

FAMILY TREES

Some families pass down recipes. Others, traditions. In the Quad Cities, families pass down Festival of Trees.

For 40 years, the festival has been where family traditions begin — and where new ones take root.

From the Premiere Party to Parade Day, it's been a shared ritual across generations, drawing parents, grandparents and kids into the same glitter-covered story.

Few families embody that better than Sara and Mike Thoms.

Sara has been one of those magical elves behind the scenes since the 1980s — working late into the night to help the festival sparkle, serving on countless committees and quietly making the magic happen. Together, she and Mike have taken their children to the parade since it began — sometimes as spectators, other times as clowns walking in it. “What makes Festival special is how it brings the whole Quad Cities together,” said Mike. “It’s not about which side of the river you’re from — it’s about pride, creativity and a shared belief that art and tradition make this region stronger.”

Their tradition doesn’t stop when the season ends. The Thoms’ leadership has touched every corner of our cultural ecosystem. Both have served on boards for the Putnam Museum, Figge Art Museum, Quad City Symphony Orchestra, Quad City Botanical Center and Quad City Arts, and as trustees of The Cultural Trust — Sara as a past trustee and Mike as a current one. They continue to model what it means to invest in arts and culture as a family way of life.



Mike Thoms, former Mayor of Rock Island and current Trustee for The Cultural Trust; and Sara Thoms, former Trustee for The Cultural Trust



Aaron and Ashley Tennant and their children walking in the Festival of Trees Parade.

That same spirit carries through the Tennant family.

Aaron and Ashley Tennant have cast their support across the arts for years — walking in the parade with their kids, storing decorations in Cantrell Trucking trailers after the festival wraps and lending a hand whenever a Legacy Partner calls.

Aaron helped lead The Cultural Trust’s 2018 campaign that grew the endowment to \$32 million, securing the funds that kept Festival of Trees and other cultural traditions alive through the pandemic. Across decades, families like theirs — and countless others — have made the festival more than an event. They’ve made it a mirror of who we are: generous, creative, connected.

Because in the Quad Cities, when people gather to celebrate Festival of Trees, they’re reminded this isn’t just about lights, ornaments or floats.

It’s about family — the ones we’re born into, the ones we build through art and generosity, and the one we’ve become as a community.

And it’s never too late to start a new family tradition — whether it’s Teddy Bears and Treats, Sugar Plum Ball, Silent Disco or a simple afternoon at Festival of Trees.

Choose to make time, make a moment and make a memory with your family — one that might just become the tradition of a lifetime.

Because culture matters here. And it always will.

