

## AIAA Greater Huntsville Section Volunteers at Galaxy of Lights

By  
*Naveen Vetcha and Ken Philippart*

Despite the turmoil of a pandemic, the AIAA Greater Huntsville section continued its holiday tradition of volunteering at the Huntsville Botanical Gardens' (HBG) Galaxy of Lights in 2020. On December 9, volunteers from the section staffed the ticket booths and directed traffic at the Galaxy of Lights. This was the fourth year in a row that the section served as the volunteer organization running the Galaxy of Lights for the evening but the first time the group had to deal with the complications of face masks, social distancing, hand sanitation and interacting with the public during a global pandemic. The section safely met the challenge.

Galaxy of Lights is a holiday light extravaganza featuring larger-than-life animated light displays. It is an annual light show organized by HBG that attracts over 30,000 walking night visitors and 25,000 carloads of people on driving nights. The show runs from November 13 to January 2. Visitors can explore 2.5 miles of magnificent light displays weaving together holiday themes, classic characters, and scenes from the natural world. The event is HBG's largest fundraising event and is run almost exclusively by volunteers. Local groups and societies choose nights to be the sponsoring organization and help the gardens with running the event by manning the admission booths, controlling the traffic, answering questions, and counting cars and revenue. This year Galaxy of Lights is celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and has grown from the original 20 displays to over 200.



Greater Huntsville Section Volunteers gather before heading to the gates

The section's planning traces back to our participation at the event in the past three years. Past chairs of the section, Naveen Vetcha and Ken Philippart led our participation at this event in the last three years. All the volunteers who helped in the past years loved their participation and suggested that we continue the tradition. Taking note of this, Naveen contacted HBG and chose Dec 9<sup>th</sup> 2020 as the day that AIAA would return to HBG.

As the day approached, Naveen attended the training session as the event Day Captain and began organizing the section's participation. Ken Philippart again supported the event as co-captain. A call for volunteers was sent out in November and received a great response with 16 AIAA members and family members signing up to help.

The night's activities kicked off with an orientation from the HBG staff including discussions on safety rules and equipment, with additional requirements this year due to COVID. HBG provided safety guidelines to all the volunteers. HBG also provided masks, gloves, and face shields for volunteers.



AIAA Greater Huntsville Section volunteers at the admission gate

The volunteers were divided into two teams. Each team member was assigned a particular task such as collecting passes, selling admissions, directing traffic, taking credit cards or counting cars and the night's proceeds. The teams staffed the gates in 30 to 45-minute-long shifts, taking turns working and then relaxing in the Volunteer Room to network and enjoy a potluck dinner, drinks and camaraderie. Clear skies during the event allowed some volunteers to observe some prominent constellations such as Orion and Cassiopeia and the planets Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn.

Volunteers worked from 5:30 – 9 pm, braving the cold to admit 431 vehicles and raise \$4,700 in cash to support HBG operations. When the gates closed to the public, all volunteers received the opportunity to drive through the light display at their own pace at no charge and to take as many photos as they wished.



[AIAA Greater Huntsville Section Banner at the Galaxy of Lights Entrance](#)

Greater Huntsville's fourth time participation in the Galaxy of Lights was a fun and festive way for AIAA to give back to the Huntsville community during the season of giving while getting to know fellow section members in a relaxed setting.

The section thanks our volunteers: Mark Smith, Hannah Smith, Hunter Dunne, Jacob Clark, Carlton Corbitt, Maria Doucette, Nancy Donahoo, Eric Jackson, Ken Philippart, Lisa Philippart, Lauren Fisher, Mary Beth Ledford, Kaitlin Oliver-Butler, Philip Butler, Brandon Stiltner, and Naveen Vetcha.