

It's Christmas time in the city

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Y Service Club tree lot continues 46-year tradition

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EAST KILDONAN

On a cold December afternoon, the Winnipeg Y Service Club Christmas tree lot in East Kildonan is filled with balsam fir and Manitoba spruce trees. The 100-per cent-volunteer-run tree sale puts all its earnings back into the community, and this year it celebrates 46 years in operation.

“When the trees arrive, Christmas arrives,” said Brad McKay, former Winnipeg Y Service Club president and a retired teacher at Collège Miles Macdonell Collegiate.

The Y Service Club lot is located on the basketball court between Miles Mac and the Elmwood-Kildonan branch of the YMCA-YWCA at 454 Kimberly Ave.



Photo by Jesse Brogan — A pair of happy customers carry their chosen Christmas tree to their vehicle at the Winnipeg Y Service Club Christmas tree lot.

“When the shirt smells like trees and you can’t get the pine needles out, then you know it’s Christmas,” added Colin McDougall, media liaison for the Y Service Club.

The Winnipeg Y Service Club is one of the few volunteer-run Christmas tree lots still operating in Winnipeg. When the St. James Optimist Club announced last month that it would no longer operate its annual lot on Ness Avenue, it became apparent such community initiatives are becoming rare.

“When I get a smile on the kids’ faces it touches the heart, and that’s what keeps me going,” McKay said.

McKay has been volunteering at the Winnipeg Y Service Club lot for 31 years.

“It’s all about generosity. We generously give our time to work on this — set it up, take it down, unload trees. The way I look at it, this time of the year — in fact, any time of year — is that generosity is really important. Even just a ‘How was your day?’” McKay said.

The tree sale has raised around \$700,000 over 46 years. Earnings have gone directly to causes as varied as renovating bathrooms at local facilities, purchasing insulin pumps for kids, memberships to sports clubs, shoes for physical education, and \$500 scholarships for high schoolers heading to university. The club has also supported the Miles Macdonell football team for 14 years.



Photo by Jesse Brogan — Bryce Bruce, defensive lineman for the Miles Macdonell football team (left), is pictured with Aiden Spencer at the Winnipeg Y Service Club Christmas tree lot in East Kildonan recently.

Many heartfelt moments from his volunteer tenure stand out for McKay. One year, a former phys-ed teacher at Miles Macdonell needed to take his two daughters to a basketball tournament in Alberta but didn't know if they could afford it. After a conversation with organizers of the Winnipeg Y Service Club, McKay was able to get a cheque written to cover travel expenses for the family to make it to the tournament.

"You can make a difference, and you can see the difference you're making within your own community. And that creates the community as well," McDougall said.

Dan Washnuk has been coaching the Miles Macdonell Buckeyes football team for 18 years and teaching English at the high school for 16 years. He said that school and team organizers always look for ways to keep the game as affordable as possible for the kids. When McKay approached Washnuk about the football team helping out at the tree lot, an 18-year volunteer tradition began.

"The main reason I volunteer is because I know that some people cannot afford football. Football is expensive. When you volunteer it lowers the cost, and some people need discounts," said Bryce Bruce, a defensive lineman for the Miles Macdonald football team.

Washnuk said the Christmas tree sale is the one volunteering event each year that kids ask to sign up for.

“One line I stole over the years is that ‘our best players have to be our best people,’” Washnuk said.



Photo by Jesse Brogan — Colin McDougall, media liaison for the Winnipeg Y Service Club, loads up a tree for a longtime customer of 30 years.

The Winnipeg Y Service Club tree lot operates Monday to Friday from 2 to 9 p.m., Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. and Sundays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Pricing for trees starts at \$45 for Manitoba spruce and \$90 for the balsam fir after tax.

For more information, visit winnipegchristmastrees.com