

In December of 2003 we had the honor of presenting a Christmas tree to the White House, and meeting President and Laura Bush. It all started when we won Grand Champion at our state Christmas tree contest. That made us eligible to compete in the national tree contest held in Grand Rapids, Michigan. We chose what we thought was our best tree and worked on it all summer. We fertilized and pruned it until it was the best it could be. The day before the contest, we cut the tree and carefully loaded it into a wooden crate and then into a rented U-haul trailer. We drove all night to deliver the tree on time. There were about 60 other trees in the competition and our won! The winner of the National Christmas tree contest has the tremendous honor of presenting a tree to the White House to decorate the Blue Room for the holiday season. That is how we found ourselves being given a personal tour of the White House on Dec. 1<sup>st</sup>, 2003 by Laura Bush herself!

We took three trees to the White House that Christmas. One was an 18 ½ ft. fraser fir that stood in the blue Room and was considered the focal point of the holiday decorations at the White House. The other two trees were not for public viewing, but instead were for the personal enjoyment of the President and his family. One was placed in the Oval Office and the other served as the Bush's family tree.

We arrived at the White House early in the morning and were greeted by Gary Walters, the Chief Usher at the White House. He was the one who introduced us to the First Lady before we went on a tour of the White House. As we walked through that famous building, we could hardly believe that it was the First lady herself showing us all of the things that she thought were most interesting. After the tour, Mrs. Bush took us into the Diplomatic Reception Room for an informal reception with tea, hot cider, and cookies.

The actual presentation ceremony came next. The tree was brought up to the front of the White House on a horse drawn wagon. It was at this time that we were hoping to be joined by President Bush for a few minutes, but a phone call in the Oval Office put him behind schedule and he no longer had time. The whole experience up to this point had been beyond our expectations, but we were still very disappointed as we stood there and watched him board the helicopter to leave without meeting with us. Our disappointment lasted only a few minutes, however, because we were told that he would be returning that evening, and hopefully, we could meet him then. We spent the next hour or so taking pictures and doing interviews before leaving the White House.

That evening, after spending the afternoon hoping and praying that we would get to meet President Bush, we finally did! We arrived back at the White House at 8:00 pm and again went to the Diplomatic Reception Room to wait. We were told that he would be arriving at around 9:00, but that after a long day of meetings, he might not agree to see us. He would be entering the White House through the room where we waited, and we were very nervous and even afraid that he would be angry by the surprise visit so late at night. When he finally walked into the room, he couldn't have been more gracious! The President of the United States spent about 20 – 30 minutes just visiting with our family! We talked about Wisconsin, his visit to Iraq, and our tree farm. He told us about the trees that he was having planted on his ranch in Texas. After a few minutes, he saw our cameras and invited us to take some pictures, even posing with each one of us individually. These are photos that we will treasure forever.

As he prepared to leave, he asked us if we would also like to see the Oval office. Before being escorted there by one of his aides, the president told us about certain items in the Oval office that have special meaning for him...things that he brought from Texas or were given to him by friends and family while in office. The Oval office is an impressive room to be in, and we took our time looking around and just enjoying the moment. While there, the President's aide gave each of us a souvenir, cufflinks for the men and pins for the women, each with the presidential seal.

The next day, we went back to the White House for a party that is thrown for the dozens of volunteers that help to decorate every year. By now, our tree was up and decorated. Laura Bush was at the party to thank everyone for their help, and she posed for pictures with everyone in front of our tree. The food was amazing, and the White House looked like something out of a fairy tale with all of the holiday decorations.

We will never forget the warm hospitality of the first family and the White House staff, or the incredible honor of being there! It truly was a once in a lifetime experience.