

Obamas welcome Christmas

First lady presents decorations at White House and thanks volunteers

By Katherine Skiba Tribune reporter

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WASHINGTON -- In styling the Obamas' first Christmas at the White House, Michelle Obama went grand, glorious and green.

The largest tree in the mansion -- an 18 1/2 -foot Douglas fir adorning the Blue Room -- is festooned with hundreds of ornaments, all recycled from previous administrations and spruced up by groups around the country to reflect cherished landmarks.

Chicagoans clearly had a vote, since the city is represented in orbs singling out the Lincoln Park Zoo, the Chicago Theatre, the Art Institute of Chicago and the DuSable Museum of African American History.

"Sweet home, Chicago" is the rhapsody on another ornament.

It takes its place with ornaments depicting a Georgia peach, a Maryland crab and others heralding spots from Maine (the Wiggly Bridge near York Harbor) to California (the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Library).

The tree's wide-ribbon garland and its other accents are recycled too. And its glimmering lights? All from low-voltage LED bulbs.

At a press preview Wednesday, Obama revealed the year's holiday theme, "Reflect, Rejoice, Renew," and the reason for it.

For the Obama family, she said, Christmas and the New Year have "always been a time to reflect on our many blessings, to rejoice in the pleasure of spending time with our family and our friends, and to renew our commitment to one another and to the causes that we believe in.

"And I wanted to continue that part of the tradition during our first holiday season here at the White House."

Planning for the holidays began last summer, and the first of an expected 50,000-plus holiday visitors began streaming through Tuesday, she said.

There were dozens of "elves" behind the decorating, which, while elaborate, was more

understated than in recent years. Ninety-two volunteers from 24 states put in more than 3,400 hours of their time, Obama said.

Among the volunteers were some from the Lillstreet Art Center in Chicago. White House staffers and National Park Service workers also rolled up their sleeves in the effort, aides said.

They helped erect a large, ornate nativity scene in the East Room, graced by four fireplaces wearing opulent fresh garlands on their mantels. There, as in the other rooms on the State Floor, Mother Nature is amply represented with adornments of dried hydrangea (leftovers from White House floral arrangements), honeysuckle vine, magnolia branches, cranberries, gigantic pine cones and painted magnolia leaves. Several ruby-red wreaths were created from the magnolia leaves. Two 8-foot topiary trees were crafted from dried pepper berries, all from California.

The flowers? They range from pink-tinged white amaryllis, fringed with pepper berry, to pale pink roses married with boxwood.

In all, the White House has 27 trees inside and out, mostly Douglas and Fraser fir, aides said. Six are live trees with their roots balled and wrapped in burlap, awaiting outdoor planting after the holidays.

In going green, the White House beehive even got in the act, albeit quietly. The State Dining Room is host to a 390-pound gingerbread house, which features gingerbread baked with honey from White House bees. A "gingerbread masterpiece," Obama dubbed it.

Pastry chef Bill Yosses said the gingerbread house was a six-week project, using white chocolate for the exterior with dark chocolate touches. The house, 56 inches long and 29 inches wide, is not meant to be eaten. But Yosses, for whom this is his third such creation, said some guests in earlier years have been unable to resist a nibble.

Highlights of the gingerbread house include a marzipan likeness of Bo, the Obama's black, shaggy-haired Portuguese water dog; a replica of Obama's White House kitchen garden; and a "shadow box" feature that lets visitors peek into the miniature State Dining Room, its chandelier aglow.

Its post-season destination? The White House Visitors Center, not far away.

Though the decorating "elves" are taking a breather, Yosses and his team are still working up a sweat. They're busy preparing pastries for the 12,000 people expected at holiday receptions at the White House, he said.

Obama, in her remarks, thanked volunteers Wednesday and touted two holiday charities. One is the Marine Corps Reserve's Toys for Tots drive. The other is a new "Feed a Neighbor" initiative that is detailed on the Web site [serve.gov](http://www.serve.gov). The second program will

help connect people with opportunities to deliver meals to homebound seniors, offer help at food pantries or plant community gardens and share produce with others, she said.

White House officials said decorating costs came out of the mansion's operations budget, but declined Wednesday to divulge how much was spent.

Earlier this week, first daughters Malia and Sasha and their live-in grandmother, Marian Robinson, got a sneak preview of the decorating. But the daughters were absent at Tuesday's reception, which was held to reward volunteer decorators and those who donate their time in the White House Office of Correspondence, one aide said.

Among those feted Tuesday was Kim Fawley, a seventh-grade teacher from Broadway, Va., who estimated that she put in 40 hours helping ready the tall tree in the Blue Room. According to Fawley, the first lady dropped in at the party, but not the Obama daughters.

"Mrs. Obama said the girls were upstairs, doing homework, and couldn't break away," Fawley said.

On Thursday afternoon, the first lady will join President Barack Obama for the annual National Christmas Tree lighting ceremony on the Ellipse near the White House.