Marie Schlachter and her family made the annual Hospice of the Plains Tree of Lights ceremony extra special Monday night just prior to the HHS band concert.

Lit up with beautiful angel ornaments, the Tree of Lights was the focus as Marie's mom Shannon paid tribute to the group that has done so much for Marie and their family.

Hospice volunteer Eileen Moss introduced Luke and Shannon Schlachter and their daughters Josie and Marie. She was sincere in noting it's an honor to dedicate the tree this year to Marie.

Moss explained for every donation given, an ornament is placed on the tree in honor of a current or past Hospice patient. The angel ornament was especially appropriate for this year's special honoree, Marie.

Shannon praised Hospice of the Plains as a fabulous service. "I honestly don't know where we'd be without them. I truly believe that our nurse is a gift, and that all who are called to serve in this profession really are angels in disguise."

She encouraged those who feel compelled to consider making a donation to Hospice in honor of Marie or any loved one who is currently or has been under Hospice care.

Annually, Hospice volunteers decorate Christmas trees and conduct ceremonies to honor departed loved ones and to celebrate the hope that Hospice brings to the terminally ill and their families.

This year, Hospice must raise $272,500 through the Tree of Lights, the Enterprise Zone, memorials, donations and grants.

The funds will provide nursing care, counseling, social work and pastoral services; durable medical equipment; oxygen, medical supplies and medications which are required to treat the symptoms of the terminal illness; nursing assistant and homemaker service; therapies; dietary counseling; bereavement support for the family for one year after the patient's demise and administrative costs.

In 2007, Hospice of the Plains served 118 families, during which time the average daily cost for each patient was $151.50. Of this, Medicare and Medicaid paid approximately 85 percent.

Since the 1982 Hospice Medicare legislation which provided $1 daily for medicaitons, expenses have soared. For example, Zofran, used for severe nausea, equals 91 percent of each day's $134.62 reimbursement. One Lupron injection for prostate cancer equals 21 days of reimbursement.

If an individual is hospitalized for a condition resulting from the terminal illness, or receives respite care in a skilled nursing facility (SNF), the hospital or SNF receives the entire Hospice reimbursement, although Hospice continues to provide services.

For those not eligible for Medicare or Medicaid, partial reimbursement, averaging 40-80 percent, may be received from their insurance. Other than those who pay privately, the only patient expense is that of his/her yearly deductible.

Medications or treatments necessary for illnesses, other than the terminal disease, remain the patient's responsibility.

Ultimately, Hospice of the Plains provides service to all Hospice appropriate persons, regardless of one's ability to pay. Hospice of the Plains receives no federal, state or local tax assistance.

This year, Hospice saved one young individual more than $52,300 in medication expenses.

And $44,517 in medications and oxygen was provided for another who resided in a Logan County nursing home, saving the State of Colorado Medicaid program several thousand dollars.

Previously, another individual who was paying privately to reside in a Yuma County nursing home would have been billed $7,500 for one month of oxygen had the individual not been under Hospice's care. Prescription and oxygen savings to that family was nearly $23,000.

These savings provided to hundreds of such individuals exceed the median yearly income in the counties Hospice of the Plains serves.

Donations or inquiries to Hospice of the Plains may be sent to: 125 W. 5th St., Wray, CO 80758.