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## **“Christmas tree farms are naturally a joyful place”**

A married couple’s dream for retirement turned into a service to their community in New Hampshire (United States).

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For Renee and John, who live in New Hampshire, Christmas trees are not just an annual tradition – choosing just the right one, bringing it home, and decorating it in preparation for Christmas – but a full-time job. After

their children had grown, the two dreamed of taking on a retirement project together. So when circumstances presented them with a property that would work perfectly as a Christmas tree farm, they dove in.

“John was getting itchy about doing something in agriculture,” Renee says, and so they went to a Farm and Agriculture Show where they met a young couple who owned a Christmas tree farm, inspiring them to explore the business. Around the same time, sadly, John’s mother passed away, leaving them with a 10-acre hilltop property, the perfect location for a Christmas tree farm. “God clearly had his hand in marrying the idea with the right property.”

It takes at least eight years to go from planting to selling Christmas trees, so even after they committed to the

idea, it took time for the farm to take off. But Renee and John never saw their farm, “Live Tree or Die,” as just a business. It’s a source of friendship, memories, and opportunities to bring their community together. One of the biggest examples of this is their annual wreath-making event for veterans’ gravestones in a local cemetery.

“There has been a long tradition in Amherst, New Hampshire of placing wreaths on the gravestones of veterans,” says Renee. “We thought it would be more meaningful to make the wreaths instead of simply purchasing them. So we volunteered to make this a program based at our farm. Gathering our neighbors to do good for deceased veterans reminds all of us of the sacrifice of our veterans for our nation.”

The wreath-making event has taken place two years in a row now with

great success. This year, in a single day, the farm welcomed about 200 people to create 140 wreaths for a local cemetery, as well as wreaths for their own homes.

Participation in the event is free, and Renee and John provide all the supplies for the wreaths themselves — including 750 pounds of brush, as well as rings, tables, tools, bows, and wire. They also pay some staff members to teach participants how to make and decorate their wreaths. “Our goal is to give back to our community and to create an event that brings people together doing good,” they said.

As a supernumerary of Opus Dei, Renee finds the teachings of St. Josemaría inspiring in her work on the farm and especially at the wreath-making event. “The Work promotes the concept of bringing God into everyday activities,” she

said. Having a Christmas tree farm provides ample opportunities for conversations about the meaning of Christmas and the birth of Jesus, and the wreath-making event allows them to contribute to another tradition close to the community's heart.

“Christmas tree farms are naturally a joyful place,” continues Renee. “It’s beautiful, and families visit our farm to get their photos taken for their Christmas cards. Then they return to select a tree for their family.”

Renee and John enjoy seeing how many happy memories families make together by visiting their farm. In addition, they have found it creates many opportunities for bonding within their own family as well: “The farm has not only helped us spread the joy of Christmas with our community, but it has also helped us build our own family

relationships. Our children are actively involved in the farm. We also have other relatives who help, and we have also employed many young adults in the area. Working with them also provides us with wonderful opportunities to share the joy of our faith.”

Through their work on the Christmas tree farm, Renee and John hope to keep the joy of Christmas alive in the hearts of their community — not just at Christmas time, but all year long.

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