



NOW Photo by C.T. Kruger

Scott Kitzman holds up a tree for Mike and Carol Story of Brookfield to inspect. The Storys have returned to the tree lot at Eble Park for three years because of the lot's selection and the service they receive.

finest firs

By Alan Hamari
Staff Writer

Lot operator goes the extra mile to help customers buy their favorite Christmas trees

Bill Konezke and Scott Kitzman stand in front of Eble Park's famous white dairy barn on a blustery Thursday afternoon, shoving a bulky, 8-foot Christmas tree through a makeshift baler.

Once the tree is secured in its netting — making it easier for people to haul inside their homes — Kitzman fastens the tree to the top of a waiting minivan, get-

ting a cheerful "thank you" from the driver.

Over the next half hour, a handful of other customers stop at the lot and pick out trees, but as dusk settles and headlights start to pop up along Bluemound Road, traffic on Konezke's lot slows.

Please see **FIRS**, Page 4

FYI

WHAT: Bill Konezke's Christmas tree lot

WHERE: Eble Park Ice Arena, 19400 W. Bluemound Road

HOURS: 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. every day

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Photo by Dick Stack
BrookfieldNOW.com
Contributor



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GOING PRICES: A house at 21395 Cologne Road in Brookfield recently sold for \$309,000. For more home sale listings, visit your local NOW site.

FIRS

Continued from Page 3

"Welcome to the tree business," Konetzke says.

Tree sales grew on him

Konetzke is in his 29th year of Christmas tree sales and runs two lots, one at Eble Park and the other in his hometown of Oconomowoc. Konetzke inherited the Eble Park lot from a friend and has been at the site for about a decade.

When he first started selling trees with a friend in Oconomowoc, Konetzke said he was just looking for something to do to fill the time during winter construction layoffs. His first lot had 200 Scotch pines, and Konetzke would spend the days waiting in his car for customers to show up.

Now, after selling Christmas trees for nearly three decades, Konetzke sits inside a heated construction trailer he rents for the Eble Park lot. A combination TV/VCR sits on a counter-top next to a radio tuned to NPR's "Talk of the Nation."

The first year "wasn't a banner year," but Konetzke said he stuck with the tree lots because "it kind of grows on you."

"The best part is dealing with people that are in a jovial mood, a holiday mood," Konetzke said. "And I do enjoy working outdoors."

Weekend 'insanity'

Konetzke and his employees set up the lots the week of Thanksgiving and keep them open until a few days before Christmas. Each lot, which is staffed from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. every day, has two or three workers on six-hour shifts on weekdays. On weekends, staff

increases to four or five workers.

Konetzke makes a couple trips a day between the lots in Brookfield and Oconomowoc, shuttling supplies between the two sites. He also delivers two or three trees a day.

Still, it's not always busy at the lots, and down time is just part of the process, he said.

"There's times you don't see anybody for an hour and then the next hour you have 10 people," Konetzke said.

Kitzman, who started working on Konetzke's lots about six years ago, said the lot sells probably eight to 10 trees on a weekday.

Weekends — especially the first weekend in December — are a different story, he said.

"Weekends are insanity," Kitzman said.

Best ones go fast

All of Konetzke's trees, which range in price from \$30 to \$60, come from growers in Wisconsin and North Carolina. Konetzke, who said he buys trees "by the hundreds," gets balsam firs from farms in Tomahawk and Mosinee, and the Fraser firs come via truck from North Carolina.

Konetzke, who puts up a Fraser fir in his house, said the balsams are probably his biggest sellers but Frasers "aren't far behind."

No matter what the type of tree, the best ones usually are the first to go, Konetzke said. Konetzke sold a half dozen trees while setting up the Eble Park lot, before it was technically even open.

Service key to repeat business

Carol and Michael Story of Brookfield have been coming to Konetzke's lot for the last three

BY THE NUMBERS

5

Wisconsin's rank in 2002 among Christmas tree growers in the United States, behind Oregon, North Carolina, Michigan and Pennsylvania

7

average time, in years, it takes a Christmas tree to grow to its ideal height; some trees are grown up to 15 years

1.6 million

Christmas trees harvested in Wisconsin in 2002

30 to 35

Christmas trees sold average nationwide, in millions.

Source: National Christmas Tree Association

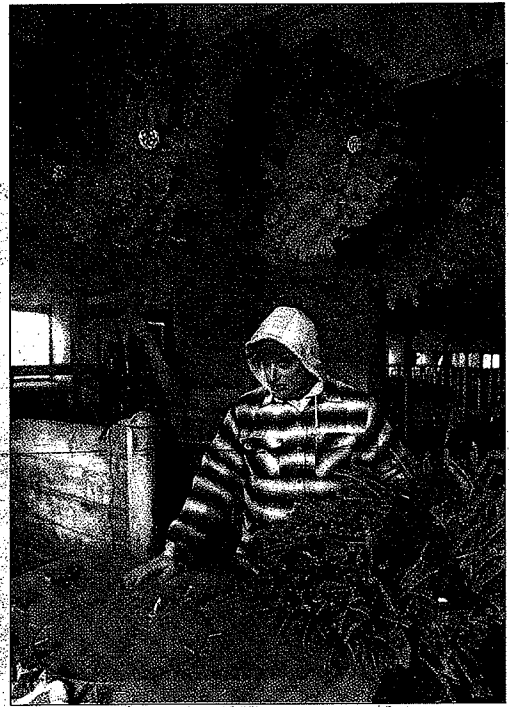
years because, as Carol puts it; "They're very nice to work with."

"They have a nice selection of trees and they last a long time," Carol said. "We never lose our (needles) before Christmas."

Konetzke said his emphasis on customer service — including removing lower branches and bundling the tree to make it easier to carry — brings him a lot of return business like the Storys.

"Most of what we get is repeat customers," Kitzman said.

Konetzke also gets a lot of business from families, including Brookfield's Leslie and Mike Harrison, who brought their 5-year-old son Danny to the lot last week. Danny seemed more concerned with examining every square inch of the lot than picking out a tree with his parents, but his imagination was captured by a tree that was at least three times as big as he was.



NOW Photo by C.T. Kruger

The advent of crimp rings make it easy for Bill Konetzke to fashion wreaths of various sizes at his tree lot at Eble Park on Bluemound Road.

FYI

"If you can pick it up, you can take it home, buddy," Kitzman said with a laugh.

Konetzke said it's nice having families — and especially little kids — on the lots during the holidays.

"See that right there?" Konetzke asked, pointing at Danny. "Running, laughing — you get a couple of them, that's special ... because they know Santa's coming."

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Some tips for caring for your Christmas tree from lot owner Bill Konetzke:

- put a fresh cut on the tree's trunk to help absorb water
- keep the tree away from heating vents and direct sunlight if possible
- the best trees are sold first, so buy early

ON THE COVER — Dion Brass hauls a bundled tree to a truck to be moved from the Christmas tree lot by Eble Park to another another lot during setup for the Christmas tree sales season.

December 6, 2007

NOW
BROOKFIELD

This publication is a successor to the Brookfield News and Elm Grove Elm Leaves.

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ELM GROVE

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Wisconsin Newspaper Association
National Newspaper Association
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Brookfield-Elm Grove NOW is published weekly by Community Newspapers Inc., 333 W. State St., Milwaukee, WI 53203. Editorial offices are located at 1741 Dolphin Drive, Suite A, Waukesha, WI 53186.