AFTER THE EXCITEMENT: DONATING THE ROCKEFELLER CENTER CHRISTMAS TREE

Once in a lifetime experience

by Sharyn Flanagan

DRIVERS HEADING THROUGH Gardiner on Route 44/55 may not even notice the modest Christmas tree perched on the tree stump in front of the Asendorf/Puchalski residence. To the casual observer, it's simply a holiday decoration that one might see in front of any home. But the small tree mounted on the stump, affectionately nicknamed “Little Rockefeller” by homeowner Al Asendorf, is a tribute to the grand tree that once grew there: the 78-foot-tall Norway Spruce that now towers over Rockefeller Plaza in New York City as the official Rockefeller Center Christmas tree for the 2015-2016 holiday season.

Mounted on its platform overlooking the famous ice rink, the tree somehow appears much larger than it looked when it was in front of the Gardiner residence. Decorated with a Swarovski crystal tree topper and 45,000 lights, it's a stunner.

"Daddy, is that a real tree?" says one child.

"That's the most beautiful Christmas tree I've ever seen," says a woman nearby.

That sentiment is overheard numerous times, voiced by one person after another in the multitude of people flooding the plaza. They take each other’s picture against the backdrop of the tree and thrust their phones or cameras into the willing hands of strangers to photograph them together. Others are more prepared, equipped with a selfie-stick and gathering their group together for a self-taken shot, jostled by the constant ebb and flow of the crowd. One can only imagine how many holiday photos this tree will be in by season’s end.

The tree does, indeed, have the perfect shape for a Christmas tree, and it's truly magnificent when viewed all lit-up, especially when the sporadic bursts of flashing lights on the tree go off like the finale in a series of fireworks. Most of us in

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New York have seen many previous Rockefeller Center Christmas trees, but it’s hard to not feel attached to this one, having seen it in its original location and having witnessed its journey to this moment. “Hey, that tree came from down the street from where I live!” I want to tell somebody... anybody. And if it makes this reporter feel like that, imagine how the family that donated the tree feels.

Are they still glad they did it? And what was it like when they first saw the tree that they were so familiar with transformed in this iconic way? That’s what we wondered at New Paltz Times. We asked, and Nancy Puchalski and Al Amsden were kind enough to invite us in to chat with them and other family members about their once-in-a-lifetime experience.

The official tree-lighting was held on Wednesday, December 2. Most of the family went into the city that morning on a bus arranged for by the PR firm for Rockefeller Center. They checked into the Omni Hotel, then wandered around the city a little bit. They were meant to have dinner at Bill’s Bar & Burger on 51st and Fifth where the PR people would meet them to take them to the tree lighting after dinner at the pub and getting to the tree-lighting on time, where they were interviewed beforehand by a phalanx of press including reporters from Finland, Scotland, Ireland and Japan.

The family was given their own section to stand in located above the tree looking down on it, although they could see across the street, now,” Nancy adds. “They took a picture with you, too...” says Al. “It was amazing,” says Nancy. “We’ll go back later when there’s not so much going on. We saved the places they gave us to go up to the [Top of the Rock] observation deck and the ice rink.”

Do you have any sense of having been a part of New York State history? It’s a unique experience not many people can say they’ve had.

“It’s the small things,” says Al. “Like people drive by and stop, then run up and stand on the stump to take a picture and then they drive off real fast, or I’ll go to the bank and they say, ‘Oh, you’re the tree guy.’ I’ve had a lot of people call me up and say how great they think the tree looks... we heard somebody got engaged under it. Maybe they can come back and get married at the stump!”

Did you keep any souvenirs from the tree? “I wish we had taped their segment the day prior. ‘I wish we had known that in advance,’” says Nancy Puchalski. “We might have come in a day earlier.” They did get to see the live performances by Sting and Andy Grammer as well as the children’s choir. When the city’s mayor, Bill de Blasio, flipped the switch that turned the lights on, it all happened very fast, says Nancy. “All of a sudden they were counting down and that was it.”

So what is it like when you first saw the tree in that environment? “The tree looked huge down there,” Al says. “I couldn’t believe that tree had been in the yard, but it was.”

“Seeing it next to buildings instead of in the lawn here was pretty amazing,” adds Jeremy, Al’s son, who remembers using the tree as a fort while growing up with it. “It’s a totally different atmosphere.”

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How has the reaction from people here been? “We were worried at first that when this happened, the neighbors would be upset with all the activity and closing down the road,” says Al, “but it seems like a lot of them were more excited than we are. They tell us they like it put the Gardiner, New Paltz area on the map. It’s really been all positive.”

One of Nancy’s colleagues at work gave her a special picture frame marking the occasion, she says. “I was really touched by that.”

Did you keep any souvenirs from the tree? “We kept some pinecones, and a couple of wedges of the trunk and we’ll get some slabs of wood when it gets cut up for Habitat [for Humanity] that I’ll use for making a tabletop, things like that,” says Al. (He enjoys woodworking, having made everything from a grandfather clock to some nice wooden chairs that fold into each other, says daughter-in-law, Andrea.)

What will your own Christmas be like this year? “It’s always packed for Christmas here,” says Nancy. “We got a smaller tree this year to make room for more people. It always goes on all night!”

Are you still glad you donated the tree and got involved with all this? “We are, but we do kind of miss the tree,” Nancy says. “But we made a lot of new friends, and everybody has been really nice about it all.”

Al agrees, saying he was joking around at the tree-lighting, saying, “Okay, that’s enough, bring it back home now.” “It’s something that you saw every day and didn’t really pay attention to unless you were working around it or sitting in the stump. We don’t see the whole effect of it until it’s gone and now you look and it’s bare there.”

“We can see across the street, now,” Nancy adds.

The people at Rockefeller Center offer to come back and do landscaping where the tree was, don’t they? “They came and did some landscaping before they even took the tree out,” says Al, “and they’re going to come back now and grind the stump. Then they’re going to plant another tree that won’t block the house: one maybe ten, 20 feet tall. Maybe we’ll decorate that one next year and later on down the road, the grandkids’ kids can do the same thing with it we did!”

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