

From the Winston-Salem Journal:

Perfect Gift

Locally made ornaments go to White House, give Mitchell County a holiday bonus

By Monte Mitchell, JOURNAL REPORTER
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SPRUCE PINE – Just one season after The Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree store opened, the first lady of the United States told a White House audience yesterday how people in Mitchell County are using imagination and skill to overcome devastating job losses.

Two White House trees feature ornaments made by local crafters and sold in the store, which was started to help spur economic development after Mitchell County lost more than 5,000 textile, furniture and other manufacturing jobs over the past 10 years. The store sells items featured in or inspired by Gloria Houston's children's book, *The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree*.

Two White House trees are decorated with a mixture of 135 handblown red glass balls and 115 Carolina Snowflakes, a three-dimensional design hand-woven from reeds dyed in walnut brown, red and green. The North Carolina ornaments are on a tree in a West Wing reception hall outside the President's office and on a tree in an East Wing reception room where people arrive for state dinners and other events.

"This is a wonderful American story," Laura Bush said during a press preview yesterday of the White House's Christmas decorations. "A town in North Carolina that had a lot of textile mills, and when that industry sort of came to an end in that town in North Carolina, they all worked together, the people in the town, to figure out a new industry for themselves, and they came up with making these wonderful ornaments."

Shirley Hise, the executive director of Mitchell County Chamber of Commerce, and Patti Jensen, Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree project coordinator, met Mrs. Bush at a White House decorator's reception yesterday afternoon.

"What thrilled us is she really did seem to be aware of the project and the ornaments," Hise said. "We were told from the beginning that she had reviewed the project and been touched by it."

The road to the White House, Jensen said, started as a bit of a joke back in the summer, when U.S. Rep. Patrick McHenry, R-10th, was visiting Spruce Pine. During a presentation, Jensen made the offhand remark that a benchmark for success would be for the project's handmade products to wind up in the White House since Hise had such a keen interest in history. She taught it at Mitchell High School for 30 years. That was on a Thursday. McHenry called back the next day to ask if they could have a presentation ready for the White House by the next Monday.

"We were like, OK, cool," Jensen said.

Another 22 people from Mitchell County are traveling to Washington today, and they plan to visit the White House on Saturday.

Too busy to break away during an already busy season were the artists who made the glass balls and Carolina Snowflakes.

"This time of year, I'm basically chained to my furnace," said Virgil Jones, who uses molten clear glass and a blowpipe to start his creations. It takes about eight or so minutes to craft each piece, including rolling the white-hot glass in crushed bits of colored glass.

Jones, who moved last year and now operates a studio at his home in Asheville, said he would have loved to have gone to the White House. He had to drop everything else to meet the White House's deadline, but he considered it an honor. "I'm also pleased to be able to help out with what's going on in Spruce Pine," he said.

Jones makes ornaments in 64 colors, but the White House wanted the Christmassy red ones.

Laura Bush told reporters that the White House's Red Room was the inspiration for the 2006 holiday theme of "Deck the Halls and Welcome All." The White House has four dinners, a lunch and 19 receptions planned for the holidays.

Visitors may notice that each of the red glass ornaments has slight variations that make them one of a kind. They were packed in bubble wrap for the trip to Washington, but the ones from the store come in a handmade wooden case. It's \$30 for a single ball and wooden case.

Clock builder Luther Stroup makes the wooden boxes, which also hold sets of four, six and 12 ornaments. "It's scary," Stroup said, talking about the demand they can expect from being featured at the White House. "I can't make them fast enough now."

Billie Ruth Sudduth, who makes the Carolina Snowflakes at her home studio in Bakersville, already had one co-creator and said she has now taught three more people in expectation of the demand.

"I call them my elves," Sudduth said.

The Carolina Snowflakes cost \$30 for the 10-inch versions and \$17 for the 7-inch ones.

The artists get most of the profit from store sales, and part of the proceeds go to scholarships. This year's recipient is a freshman at Wake Forest University.

Both artists featured at the White House already have well-established reputations. Lending their names and crafts to the store was part of their contribution to the project.

But the store features 30 individual small businesses, including crafts made by people who lost manufacturing jobs. The exceptional-students class at Mitchell High School prepares the lumps of coal wrapped in burlap.

In 2003, Houston, who grew up in the Mitchell County community of Ingalls, agreed to give the legal rights to products from her 1988 book to the Mitchell County Development Foundation. In the previous year, the county had lost more than 2,500 jobs.

It took 18 months to work out the copyright issues. The store opened in November 2005.

Spruce Pine is still a storybook village, where the train still runs through downtown on tracks above the Toe River.

Everyone was supposed to keep the news secret until the first lady's announcement yesterday, but it has been part of the town buzz for months. The first lady's office notified McHenry and Hise in August that the decorations had made the cut for the White House.

Phone calls to the store were already increasing yesterday afternoon as news spread beyond Mitchell County, and Sudduth wonders whether her fingers will be able to keep up with demand created by national exposure.

"Are we going to be ready?" she said.