

Why's that palm on the roof? It's tradition



A tree topping took place April 28 at The Woodlands, a skilled nursing care Green House health center being built on the John Knox Village campus in Pompano Beach.

(Joe Cavaretta)

By **[Diane C. Lade](#)** Sun Sentinel [contact the reporter](#)

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If you've ever seen shrubbery taking flight, hoisted by construction cranes to the top of towering, partially-finished buildings, you may have wondered what the tree is doing up there.

No, it's not landscaping for roof gardens. It's part of a tree-topping ceremony — a centuries-old tradition where a live tree is placed on a structure's top final beam, signifying it has reached its maximum height. It also is a time when all those involved with the construction congratulate each other for their work and staying safe, and hope for a successful project completion.

The ritual and its reasons, however, remain a mystery to many who notice a tree oddly stuck on top of a half-finished building, said contracting veteran Daniel Whiteman, vice chairman of Miami-based Coastal Construction.

Diane and John Dalsimer, retirees living in the John Knox Village retirement complex in Pompano Beach, only vaguely knew about tree toppings when they heard one was happening in their community. They were among about 100 people attending a tree topping in April for The Woodlands, a skilled nursing care Green House health center being built on the village campus by The Weitz Co.

"It was thrilling," said Diane Dalsimer, 73, who along with her husband were on the residents' committee shepherding The Woodlands. "You don't often see big trees flying through the air." Whiteman said these events have become more popular as local high-rise construction booms. They usually are planned by the client and contractor. Among his company's current projects: the Margaritaville Hollywood Beach Resort and the new [Palm Beach County's](#) convention center's Hilton hotel, which had a palm tree placed on its roof last month.

At his first one, Whiteman strapped on a safety belt and rode through the air with the tree, "something they would never let you do today," he said.

Whiteman said the once-simple ceremonies have morphed into elaborate parties, many complete with food and commemorative T-shirts. The guest list can include investors, community dignitaries, prospective buyers or future residents of a new building's offices or condos.

At the John Knox Village ceremony, each attendee received a souvenir whistle, representing the warning signal sounded on the construction site whenever the crane is in motion. The seniors blew their noisemakers as a Christmas palm, donated by Nanak's Landscaping in Deerfield Beach, ascended 82 feet.

The tree was secured, along with an American flag, to the building's top beam, where it will stay for several weeks until it is planted in the village's gardens.

As people watched the tree rise, "I saw some with tears in their eyes, knowing this will someday be their home," said John Knox Village CEO Gerald Stryker. The facility — which will have 144 private rooms and unique communal kitchens and living spaces — is scheduled to open in April 2016.

Anthony Abbate, an architect, professor and [Florida Atlantic University's](#) associate provost for Broward campuses, first saw live trees on top of buildings under construction as a young student touring Germany. He said the custom is thought to have started

centuries ago in northern Europe, as a way for builders to show respect for forest spirits and the trees killed to provide lumber. His clients have requested topping ceremonies through the years, and Abbate had one for his Fort Lauderdale home. Palms are the customary choice in South Florida, replacing the traditional evergreen. "It's a symbolic moment, when everything is on track to finish the house," Abbate said.