

Easter parade showcases pro-life commitment

JOLIET, Ill. - In keeping with the springtime theme that celebrates the wealth of new life found throughout nature - blooming flowers, budding trees and newborn bunnies - the pro-life ministry at St. Patrick Parish in Joliet fits right in.

For the fifth year in a row, St. Patrick Parish entered a respect-life float in Joliet's Easter parade, held April 1. More than 90 entries in this year's parade attracted several hundred onlookers along the route.

Joe and Joan Bannon, who co-chair the pro-life ministry committee at the parish, led more than a dozen committee members and a host of pro-life teens in delivering a message that supports life beginning at the point of conception.

It takes about four hours to decorate the float, a 25-foot-by-12-foot plywood stage situated atop a hayrack. The old decorations are replaced with a fresh design in frills, garland and confettilike plastic pieces, but the green carpet that blankets the top is a permanent fixture, said Joan Bannon.

The parish float was two entries behind Peter Cottontail, who wagged the white bushy feature for which he was named, and immediately in front of a lively entry that promoted family unity by dancing in roller skates to the 1979 hit song, "We Are Family," by Sister Sledge.

On this year's float, demonstrating the generational flow of natural life, the Bannons, a gray-haired couple, sat in rocking chairs in front of a "Respect Life" banner. Directly in front of them were young parents Joe and Beth Perona and their four children - Michael, 5; Joe, 4; Rebecca, 2; and Katie, 7 months.

Poster-size pictures of smiling, chubby-cheeked babies hung on the sides of the float, and on the back, a wall-size image of an infant was intended as the final message from the pro-life float as it left.

Although the temperature was a comfortable 57 degrees, a whipping wind required a bit of stamina during the two-hour parade. The Perona family weathered the event well, said Joe Perona in an interview with the Catholic Explorer, Joliet diocesan newspaper.

Being part of a parade is healthy, family fun, he said, but more importantly the theme of the float speaks to a set of values the couple shares. Pro-life issues, he said, are “just something we’re passionate about.”

Strolling the parade route alongside the float were a number of pro-life advocates. Julie Dillenburg, a second-grade teacher at St. Patrick School, said she makes the parade an annual part of her springtime activities. “It is a lot of fun. I see a lot of my students. They wave to me.”

Another veteran of the parish pro-life committee, Karen Hatfield, has witnessed a change among parade-goers. “We hand out Life Savers on a card. It says, ‘Have a Life Saver. Respect and defend life at all stages.’”

In the early years, she recalled, people used to pull their hands away. Now, “a lot of them take it. We want the parents to read it when they get home,” she said.

A group of pro-life teens from throughout the region joined forces and lent their smiles and enthusiastic waves along the route. “It’s outreach. It’s all about saving babies, and (it’s) comfortable to talk about in a group,” said 17-year-old Michael Santschi of St. Jude Parish in New Lenox.