



PHOTOGRAPHY • DAVE PELESCHAK

Glenna Banda, executive director of the Children's Foundation of Guelph and Wellington, was all smiles this past January on tree pick-up day.

# *Opportunity seized*

Trees for Tots is Guelph's little fundraiser that could

BY JOANNE SHUTTLEWORTH

**T**rees for Tots has been a successful fundraiser for the Children's Foundation of Guelph and Wellington, raising more than \$50,000 last January and about \$150,000 over its five-year history.

But Trees for Tots also offers lessons in how an entrepreneurial spirit can capitalize on an opportunity, build support in the community and continue to grow every year.

"It's kind of amazing the way it came together," says Glenna Banda, executive director of the foundation. "There was such support in the community for the idea, right from the beginning."

Banda was speaking last January at a wood-chipping site on Edinburgh Road, one of several throughout the city where hundreds of volunteers were dropping off Christmas trees picked up from curbs.

Banda stepped out of the fray to talk about how Trees for Tots began, the individuals

who brought their expertise to the table, and her delight that the fundraiser has become a beloved initiative for residents and volunteers.

It all began in November of 2012 when Guelph City Council decided to scrap its Christmas tree collection program in an effort to trim the operating budget. Estimated savings were pegged at \$29,000.

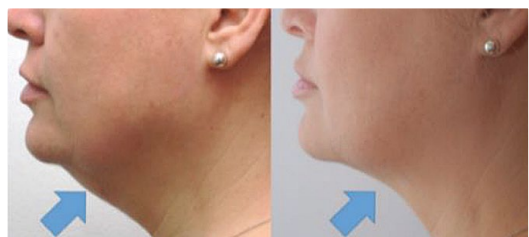
That left an opening for an enterprising individual or organization to take over the service. But it also left only a few weeks to





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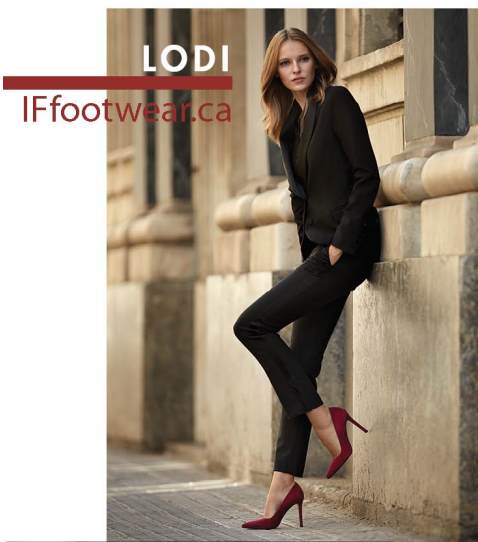
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*“It’s kind of amazing the way it came together. There was such support in the community,” for the idea, right from the beginning.”*

GLENNA BANDA, CHILDREN’S FOUNDATION OF GUELPH AND WELLINGTON

pull such a program together.

The Children’s Foundation of Guelph and Wellington decided to go for it.

“Marty Williams (executive director of the Downtown Guelph Business Association) put the bug in our ear,” says Banda. “He told us the city had just cancelled Christmas tree pickup and maybe we could charge \$5 a tree and do it as a fundraiser. Within 24 hours of being just an idea, we launched Trees for Tots.”

“I was angry,” Williams says with a chuckle as he recalls that council budget meeting. “I thought the projected savings amounted to peanuts and was hardly worth the inconvenience of people having to go to the dump, or having people chucking their trees where they shouldn’t.

“So I called Peter Thurley (development co-ordinator of the Children’s Foundation at the time) and suggested that he and I should rent a truck, collect a few Christmas trees and raise a few thousand dollars. He went to the foundation, they said yes, and from there it left just took off.

“It’s illogical that the service was cut in the first place, but it’s morphed into a great fundraiser.”

Guelph Hydro volunteered its expertise to work out collection routes for volunteers. Landscapers and tree removal companies offered trucks and wood chippers. Volunteers came forward with trucks and muscle. Corporate sponsors made donations. Residents registered for the service.

Trees for Tots raised \$20,000 its first year. Which is all the more remarkable, Banda says, as the Christmas tree collection falls directly on the heels of another of the

Children’s Foundation’s major initiatives, its annual Adopt-a-Family Christmas hamper drive.

“It was a little overwhelming that first year, that’s true,” Banda says. “But a lot of great people came forward and offered to help and that’s why it’s been successful. We don’t have the technology to figure out the routes. We didn’t know what to do with the trees once we picked them up. People stepped up and we worked it out along the way. It really was incredible.”

Banda says Terry Jay, owner of Terry’s Tree Removal, was instrumental in organizing tree chippers for the first two years. At the time Jay said he wanted to help the Children’s Foundation because when he was a boy his family had received a Christmas hamper one year and he was finally in a position to pay it forward.

Tragically, on Feb. 7, 2014, Jay was killed in an accident at Toronto’s Pearson Airport, where he had a snow removal contract. After his shift that day, he went to help another off-duty contractor who was having trouble with his truck in the parking lot. Jay became trapped under that truck’s equipment and died before paramedics could get to him.

“That was tragic,” Banda says. “Terry was a strong supporter of our program and a really nice person. His family still volunteers – his dad came out (last) year. But yes, that would have been our lowest point.”

The year of the ice storm also posed problems for the little fundraiser. Collection had to be postponed as ice encased the city. But overall the operation has become more streamlined and efficient.



PHOTOGRAPHY • DEAN PALMER

Trees for Tots volunteers pose at the Ignatius Jesuit Centre, one of the collection points during the 2017 event.

The Children’s Foundation uses the funds to run three programs: Adopt-a-Family, which provides Christmas hampers including grocery gift cards and gifts for needy families; Food and Friends, a breakfast, lunch and snack program at local schools; and Free to Play, which covers registration fees so children living in poverty can participate in sports.

Banda marvels that the project is still going strong. Thousands of trees are collected each year by hundreds of volunteers.

There’s a certain camaraderie that develops over physical labour and a hot soup lunch. Many of the volunteers have been at it since the beginning, Banda says.

Williams says what he likes about Trees for Tots is that it draws out a different set of volunteers than the fundraisers he’s used to

### TREES FOR TOTS

The Children’s Foundation of Guelph and Wellington’s Christmas tree collection is scheduled for Jan. 6, 2018.

City of Guelph residents can register from Dec. 1 to 29 at [treesfortots.ca](http://treesfortots.ca) or by calling 519-826-9551, ext. 25. Minimum donation is \$10.

seeing.

“You see people you don’t normally see in volunteer circles – guys with trucks and chippers, people who are prepared to do a few hours hard work. That’s the fun of it,” he says.

Krista Pedersen has volunteered with Trees for Tots for two years, and on that chilly day last January, it was her

job to hand out new routes to the volunteer truck drivers after they dropped their loads at the chipping site.

As a teacher, Pedersen says she had a bit of time to volunteer over the Christmas break and two years ago she discovered Trees for Tots.

“I was actually looking at the Adopt-a-Family program, but the foundation said they needed volunteers for this,” Pedersen says with a smile. “It’s not bad if you dress for the weather. And it really feels good to help.”

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