



WHEN TREES BECAME STAGES

In the early years of Festival of Trees, the decorated trees weren't just displays — they were trophies. Companies proudly showcased them in their lobbies, and community leaders set them up in their homes. To own one, you had to be at the Premiere Party that Sarah Elliott and Jody Ruhl had just cemented as the social ticket of the season — and you had to be the highest bidder. (During more recent Festivals, trees are still put up for auction, with the funds raised supporting Quad City Arts.)

That made the Festival more than a holiday event. It became a competition of artistry. Designers treated trees as canvases, building creations that pushed imagination further each year. Some were whimsical, some sophisticated, some downright daring. What mattered was that they weren't just trees — they were statements.



“Over the years there have been notable designers who have done some incredible things, like Damian Parizek and Wynne Schafer,” said Pat Wohlford, chair of designer recruitment at Festival of Trees. “Just a lot of talent.”

The competition gave the festival credibility. Winning a ribbon meant recognition in the paper and buzz across the community. Bidding wars proved artistry had tangible value, raising funds while sending the festival creations into the city's most influential spaces.

In many ways, the trees themselves became stages. Designers weren't decorating for December. They were performing for the Quad Cities, knowing their work would be remembered, written about and displayed far beyond the RiverCenter floor.

Nearly 40 years later, that same spirit of artistry still drives the festival. The names may change, the designs may evolve, but the heartbeat remains: creativity celebrated, community gathered, tradition built one masterpiece at a time.

Some designers are already sketching their 2026 concepts while putting final touches on this year's trees. Others keep storage rooms — even backyard sheds — devoted solely to the festival creations. That level of commitment shows how deeply this tradition is woven into the Quad Cities.

It's also why the festival's future is now protected by the Cultural Trust. The same way designers plan years in advance, the trust exists to ensure the festival itself — and the creativity it represents — will be here for generations. Because artistry is only as enduring as the structures that sustain it, and in the Quad Cities, they've chosen to make that investment permanent.

