

NOVEMBER 2024

# STANLY

the magazine



- Couple decorates bungalow with Christmas cheer
- Wagner continues Swarovski Christmas traditions
- Agency marks 30 years of Christmas tradition

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# CONTENTS



**8** *Couple decorates bungalow with Christmas cheer*

**12** *Wagner continues Swarovski Christmas traditions*

**16** *Agency marks 30 years of Christmas tradition*

## About STANLY the magazine

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**On the cover:** 'Tis the season for Christmas cookies.  
*(Metro Creative Connection photo)*

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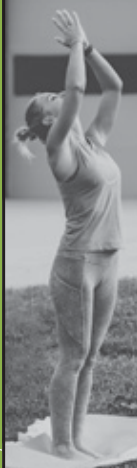


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*Jane and Gary Rife at home in Badin.*

# *The* Rife life

*Couple decorates bungalow with Christmas cheer*

PHOTOS AND STORY BY JO GREY





*The Memories of Williamsburg ornament is on the Travel Tree.*



*Jane's handiwork — brooches from their grandmothers*

Jane Rife is a Hallmark holiday movie buff. So much so that before she and her husband Gary moved away from Memphis, Tennessee, she gained a spot in a ballroom scene of “Christmas at Graceland 2,” filmed at the Peabody Hotel in 2019.

Jane admits she spent more than she earned. Her party dress cost \$90, but her wages only came to \$65.

Even so, she's still a fan.

Jane is a Christmas fan, too, and spends a couple of weeks around Thanksgiving turning their home into a 3-D scrapbook of holiday scenes.

“I just love surrounding myself with the family mementos I grew up with and those we've collected throughout our marriage,” said Jane. “As I'm unpacking them, each one is like a hug. Even the special treats I always make during the season bring back memories of helping my sweet grandmother make the same cookies and treats.”

When the Rifés moved to Badin in 2020, they purchased an early 20th century bungalow on a corner lot that included a small, separate cottage in the backyard. If anyone is thinking of giving

their house a name, Gladys is taken, and so is Mabel.

“I just thought they needed names,” said Jane. “Plus, it helped us distinguish between the two houses when we were talking about them, especially with our daughters who live in other states.”

Appropriately, Jane searched out popular names from the era — Gladys for the main house and Mabel for the cottage.

Since their move, the Rifés, who are handy with power tools, paint brushes and garden shovels, have updated “the ladies” inside and out. Serene paint tones on interior walls and classic white trim make the perfect backdrop for seasonal color, like red throw pillows for the sofa and greenery for the mantle.

Traditional pine branches and red bows appear in late autumn as if by magic on windowsills and in window boxes. Dusk-to-dawn candles in all windows and snowflake lights hanging from the porch ceiling add a nighttime glow. Passersby can't help but notice the gigantic “snowflakes” hanging from bare crape myrtle limbs

out front — only fellow creatives are likely to guess Jane made them from plastic coat hangers. Front-door wreaths for both houses, plus pots of Christmas greenery and an old wooden sled on the front porch complete the picture. The “ladies” have turned into holiday classics overnight.

Though the Rifés are people who spend a lot of time planting and caring for shrubs, flowers and summer vegetables, they've chosen artificial trees for December — three each year. Gary says his job is to bring out the boxes and put them away.

The smallest is a tabletop vintage aluminum tree decked out in “shiny brite” collectible ornaments, some passed down from Jane's mother and grandmother. All the branches are exactly alike in length, but with holes in the trunk shaped to give each inserted branch the perfect slant, the shiny limbs form the tree's conical shape.

The living room tree dotted with white lights is a study in variety. Each ornament holds a family memory. Underneath the tree, a red toy train Gary built is dubbed the “Badin RR.” Jane calls



on him to add shims to the tree stands as needed, making the difference between a tree standing tall and straight or listing and leaning.

“Gary has dared me to say either of the big trees needs one more shim,” said Jane.

*A vintage collection of Shiny Brite ornaments are on this vintage aluminum tree.*

The Rifles call the other big tree their “travel tree.” It’s like a picture album of vacation spots, family visits and camping trips from their travels over the years. They’ve ridden a San Francisco cable car and they’ve seen Rock City and visited a few dozen other places, but the tree still has room for family memories.

“How perfect is this Santa tree topper, buzzing merrily around in his little plane?” asked Jane.

Tall people might have to duck.

Jane also warns that the tree rotates in the opposite direction.

“So it can be a bit trippy to watch for very long.”

Whether it’s a family heirloom, the latest travel bauble, or daughter Lindsay’s cross-stitched ornament commemorating Jane’s movie debut, this Badin home is gloriously rife with Christmas keepsakes. Jane’s passion for rendering ordinary objects things of lasting beauty shows no sign of fading away.

Might Gladys and Mabel also have a movie debut in their future? **S**

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*The living room tree and favorite ornaments.*



*Jane is a Hallmark movie buff. She appeared in crowd scene of the 2019 film "Christmas at Graceland II."*

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# crystal *clear*

*Wagner continues Swarovski Christmas traditions*

PHOTOS AND STORY BY JO GREY



*The "skinny tree" is dressed in crystal and pearls.*



*A Swarovski crystal ball adorns the tree.*



*A Swarovski snowflake with the well-known swan logo.*

**S**tarr Wagner gave her mother a Swarovski crystal snowflake in 1995 because her mother liked sparkly things, pretty things.

“Gene Starnes at Starnes Jewelers in Albemarle ordered the snowflakes for me each year and Mother hung them on her sliding glass door,” said Wagner.

Though Rubye Still died in 1999, Wagner has purchased the limited-edition Christmas ornaments every year since. By coincidence, her ornament-giving tradition began 100 years after Daniel Swarovski founded his crystal-cutting company at the foot of the Austrian Alps.

It so happens Gary and Starr Wagner also live at the foot of a mountain range, though in comparison the Uwharries seem more like hills. They built a house off Valley Drive 39 years ago where in years past they’ve put up 12 Christmas trees, including three trees on the front porch.

“They were live trees except for two seven-foot skinny ones. Those are the winter trees that stay up through February,” said Starr.

They normally flank the dining room buffet, strung with simple pearl garlands and adorned with her mother’s five ornaments plus another 25 years’ worth of collected Swarovski snowflakes and shimmering glass balls.

The Wagners met in high school, graduated from Appalachian State University (ASU) and eventually settled back home in Stanly County.

Badin Elementary School’s longtime principal, Elvin Fisher (now deceased), hired the fresh-out-of-school teacher and she taught there for 11 years.

Gary served in the U.S. Army for two years, then worked at Alcoa’s Badin Works for 40 years, retiring in 2016.

Starr retired this past May from her administrative duties at Park Ridge Christian School and after decades of teaching preschool at The Little Red School House in Albemarle. Her mother founded both institutions.

Living in the western Carolina mountains influenced Gary and Starr’s Christmas tree tradition of getting trees from mountain tree farms. Last year’s grand Fraser fir was from West Jefferson. It spread about five feet wide and stood close to 10 feet high in a place of honor in the



*Little Bit enjoys Christmas.*

middle of the sunroom.

The Wagners speculate that their kitty, who was 6 months old at the time, saw it as a tree-climbing challenge. When Starr heard a thump and bump in the still of the night, she hurried downstairs to find the tree toppled over, but with no serious damage to the kitty or the Waterford crystal ornaments. Little Bit is not so little this year and seems more interested in being a lazy cat. That’s a good thing.

Last year, weeks ahead of the Christmas holidays, Starr began preparing for the family’s favorite meal by boiling, deboning and freezing poultry and broth to make chicken and dumplings. Gardening friends passed along okra which she chopped and froze for frying on Christmas Day. She rounded out the day’s chicken-and-dumpling menu with her grandmother’s slaw and deviled eggs.

“I love to cook,” says Starr, “but we serve the fancy stuff on Christmas Eve.”

Plain or fancy, everything adds up to joy and family fun for three generations.

“It’s what makes Christmas,” said Starr.

But this year, it seems the storm that altered the mountains and valleys of western North Carolina has tamped down the family’s normal

rush of preparation for the coming holiday season.

“The mountain people are hurting,” said Starr.

Her sympathy for her western neighbors shows in her voice and suggests uncertainty about holiday plans.

“But I do know God is in control,” she said, “and He works in all things for good.”

With over 40 years as a dedicated educator now behind her, and retirement stretching out before her, Starr does what any retiree might do. She uses her newfound freedom for new tasks — she’s cleaning out the attic, the closets and the basement. She said goodbye to the dining room wallpaper and gave the room a fresh coat of paint.

Will the skinny winter trees flank the buffet again this year?

“I may put them in the living room,” said Starr.

With the possible scarcity of North Carolina evergreens caused by September’s ravaging flood waters, the Wagners aren’t sure they’ll get another live tree.

“We have a 12-foot flocked tree. I guess we can bring it up from the basement,” said Starr.

Their 4-year-old grandson’s expectations are undaunted. Levi’s favorite glass Rudolph figure has been sitting out since last year, said Starr.

“And Levi still wants me to set out the Christmas village and his Christmas tree. He can take off the trains and the John Deere tractor ornaments anytime he wants to play.”

Starr admits to a past penchant for haunting Christmas stores. Her favorite is Salem Creek in Winston-Salem. She also enjoys unpacking boxes of fragile Christmas crystal each year.

“The ornaments are like my old friends. The date on each one makes me think back about what happened that year,” she said.

At least two of their three daughters and their spouses, plus one grandchild, will soon be home for Christmas as usual, which inspires the Wagners to do what they do — string tree lights, hang beloved ornaments and set the table with the good Christmas plates.

And tuck away Christmas memories in a boxed crystal orb for next year’s celebration. **S**

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*Volunteer Coordinator Hailey Black, left, joins five of the regular Angel volunteers, Lynnne Lawrence, Pam Hollbrook, Linda Almond, Maxine Basinger and Hazel Little.*

# ANGELS

a m o n g u s

*Agency marks 30 years of Christmas tradition*

PHOTOS AND STORY BY JO GREY



Two thousand years ago at Christmastime, a multitude of angelic beings announced God's good news to shepherds on a Middle Eastern hillside.

These days, soundless angel figures — symbols of hope, joy, and heaven — adorn Christmas trees and fireplace mantels in homes all over the world.

Here in Stanly County, faithful volunteer crafters have created a host of hand-made Hospice Angel ornaments for the Festival of Trees at Stanly Commons, in celebration of the 30th Anniversary of the program founded by Hospice of Stanly County, now known as Tillery Compassionate Care (TCC).

Hospice services in Stanly County were first provided in 1981 by a staff of three and a small group of volunteers who extended compassionate care to people faced with serious illnesses.

"It took a long time for the idea of hospice care to catch on," said former Volunteer Coordinator Sylvia Lingerfelt. "People used to think we came in to help them die, but we come in to help you live."

Volunteers Sharon Covey and Pam Hollbrook have seen firsthand how hospice professionals support patients and their families.

"Hospice came to my attention when my dad needed care. Until then, I didn't know about all the things they do," said Covey.

Likewise, Hollbrook decided to volunteer with the agency after her father died. Since taking Stanly's training class in 1988, she's befriended patients and their families, handled office work and helped with fundraising. She was on hand in 1994 when Joy Graham Whitley suggested they decorate a tree with angel ornaments to honor and remember all their patients.

The first and the current angels



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*Linda Almond, Maxine Basinger, Sharon Covey*

Whitley purchased the first angels — ready-made macaroni ornaments — for a 12-foot tree set up in Albemarle’s former indoor shopping mall between Belk’s and JCPenney’s retail stores.

After Whitley hired Lingerfelt, the two decided to make the ornaments in-house.

“Many volunteers wanted to do more, so crafting the angels gave volunteers another way to serve, to give something back,” said Lingerfelt.

“When we first began making angels, my favorite part was shopping,” said Hollbrook. “A carload of us would look for ideas at craft fairs, then purchase halos at the hardware store, or shop for fabric in Monroe. But that was before the internet.”

And before Pinterest.

Now, Hailey Black, the current TCC volunteer coordinator, searches out and adapts ideas she finds online.

This year’s design was inspired by the 30th anniversary color and gift of jewelry. It took two months for volunteers to prepare the angel components by cutting yarn, gluing bits of ribbon, tying tiny bows, and pinching lace into wings, then packaging everything for easy access by the crafters.

“The volunteers are the heart of the angel project,” said Black. “Though our numbers have fallen since the pandemic.”

One afternoon in mid-October, on the second floor of TCC offices on North First Street in Albemarle, Hazel Little, 92-years-young, uses her nimble fingers to thread a circle of narrow ribbon, joined to a length of cording, through a hole in a small wooden ball — the first step in assembling one Hospice Angel.

Next, Linda Almond groups five strands of honey colored yarn and covers



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## December

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*Volunteering together were Deborah B. Watkins and her daughter Alyssia Johnson.*

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each wooden ball with a thick head of angel hair.

Sitting next to her, Maxine Basinger counts strands of emerald yarn for a tiny robe.

By the time the women assemble the ornaments, they have counted out thousands of wooden balls, halo rings, hearts of pearl and strands of yarn.

“We have to know how to count,” says Almond.

But counting isn’t all it takes.

Once the ornaments are assembled, Sharon Covey gently combs the brown and green yarn, fluffing each angel’s hair and robe.

Next, Hailey Black trims uneven strands of yarn to perfection.

Combing and trimming has slowed the process this year, and the group of crafting friends is small, but the goal is 1,000 angels.

“We have a good time doing this,” said Almond. “We didn’t stop even during the pandemic, and we really missed the camaraderie while we worked from home.”

The angel makers keep their fingers moving, and one-by-one the count goes up.

Black says that many angel volunteers are widows or daughters of former hospice patients who find solace for their own grief by making angels for others.

Hollbrook is no stranger to grief. She thinks especially of her grandson, her daughter’s first child, Taylor Enzor, who died at birth in 2008.

Basinger lost her husband in 2011 and her son-in-law last year.

“I purchase angels for my children and grandchildren each year and leave my angel tree up past Christmas,” she said.

Deborah Watkins has bought hospice angels for more than 10 years, and with her husband’s passing in April, this year’s angel will be a significant addition to

her collection.

The stars of December's Festival of Trees are the \$12 angel ornaments arranged alphabetically on the Angel Trees, as well as 52 trees decorated with themes and sponsored by families and businesses to honor and remember a loved one or a special pet.

Sandy Selvy-Mullis, TCC development and marketing manager, says the fundraiser helps support the bereavement department, which of-

fers free services to the community as well as to hospice patients and families.

"The funds also help make sure we can provide care to everyone who needs it, regardless of ability to pay," said Selvy-Mullis.

TCC Bereavement Services will host its 2024 Hospice Tree Lighting Ceremony at Stanly Commons at 6 p.m. Dec. 9.

"The lights will be left on 24 hours a day, every day, symbolizing the light of each loved one,"

said Bereavement Counselor Janna Spurr.

That evening, Hospice staff will be available, talking with and supporting attendees in their grief.

"It helps to be around other people over the holidays," said Spurr. "We'll sing carols, have refreshments and children can decorate cookies and visit with Santa."

The festival runs from Dec. 1-31, with access Monday-Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

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BROKERAGES

Lingerfelt thinks of the families coming to the festival in search of their loved one's angel — each one identified by a tiny paper tag with the honor-ee's name. It's important for them to find their angel.

"I've seen families stand and cry when they see their angel, bringing memories and closure to those grieving families," said Lingerfelt.

Perhaps a wise man's ancient words are timely.

"For everything there is a season ... a time to be born, and a time to die ... a time to weep and a time to laugh..."

Perhaps at the Festival of Trees, memories hold both tears and laughter. **S**



*Maxine Basinger shows the 2011 angel from the year her husband passed.*

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