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FEATURED

Retiree unmasked as the artist behind the library's giant penguin

Rebekah Sutherland Herald Review
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For weeks, a silent sentry has been standing guard outside the Grand Rapids Area Library, delighting children and baffling staff. The mystery of the giant penguin—a clever transformation of a spruce tree located right outside the children's wing—remained unsolved until a local retiree walked through the library doors last week with a confession.

The “culprit” is Jim Columbus, a former City of Grand Rapids employee who retired five years ago.

In a poetic twist of fate, the very spruce tree he chose to decorate was the same one planted in his honor when he left his city post.

A labor of love (and 50 safety pins)

The idea for the penguin didn't come from a store-bought kit. Inspired by his daughter in Maple Grove, who protected one of her trees from the harsh Minnesota winter, Jim decided to take the concept a step further.

For Christmas this year, Jim's wife, Sally, and his family gifted him the materials to bring his vision to life. Rather than a simple slip-on cover, the penguin is handmade. Jim meticulously wrapped the tree in pieces of burlap, securing the look with over 50 safety pins and a collection of oversized accessories.

"I thought the hat was going to be too big when I was making it," Jim laughed, noting that it barely fits the penguin's sturdy head. "I might have to go back and make it a little bigger."

The penguin appeared overnight, leaving the library community in a state of wonder.

"We didn't know who did it," said Tracy Kampa of the Grand Rapids Area Library. "It was a great mystery for a long time. I had a hunch because it was Jim's tree, but it wasn't until he was standing in my office door last week that I knew for sure."

The impact was immediate. According to Kampa, children have been "100% reacting" to the new resident. "They get so excited when they walk past. They'll actually haul their grownups over to the window just to show them the penguin."

The penguin's arrival provides a much-needed aura of joy during a challenging chapter for the library. Recent budget cuts have forced the facility to limit its hours, leaving the building dark four days a week.

"It has been hard to be at the library lately," Kampa admitted. "To have something just for fun is such a treasure."

Jim Columbus noted that during his time with the city, he saw firsthand how vital the library is to the community. Even when the doors are locked, the penguin remains on duty.

“It catches their eye, brings a little smile,” Jim said. “That’s what it’s about.”

The penguin plans to keep his post until the winter snow finally fades. Until then, he stands as a reminder that even when the impact of budgets and hours gets tough, the spirit of Grand Rapids remains alive.

The Grand Rapids Area Library is currently open Monday through Wednesday, 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

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