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Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree Found at Home of 9/11 First Responder

by Katie Kretschmer, Posted Nov 12th 2010 2:42PM Filed under: Christmas, News

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Peter and Stephanie Acton pose with their children in front of their 74-foot Norway Spruce. Credit AP

How does a tree go from a backyard in Mahopac, NY, to center stage at Rockefeller Center? Holidash talks to the man who found this year's Christmas tree.

There's always pressure to find the perfect Christmas tree. Imagine if you had to pick one of the most famous trees -- the Rockefeller Center Tree. Erik Pauze, part of the landscaping team at Rockefeller Center, says it's a year-round job. "I'm always on the lookout for the tree," he told Holidash. "In fact, on my way up to Mahopac yesterday, I spotted a good candidate for next year. I stopped, took some photos and it's in the file."

Mahopac is the small town about 50 miles from Manhattan where, on Sept. 11, Pauze spotted an impressive Norway spruce in the yard of Peter and Stephanie Acton. "I had a good feeling as soon as I saw it," he says. Stephanie told reporters she thought it was a joke when Pauze knocked on her door and

told her the 74-foot tree in her back yard might be a contender for the spot in the plaza. "We look at a couple hundred trees every year, but when I walked around this one, I just knew it was the one," Pauze said.

So, what does Pauze look for when scouting for the next Rockefeller Center Christmas tree? "Size is important, of course," Pauze told Holidash, (the minimum height requirement is 65 feet; the tallest so far was a 100-foot tall tree from Connecticut) "but symmetry and shape are important too. The tree needs to be nice and full."

Although this is the first tree that Pauze has found, he's been involved in selecting the tree for a few years. So far, no one has turned down the opportunity to donate their tree, said Pauze.

"They're always thrilled and honored and they always have so many stories about how the tree has been a part of their lives." While he was checking out the Acton's tree, he says 11-year-old Seamus Acton came out with a tin. "It was full of all the cicadas he had collected from under the tree that year. You could tell the tree was really part of their lives," not just part of the landscape.

Peter Acton, a veteran firefighter and Ground Zero first responder, wasn't at home when Pauze rang the doorbell; he was at a memorial service for victims of the 9/11 attacks. "It's an uncanny story," [Acton told the New York Daily News](#).

The Acton's tree arrived on the plaza and was set in place on Nov. 12. "Once the crew has the tree secured, I'll be giving the tree about 90 gallons of water a day for the next four or five days, Pauze said. "Then, it will drink a little less every day." Although adding aspirin to the water to your tree at home can help make it last longer, Pauze says he won't be adding 90 cases of aspirin to the Rockefeller Center tree. "It does fine with the water and the cold air," he said.

The tree team festooned the Acton's tree with 30,000 multi-colored LED lights (powered in part by solar panels) and topped it off with a huge Swarovski crystal star (how huge? 9½ feet in diameter, thanks!) to get it ready for last night's lighting ceremony; for the rest of the month, it will bring holiday happiness to everyone who sees it.

The Acton's tree will continue to spread joy when it all comes down in early January. "This year we're really happy that the tree will be milled into lumber and donated to Habitat for Humanity," Pauze said. As Stephanie Acton said, "[what a great way for it to end.](#)"

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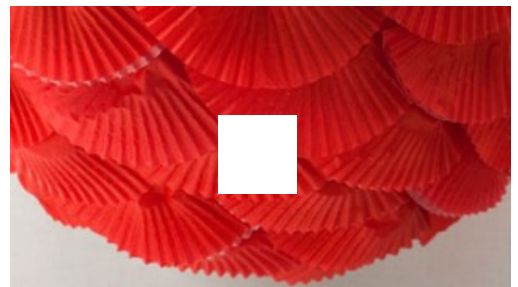
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