

40 CHEERS FOR THE ELVES

In the Quad Cities, the term “elf” takes many forms during Festival of Trees season.

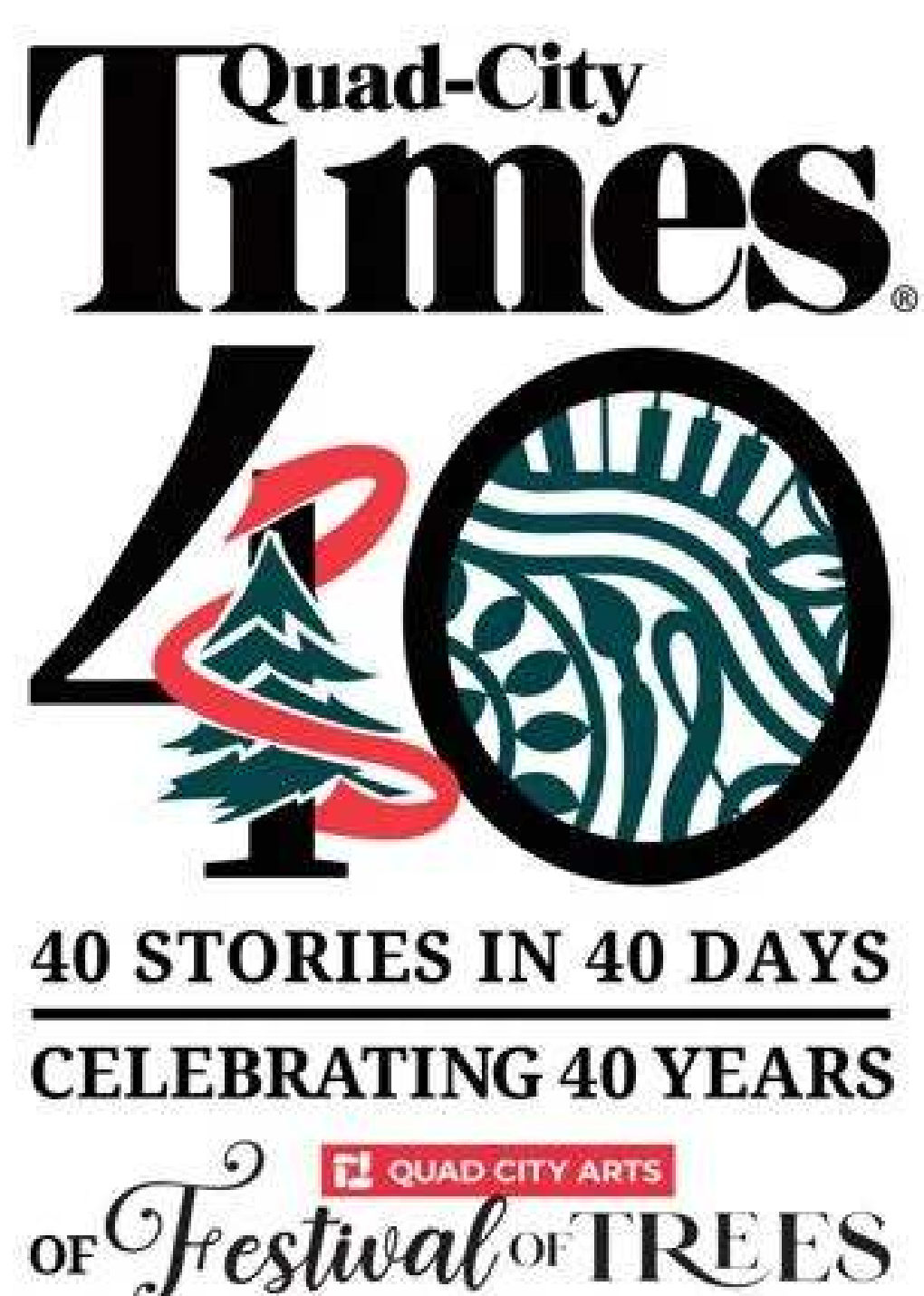
It could mean a thespian like 13-year-old Nora (the daughter of this writer), who’s elated to be in the cast of “Elf Jr.” this year — ready to sing her heart out on the holiday stage. It could mean a parade-walking elf, waving to families as the marching bands pass by. Or it could mean one of the quiet ones — the invisible elves who have spent 40 years holding the festival together from behind the scenes.

These are the magic keepers. The elves who helped Festival of Trees endure from its inaugural year — 1986 — when excitement for a brand-new community celebration shared headlines with the shocking death of a famous actor at the Adler Theatre. Even then, the show went on. The community came together.

And somehow, Festival of Trees found its place in local history — a symbol of joy carrying the community through unexpected loss.

Those early elves set a tone that’s lasted decades. They built, repaired, repainted and reimaged. They made philanthropy feel joyful. They stretched dollars, lifted spirits and made art feel possible for everyone.

But elves grow tired, too. The names and faces shift. Committees change. What began as a tight circle of veterans is slowly becoming something new — a broader, more open table where the next generation can lead. That’s how it should be. The magic isn’t gone; it’s just changing hands.



Still, those early elves deserve a bow. For every late-night ribbon fix, every volunteer meeting that turned chaos into choreography, every act of kindness that made someone believe they belonged.

Because the festival has never been about trees alone. It’s about the people willing to show up quietly, year after year, to make joy happen.

So here’s to the elves — past, present and still to come. May their spirit always outlast the glitter.