

Donors

From A1

workplace. The nonprofit college has been part of Union Grove since 2008.

Those offering donations to brighten the holidays on campus say the college is a treasured part of the community.

Kat Kaae, a resident in the nearby Town of Dover, said she is experiencing financial difficulties and will not be celebrating the holidays normally at her house. So she donated her tree to the college, and she plans to deliver several ornaments, too.

Kaae said she is impressed with the college's mission of helping people with disabilities.

"I think it's absolutely wonderful," she said. "That's what it's all about — helping somebody else."

The faith-based college, which celebrates Christmas during the winter holiday season, tradi-

tionally has displayed as many as eight artificial trees. The 88-acre campus includes student dormitories as well as classrooms, halls and offices.

Flood damage

Because of disruptions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, the college last year went without holiday decorations.

When staff decided to revive the tradition in 2021, they were disappointed to learn that all of the college's trees and ornaments had been soaked and destroyed by floodwater seeping into a campus basement.

Becci Terrill, the college's director of stakeholder engagement, said she was devastated, knowing that the nonprofit school could not afford to buy replacement supplies on such short notice.

"It was like, 'We have no trees. Oh, my goodness,' " she recalled. That was when officials decided

to put their faith in Union Grove, by asking whether people around town had any holiday decorations to spare.

Griffis posted a message on Facebook in a group called, "The Grove Community Group." Almost immediately, residents in the area began digging into their attics — and their pocketbooks — to help the college find its Christmas miracle.

Jennifer Ditscheit, a village trustee, pulled an old tree out of her basement and delivered it to the college.

Ditscheit said the white tree was in good condition, but she had no more use for it. Knowing that it will brighten the holidays for students and staff at the college, she said, "warms my heart."

"I was so excited to find a home for it," she said.

Community support

Others in the community stepped up to lend a hand, too.

Village President Steve Wicklund and his company, BSW Electric LLC, purchased four new artificial trees and gave them to the college. Wicklund called it an example of community spirit.

"When there's a need in the community, Union Grove answers the call," he said.

Mike Aimone, a former village president, also turned out, calling Shepherds College the "perfect spot" for an unneeded Christmas tree that he pulled out of his mother's basement.

In all, the college soon had nine donated trees, plus many more on the way. The college was still accepting donations of ornaments, especially any colored in the school's official colors of orange, blue and lime green.

Still other people were making cash donations to help the college with its holiday decorations.

College officials planned to begin putting up their trees as Thanksgiving draws nearer.

Griffis said the students — who live with autism, Down's syndrome and other forms of disabilities — would appreciate knowing that their college engenders such thoughtfulness among neighbors. The students will draw self-confidence, Griffis said, from knowing that outsiders made an effort to provide for them during the holidays.

"That is so valuable to be able to say," she added. "They need to feel that sense of place."

Terrill broke down in tears of gratitude as she watched donors come through the door with donated trees and words of encouragement for Shepherds College. She compared it to the happy ending of the Frank Capra holiday movie classic, "It's A Wonderful Life."

"It's like one of those good, old-fashioned Christmas movies," she said. "It's just heartwarming to know there's so much good."