

Festival of Trees going strong after ten years

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The generosity, pride of Gallup on display

The holiday season is known as a time for giving, when people reflect on the previous year and share their good fortune with others. More than friends and family, this kindness is also given to people they don't know, as well as those less fortunate.

Sharing and giving back to the community is the cornerstone for the Festival of Trees, which has become a staple in Gallup in the 10 years since its launch.

The event's organizer, The Community Pantry, states the festival is more than a display of dazzling decorated Christmas trees and wreaths. It represents the generosity and pride of Gallup and its community.

"This is a time of the year when everyone is giving," Alice Perez, executive director of The Community Pantry said Nov. 23. "We hope that everyone realizes the amount they give through the festival counts towards purchasing and providing food for the community."

This year's festival is being held in loving memory of Joe Vargas, a life-long resident of Gallup who passed away last year.

"He was somebody that contributed all of his adult life to the children of McKinley County, and their future," Perez said. "Knowing he put all of his time and effort into giving to our children, we decided to honor him at this year's festival."

This recognition is given to people who dedicate themselves to serving their community, she added.

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TIME TO GIVE BACK

The festival draws hundreds of visitors from Gallup and surrounding regions to donate and sponsor trees and wreaths, as well as a chance to enter to win a tree or gifts. The trees in the festival are on display at Rio West Mall, 1300 W. Maloney Ave., until Dec. 4, but The Community Pantry says visitors to this year's festival will be required to adhere to CDC safety guidelines.

"We are working with the pandemic because we don't want 400-500 people in one place," Perez said.

While the festival may look different this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the staff wants to assure the public they will continue to serve them as they have in the past, along with the community's help.

Anyone who is willing to give back by supporting The Community Pantry's mission to help children, veterans, elders, and families in need will find the Festival of Trees is a great opportunity.

The main way to participate is to donate or sponsor a decorated tree or wreath along with gifts. This allows donors to help The Community Pantry raise money and spread awareness about hungry children across the county and the state.

Tickets for a chance to win one of the trees or prizes on display sell for \$3 separately or for \$10 for a pack of four. They are available online or at the festival site. Each of the trees can be viewed in person at Rio West Mall or online at the fundraiser website.

The drawing will be held virtually on Facebook Live Dec. 4.

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“We call the winners of the drawing afterward, set up an appointment for them to pick up their tree,” Perez said. “This way it’s safe and there is enough room to socially distance.

“It worked out when we did this last year, so we are working to ensure everyone can have a good time,” she said.

A COMMUNITY-WIDE EFFORT

The Community Pantry is for every member of the community and not just the needy.

It offers the Produce Program, which provides fresh produce and perishables weekly from Arizona, New Mexico and Texas.

There is also the Dollar Stretcher program, which gives the pantry extra buying power by creating special food boxes that can be sold at a discount, which bypasses higher grocery store prices.

The Community Pantry also grows food using its onsite Hope Garden in addition to the food it hands out in programs like Food for Kids and the Emergency Food Boxes.

Last year, Perez said the festival brought in about \$15,000. Since more people are able to gather this year, the pantry has set a larger goal of \$25,000.

“We were supporting about 7,500 families a month last year at the peak of the pandemic,”

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Perez said. “But this year we had some lulls as the stimulus and unemployment went out— but the money runs out and so our support has gone back up.”

The fluctuating number of community members needing support is a reminder of the importance of the Festival of Trees.

To view the trees and wreaths that are part of the drawing and purchase tickets to enter, visit <https://go.rallyup.com/d6cfa3/Campaign/Details> .

For more information on The Community Pantry as well as to donate, visit <https://thecommunitypantry.org/>

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