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Dept. of Military Affairs: Executive Residence tree a tribute to those who serve

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MAPLE BLUFF, Wis. — Wisconsin National Guard volunteers joined Linda Hughes to continue a state tradition last week by decorating the Tribute to Our Troops tree at the Executive Residence.

The tradition honoring fallen and deployed troops has endured since 2005, a year that saw many Wisconsin service members killed in action in the Global War on Terror. Jessica Doyle, then Wisconsin's first lady, came up with the idea and asked Hughes — whose nephew Joshua was killed in Iraq earlier that year — to create ornaments for the tree. The tradition has continued through the Doyle and Walker administrations.

Hughes says she chose this year's theme of dreamcatchers because the unbroken circle of the dreamcatcher matches the unbroken love in the families' hearts, though their service member is no longer there. She also incorporated a gold star, the symbol for the families of fallen service members, into the webbing of the dreamcatcher.

Each ornament Hughes makes has a "dog tag" representing a fallen Wisconsin service member, and she sends the ornaments to their families after the holiday season. In the letter accompanying each ornament, Hughes has written the following wish: "Wake up every morning with a new dream for the day."

Hughes says she feels these visual reminders of fallen service members' lives are

important to the grieving process and to honor their legacy.

Master Sgt. Larkin Wilde, an Airman with the 115th Fighter Wing, said she volunteered to help decorate because of family.

“It’s a way to celebrate the military families that sacrifice so much through the years,” Wilde said.

Wilde said she plans to share the experience with her family when the tree is lit during a ceremony Nov. 25 at 4:30 p.m., followed by a public open house.

Thousands of Wisconsin service members are on duty around the globe this holiday season, including hundreds of Soldiers and Airmen from the Wisconsin National Guard.