Suggested headline:

***Going to new heights to light up Christmas***

**By Bill Barth and Stephanie Klett**

Ever wondered where to find the World’s Tallest Glass Tree?

Well, probably not.

We know a couple of guys, though, who not only want to show it to you – they’ll let you help build it.

Meet Rob Elliott of Williams Bay, Wisconsin. He and his life-long friend, Jason Mack, have known each other since they were kids in suburban Chicago. They were roomies while attending Illinois State University in Bloomington-Normal, where Rob studied tourism and management and Jason worked with sculpture, especially glass. Entrepreneurs at heart, as students they came up with an idea.

“We had a factory in downtown Bloomington in this old derelict, condemned building and we would throw big events there,” Rob told us. “We put our furnaces in there. We would do live bluegrass bands and make (glass) sculptures and have hundreds of people come. It was a lot of fun. No running water. The place was leaking from every orifice.”

That’s where the tall glass tree idea was born. The 12-footer was constructed outside the old factory, attracted onlookers and sparked interest which resulted in building a few more for people in the Bloomington area.

Later on Elliott wound up in Williams Bay with his wife and kids, operating the Elliott Group, which includes real estate and rentals along with a high-end carpentry firm. Jason is the master glass artist, with his studio in Champaign-Urbana, the community best known as the home of the University of Illinois. Their interest in tall glass trees continued, though, with projects in Champaign, but also with an eye toward Wisconsin. By 2022, the move was ready.

“We were looking in Milwaukee,” Elliott said, “and a bunch of other spots. Finally, Yerkes said ‘let’s give it a go’.”

This will be the third year for the World’s Tallest Tree Festival on the grounds of the famed Yerkes Observatory in Williams Bay. The art has come a long way from that first 12-foot tree. This year’s sculpture includes a 31-foot tree topped by a 5-foot star, for a total of 36 feet. The closest “competitor” is a 28-footer in Italy, so Elliott says this size will be standard “until somebody gives us a poke.”

The festival is scheduled for two weekends – December 6-8 and December 13-15. Hours are 4-7 on Fridays and noon to 7 Saturdays and Sundays. Admission is $5 for adults. Kids are free.

The tree begins with the erection of a metal skeleton. Then the glass – some 3,000 pounds – is melted. The whole thing is mobile and rotates, allowing melted strands of glass to be placed along the skeleton. The entire process is conducted during open festival hours so visitors can see the tree being built, one strand at a time, until it reaches its record height. One central LED light is all it takes to create a magnificent glow, this year themed in blue.

Here’s where it gets fun. Visitors not only can watch the magic happen, they can be part of it. For $10 folks can sign up to wrap molten glass. Not to worry, it’s done with the help of the crew so participants do it safely. Last year more than 1,000 people joined the build.

“Kids from 3 to 93,” Elliott said. “You have them look at hot glass and it changes the way they think. It’s almost like their imagination kicks back on. It’s a cool phenomenon to see.”

There’s more to the festival than a tall tree, so plan to stay awhile. Park at the nearby high school, then enjoy a heated trolley ride to the site. Check out the Winter Market’s large heated tent, with lots of creative artists and vendors and their wares. There’s also a smaller heated tent to warm up and relax. Patrons can buy hot chocolate, beer and wine, and there are food trucks on-site for the hungry. The famed Yerkes Observatory beckons.

“We work very closely with Yerkes,” Elliott told us. “Now they’re doing mini-tours during the days of the festival. People also walk the grounds and check out the arboretum.”

Walt Chadick is Yerkes’ program director, and a big fan of the tree festival.

“Yerkes Observatory has a mission of interweaving programs illuminating astronomy, architecture, arboretum and art,” Walt said. “The World’s Tallest Glass Tree Festival is a symbiosis of all four. We juxtapose the importance of glass in astronomy, from our famous Great Refractor lenses to our 180,000 glass plate pictures of space, with the scientific approach to glass art and architecture through the work of Jason Mack, Rob Elliott and their team.

“We’re stoked about the festival every year because 15,000 upbeat folks come to our pocket of paradise for a community-driven celebration of creativity, color, festivity and fire.”

It’s important to know the festival operates as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. After covering costs Rob, Jason and the team donate proceeds to support various charities and science programming. Yerkes and more than a dozen other organizations have benefited.

To donate, or for more information, go to the website worldstallestglasstree.com.

Glass recycling is a personal commitment shared by the team. Through various partnerships they work to gather glass and recycle it, particularly working with Strategic Materials Inc. in Delavan.

“People want to help if they know,” Rob explained. “A glass bottle in the ground will last a million years. But I can take the same bottle, crush it, melt it, and make the same bottle a million times. From the same one. It doesn’t lose any of its properties. It’s the same thing over and over and over again. Why do we stick it in the ground?”

And, yes, if you’re wondering, all the glass that goes into the 36-foot tree has been recycled. And will be recycled again.

One day, the hope is that Jason will relocate his studio from Illinois to the Lake Geneva area, where the team will create a “glass forest” attraction. Sounds like a great idea.

Until then, don’t miss the World’s Largest Glass Tree Festival. Help string the molten glass. Visit the vendors. Tour Yerkes.

With two heated tents – not to mention a 2300-degree glass furnace – there’s no excuse to stay home and chill.

*Bill Barth is the former Editor of the Beloit Daily News and a member of the Wisconsin Newspaper Hall of Fame. His wife, Stephanie Klett, is the President and CEO of Visit Lake Geneva, and the former Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Tourism.*