

Hanging out in the best of houses pays White House pick makes it a fine Christmas for Spruce Pine store

By Monte Mitchell, JOURNAL REPORTER
Saturday, December 23, 2006

SPRUCE PINE – A prominent choice by the first lady of the United States has helped quintuple sales this year at The Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree store.

Laura Bush picked the store's handblown red glass-ball ornaments and Carolina Snowflake woven-reed ornaments for two White House Christmas trees.

"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," she told an audience when she unveiled the White House's Christmas decorations.

At home in Jeffersonton, Va., about 35 miles from Washington, Bob and Gerry Canipe saw the television coverage that followed.

They were in the store yesterday.

"Are you worn out?" Gerry Canipe asked Shirley Hise, the director of the Mitchell County Chamber of Commerce, who was helping in the store.

"Just about," Hise said.

"Saw you on TV," Canipe told her.

The store sold about \$20,000 in merchandise during December last year. It has sold about \$100,000 this year.

They've been sold out of the red-glass ornaments for a month. Even though the back orders are piling up, people don't seem to mind, Hise said.

Hise and Patti Jensen, the project director, have had to drop their other duties to help take telephone orders, with the blessings of the chamber. They have hired two college students to help. "We've shipped stuff to Hawaii, Alaska, the West Coast, the Northeast, the Midwest," Jensen said.

They have received about 500 telephone orders, with each one typically sending a number of items to multiple addresses as gifts.

Most of the callers wanted to stay on the line and talk about the story Mrs. Bush told about Spruce Pine. "The people who called in were so excited about what the community is doing," Hise said. "They've never been here and probably never would be, but they were so touched by the story and what we were doing."

The store sells merchandise featured in or inspired by the children's book *The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree*, by Gloria Houston. The store opened last year to help spur economic development after Mitchell County lost more than 5,000 textile, furniture and other manufacturing jobs over the previous 10 years. Almost all the profits go to the local artists. Houston gets a small percentage, and some money is set aside for scholarships.

The book tells the story of Ruthie, a child determined to fulfill the family's turn to climb a mountain and bring in the community Christmas tree even though her father is away serving in World War I.

Kaye Hughes of Linville visited the store for the first time yesterday and browsed among such products as the lantern featured on the book's cover and knit scarves like the one that kept Ruthie warm. Hughes is a retired reading teacher who often used Houston's book in her classroom.

"I think it gives them a feeling for how things were in the mountains at the turn of the century, World War I era, and I think that's an eye-opener for them," she said.

From the mountains of North Carolina to the White House, the trees featured 135 of the red-glass balls and 115 of the Carolina Snowflakes. One tree is in the West Wing, just outside the President's office, and the other is in the East Wing reception room where people arrive for state dinners and other events.

The work of more than 30 artists is featured in the store. Hise said that sales for each one have increased this year.

"You can't buy the exposure we've gotten here," she said. "We would never have been in a position financially to do that. I think our challenge is how do we capitalize on this, move it forward to a new level and not lose the momentum."

They'd like to be featured in a display window in Macy's next year. They even dream of the really big time: A shot on Oprah to tell their story.

"We have big plans and big ideas and people don't laugh at us like they used to," Hise said.