

CELEBRATING 40 YEARS

She knows where all the trees are buried

Sponsored content by Jen Lewis-Snyder, CEO and president, The Cultural Trust

After 40 years of ribbons, deadlines and designer drama, Festival of Trees veteran Pat Wohlford still runs the show. Clipboard in hand, she moves through the RiverCenter with the ease of someone who helped build it — one ribbon, one designer, one deadline at a time.

Since 1990, Wohlford has been the festival's historian, referee and secret weapon. Ask her about a tree from 2007 or who borrowed the good extension cord in 2014 — she'll know. She remembers every designer, every theme and every near-disaster that somehow turned out fine, probably somehow thanks to her, though if you know Wohlford, you know she won't take the credit.

So how much Festival wisdom and history can one woman share? Leaders at The Cultural Trust decided to find out. They prepared 40 questions, one for every year, and put 40 seconds on the clock — because Wohlford likes to do everything under a tight deadline and a little pressure.

First memory: "Rolling red and green mylar streamers on the floor during teardown."

Biggest "oh boy" theme: "Eyes All Aglow. No one knew what to do with that."

Caffeine source: "Adrenaline. Always."

Average steps per day: "Never under 10,000."

Memory system: "Files. Notes. Calls to every past designer. Psychic precision optional."

Weirdest discovery under a tree: "Empty Ghirardelli wrappers. Lesson learned."

Most common crisis: "Lights, not glue guns."

Harder to wrangle: volunteers or designers?[JC1] "Always designers."

Song of the season: "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas."

First role: "Secretary, under Karen Getz. Red blazer. Shoulder pads."

Funniest chaos: "Security call that turned into a sale."

Favorite designer: "Damian Parizek — pure talent."

Biggest jaw-dropper: "Joel Ryser's blown-glass tree."

Last-minute miracle: "No-shows covered by backup designers. Even the filler tree sold."



Competition now: "More categories, more creativity."

Advice to new designers: "Relax — have fun."

Butterflies? "Every year."

Personality of Festival: "Sparkly, clever, extroverted, devoted."

Hardest year: "COVID. Small but mighty version at Quad City Arts."

Volunteer culture: "Dedicated, aging, still magical."

Why she keeps coming back: "It's everything — I love what it does for our community."

What never changes: "The trees. The joy. The people who make it happen."

Wohlford's seen it all: from shoulder pads to sequins, from paper trees to LED light shows, from handwritten tags to digital bids. Through it all, she's kept the heart of the festival steady.

After four decades, she doesn't need directions, reminders or luck. She knows where all the trees are buried — and exactly who decorated them best.

Coming tomorrow: Festival as community stage



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