

CELEBRATING 40 YEARS

Karen's kind of Christmas

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Before there were light tunnels, parades and record-breaking crowds, there was Karen Getz — clipboard in hand, red blazer sharp at the shoulders, Festival of Trees pin gleaming and a smile that could power the RiverCenter.

For nearly two decades, Getz was the defining force behind Festival of Trees. The Quad-City Times chronicled her endlessly: part visionary, part organizer and always a ringleader of joy. Her energy was legendary.

“Karen had high expectations, and she lived Festival,” said longtime volunteer and 2025 designs chair Pat Wohlford. “She had a closet full of red and green suits, always dressed to the nines. It wasn’t just during the holidays either — Karen wore a Festival of Trees pin all year round.”

In 1991, Getz promised a festival “bigger and brighter than ever.” By 1992, she’d made it personal. “I hadn’t really been involved in volunteer work until this came along,” she told the Times. “But what appealed to me was that it involved the whole community.” That year’s event drew more than 50,000 people and raised over \$275,000 for Quad City Arts — a ten-fold increase from its debut in 1986.

By 1994, Getz had become the face of the festival. Times columnist Bill Wundram wrote, “She makes people feel very special. She makes them their most productive.” Under her leadership, the festival expanded to include the Parade of Trees, children’s playhouses, celebrity trees and the Holiday Pops concert with the Quad City Symphony Orchestra — an unforgettable blend of gospel choir, symphony, children’s chorus and ice skaters spinning across a full rink.

Getz’s leadership defined an era. She made artistry and volunteerism inseparable — proving that creativity could be organized, measured and multiplied when paired with generosity. She didn’t just lead a team; she built a framework for joy. That framework still shapes how the region invests in art, culture and community — blending heart with strategy, magic with management.

Even after a serious accident changed her life in 2004, her presence never left the festival floor. The Karen Getz Memorial Fund and Karen’s Kids program continue her work, ensuring local children and nonprofits can experience the event she loved most. Her influence lives on in every elegant display, every efficient schedule, every warm welcome.

In many ways, Getz embodied what The Cultural Trust now calls a Culture Champion — someone who doesn’t just support the arts but lives them. She understood what creativity does when nurtured: It strengthens minds, uplifts spirits, fuels economies and connects people.

“Karen involved my family in everything Festival had to offer,” said her stepdaughter, Tina Getz. “My children, their cousins and I marched as clowns in the parade and went to every Pops concert. Karen was everywhere we looked — and on Festival weekend, she simply glowed.”



Karen wasn’t the only Getz to leave a mark. Tom Getz, her husband, shared her passion and was a fixture of the festival’s spirit, recruiting ambassadors to greet guests with candy and leading the beloved Clown Corps.

“All the time, we think of Grandma Karen and my dad, Grandpa Tom,” Tina added. “For years, he led dozens of community members, all professionally costumed as clowns, in the parade. We’re excited to return again this year for the anniversary. Our grandchildren will watch the helium balloons for the first time, and my son and I will once again march as elves.”

Karen Getz was more than a volunteer. She was an architect of joy — a woman who proved that service could sparkle and that culture is strongest when led by those who give their hearts to it.

As one Quad-City Times editorial put it best: “She makes magic happen. But the real magic is how she made everyone else believe they could, too.”

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