

## **75<sup>th</sup> ROCKEFELLER CENTER® CHRISTMAS TREE FAMILY**

The last time Joe and Judy Rivnyak visited New York City, in the early 1970s, their daughter Jody was two, they had just bought their house in Shelton, Connecticut, and the Norway Spruce in the backyard was certainly big, but nothing to write home about. “I think we saw a car show or something, I can’t even remember,” Judy said of her last jaunt to the city. Now, some 34 years later, the Rivnyaks’ next trip to the Big Apple will be truly unforgettable—because their 75-year-old Norway Spruce will be the center of attention at the 75<sup>th</sup> Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony.

Although its current destiny is to provide wonder and holiday cheer for millions under the bright lights of the big city, the majestic tree’s role for the Rivnyak family has been intimately personal as well as practical. A decade ago, for example, Judy found a cute Beagle/Rottweiler puppy huddled under the tree during a massive thunderstorm. That puppy is now Jake, 13, their beloved family dog. “We always felt like Jake found that spot under the tree because he knew it was a safe place,” said Judy, a true animal lover.

Joe, who has worked as an electroplater for many years, and Judy, who taught third grade before taking a job at a local Italian delicatessen, are both in their early 60s, and have been married for 41 years. Their daughter, Jody (a blending of “Joe” and “Judy”), is 36 and lives in nearby Cheshire, Connecticut, with her husband and three children: 6 year-old Connor, 4 year-old Noelle, and baby Payton, who is nine months.

Sometimes, people like the hardware-store owner in town predicted to Joe and Judy that theirs would be “a Rockefeller tree,” but the humble Rivnyaks have simply enjoyed the everyday joys of having a giant, beautiful tree on their property. At a housewarming cookout they hosted three decades ago, when a rainstorm threatened to push the party inside, the tree provided cover from the elements for Joe and the barbecue under its huge arching boughs. Their grandson Connor likes to climb the tree and collect cicadas, sometimes 30 at a time. And then there is the simple, quiet pleasure of standing outside and listening to the old tree softly bend and creak in the wind.

Their reverence for the tree is easily recognized – it’s even poetic at times. “I love to stare at it out the window, the way its boughs and needles come swirling out like the sea,” Judy recalled. “In the rain, the needles on the lower branches would lean down and touch your head. And on a sunny day the branches up top seem to be trying to reach up to the sky.”

The Rivnyaks have always called it a “pine tree,” until Tishman Speyer’s horticultural staff clarified that it is technically a Norway Spruce, like the vast majority of Rockefeller Center Trees. No matter what it’s called, it’s no ordinary tree.

“We’ll miss it for sure. But so many other people are going to enjoy it, it’s really a privilege,” Judy said of the tree’s upcoming moment in the spotlight. “I wonder if we’ll even recognize it with all those lights on it.” They’ve been taking lots of pictures to remember it by, even trekking across the street and down the neighbor’s driveway to get the whole tree in the frame.