



BACK TO THE FESTIVAL: A TIME-TRAVELER’S JOURNEY THROUGH 40 YEARS OF TREES, TRADITION AND COMMUNITY

Buckle up. Like the Festival of Trees itself, Brian Allen, executive director of Quad City Arts, got his start in life in 1985, the same year a futuristic movie hit theaters and inspired generations to dream beyond time.

Now, he invites you to fire up the time-traveling sportscar, hit 88 miles per hour and journey with him through four decades of dazzling trees, glittering galas and the visionary dreamers who turned a simple idea into one of the Quad Cities’ most cherished holiday traditions. Roads? Where this journey is going, you don’t need roads, just the stories preserved through time, courtesy of Allen and the Quad-City Times. Here are some of his best memories of his own journey.



1985: The spark is lit

In December 1985, the Quad-City Times announced the creation of a new holiday fundraiser, Festival of Trees. Led by Diane Sulg and the Visiting Artists board, the goal was simple: bring together art, community and creativity at a moment when hope mattered most.

1986: The first festival

The inaugural event featured 60 decorated trees, 16 lifelike Santas and a gala titled “An Affair to Remember.” Cary Grant, brought in through the Visiting Artist Series to have a conversation at the gala’s end, passed away that weekend, turning the evening into a heartfelt tribute.

1987-1991: Momentum and growth

Jody Ruhl and Sarah Elliott oversaw the gala in 1987, and by 1989, 58 professional tour groups were visiting Davenport for the festival. Attendance doubled, fundraising tripled and local businesses flourished from the economic impact with more than \$1.2 million that year.

1992: The festival hits the streets

The first Festival of Trees Holiday Parade debuted in 1992, with 21 giant balloons and glowing Times coverage. Local reporter Paula Sands called it “magical,” and the parade quickly became the unofficial kickoff to the holiday season.

2000: A touch of Hollywood

In 2000, Lauren Bacall graced the Festival for a style show luncheon and “Dessert Among the Trees,” partnering with the Quad City Symphony Orchestra. A Madrigal Brunch rounded out a weekend of cultural elegance.

2005: Twenty years of wonder

Celebrating its 20th year, Festival of Trees introduced new events including a “Festival Cheers” for young professionals and a home demonstration series. Nearly 100,000 attended under the theme “Once Upon a Festival.” As Judy Holdorf, director of Festival of Trees, told the Times, “It’s a beloved tradition in the Quad Cities.”

2007-2024: Legacy and renewal

The founding of The Cultural Trust in 2007 ensured the festival’s long-term future. By 2013, the Festival of Trees had raised over \$4 million since inception and engaged 3,500 volunteers annually. Even the pandemic couldn’t stop it. 2020’s televised “Day of Giving” kept the lights glowing. By 2024, the event was again drawing more than 100,000 guests in total.

2025: “Tinsel & Tradition”

This year marks 40 years of imagination, generosity and art in motion. As the time machine coasts back to the present, one thing remains clear: Festival of Trees has never been just about decorations, it’s about people, perseverance and the power of creativity to unite a community.

As Quad City Arts looks ahead, the sights are already set on the next milestone, 50 years of Festival of Trees, proof that with enough heart, collaboration and a little holiday magic, the best is yet to come.

