

Homewood—Flossmoor

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 28, 2013

A CHICAGO SUN-TIMES.com publication

SOUTHTOWNSTAR

PREVIEW



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Flossmoor couple snags grant for Christmas tree program

BY SARAH ZYLSTRA

This Flossmoor couple takes Christmas trees seriously.

Jennifer Molski and Tony Manos, who began a Christmas tree recycling program in Homewood and Flossmoor in 2010, received a \$1,000 grant this summer from the Pollination Project, which gives a grant every day to "individual change-makers" across the globe, according to its website.

Molski and Manos will use the money for a new website for the recycling program, posting dates and locations, facts on the benefits of real Christmas trees and a short promotional video.

"One of our goals is to make this a zero waste campaign," Molski said. "The website will certainly help us get there."

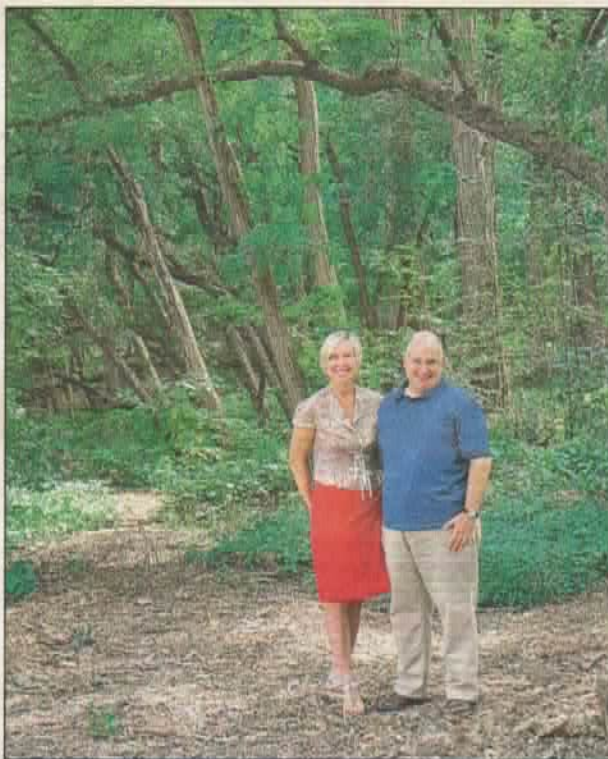
Molski and Manos started the recycling program almost four years ago, shortly after moving to Flossmoor.

Irons Oaks Environmental Learning Center in Olympia Fields is the beneficiary of the program. Irons Oaks is operated by the H-F and Olympia Fields park districts.

"After our first Christmas season out this way, I was shocked when I saw all the Christmas trees at the curb waiting to be picked up and placed in the landfill," Molski said.

"In the city, they have a huge Christmas tree recycling program where people can bring their trees. You'd go by museums and see the trees almost piling in the street," she said.

She called the Irons Oaks



Tony Manos and Jennifer Molski of Flossmoor walk a trail at Irons Oaks Environmental Learning Center in Olympia Fields that was upgraded with wood chips from recycled Christmas trees. | SARAH ZYLSTRA FOR SUN-TIMES MEDIA

nature preserve, and got a warm response.

"We were on board," Irons Oaks manager Cheryl Vargo said. "We thought it was great. The parks department does all the chipping, and we use the chips on the trails at Irons Oaks. We always need the resource replenished, and it's a great way to make it a tie to our community."

The chips from the Christmas trees make up about 20 percent of those needed each year for the trails, she said.

Over the past three holiday seasons, more than 1,500 trees have been recycled, Molski said. The number of donations grows

each year, partly because of a vow Molski made.

"Two years ago, I made a promise to myself that every year we would try to expand the program," she said. That year, they started collecting broken or unwanted holiday light strings to be disassembled and recycled. So far, more than 1,500 pounds of holiday lights have been recycled, she said.

Last year, her boost came from the H-F Park District when administration agreed to be a drop-off point for the lights. That opened up five locations for people to leave lights from Thanksgiving until Jan. 10.

This year, the website is

only part of her expansion. Instead of accepting trees only from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Jan. 4, Irons Oaks will now also allow people to drop off trees anytime between Dec. 26 and Jan. 10, Molski said.

"We were hesitant at first," Vargo said. "We were afraid people would come and throw the trees into our woods and not be respectful."

But several people called her last year, unable to make the drop-off date but eager to recycle their trees. Vargo allowed those people to stack their trees, with the tips of the trees facing the woods, in the parking lot at 2453 Vollmer Road.

"They were very respectful," Vargo said. "We had no problems with extra tinsel, or people not undecorating their trees."

So this year, the parking lot will be open for people who can't make the drop-off date or want to take their tree down before Jan. 4.

While the program has been encouraged by Homewood and Flossmoor, it's open to anyone who wants to recycle.

"I really like that many people showed up not only with their own tree, but stopped and picked up a few more along the way," Vargo said.

"We had a lot of multiple tree drop-offs this past year. People were willing to bring theirs and their neighbors, or were willing to go back and get more. It was definitely a big community feel," she said.

Vargo said she appreciates that people want to do something responsible with their trees. "There is another life the trees can have, and the life on our trails is perfect."