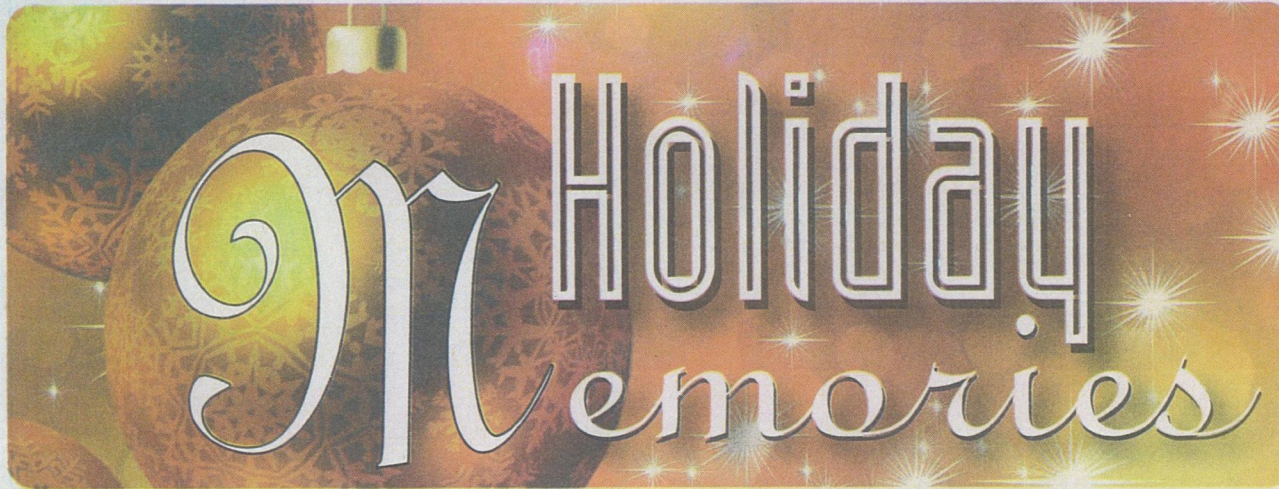


COMMUNITY

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About the Contest

More than 540 people entered the Leader-Telegram's annual Holiday Memories Contest.

While we don't have enough room to publish all the stories in the newspaper, we thank all who entered and have made this contest popular for more than 20 years.

The honorable-mention adult entry and other stories from adults run today on the Community page. Other adult stories appeared last Thursday in the Community section.

First-place and honorable-mention student entries and additional stories also run today in the Lifestyles section. Winning students earn \$50 savings bonds.

The winning adult entry will be published Friday, Christmas Eve. The adult winner earns a year's subscription to the Leader-Telegram.

While most entrants wrote about Christmas, memories could be of any holiday.

'Angel lights'

By Barbara Arnold
Eau Claire

When I returned to Eau Claire in 2004 to care for my mom, we established a tradition of putting up Christmas lights outside the day after Thanksgiving.

I wanted twinkling white lights as I'd seen on the boulevards of Chicago. Mom wanted multicolored lights. So we compromised: 12 nets of multicolored lights and three strands of twinkling white lights.

That year, for the first time, we also had a floor-to-ceiling tree inside Mom's great room. But, after her beloved cat Kitty toppled the tree a few times, my brother Richard suggested a

"live" tree.

The following year, he and my brother Dean delivered an 8-foot-tall real tree and "planted" it in the center of the picture window. Mom was delighted — and I knew where to put the white lights.

Spring came. Richard picked up the tree to transplant at the lake.

Summer came. I drove Mom to the lake to check on her tree.

Winter came. A new live tree was delivered.

Year in, year out, until 2009 came. Mom was in hospice. In November, we almost lost her. With Kitty by her side in bed, our pastor gave her communion.

She was alert and then went to sleep.

Word went out, and friends stopped in to say "goodbye." Roger, our longtime handyman, kneeled by her bed, stroked her hand a bit and said: "Hey, good lookin'." Amazingly, she woke up and was talkative.

That afternoon, as Kitty and I laid beside her during nap time, I asked, "So Mom, are you coming or going?" She turned her head toward mine, looked me straight in the eye and firmly said, "I'm staying."

She added, "When are you putting up the Christmas lights?"

"The Friday after

Thanksgiving," I replied.

"Put them up today," she responded. And I did, the Saturday before Thanksgiving.

Time had taken its toll on the white lights. Just one strand was left. On a whim, after finishing with the nets of multi-colored lights, I tossed it on a straggly pine tree in front of the kitchen window.

After the sun set, we both realized the white lights had taken the shape of an angel. Mom asked for a closer look. Carefully lifting her into the wheelchair, I steered her toward the window and held her up. Yep, those lights looked like an angel all right.

Looking at the Christmas

lights became a three-to-four-times-a-day ritual, at her request. First, I turned them on, and then I'd get her out of bed and into her wheelchair. Next, I'd roll her down the ramp in the great room. Finally, I transferred her to the lift chair.

Mom passed away on Jan. 23, 2010. She wasn't able to see the lights that day.

Spring came. I took down the lights once and for all. The "angel" lights finally had expired.

I don't know if I'll put the multicolored lights up this year. But I came across the plastic communion cup the other day, and I'm thinking I might.