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*In the twinkle of an eye, a sick boy's acorn became a mighty oak*



JILL TOYOSHIBAI The Kansas City Star On

Christmas Eve in 2002, Spencer Mattson helped elves plant an acorn on his farm near Cameron, Mo. Benefiting from some fertilizer from the North Pole, it sprouted 30 feet in 35 minutes. Since then, the tree and Spencer have grown even taller.

## MAGIC FOR A MIRACLE

Elves devised a holiday treat for a little boy battling cancer

By LEE HILL KAVANAUGH  
The Kansas City Star

**C**hief Elf slouches at his desk, a blitz of yellow sticky notes circling his computer screen like a wreath.

At Elf Central, all is quiet at 2 a.m. But with just one week to go before Christmas 2002, all is not well.

Chief Elf leans on his elbows, rubbing his forehead and stubble of beard. What's left of his hair is turning gray. His worry lines are sinking deeper. And his aging

### First glance

. Two years ago a group called Elves of Christmas Present provided an ailing boy a magical holiday treat.

. Its volunteers made an acorn grow into a 30-foot oak in 35 minutes.

eyes are bleary from staring at photos of children, most of them terminally ill. The Elves already are working on eight other Christmas projects. But they have one more to arrange.

Try as he might, no amount of brain storming can conjure up a gift idea for Spencer Mattson, a toddler from rural Cameron, Mo.

Relatives describe Spencer as "a little farm boy." Just weeks ago he corrected his nurses at Children's Mercy Hospital telling them that tractors don't run on gasoline, but diesel.

Chief Elf knows the idea should involve farming and growing. But on this night, he cannot think anymore.

Spencer's 3-year-old body is battling, brain tumor the size of an egg. Choroid

plexus carcinoma. He has spent most of his childhood in hospitals, enduring three brain surgeries, chemotherapy, two stem cell transplants, blood transfusions, MRI tests and numerous catheters he dubs his "noodles."

Spencer's family suffers too, with a shortage of hope. Doctors told them their little boy probably would not see another Christmas, guessing he might live 10 to 14 months if they're lucky.

The Elves of Christmas Present want to give Spencer the Christmas memory of a lifetime.

For 15 years, the Elves have sifted through heartache in the metropolitan area, trying to make Christmas extra special for a few families who have had a tough year. The Elves' gifts go far beyond the ordinary store-bought presents.

A true gift is wrapped in sacrifice, they say. The Elves sacrifice their talents, money and time. Especially time. Most gifts are executed late on Christmas Eve, into the young hours of Christmas morning. Years ago, the Elves learned that within those 24 hours, the impossible becomes possible.

One year, they synchronized 250 carpenters, electrician's, finisher's, roofers and plumbers to build a handicapped-accessible bedroom and bathroom for a mother with the recent amputations of an arm and leg.

Another year they brought "mountains" to a Kansas boy who was too sick to travel to them. The Elves installed in his bedroom a wall-size painting of snow-capped peaks, complete with sound and lights.

And once they gave a boy whose sister had died on Christmas Eve the ride of his life - and a happy memory to replace a sad one - delivering gifts with Santa Claus in a helicopter, landing in a cul-de-sac in Kansas.

The Elves usually never see the joy connected with their gifts. Always anonymous, the Elves toil in secrecy, working in teams, leaving before the recipient awakes.

But Spencer and his family won't have any special Christmas moment if Chief Elf doesn't think of something.

He flicks off his computer and heads for bed. Maybe sleep will bring an answer. The Elf, who walks with a cane, limps past the living room. The television is blaring a station his family nor-

mally doesn't watch. Annoyed that one of his four children left the TV on, he reaches for the switch.

And stops. The flickering images show a landscaping company moving large trees.

The Elf spins around, boots up his computer once more, and spends the last hours of darkness digging out information on truck-mounted tree spades.

And imagining a tiny acorn growing into a mighty oak.

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In his Kansas City office, Santa Claus adjusts his reading glasses and places his desk light to shine on two clusters of acorns about to be inspected like fine jewels.

Half a dozen of the nuts are from Massachusetts; the others are from Maryland. Claus called his brothers on the East Coast right after Chief Elf called him with the idea. Their boxes arrived overnight by FedEx.

Claus peers over each looking for blemishes, black marks, imperfections. Only the prettiest and biggest acorn with the finest nut cap and stem will do. After all, a magic acorn from the North Pole should be absolutely perfect.

On this same morning, Spencer Mattson is completing a week of chemotherapy at Children's Mercy Hospital, waiting for yet another bout of the yucky medicine to drip into his veins.

Nausea and vomiting are regular visitors whenever he has this procedure. Still, the protocol is a gift, buying him time. And Spencer is really happy this day: Christmas comes in two days, and he's going home.

Project Spencer, as the Elves call it, is taking form. Details are checked off hour by hour.

The acorn? Check.

Fertilizer from the North Pole? Check, with a nod to Mrs. Claus, who found red and green sugar sprinkles in the baking section of Price Chopper.

The watering can and trowel? Check. Claus has a multicolored watering can and a trowel carved with the initials "S.C."

Spencer's grandma, Robin Connell, also told Chief Elf that Spencer loves watching helicopters land at Children's Mercy. The Chief lined up an Elf heli-

copter pilot to arrange for a ride.

But here it is, two days before Christmas, and the Elves still haven't found the tree or a tree spade - no one wants to work on Christmas Eve. They need a tree spade that can chomp a 7 1/2-foot circle out of frozen earth. A truck so strong it can lift almost 13,000 pounds, the calculated weight of the dirt along with one large oak.

But Christmas has its own magic. Another phone call. Another tree farm. This one, The Tree Patch, is just seven miles from Spencer's home. Owner Ron Diven has not one but two go-inch tree spades.

That afternoon, Diven takes a chilly walk around his farm, searching for one perfect oak. It must survive the shock of transplant. With Spencer's diagnosis, no one wants his parents to watch his special tree wither and die while he struggles to live.

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The morning of Christmas Eve, Julie Mattson is nervous. She has tried to prepare her son for what strangers have assured her will happen, reading Jack and the Beanstalk to Spencer over and over and over again.

But she has doubts. The plan just seems too far out, with too many chances for error. And she's pretty sure Spencer will not climb into a helicopter.

The plan: Santa Claus arrives at their farm by helicopter. Claus and Spencer plant a magic acorn and fertilize it, marking it with three orange construction flags. Then Spencer is whisked away for a helicopter ride. When they return, a mighty oak will have burst forth from the acorn.

Yeah, best laid plans, she thinks. Five days after terrorists destroyed two towers in New York, she and her husband, Rob, learned that their baby boy had a brain tumor. He was just 2, their only child, the baby they waited 11 years to have, the baby that doctors told them they never would have. Spencer is their miracle baby.

Now their lives revolve around medical scans of brain tissue and an egg-size tumor breaking their hearts.

The Mattsons won't allow themselves to plan. Spencer's cancer has taught them that. The only way to find happiness is creating special memories, moment to

precious moment.

Hours later, 90 miles away at Johnson County Executive Airport in Kansas, two Elves - a helicopter pilot and co-pilot - are running through their safety checks. The air is bitterly cold at 22 degrees. Puffs of white smoke pool with every breath.

Santa Claus arrives, and after settling his 6-foot body with its 350 pounds into the whirring machine, discovers the seat belt won't reach around his belly.

Afraid this glitch might ground their plans, he tells no one.

At 5 p.m., according to the Team Spencer Agenda sheet, they zoom off for their 40-minute ride to the Mattsons' farm. Pilot Elf follows Global Positioning System readings that he set the day before. As an added safety feature, a dozen firefighters from the Cameron Volunteer Fire Department wait at the landing site, ready to aim their brightest halogen lights.

At 5:30 p.m. in Cameron, a convoy gathers a half mile down a gravel road from the Mattsons' place. At the front, two Big John Tree Spade trucks idle in the darkness, one carrying a 30-foot oak in its massive claw.

Pickups arrive, along with cars carrying electrician's, ground crew, friends and relatives - all Elves tonight.

Eyes search the starry sky. The convoy's instructions are to wait, hidden, until the helicopter ascends once more with Spencer.

Right on cue, a speck appears on the horizon. Just a tiny red blinking light. It grows larger, accompanied by the crescendo of an engine beating the air. The fire department hoists its lights, making the grassy hill a stage.

Spencer's gift of a lifetime has begun.

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His parents remember the night as a blur, but Grandpa Ken Connell videotaped



JILL TOYOSHIBN The Kansas City Star

This month, Santa Claus returned to Spencer Mattson's farm near Cameron, Mo., to turn on the Christmas lights strong on the magical oak they helped plant in 2002 in Spencer's yard.

everything.

There's Santa climbing out of the helicopter. Santa asking Spencer about tractors. Santa and Daddy and Spencer planting the magic acorn. Santa trying not to panic when he realizes digging a hole in the frozen ground is almost impossible.

There's Spencer grabbing the watering can and fertilizer, and then, because the water is sprinkling out too slow, pouring it out in one swoosh, sending all the adults into peals of laughter.

Lots of laughter.

When Santa asks Spencer if he wants to ride along, Spencer races to the helicopter, beating both the pilot and Santa. The engine whirs again and the helicopter swings aloft, its nose pointing toward Kansas City. As they ascend, Santa looks back and sees a cascade of headlights switching on.

The workers on the ground know they must move fast. They have maybe 35 minutes to plant a tree. The first truck's claw rips out the hole. Following right behind, the second spade plunks the 30-foot pin oak into its new home.

Just for a moment the tree stands alone.

One perfect oak.

Then the crowd descends, filling the hole, mulching, watering. Strings of lights rise into the air on poles and are draped onto the oak's uppermost branches. Fourteen light strings flow away from the tree, transforming the oak into a Christmas tree.

One final Elf detail: three orange construction flags waving from its very top, as if the tree had burst from the acorn.

Now, in Kansas City, Pilot Elf and his passengers pass over the Country Club Plaza lights and then hover above the mouth of Kauffman Stadium before heading back to Cameron. None too soon, either - with just a hint of trembling in his voice, Spencer asks for his family and his blankie.

Pilot Elf scans for the firefighters' lights on the hill, but the light of the tree guides him best. The crowd chatter rises as the helicopter appears, then lands. After a few seconds, Santa emerges, carrying Spencer.

A hush. Everyone waits, watching for the moment, the look on Spencer's face when he sees that his tiny acorn has grown into an oak.

Spencer looks, there's a pause ... but it passes like a sigh.

Yes, he smiles and utters, "That's my tree." But the toddler wants his mommy and daddy, and his blankie. He's done with Santa, the helicopter and the glittering lights.

All he wants now is to bury his face into the safest place in his world: Mommy's shoulder.

With her husband by her side, Julie Mattson wraps her arms around Spencer and looks out at the sea of people, their faces illuminated by the tree - friends, relatives, strangers. She marvels that so many would care enough to stand in the freezing chill to give their little boy such

a gift. Such a memory.

And just for a few moments, she does n't notice the cold.

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*For the past seven months, Spencer Mattson has lived life as a normal kid. No hospital stays. No radiation treatments. No vomiting from his yucky medicines.*

*Although treatments destroyed the egg-size tumor, others popped up. But since April, the two small tumors that remain have not grown. He continues his chemotherapy and will have his next MRI in January.*

*Earlier this month, in what is turning out to be an annual tradition, Spencer's pin oak was lit for the third year.*

*Santa Claus was there too, riding out to the Cameron farm on a fire truck with red lights flashing. When Spencer saw Santa, he flung his arms around his neck, gave him a big hug and asked for more of that special fertilizer so his dad could use it on his crops.*

*And everyone there who loved the little boy had joy for one reason: Spencer, now 5, is still here.*

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