

Behind the Cover

How an ornament became a Texas Bar Journal tradition.

BY LINDSAY STAFFORD MADER



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FOR 16 YEARS, THE TEXAS BAR JOURNAL HAS FEATURED THE BELOVED CAPITOL ORNAMENT ON THE COVER OF ITS DECEMBER ISSUE, inciting holiday spirit and state pride, as well as memories of the massive sunset-red granite building that neighbors the State Bar headquarters in downtown Austin.

When the Capitol ornament was put on the cover of the *TBJ* for the first time in 1997, nobody imagined that it was the beginning of an annual tradition. “It was always a challenge to decide on a December cover,” said then-managing editor Kelley Jones King. “At that time of year, people are not paying much attention to serious news, and with so many cultures celebrating holidays in December, there was always criticism, even with the general ‘Happy Holidays.’”

KaLyn Laney, State Bar of Texas external affairs officer, had one of the ornaments in her office and suggested to King that it might make for an appropriate cover. KaLyn’s mother, Nelda Laney, had started the ornament program one year earlier in 1996, when her husband, Pete Laney, was Speaker of the Texas House.

After the state made a considerable investment to completely restore the Capitol, Nelda was brainstorming ways to raise non-tax revenue to help maintain and preserve the building. “And I wasn’t likely to get any from my husband,” she joked. Then, as Nelda was taking down the Capitol’s Christmas tree, she came across an ornament of the White House in Washington, D.C., from Martha Brooks of Dallas.

“She read the pamphlet that was with it and learned that it was for preservation,” said KaLyn. “I think she looked at the White House one and went, ‘We’re Texas, you know. If they can do it, we can do it. And if they sustained it for all these years, why can’t we?’”

Nelda researched how to create a similar program in Texas and located ChemArt, a company in Rhode Island, to manufacture the ornaments. She drummed up initial interest by selling pre-orders to legislative families and workers. She also contacted various publica-

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tions around the state—including *Texas Monthly*, *Texas Co-op Power*, and others—asking for free advertising space.

Once the first order arrived, Nelda sold ornaments from the trunk of her car and to anybody she encountered, including strangers, friends, and especially, acquaintances who owned a store. The ornaments became popular so quickly that she had to request several additional orders that season. A total of 14,000 were sold the first year.

"If you sat by my mother on an airplane," said KaLyn, "she was going to convince you to order one even if you had never been to Texas."

"I've always said," Nelda added, "That's what I want on my tombstone—the Capitol ornament lady."

Nelda designed the first seven ornaments and was known for being diligent in making sure each detail was perfect. She continued to supervise the ornament program as a volunteer until 2002. Now the Capitol Ornament Committee selects each ornament theme, which is inspired by the architectural features of the Capitol building, its contents, or the surrounding grounds. The committee sends the theme to ChemArt, whose artists then mock up several samples for final selection by the committee. Each ornament is finished in 24-karat gold.

The 2013 ornament, featured on the cover of this month's issue, portrays the skylights of the legislative chambers. The 10 most recent ornaments are available for \$20 each at the Capitol gift shop website (texascapitolgiftshop.com). Some of the out-of-production ornaments—true collectors' items—have been sold on eBay for up to \$400.

Texans have continued to embrace the Capitol ornaments, with tens of thousands selling each year—making

it the largest state ornament program in the country (only the White House's ornament program sells more units). According to Shawn Goodnight, retail director for the Texas State Preservation Board, ornament sales can be impacted by a number of external factors, including the popularity of the design, economic fluctuations, and current events, such as a Texas politician running for the U.S. presidency. The Capitol gift shop estimates that 51,000 ornaments were sold in 2012 and anticipates that it will sell its millionth ornament this holiday season.

"I was certainly hopeful it would last forever, but I did not expect that numbers would climb as quickly as they did," Nelda said. "I always liked the first one, and I liked the flag. I liked them all, to be honest."

Goodnight noted that the ornaments have generated more than \$7 million to date, which has been used for Capitol preservation and education projects, such as repainting the Capitol dome, conserving historical paintings, and developing free curriculum guides for fourth and seventh grades. The initiative's success has even encouraged other states, such as Wisconsin, to begin their own ornament programs.

"Mrs. Laney was so gracious and grateful," said former managing editor King. "I think she would tell you that the *Bar Journal* was one of the best advertisements the program could have received. Many lawyers are history buffs, and all Texans are proud of the Capitol and happy to contribute to its upkeep. Lawyers bought ornaments for their families, friends, and clients. It really was a well-received program, and once it was on the cover for a few years, there was no way we could break the cycle—even if we wanted to!" **TBJ**