

WHEN WOMEN BUILT THE FIRST NIGHT OF MAGIC

In 1986, Festival of Trees lit up the RiverCenter for the very first time. But before a single ribbon was tied, it needed credibility — people who could turn an idea into a must-attend community tradition. That's where Diane Sulg, Sandra Figge, Sarah Elliott and Jody Ruhl stepped in.

As members of the original organizing team, they brought legitimacy, energy and vision to what was then an untested concept. Their combined leadership laid the foundation for what would become one of the Midwest's most beloved holiday events.

By 1987, Ruhl and Elliott took that momentum one step further as the inaugural Premiere Party chairs. They weren't just planning a gala — their names on the invitation signaled to Davenport's business and cultural leaders that the festival was something to be taken seriously.

"It really was the event of its time," recalled Ruhl. "Influencers like Diane Sulg made us feel like anything was possible. She had a way of energizing volunteers and uniting them. I was happy to be part of something so special."

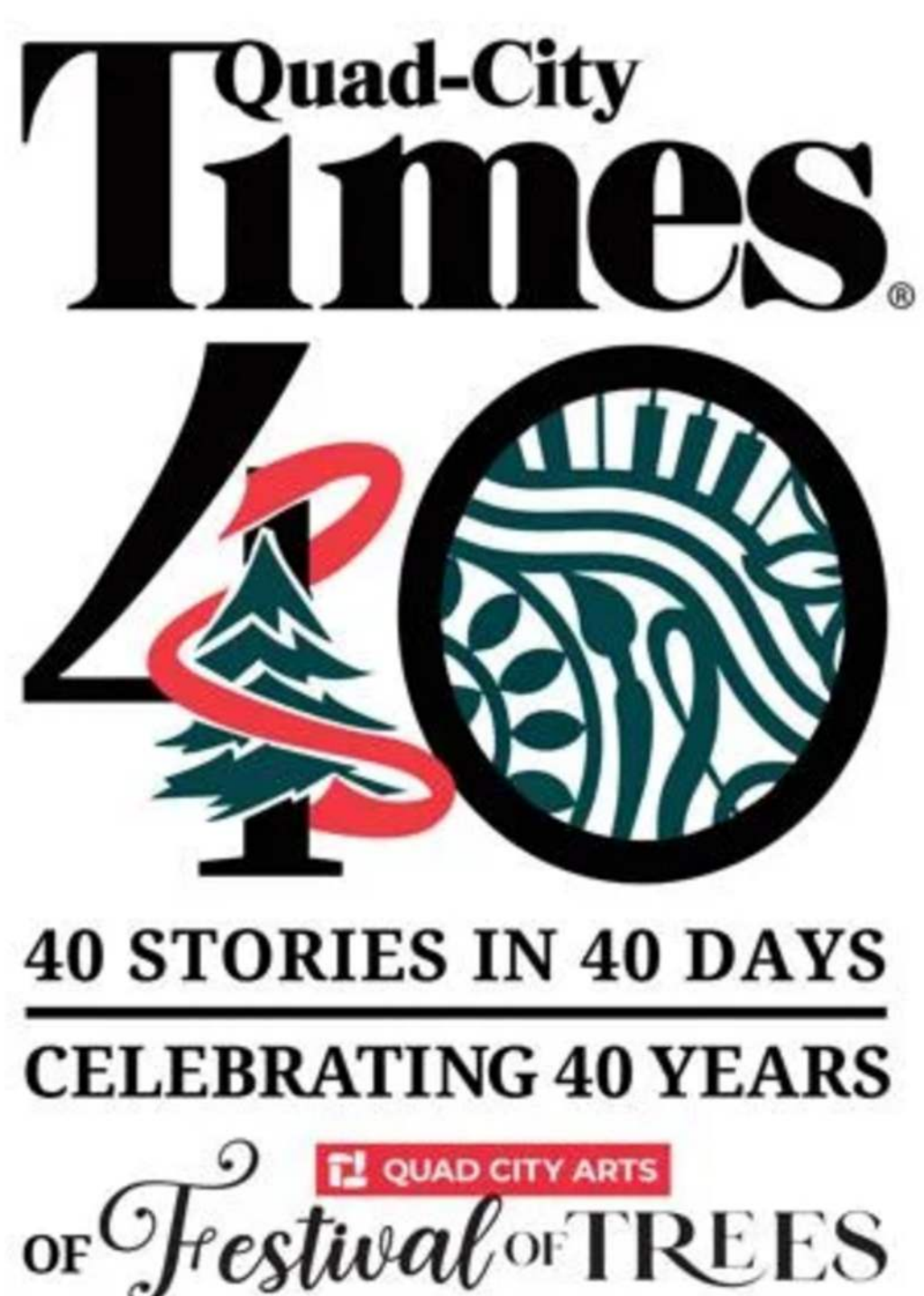
The first Premiere Party was about more than champagne and music. It was proof that Festival of Trees could hold its own as a social event on par with the city's most glamorous evenings.

"The Quad-City Times really did evoke interest in what we were putting together," Ruhl said. "It validated all those late nights ensuring every detail was perfect."

The early leadership of Ruhl, Elliott, Sulg and Figge established a rhythm that continues to this day — a sold-out celebration that blends glamour, generosity and community spirit. They set the standard for how the festival would define elegance and purpose — then and now.

"It doesn't feel like we started this 40 years ago," Ruhl said, "but it feels so great to know the tradition has lived on and that its impact still does so much good for our region."

Nearly 40 years later, Festival of Trees has grown into one of the Midwest's largest holiday traditions. And the same Premiere Party Ruhl and Elliott helped launch remains the event that marks the start of the season.



One of the brilliant things about the Premiere Party," said Linda Bowers, chair of The Cultural Trust, "is how it romanticizes art and culture. Forty years ago, those brilliant women knew it was worth lifting with glamour — and today we continue that time-honored tradition because culture matters here, and it always will."

What started with a bold idea in 1986 — and the conviction of women willing to lend their names and leadership — has become a holiday ritual for thousands. Every time guests raise a glass at the Premiere Party, they're still part of the tradition that Ruhl and Elliott formalized in 1987, building on the groundwork laid by Festival of Trees trailblazers just one year earlier.