

CELEBRATING 40 YEARS

Lunch with legends: The art of celebration

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

The day before Thanksgiving, the Quad Cities quietly rearranges its schedule. Meetings end early, offices empty and downtown Davenport fills with laughter, massive gift bags and free-flowing champagne.

It's the same ritual that's marked the start of the holiday season for more than three decades: Celebrity Lunch. Here, familiar faces trade suits for aprons. News anchors, mayors, teachers and business leaders balance trays instead of microphones and budgets. Between photo ops and applause, you'll find the city's most beloved leaders doing what they do best — serving their community, quite literally.

As the Quad-City Times wrote in 1993, "Festival week kicks off with lunchtime laughter and ends with black-tie sparkle." That rhythm still holds true today, only now it's reversed.

If Premiere Party is the chandelier, Celebrity Lunch is the sunlight through it — equally bright, just while the sun is still out. One is elegant, one is exuberant, and together they represent the spirit of giving during festival week.

In 1987, women like Diane Sulg, Sarah Elliott and Jody Ruhl imagined a new kind of fundraiser — one where art, design and generosity collided under chandeliers and live music. The first Premiere Party became an instant hit, establishing Festival of Trees as the most anticipated night of the year.

But it's the balance of both events that makes this tradition legendary.

Daylight gives us laughter and connection. Evening gives us elegance and awe. Together they remind us that celebration — when done with intention — is an art form in itself.

Every city has its legends, another word for Culture Champion. Here they wear sequins or Santa hats, depending on the hour. They're the volunteers who've shown up for decades, the sponsors who've turned giving into tradition and the servant leaders who've made Celebrity Lunch the Quad Cities' most joyful half-day holiday.

Longtime volunteer Pat Wohlford once called Festival of Trees "the city's most beautiful expression of teamwork." She was right. The sparkle of Premiere Party wouldn't shine without the hundreds of volunteers who spend weeks before Thanksgiving wiring lights, polishing ornaments and preparing to feed a crowd.

For many, Celebrity Lunch is a reunion — a chance to see old friends (and challenge them to give generously or face the consequences), laugh about who spilled soup, and toast to another year of magic. For others, Premiere Party is the tradition that defines their November calendar.

Both belong to the same family of generosity — the kind that blurs the line between social event and civic pride. And both are led by the man who needs no introduction, Decker Ploehn.

Festival archives from 1992 and 1993 show how little has changed — and how much we've grown. Festival week still follows the same rhythm: an evening lit by chandeliers followed by a lunch fueled by laughter. And while menus, music and venues have evolved, the spirit hasn't.

Last year's Premiere Party proved that perfectly. For the first time in years, Quad City Arts reintroduced a live auction with just one item: The Culture Bright Package.

With support from The Cultural Trust, all six Legacy Partners came together to offer a full year of arts and culture experiences. The result? The most successful fundraising night in Festival history.

At The Cultural Trust, we call this rhythm the art of celebration — proof that joy, when shared and well-organized, becomes cultural infrastructure. These events aren't just parties. They're fuel for a creative ecosystem, sustaining jobs, audiences and imagination all year long.



Each tray carried, each toast made, each volunteer hour logged is a note in a 40-year symphony of community giving — one that continues to grow louder, brighter and more intentional with every season.

As we celebrate 40 years of Festival of Trees, we're reminded that these events — day and night, aprons and gowns — tell the same story.

That generosity wears many outfits.

That laughter and luxury can serve the same mission.

And that when a city celebrates its artists, its volunteers and its culture, it's not indulgence — it's investment.

Because art deserves applause.

Because giving deserves a standing ovation.

Because culture matters here — and it always will.

Coming tomorrow: The heart of hospitality

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