

Makeover for the Holidays

A look inside
the HopeSpring Holiday
Tour of Homes

BY SANDRA WALNECK

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOMASZ ADAMSKI

Christmas arrived early at the home of Michele and Tammy Grieco last year. While candles were still burning in Halloween jack-o'-lanterns, the interior of their Kitchener house was being transformed into a charming winter wonderland.

A crew of volunteers from the HopeSpring Holiday Tour of Homes for 2017 had arrived to begin decorating the Griecos' house in preparation for the November fundraiser. It was one of five lovely and distinct local homes decorated for the season and featured on the 16th annual tour.

Michele recalls that when they were asked to participate, they did not hesitate. "Everyone's been affected by cancer. I lost my uncle to cancer," Michele says. "We said 'yes, no problem.'"



A local realtor, Grieco then approached two colleagues to see if they would also feature their homes in the tour. “They said yes right away.”

For more than 22 years, HopeSpring Cancer Support Centre has offered comfort and assistance to people diagnosed with cancer, their loved ones and caregivers. Funded solely through private donations, its vision statement is simple: “Inspire – Empower - Hope.”

Its services range from offering wigs and camisoles to relaxation therapies and yoga classes.

In HopeSpring office at the rear entrance of the Inn of Waterloo, a team of 125 volunteers has created a welcoming and peaceful oasis. They’ve dispensed with an institutional atmosphere by offering cosy

afghan blankets and handmade slippers available right by the entrance, along with tea and cookies. Volunteers are always present to answer questions and offer support.

The Holiday Tour of Homes is HopeSpring’s main fundraiser, usually selling out the 1,000 tickets it prints each year. The 2018 tour runs Nov. 9 and 10.

Melanie Magna, co-chair of the Holiday Home Tour Committee, is dedicated to the continued success of the event. Magna, 30, knows no one can put a dollar value on providing comfort to someone struggling with their cancer diagnosis, but there is a cost to run these programs.

“I want people to know about this charity event because HopeSpring receives no government funding,” Magna says. “And you can walk into HopeSpring tomorrow and see your money at work.”

It’s a family affair for Magna, as her mother, Marni, was co-chair for more than 10 years, and her sister, Shannon, 28, is on the committee. Their family home was featured on the tour 13 years ago and Magna remembers volunteering that day to greet visitors and guide them through the house.

In 2016, when it was time for her mother, along with co-chair Joan Young, to step down, Marni turned to her daughters. “She said, ‘Girls, you have to do it.’ So we did!”

The two sisters, along with Lindsay Seibel, 35, co-ordinate the tour with the help of volunteers. The tour is made possible by corporate sponsorship, and the dedicated teams of interior decorators and florists who donate long hours and supplies. Volunteers act as house managers and are stationed throughout each location to ensure rules are followed and everyone is safe.

Choosing the houses usually begins early each year, with the goal of offering a variety for people to walk through. “Houses are selected on a range of criteria,” Magna says. “We especially look at access and safety, and we need to have two exits.”



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Older or newer, bungalows or two-storeys, all are possibilities. "We want people to walk into a house and be able to picture themselves living there," she says.

Magna laughs when she explains what people most like to see. "Little kids' rooms are a huge hit," she says. "But people love a really nicely done laundry room!"

The tour sees participants return year after year, and some groups make a special evening of it on the Friday by renting a limousine to transport them from house to house.

The 2017 tour had its challenges. First, some changes needed to be made to the line-up of houses. Then, once all the houses were settled, a last-minute hiccup arose when an interior decorator was unable to take part.

"Ten days before the tour we found out," says Magna. "OK, I thought, we have to do it, it has to happen!"

The house without a decorator turned out to be the Griecos'. After consulting with Michele and Tammy, Magna and team got straight to work using a combination of their own Christmas decorations, new purchases, and a few of the Griecos' items as well.

The Griecos' two-storey 1920s home had undergone a complete interior renovation less than two years earlier. Despite the extensive update, the house retains much of the charm and style of an older building. The second-floor layout of bedrooms and bathrooms mimics what would have originally been there, but with modern additions such as a laundry room.

Although the house was designed to suit

their family, which includes daughters Grace, 13, and Ava, 10, they also created a house perfectly suited for the tour.

With an attractive and functional large front entrance, elegant living room ideal for a soaring Christmas tree, and lovely backyard, it was a joy to decorate for the whole crew.

Donna Swinson and Dawn Tomlinson of Lilies White Floral Studio in Kitchener were pleased with the colour palette of the house. "It is a fairly traditional but modern house," says Swinson. "There's lots of white, wood and greys, and we went that way with lots of winter greens."

Having taken part in the tour since it began, Swinson and Tomlinson have worked with all types of homes. Swinson felt the style of the Grieco house was a good fit for their studio's vision. "There was a

white and natural, rustic woodsy look," she says. "More winter, than Christmas."

Tour participants were delighted with the results. "We really felt like people were enjoying it," Swinson says. "The people were actually looking at the flower arrangements and especially the mantelpiece." Several people called the studio after the tour for similar pieces for their own homes, she says.

And there was no missing the gorgeous white and silver Christmas tree overlooking the living room.

Although they appreciate the positive feedback, supporting HopeSpring is what keeps them coming back year after year, Swinson says.

"Everyone we've dealt with over the years has been so kind," Swinson says. "We are

working with good people, and it's such a good cause. We can use our talents and help out."

Another long-standing participant, Meadow Acres Garden Centre, was responsible for the exterior decorations. This Petersburg business has donated to the tour for more than 10 years.

Jenna Sardella, who is responsible for buying and home décor at the store, enjoyed working on the Griecos' home.

"I've been doing it for four years, since I've been here at Meadow Acres," Sardella says. "This is the first year that we've only done the outside decorations."

It was a busy weekend with two other charity events on the go, so Sardella and her colleague, Onnie Rienguette, had their hands full. But as soon as Sardella saw

the front entrance of the house she was inspired.

"The house on its own was stunning," Sardella says. "There are different levels at the entrance and we started with that. We used deer at the front, and lanterns to lead you into the front door."

One of the deer sported a necktie, a nod to Michele Grieco's personal style. "The homeowner is always dressed to the nines," says Sardella.

"And not everything has to be Christmas," Sardella says. "We use things that can work throughout the year."

It is a labour-intensive project. Two vehicles and a cube van were used to transport everything to the house, and the team worked for a full day to set it all up. Everything needs to be removed on the



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Even the bedrooms got the Christmas decorating touch when Michele and Tammy Grieco offered their house as one of the stops on last year's HopeSpring Holiday Tour of Homes.

Monday after the tour weekend.

For the Grieco family the experience was fun, and easy. "I was here for all of the decorating," Grieco says. "I felt like they knew exactly what they were doing."

Although the family did not participate in the gorgeous interior and exterior decorating of the house, it did have an impact on their usual routine. And on the tour weekend, they needed to find alternate accommodations. This wasn't a problem, Grieco says. "I said 'You're staying at your grandmas!' Everyone was happy with that."

Grieco stayed in the house during the tour and met people as they came through. "It was very enjoyable," he says. "I had a great time."

And one special visitor made every moment worthwhile.

"A woman came in who I recognized; I hadn't seen her for years," says Grieco. He

noticed immediately that she had shaved her head due to her own cancer diagnosis.

"She said 'I want to thank you for giving up your home. I rely on HopeSpring. They've been so wonderful to me during this time.'"

Grieco had already planned on volunteering for this year's tour, but this chance meeting was an emotional reminder of how valuable HopeSpring is to our community. 

**17th Annual HopeSpring
Holiday Tour of Homes**

Nov. 9 from 4 to 9 p.m.
Nov. 10 from noon to 4 p.m.
hopespring.ca
519-742-HOPE (4673)



Homeowner: Penny and Greg Maillette
Decorator: Hudson's Bay
Florist: Dutch Mill Flower Shop

Festive houses

The HopeSpring Holiday Tour of Homes raises funds for services provided free to those facing cancer, along with their caregivers and families. To set the mood, enjoy these photos of four more houses that were on last year's tour.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOMASZ ADAMSKI



Homeowner: **Krista Henley**
Decorator: **Not Just for the Garden**
Florist: **Living Fresh**



Homeowner: **Christine and Brian Stevanus**
Decorator: **The Frugal Decorator**
Interior Florist: **Jodi Leigh Designs**



Homeowner: **Nicole Pohl**
Decorator: **Fresh Look Design Event and Wedding Specialist**
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