



Nicole Evans, 4, gets a boost from her father Morgan Saturday as they put the angel on the top of a Christmas tree at St. John's Lutheran home in Billings. Morgan's wife, Vicki, and her family have been bringing a tree to the home for 38 years. Vicki's father, Robert Wendorff Sr., who started the tradition in 1963, was on hand Saturday to watch the festivities. DAVID GRUBBS/Gazette Staff

A Christmas tradition goes on

Family adorns tree at St. John's 37 years

By JACQUELINE JOHNSON
Of The Gazette Staff

When Harriett and Bob Wendorff and their three children placed an angel on top of a pine tree at St. John's Lutheran Home in 1963, who would have predicted that every year for the next 36 years, they, their children or their grandchildren would unwrap that same angel and put her on a tree at the retirement home.

Harriett Wendorff died in 1992, but Bob joined five of his grandchildren and his daughter, Vicki Evans, to decorate a tree Saturday morning in the St. John's dining room. Evans' two youngest daughters, Nicole, 4, and Alexandra, 3, each had a hand in getting the angel to the top of the tree.

"It's like Christmas at our house doesn't really start until after we've done the tree at St. John's," Vicki said. "When I was a kid, we'd go up to Reed Point and cut the tree on the weekend after Thanksgiving. Now we wait for the call to tell us that the tree

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is up and the invitation, "When are we coming out to decorate?"

The only thing that has changed over the decades is the switch to an artificial tree. Everything, from the angel to the ornaments, have been carefully saved over the years. The residents at St. John's always give the

family a round of applause when the lights are plugged in.

"Mom and dad were active out there from the start," Vicki said. "Mom was concerned that the people at St. John's wouldn't have any place to go on Christmas, so she and Dad cut down a tree and had us all help decorate it. It's always been an old-fashioned tree, a family-style tree with strings of popcorn and cranberries. It's a tradition that the majority of the ornaments are homemade."

Evans' family had a strong commitment to helping out at St. John's not just during Christmas but throughout the year. Harriett volunteered at least one afternoon a week for more than 20 years. And the family gathered there to help the elderly resi-

dents celebrate holidays including Valentine's Day and Easter.

"I used to say when I was growing up that I had more grandmas and grandpas than anybody else," Vicki said. "All of my own grandparents, except for one, were deceased by the time I was born."

Evans said senior citizens love interacting with young people, and youngsters like being with them — that's part of what makes visiting St. John's so special.

"We as a society sometimes just stick the elderly in a building somewhere and forget about them," Vicki said. "When I was a child I was never intimidated by the elderly. I learned how to enjoy them and appreciate them. That's why I continue to go."