

Fire in time results in joy

Excess regeneration allows for tree distribution to needy

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After the Hourglass fire blazed through Pingree Park in

1994, the stands of lodgepole pine regenerated naturally, but were too thick for a healthy forest.

Those that needed removal found new life in homes throughout Northern Colorado through the nonprofit Gift of a

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Green Christmas, spreading Christmas cheer.

This year, 300 families throughout Larimer County, Weld County and even as far east as Fort Morgan will receive trees and full decorations from the nonprofit founded 10 years ago by Fort Collins resident Ryan Behm.

Among them are six families that lost everything in the High Park fire in June.

"Whatever they need, we're going to give it to them, no questions asked and Merry Christmas," said Behm, who relies on nearly 200 volunteers to make the special deliveries happen. Some were delivered Saturday, and the rest will go out next weekend.

"It will mean a lot to (my kids)," said Angela Valdez, a Loveland mother of five who requested an artificial tree. "They're really excited."

Each year, Gift of a Green Christmas cuts and buys trees to deliver to families who cannot afford the supplies to brighten their home — thanks to volunteer time and donations of money as well as extra decorations. Most are real trees, but a few request artificial ones.

This year, volunteers worked with the Colorado State Forest Service to cut the trees out of an 80-acre lot at Pingree Park west of Fort Collins.

"A lot of these trees are regenerated from the Hour-

glass fire that burned in 1994," said Forester Boyd Lebeda. "They regenerated naturally. They've done so well there's actually too many of them per acre for them to grow up and be a good, healthy stand of trees. This is a good time for us to thin them out and give the other ones room to grow."

The density is about 1,000 trees per acre, and volunteers culled 300 over 80 acres.

The trees will last just a season, but the meaning behind them and the memories they make will last a lifetime. Behm remembers the first tree he cut for a young man he mentored and the reaction of that boy's mom — a gesture that launched the nonprofit.

"I'll never forget her face when she came in, and the difference that it made," Behm said.

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Members of the Robson family, from left, Maddie, 7, Duane, Jaxon, 4, and Kathie carry a freshly cut tree together while delivering it as part of the Gift of a Green Tree program on Saturday in north Loveland.

Reporter-Herald/STEVE STONER

To help or receive help

The Gift of a Green Christmas accepts donations, including extra decorations, year-round. This year, the group still has trees available for delivery Saturday, Dec. 8, to families in need. To request a tree or donate decorations contact Kathie Robson at gogchristmas@gmail.com