



SA TODAY TRUMP RESPONSE TO CLINTON CRITICISM: 'SHE LIES LIKE CRAZY' PAGE 1B

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Commemorating a fallen tradition



ANDREW JANSEN/NEWS-LEADER

From right, Baleigh Winkler, Elizabeth Webster and Thayne Ritter, all members of the Woodland Hills Family Church Gap Year Program, assemble and stamp ornaments that were made from the remnants of the Ozark Wildcat rollercoaster that once stood near the entrance of the Branson church. The ornaments were given to church members as gifts.

Branson
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THOMAS GOUNLEY
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Leaders of a Branson church that meets in a former amusement park prepared a surprise for members on Sunday, the first day of services following the demolition of an adjacent abandoned roller coaster that had become part of the worship community's identity.

Unbeknownst to most members, when the Ozark Wildcat coaster came down last week, Woodland Hills Family Church staff requested and received

some wooden planks that had comprised the structure that once served as a post-baptism ritual. And volunteers quickly made about 800 ornaments to be distributed following Sunday's 9 and 11 a.m. services.

Wednesday morning, the planks were cut into chunks. Holes were drilled so hooks could be added. Then, that afternoon, volunteers participating in Link Year, a gap year program run by Branson's Kanakuk Kamps, stamped "2015" and the church's logo — a tree, which represents family — on each piece.

See COASTER, Page 8A

ELVE
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MAS
GREGORY J. HOLMAN
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9 This Twelve Days of Christmas list is not your typical one. No lords-a-leaping!

2 The Twelve Gregslists of Christmas are day-by-day lineups of fun things to do, and some things to think about. in the run-

up today.)
We'll have one Gregslist per day, through Christmas Eve.

On the Ninth Gregslist of Christmas...

TUES., DEC 22

Hit up Farmers Market of the Ozarks as you plan your holiday

note: The market will be closed for Saturday, Dec. 26.

See the men's basketball Bears during Christmas week. The Bears are playing Southeast Missouri State at JQH Arena at 7:05 p.m.; tickets from \$10.

Hear Maddie Butler and Dan Stricker's cover stylings. Madison Avenue will be playing



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The Explore program

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day, fee-based program. It

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said.

Coaster

Continued from Page 1A

Family Ministries Director Stephanie Watson supervised the process.

"People are going to flip out on Sunday when they get these," she said last week. "We know that."

Herschend Family Entertainment, which owns nearby Silver Dollar City and other entertainment properties, opened Celebration City in 2003. But the park had a short life span, closing for good at the end of the 2008 season, following what the company characterized as disappointing financial returns. Ozark Wildcat and the other rides went silent.

Woodland Hills began meeting in an auditorium and theater in the park made to look like a castle in 2004. The non-denominational evangelical church was allowed to continue operating out of the space even after the park closed.

The church believes there are only two other worship communities in the country that meet in an abandoned amusement park.

The roller coaster became something of a lighthouse for the church — a landmark that helped visitors find it amid the rolling hills of the Ozarks. But church members also feel the coaster, and really the whole theme park vibe, captures their spirit.

As the church puts it on its website: "Yes, we meet in a castle and we LOVE it! It says a lot about who we are. Creative, family friendly, and non-traditional."

Silver Dollar City spokeswoman Lisa Rau cautioned against reading into the timing of the demolition. Herschend doesn't have any immediate plans for the site, she said, although the company considers it a valuable piece of property. The company just decided that 2015 was a good year to commit the necessary financial resources to tear the roller coaster down.

Woodland Hills Creative Director Corey Mitchell said the request to film the demolition last week came from the top. Well, not God himself, but the church's senior pastor, Ted Cunningham. Mitchell came in on his day off, and "pretty much camped out in the parking lot all day for 20 seconds of collapsing." As of Sunday evening, the resulting video had 49,000 views on YouTube, along with tens of thousands more on Facebook.

It's not unusual for there to be demand for roller coaster remains; it's just that it typically is a secular endeavor. Members of the American Coaster Enthusiasts group recently visited Silver Dollar City, Rau said, and blocks of wood from Ozark Wildcat "were one of the most popular gifts of all." Even tree remnants that fail to make the thrill ride cut see their value increase; Rau said Silver Dollar City sells branded scrap wood from the making of its Outlaw Run roller coaster.

The original plan was to make about 700 ornaments, Watson said, but staff bumped that up to about 800 after seeing the reaction when the demolition video was published on the church's Facebook page. Woodland Hills has about 1,500 members, and the goal was to have one or



Ornaments made from the remnants of the Ozark Wildcat roller coaster that once stood near the entrance of the Woodland Hills Family Church in Branson were given to members of the church as a gift.

nament for each family in attendance Sunday. The church was founded in May 2002, and it's never had what would be considered a traditional setting. Originally, ser-

vices were held in a theater at Branson Meadows Cinema. Then they moved to Music City Center on Missouri 76. Then Celebration City, starting in September 2004.

For the most part, the church operated on Sunday mornings, before the park opened to the public in the evening. But occasionally, church members got the opportunity out-

side of park hours. On baptism days, a pool would be set up in the vicinity of the park. Occasionally, church members would then start up for

church members. "After our baptisms, we would go and ride the roller coaster as a celebration," said Andy Watson, Stephanie's husband and facility manager for the church.

Today, Woodland Hills uses five buildings that had been part of Celebration City. The castle, as it is known, is the main worship area. A former medical facility has been turned into a space for fifth- and sixth-graders. A former restaurant has been converted into The Chapel, Woodland Hills' second worship space.

At one point, Woodland Hills planned to build its own facility elsewhere in Branson. But that plan was put on hold.

"As long as they allow us to be here, we don't have any plans to build," Stephanie Watson said.

The church kept some wood from Ozark Wildcat for possible future projects. But most of it is likely finding its way onto a tree just in time for Christmas.

"This is all handcrafted," Andy Watson said. "Only in Branson do you get a handcrafted roller coaster ornament."

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