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NEWS

Night to Shine crowns kings and queens across the Arkansas River Valley



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Guests of honor wave through open windows as shimmering streamers cascade over vehicles rolling into the parking lot.

Standing on either side of the tunnel, the crowd cheers and snaps photos.

This grand entrance welcomes guests to a Night to Shine, a prom night experience that happened around the world Feb. 11.

Night to Shine, hosted by West Ark Church of Christ in Fort Smith, rolled out the red carpet and set down the dance floor for individuals with disabilities across the Arkansas River Valley.

“I’ve been coming here for years,” said Christina, a queen donning a sparkly purple gown. “It’s all dedicated to handicapped people. They have fun doing it. They love it. It makes them feel special.”

Since 2015, the Tim Tebow Foundation has hosted Night to Shine, “a worldwide movement celebrating over 100,000 people with special needs annually,” according to the foundation’s website.

Chris Benjamin, the minister at West Ark Church of Christ, calls the celebration “the happiest night you’ve experienced.”

“It’s a celebration event for people with special needs,” Benjamin said. “We call them our kings and queens. They are ages 14 and up, and I mean all the way. It’s all about celebrating life. It’s all about celebrating them ... It’s a night for everybody to shine.”

After driving through the “Shine-Thru” tunnel and picking up a gift box with snacks and fidget toys, attendees could choose to return home to watch a virtual celebration with Tim and Demi-Leigh Tebow.

Attendees could also exit their vehicles for an immersive experience with a make-up and hair station, a photo booth, a place to be crowned king or queen, a red carpet walk and a dance floor.

The event in Fort Smith brought together supporters and organizations from surrounding areas, including the Alma Police Department, the Fort Smith Police Department, the Northside JROTC Saber Team, the Van Buren Fire Department, the University of Arkansas-Fort Smith Police Department, the Sebastian County Sheriff's Office and members of the military.

This is the second year the event has been held outdoors as a “Shine-Thru” due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Benjamin expressed hopes of holding the event indoors again next year, which would bring back other activities including karaoke, a dinner, a sensory room and a hospitality area for caregivers.

“That’s what we looked forward to because the kings and queens get to go to the dance floor ... but then we tell the caregivers, ‘Hey, you come over here, and we’ll take care of you,’” he said. “They get the night off ... We miss a lot of that.”

Allison Strasser, a volunteer helping to crown the kings and queens, said the event emphasized the importance of each person and their talents.

“It’s a good cause,” Strasser said. “Everyone can find their place at Night to Shine, whether you’re a king or a queen or you’re volunteering.”