

The Lance

Keeping the memory of loved ones alive

Palliative Manitoba's Memory Tree now in its 24th year

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Kim Grant, Palliative Manitoba's board president, speaks at the recent opening of the organization's Memory Tree at St. Vital Centre. In the background are members of the Collège Jeanne-Sauvé Senior High School Choir.

The popularity of Palliative Manitoba's Memory Tree keeps on growing.

Now in its 24th year, the tree is now on display near The Bay at St. Vital Centre.

Courtesy of a United Way of Winnipeg "Day of Caring" in partnership with Manitoba Hydro and the centre, the opening ceremony for the landmark tree was held on Nov. 24. This year's guest speaker was Staff Sgt./Chaplain George Labossiere of the Winnipeg Police Service and the ceremony also featured performances by the Collège Jeanne-Sauvé Senior High School Choir.

Organizers say the tree provides a tangible way for individuals to acknowledge someone who has died by writing a personal message in a card of remembrance and hanging it on the tree during the holiday season. The service is free, although donations are always gratefully accepted, and the tree is staffed by trained volunteers who can offer support and information about bereavement services.

Last year, volunteers were on hand to provide support to 1,874 visitors who placed 1,776 cards on the 23.8-foot tree, of which 380 were children's cards.

"This is a hard time of year for a lot of people and it's an opportunity to honour and give memory to those that have since passed away," said Palliative Manitoba's fundraising co-ordinator Leila Dance.

"We have families that have made visiting the tree a regular tradition. We offer various programs throughout the year, including grief seminars, but the tree is a way people can come down and honour their loved ones."

Based on the response of the community in the first few days of the campaign, Dance anticipates this year's card haul could surpass last year's total. And because the tree's legacy is now firmly rooted in the hearts and minds of community members, she hopes that it will become a generational experience.

"Yesterday, there was a little girl colouring one of the cards for her mother," Dance said. "She matter-of-factly told me that she visited the tree last year and that she'll be visiting the tree next year. My hope is that in 20 years, she'll be visiting the tree with her kids. The tree has become so popular, not least because it's an amazing way to honour our loved ones at this time of year."

Dance is grateful for the assistance of Manitoba Hydro, which puts up the tree for Palliative Manitoba and "fixes it, reboxes it and stores it for us during the year."

The tree is open Monday to Friday from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m., Saturday from 9:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. It will be open until noon on Dec. 24.

Go online at palliativemanitoba.ca to learn more about the organization.