

Scouts help Winnipeggers be prepared for Christmas

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Edwin Tokaruk, 3, needs a place to hide from shopping for Christmas trees Sunday.

Hundreds of Winnipeggers will soon be decorating Christmas trees in their homes thanks to a local scout group.

As they have every holiday season for more than 50 years, members of the 67th Winnipeg scout group are selling trees in River Heights .



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Josh Robern, and Percival, 5, moved to Winnipeg from California a few months ago, and are volunteering to sell Christmas trees at the Corydon Community Centre parking lot in River Heights Sunday.

"The 67th scout group has been running this tree lot since 1965. So we've got third- and fourth-generation people coming from all over, they come with their grandkids and great grandkids," scout leader Murray Gartner said.

The annual tree sale, which is run from the parking lot of the Corydon Community Centre, brings in as much as \$25,000. The money is used to fund scouting activities for the year, as well as help support other scout groups.



TREVOR HAGAN / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS
Edwin Tokaruk, 3, finds a cosy place to hide while shopping for Christmas trees at the lot in the Corydon Community Centre parking lot on Grosvenor Avenue Sunday.

The tree lot opened for business Saturday and stays open till Dec. 22.

This year, Gartner believes the group will sell about 1,500 trees. On a busy Saturday, he says they can clear 250 in a day as people line up to find the perfect Christmas tree.

"It's volunteer-run, so our prices are pretty good. Often we try to increase our volume, which is important to us because the margins aren't great," Gartner said.

There are about 40 families who volunteer their time for three separate three-hour shifts, which allows the tree lot to stay open throughout the holiday season.

On Sunday, Josh Robern (who goes by the pronoun "they") and their children, Percival, 5, and Prudence, 8, were among the handful of volunteers out helping shoppers.

The fact it'll be the family's first Christmas in Canada is evidenced by the California licence plates that still remain on Robern's vehicle.

The family moved to Winnipeg in August after Robern's wife, Meghann, landed a job in the city as a church minister.

"We're building our winter wardrobes as we go, and I'm learning all the new sounds my car makes when driving on snow and ice," Robern said with a smile.

"But so far it's been pretty good. Percival is a beaver, a white-tailed beaver, which is the youngest they go. And he's so excited about it. They get to do a lot of great stuff. We moved up in August, started scouting and now we're selling trees."

The Winnipeg winter will be a bit of an adjustment for Robern — who was born and raised in southern California – but on Sunday the family didn't seem to mind the temperature as they helped customers pick out trees, cut off the bottoms and bag them.

When asked what tree is most popular with Winnipeggers, Gartner said it varies from year to year.

"They sell pretty good across the board. This year, for example, we've sold quite a few scotch pine already. That's been a more traditional tree in the past. But usually the firs are popular and then the Manitoba spruce – people love them," he said.

In total, the scouts sell seven types of trees, which range in price from \$20 to \$80 depending on size.

As families walk around browsing, a saw cuts the bottom of a balsam fir for John Pundyk, who's been buying Christmas trees at the lot since he moved to the city more than 30 years ago.

"We moved here 33 years ago, so as long as the boy scouts have had this, we've come here. We usually get a balsam fir or a Fraser fir. The one thing is they're usually nice and full, and much better than an artificial," he said.

As a volunteer hands Pundyk some change and asks if he wants a tax receipt, a young boy plays in the trees, ducking under the rows and hiding out from his family as they browse the selection.

For seven days a week, almost until Christmas day, the scouts will be out at the lot helping families in their search for the perfect tree – as they do year in, year out.

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