PRESS RELEASE

Aunt Leah’s Tree Lot Celebrates 25 Years

How Buying a Christmas Tree Helps Provide Housing for Homeless Foster Youth & Moms and Babies

Aunt Leah’s Tree Lot is celebrating its 25th anniversary this Christmas season and is looking for volunteers for all six Metro Vancouver lot locations. The Christmas Tree lot is Aunt Leah’s’ primary fundraiser, with money raised through tree sales going to provide housing for moms and babies and youth aging out of foster care.

“Each year it’s an honour to bring together such a large and diverse community of volunteers to support foster kids, moms, and babies at our Christmas Tree Lots. We have students, individuals and groups signing up to help out.” says Hope Rayson, volunteer coordinator. “This year is particularly special as it’s our 25th anniversary, and we now have three generations of families who have come together to help make the Tree Lot the success that it is.”

It is estimated that half of BC foster youth will experience homelessness. Aunt Leah’s unique approach involves providing family-like support that includes housing, financial help, life skills and emotional care. This model has been shown to stop the cycle of homelessness and, in the case of young moms, can prevent their children from going back into the foster care system.

“Currently, BC’s foster care system is not only a pipeline to future homelessness, but also a pipeline from and back to itself, due to early and unplanned pregnancies. Aunt Leah’s has responded to this crisis by helping young women in need – who we know can succeed when surrounded by supportive allies and resources-- thus preventing another generation of children & babies from entering the system.” say Sarah Stewart, Executive Director of Aunt Leah's.

Aunt Leah’s Mom House provided sixteen-year-old Sherry with a home and the support she needed to take care of her infant daughter, Marcella. Now in grade 4, Marcella is thriving and a top student in her class. Sherry couldn’t be prouder of her.

Aunt Leah’s started selling Christmas trees in the 1990s when government funding was cut. ‘It has turned into a viable social enterprise and our Christmas tree sales have grown every year. For a lot of families an Aunt Leah’s Christmas tree is a cherished part of their Christmas tradition.”

Aunt Leah’s Place was chosen by Charity Intelligence as a Top Pick in their survey of Canadian Charities. Charity Intelligence researches charities to help donors decide where to direct their giving.
Angelina Oates is the Director of Aunt Leah’s Trees. Over the past 9 years, Angelina has helped Aunt Leah’s Trees grow into one of the largest charity tree lots in Canada, grossing over $586,724 in 2018. Angelina also helps organize Aunt Leah’s pre-employment training programs, which helps give youth in care the skills they need to obtain employment and transition to independent living. The Burnaby tree lot is the site of Aunt Leah’s annual Retail Training program.

Sarah Stewart
Aunt Leah’s Place, Executive Director

In December 2016 Sarah Stewart became the Executive Director for Aunt Leah’s Place. Sarah has worked for Aunt Leah’s Society for twenty years. She started off as a Support Worker, working primarily with teen moms. From there she took on coordinating Aunt Leah’s Training Programs for five years during which she developed an employment-training program specifically for women. For the past twelve years she has been in the role of Aunt Leah’s Program Director. During this time she developed Aunt Leah’s Thresholds Program, a supportive housing program for moms and babies and Aunt Leah’s Link Program Link a social justice initiative for youth who have aged out of government care. Link and Thresholds aims to provide these young adults with a similar network of support to those given by mainstream Canadian families.

INTERVIEW CONTACTS

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Aunt Leah’s Place, Executive Director

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Sara

Aunt Leah’s Education Program Participant

Sara grew up in care, living in 25 different foster homes. Throughout her childhood people told her that, as a foster child, she could never expect to achieve much. But Sara was determined to prove them wrong! She wasn’t going to be another statistic. She wanted more for herself.

Despite some rocky teenage years, she managed to beat the odds and graduate from high school and then went on to university to pursue studies in psychology. (Less than half of BC children in foster care graduate from high school compared to 90% of children not in care).

Along the way Sara discovered, through working with kids with disabilities, that she liked caring for people and she dreamed of becoming a nurse. As she was still struggling with student debt, she couldn’t see any way of affording the program. This is where Aunt Leah’s Supporting Education for Foster Youth (SEFFY) program stepped in. SEFFY supports long-term education for former foster youth by reducing barriers and providing financial security and emotional support. Sierra learned she could apply to the program through Fostering Care (an advocacy group for foster youth who have aged out of care.) With the help of SEFFY Sara was able to enroll in nursing and is on her way to realizing her dream.

“Aunt Leah’s gave me confidence in myself and removed the barriers to me pursuing my education. I know the value of these programs. They have made my dream come true to create a more stable life for myself. It makes me want to give back. I just want to be that person that is there for people in crisis.”
Sherry

Aunt Leah’s Thresholds Housing Program Participant

Sherry Michelle became part of the Aunt Leah’s family when she moved into Aunt Leah’s house at the age of 16 with her 3-month-old infant daughter Marcella. Not only did Aunt Leah’s provide her with secure housing in a home for young women under 19 with babies but they offered her vital parenting and life skills programs. In addition, Aunt Leah’s provided financial and emotional support and helped Sherry get back to school. Sherry transitioned into independence and then her life journey brought her back to Thresholds in November 2018 where she was reunited with her daughter. Through Aunt Leah’s Sherry has gained valuable experience working as a flagger and in the Thrift Store and Tree Lot. She also acts as peer mentor for other young moms and is known to be kind, compassionate and a great listener.

Sherry was recently accepted to the Native Education College and is chasing her dreams of becoming a family and community counsellor. Her hope is to become an advocate for other young moms and former youth in care. She has recently been awarded Aunt Leah’s Rona award for her achievements.

What Sherry is most proud of, however, is how her beautiful daughter Marcella is growing and thriving. She is now in grade four and one of the top students in her class.

“Marcella’s teacher says she is a phenomenal student.”
CELEBRATING 30 YEARS!

On July 18th 2018, Aunt Leah’s Place celebrated its 30th Birthday and its three decades of providing a ‘Family Model of Care’, aspiring to mirror what BC families provide their own children through early adulthood.

The history of Aunt Leah’s is that of an organization that has needed to be light on its feet in order to serve some of the most marginalized youth in the province. The economic landscape has changed drastically over these past thirty years – with incomes flattening, housing costs skyrocketing and education requirements to enter labour markets increasing as well. In response, Aunt Leah’s has been an innovator in new service models in the areas of Housing, Education & Employment, and Life Skills, Food Security & Health, helping low-income families maintain custody of their children and preventing foster youth from experiencing homelessness.

The 2018 Youth Homelessness Count for Metro Vancouver report confirms that the mission of Aunt Leah’s Place is more relevant than ever:

“Half of respondents (50%) indicated they were currently or had been previously in foster care, a group home or under an independent living arrangement, and 11% of survey respondents indicated that aging out of care was one of the main reasons they experienced homelessness for the first time.”

Aunt Leah’s supports young people during that crucial time when they ‘age out’ of care, therefore directing scarce resources strategically and preventatively to spaces in time where youth from care are most likely to experience homelessness.

TOP 10 IMPACT CHARITY

Aunt Leah’s is proud to be selected by Charity Intelligence Canada as one of the Top 10 Impact Charities in Canada for the 4th time, and the 3rd year in a row. Aunt Leah’s is the only charity based in British Columbia on the list of Top 10 Impact Charities.

“Top 10 Impact Charities deliver average returns of seven times on the dollar, compared with average returns of 1-2 times on the dollar.” - Charity Intelligence Canada
Aunt Leah’s Place provides supportive housing for youth transitioning out of foster care and young mothers in need. Our programs target the entry and exit points of the foster care system, with a goal of providing stability, resources and opportunities similar to those provided by mainstream Canadian families.

**Thresholds House**
Thresholds House provides supported housing and services for new moms at risk of losing custody of their child. 93% of Thresholds mothers secure safe housing and maintain custody of their children upon exiting the program. While in the program these moms also made significant strides in their personal development, with each of them indicating heightened involvement in school and employment training programs.

**The Link: Housing First**
The Link: Housing First provides homeless participants immediate access to permanent housing and regular support services. After entering the program, many of these youth are now enrolled in education and training programs, or are employed and working towards independence.
AUNT LEAH’S TREES

Join The Tradition - Give Kids A Home

Aunt Leah’s Trees is a seasonal social enterprise that sells quality Christmas trees in multiple locations across Metro Vancouver. All profits go towards preventing children in foster care from becoming homeless, and mothers in need from losing custody of their children.

2018 Tree Lot Sales Figures

$586,724 Total Sales

In addition to the above five permanent locations, plus online store – Aunt Leah’s operated 6 days of ‘Pop-Up’ Tree Lots:

- Luppolo Brewing Co. – East Vancouver
- Caps Bicycles - New Westminster
- CandyTown Festival – Yaletown.

2019 Tree Lot Locations

North Vancouver
Lonsdale Quay (East Plaza)
123 Carrie Cates Court

Coquitlam
Eagle Ridge United Church 2813 Glen Drive

Vancouver - Kerrisdale/Marpole
St. Stephen’s United Church at 54th and Granville St

Burnaby
All Saints Anglican Church at Royal Oak and Rumble

Vancouver - River District
3555 Sawmill Crescent
Vancouver, BC

Luppolo Brewery
1123 Venables St., Vancouver

Can’t show up in person? Try our online tree lot!
auntleahs.org/trees
HOW TO CHOOSE A FRESH CHRISTMAS TREE

Not all trees are the same! When choosing a tree you need to think about many factors such as how early in the season you are getting it, the spot where you’ll place it at home, your overall home decor style, the type and weight of ornaments you’ll be using, the scent you like and of course, budget. But fear not, we have a guide for you with all out trees’ attributes to help you pick the perfect tree.

Buying from a friendly volunteer at any of the lots is the best experience but trees can also be purchased on line at: auntleahs.org/trees

**Douglas Fir**
- Needle length 2-4 cm long
- Needle retention average
- Dark forest green in colour
- The most popular and least expensive cultured (shaped) tree. Ends up in 60% of homes.

**Noble Fir**
- Best needle retention of all the firs
- Classic triangle shape and layered look
- Sturdiest branches
- Usually bluish green
- Classic tree smell
- Because this tree is much slower growing and requires a lot more work to get it to the required shape and size, the Noble Firs are always in short supply and more expensive
- If you want a tree that will look just as good in five weeks as the day you brought it home, pick a Noble.

**Interior Douglas**
- Also known as the Rocky Mountain Douglas Fir
- Uncultured (not shaped, sheared) tree
- Come from B.C.
- Open, layered, natural look.
- Unlike the Coast Douglas-fir, Rocky Mountain Douglas-fir foliage has no noticeable scent.

**Grand Fir**
- Lighter green in colour.
- Usually has a lower and greater girth.
- Does not have great needle retention, so if you plan to have your tree inside for more than two weeks and you don’t want a lot of mess, this is not the best choice.
- The foliage has an attractive citrus-like scent, and is sometimes used for Christmas decoration, as well as for Christmas trees.
Fraser Fir
- Next best after Noble firs for needle retention
- Attractive slim triangular shape
- Upward curling branches
- Quite fragrant - woody
- Forest green colour with silvery undersides.
- Its fragrance, shape, strong limbs, and ability to retain its soft needles for a long time when cut (which do not prick easily when hanging ornaments) make it one of the best trees for this purpose.
- The Fraser fir has been used more times as the Blue Room Christmas tree (the official Christmas tree of the President of the United States’s White House) than any other type of tree.

Alpine Fir
- It is a popular Christmas Tree.
- This tree has beautiful grey bark
- Some Plateau Indian tribes drank or washed in a subalpine fir boil for purification or to make their hair grow

Alberta Spruce (Table top)
- Excellent Needle Retention.
- Uncultured
- Layered, natural look
- Sturdy branches
- Strong minty smell

Nordmann Fir
- Good needle retention (needles do not drop out)
- Attractive foliage
- Needles are not sharp

Jack Pine
- Medium Needle Retention (8/8)
- Natural Grown BC Tree
- Light Pine Smell
- Most widely distributed in Canada
5 TIPS TO CARE FOR YOUR TREE

**Keep it Sheltered**
Once your tree is home, keep it in a sheltered, unheated area such as a porch or garage, or leave it outside to protect it.

**Make a Fresh Cut**
If it has been more than two hours since your tree had a fresh cut off the base of the stem, cut at least 1 cm. Without this, the tree will not be able to absorb from the tree stand.

**Put Your Tree in a Clean Stand**
To protect the original cut on the stump from drying out, place the tree in a stand with a built-in water bowl. If you are reusing a stand from previous years, rinse it with a capful of bleach and some water before inserting the tree. This cuts down on microorganisms that can block the tree’s ability to absorb water.

**Water, Water, Water**
The key to a beautiful Christmas Tree is making sure it’s well hydrated. Remember, a litre a day keeps the vacuum away! A seal of dried sap will cover the cut stump in just a few hours if the water drops below the tree’s base. Plain old tap water is all you need. Just remember to check its water level everyday.

**Keep it Away from Heat!**
Place all trees, real or artificial away from heat sources such as heating vents, fireplaces, radiators, television sets, wood stoves. Do not block doorways or exits.