Many communities around the country have holiday programs which raise money for local charities. In our community of Sheboygan, WI, we have the Sheboygan County Festival of Trees. The kick off of this festival in Sheboygan County has always been the official start of the holiday season in our community. This is an organization that we have been a part of for many years. Opportunities have included decorating themed trees for the benefit auction, donating time and talents, volunteering and sponsoring trees. We have also purchased many trees, wreaths and decorations during the Charity Auction and Festival which raises the bulk of the donations during a Black Tie Preview Party. We have then in turn donated these items to local nursing homes, senior citizen centers, the library and schools. This has always been one of the highlights of our year but this year we wanted to do more. We wanted to do more than just buy things or donate money. Our staff wanted to give back in a way we had not done before.

So in 2009, we decided to twist things up a bit. Instead of decorating a tree for auction, we sponsored and implemented the "Memory Tree" to remember those who have been dear to us. We looked around on the internet and purchased ornaments that could be personalized. We then ran advertisements in the local paper "selling" these ornaments as a special way to remember your loved one. Anyone could fill out the form and mail it in with all proceeds going to the Festival of Trees Charities which include Big Brothers and Sisters, Boys and Girls Club, Sharon S. Richardson Hospice, Child Abuse & Neglect Fund, Meals on Wheels, Rainbow Kids and many others.

We then personalized the ornaments with whatever the families requested and then decorated the trees. At first, we bought one tree not knowing how many people would participate. To our astonishment, we had to purchase two more trees to fit all the ornaments. This was an opportunity for the whole staff to get involved. Some personalized the ornaments, some kept track of the forms and money, some helped put up the trees and decorate them the weekend of the festival and some volunteered and sold more ornaments the weekend of the festival. The three trees where displayed at the entrance to the festival for all to see with a sign listing all the names. Following the festival, the trees were dismantled and brought back to our funeral home for the families to come in and pick up their ornaments. The entire staff helped lay out all the ornaments, wrap them and box them in gift boxes and put them in holiday gift bags which we prepared. These bags also included a pamphlet on grief during the holidays, funeral home information, a preplanning guide, pens and contact information. Ornaments were available for pick up the week after the festival. This gave us the opportunity to have 500 people, many of whom have never been, come through our funeral home to claim their ornaments. We treated the week like an open house where they could walk around and see the many holiday decorations that we put up every year. Again, it was an opportunity to bring people in during a time when they were not dealing with making arrangements or attending a funeral of a loved one, but a time to come into our home during a merrier time during the holidays.

We were pleased to present a check to the Festival of Trees for over $7,500.00 for their 12 charities. Not only did this surpass any expectation we could have imagined but also the Festival of Trees expectations. This event was so successful, we are already in the works to do it again this year and many more to come.