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## Colorful courthouse Christmas tree is a labor of love

By Alex Paul  
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**A**LBANY — Many mid-valley families spend the weekend after Thanksgiving watching football or taking advantage of sales at local stores.

But not Treasurer Michelle Hawkins and her husband Jeff.

The duo are up bright and early the Friday after Thanksgiving headed to the Vollstedt Christmas Tree Farm to pick out the perfect tree that will grace the second-floor lobby of the Linn County Courthouse.

For many years the task fell on staff at General Services, but Hawkins took it over about 10 years ago because the person who had handled the job, retired.

Hawkins also enjoys decorating things — especially the Christmas tree — even though it takes her about three days to trim its branches, flock it in white to help hold in moisture and carefully place more than 1,000 decorations from top to bottom.

“It’s my thing,” Hawkins said. “It has just sort of evolved over the years.”

Hawkins said when she first took over the project, she relied on Tom’s Garden Center to provide a flocked 8- to 9-foot tree, but now, she and Jeff find one and cut it themselves. She knows how to handle a chainsaw. Although her personal favorite is a Noble fir, they have selected a variety of species. This year’s tree is a Douglas fir.

“I saw this one and even though its limbs were scraggly, I knew it was the one,” Hawkins said. She wielded a chain saw to trim the branches into a pleasant upside down “V” shape and then felled it.

“It was so big we had to carry it from the same end,” Hawkins said laughing.

This year’s theme features red and green decorations, some new and others chosen from her huge supply generated over the years. They are stored in a cell in the old jail on the fourth floor of the courthouse.

“I have all of the decorations separated by colors,” Hawkins said. “We’ve had silver, gold, green, red, blue, even pink,” Hawkins said. “I change it every year and I try to get a sense of what the favorite color will be each year early on. If I don’t get new decorations by November 1, it’s hard to find them.”

Hawkins said it took seven cans of flocking to coat this year’s tree. It’s not only pretty, but it acts as a sealant that helps keep



Treasurer Michelle Hawkins spends three days finding and decorating the Christmas tree that is displayed on the second floor of the Linn County Courthouse. This year’s tree is a Douglas fir.

the tree fresh longer.

“I water it twice a day,” Hawkins said. “Some years, they only last until Christmas, other years we make it all the way to New Year’s Day.”

Hawkins said she does all of the decorating — lights go on first after flocking — and Jeff is her official “Santa’s

Helper” or “gopher” bringing in breakfast and lunch or going after needed items.



This is the first year the theme is both red and green.

“I just love it,” Hawkins said. “I’ve always loved decorating homes. My dad was in construction and I learned how to paint and wallpaper at 15.”

Hawkins said staff from General Services do a great job taking down the tree and disposing of it.

“They are super, very helpful,” Hawkins said.

Although she enjoys crafting the courthouse

tree, her tree at home is artificial. She is allergic to trees and deals with the issue year-round because her husband is a woodworker.

“We put a lot into putting up lights instead,” Hawkins said grinning.

## Christmas tree and Angel Tree program aids area’s needy kids

**T**he Courthouse Christmas Tree is more than just a beautiful holiday decoration.

For several years, Linn County has partnered with the Salvation Army Christmas Angel Program to provide gifts for children.

Administrative Assistant Heather Gravelle is in charge of the program from Linn County’s side.

The Salvation Army provides tags with information about each child such as age, sex, what type of gifts they would like.

Gravelle notifies county employees when the tags arrive and then places them on the Angel Christmas Tree decorated by Treasurer Michelle Hawkins.

“This year, we’re asking people to bring back the unwrapped toys to the Commissioners’ Office (Room 201) by December 13,” Gravelle said. “We ask they attach the tag to the gifts so we can make sure they match up.”

Gravelle said the tags range from babies on up to teenagers.

**Note: All of the tags have been sponsored.**



*Administrative Assistant Heather Gravelle holds one of the Angel Tree tags placed on the Courthouse Christmas Tree in partnership with the Salvation Army. The tags include information about local boys and girls and the gifts they would like for Christmas.*