

For Catonsville couple, Christmas giving means hundreds of trees

By Mary K. Tilghman

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Daniel and Heather Simons don't believe that military families with limited means should have to decide between Christmas dinner and a Christmas tree.

"Who better to honor with a Christmas tree than National Guardsmen and their families?" Daniel Simons said.

The directors of the Hubbard Funeral home in Arbutus and parishioners of St. Mark in Catonsville donated 200 trees to National Guardsmen and their families two years ago. On a cold, sunny afternoon, a steady stream of families came for a tree and a visit with Santa.

When they repeated the event last year, it was a National Guard weekend. Trucks delivered trees to Guardsmen and women on duty at nearby armories. A few remaining trees went to veterans referred by officials at Fort Meade.

"It really was quite a diverse cross-section of Maryland," Daniel Simons said. "They came from all over."

This year's Christmas tree giveaway will take place Dec. 13 at both Hubbard Funeral Home on Wilkens Avenue, and at the Arbutus Fire Department at 5200 Southwestern Boulevard.

This year, they've expanded their giveaway to help local families. To the Simonses, it's only the beginning. They hope their community outreach projects will turn into a community foundation for area businesses and individuals.

The couple cherishes the opportunity to share that holiday feeling.

"They (recipients) catch the spirit, they realize the real spirit of Christmas," said Heather Simons, who noted the spirit of the Gospel in the outreach, which "honors Jesus and his teachings, to give rather than to receive.

While Heather Simons and their two children are members of St. Mark; Daniel Simons is an RCIA candidate.

The Simonses are sharing not only trees but an idea, one they've learned over the years. The couple, who operated a funeral home in upstate New York before moving here four years ago, took a similar interest in their community there.

"Heather and I have always been that way," Daniel Simons said.

They hope this - and other projects they sponsor, such as the Memorial Day Field of Honor at Charlestown retirement community, Easter baskets at local churches and backpacks filled with school supplies - will serve as a catalyst for a non-profit

community foundation to encourage this kind of neighbor-to-neighbor philanthropy. "It's really about successful businesses taking care of their own. And we wish many more businesses would do it," Daniel Simons said.

"This is our legacy," Heather Simons added.

The price of these projects pales in comparison with the rewards, according to the Simonses.

"What you get back in return is priceless," Daniel Simons said.

And, added Heather Simons, perhaps it means those who are helped will "in turn do something."

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