

Black Forest and Neighbourhood Network give local families an evergreen Christmas



By Brock Weir

For nearly 30 years, the Kohnen family has been very conscious that they have made their living from the community and, as a consequence, have never shied away from giving back.

This holiday season is no exception for the owners of King's Black Forest Garden Centre.

Dozens of York Region residents will be able to gather around their Christmas tree this holiday season, thanks to the family-owned business, which will celebrate its 30th anniversary in the New Year. Black Forest donated 14 of their evergreens to Neighbourhood Network on Thursday morning.

Neighbourhood Network, the Aurora-based volunteer initiative, which matches local volunteers in Aurora, King, Newmarket, East Gwillimbury and Georgina with local organizations in need of a hand, are now distributing these trees to families within their partner groups, including Belinda's Place, the only shelter in York Region for single homeless women.

?It was serendipitous,? says Karl Kohnen of making the donation to Neighbourhood Network. ?We wanted to give the trees to someone who needs them and make their Christmas happier. The first people I thought of were [Neighbourhood Network Ambassador] Tim Jones and (Magna for Community's) Steve Hinder because I know they do community services.?

Adds George Kohnen: ?The reality is there are a lot of people who don't have anything and when you look around [the area] you wouldn't think that anybody has needs, but there are a lot of individuals that people don't know about and the ones who are in need don't speak up. They never say anything.

?We earn our living from the community, so we should give back.?

This year alone, Black Forest has supported Southlake Regional Health Centre and its Stronach Regional Cancer Centre, last week's Country Toy Tea hosted by the Country Day School community to collect toys and donations for local charities, and Pickering College's holiday home tour, which raises thousands for a select charity each year.

?This is the first donation of trees that I know of,? says Maggie Pelyvas, who is spearheading this year's Neighbourhood Network Holiday Gift Drive. ?We adopt so many families, we give them gifts, give them whatever we get from the community, so the fact we can give them a real tree is just an extra bonus! I already have a home for all of them, which is incredible, and I guarantee they will be in a much needed home. That we can provide them with gifts too makes this a full picture.

?I am very fortunate to have a very wholesome Christmas, but this time of year is not so happy for everybody. The fact that we can bring joy into other people's homes that normally wouldn't have it at this time of year is amazing. Giving a tree like this with [some decorations] and toys and other gifts underneath is just what we love to do. We love to give back and thankfully Black Forest Garden Centre reached out to us.?

Get ready to hear a lot more from Black Forest in the coming year as the Keele Street company prepares to enter its fourth decade.

?This year we're having a celebration,? jokes George. ?We were brainwashed from a young age.?

Adds Karl: ?We were younger, we were fitter, and we were better looking when we started.?

?Brainwashing? only goes so far, however. There are a few key ingredients, they say, to this 30 year success story. ?Working together,? says Karl. ?We work on our strengths and everybody has strengths in the business. ?Never give up, always look to the future, and hard work and family is the best,? says George. ?Everybody goes through some tough, difficult times, and life isn't always easy, and sometimes you just have to persevere. Success is perseverance. Nothing comes easy in life.?