

CELEBRATING 40 YEARS

From ‘Making Spirits Bright’ to ‘Tinsel and Tradition’

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

*“Theme: A subject, topic, or quality of a work.”
— Merriam-Webster*

As we move through Festival of Trees’ timeline, today’s reflection comes from Linda Bowers, Cultural Trust chair and longtime festival leader. Few people understand how tradition becomes identity the way she does.

Here, she shares how something as simple as a theme became a defining language of creativity for nearly four decades.

Themes surround us.

Our homes have themes. When we hear someone lives in a Craftsman-style house, we picture wood molding, built-in hutches, wainscoting and chair rails.

Our cars have themes. Say “sports car,” and we imagine something sleek and low — probably bright red with white leather seats.

Even our weather has themes. A sunny winter day calls to mind glistening snow, children on sleds and mugs of hot cocoa.

Themes don’t just describe things — they set a mood, evoke memory and invite us to imagine. The ones that interest us most make us want to know more.

The first year that Festival of Trees adopted an official theme was 1990. That year’s unifying phrase — “Making Spirits Bright” — did exactly that. The Quad-City Times doubled down on coverage, releasing the first-ever Festival of Trees Guide with a full front-page photo of the RiverCenter’s trees. New traditions debuted that year:

- Teddy Bear Tea and Luncheon, with carrot sticks, PB&Js and Jell-O cubes for kids, and salads for adults.
- Santa’s Workshop, where families could make arts and crafts.
- Avenue of Lights and carriage rides outside the RiverCenter.

Then came the moment that “knocked Santa’s socks off.” Town & Country magazine featured Festival of Trees in an article titled “Fancy Firs,” comparing the Quad Cities event to those in Chicago and New York.

The Quad-City Times quickly picked up the story, with columnist Bill Wundram spreading the word — our hometown Festival of Trees, put on by Quad City Arts, had officially joined the national stage.

It’s remarkable how something as simple as a theme can do that — turn a local celebration into a shared identity.

Festival of Trees Themes (1986–2024)

Year	Theme	Year	Theme
1986	No Theme	2007	Where Treetops Glisten
1987	No Theme	2008	Santa Claus Is Coming to Town
1988	No Theme	2009	Sparkle!
1989	No Theme	2010	Treasured Traditions
1990	Making Spirits Bright	2011	Christmas Time in the Cities
1991	Holiday de Lights	2012	Home for the Holidays
1992	Fanfare and Fantasy	2013	Making Spirits Bright
1993	Worlds of Festival	2014	It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year
1994	Like Never Before	2015	30 Years of Holiday Cheer
1995	The 10th is a Charm	2016	Bells Will Be Ringing
1996	Eyes All Aglow	2017	Jingle All The Way
1997	Visions of Sugar Plums	2018	Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree
1998	Star Light, Star Bright	2019	Christmas Around the World
1999	The First Star I See Tonight	2020	Believe
2000	Star Beams & Festival Dreams	2021	Oh What Fun!
2001	An Enchanted Journey	2022	Peppermint Forest
2002	Magical Adventure	2023	Illuminate the Holidays
2003	Winter Wonderland	2024	Merry & Bright
2004	Deck the Halls	2025	Tinsel and Tradition
2005	Once Upon a Festival		
2006	Shiny and Bright		

From “Making Spirits Bright” to “Tinsel and Tradition,” each theme has done more than title a festival — it has reflected the mood and meaning of its time. Together, they tell the story of how imagination, community and continuity became the language of our region’s most enduring celebration.

Coming tomorrow: Home of the holidays: The RiverCenter’s 40-year tradition of excellence

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