org. Be sure to register early, as race organizers have had to close out registration at 1,000 runners for the past five years.

▶ TO BUY A FIRST NIGHT BUTTON

First Night buttons, which cost \$13 apiece, will go on sale around Dec. 1. They will be available at Price Chopper supermarkets, area Stewart's stores, the YMCA of Saratoga, Adirondack Trust branches, the Saratoga Visitors Center, Boscov's stores, Wilton Mall and on the Y's website: www.ymcasaratoga.org. Children under 5 can attend First Night events free.

▶ FOR INFORMATION ON FIRST NIGHT INTERNATIONAL

Visit <http://www.firstnight.com>