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Holiday aglow: Light displays at area homes are part of season's tradition

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Kevin Grundman has fond childhood memories of watching his grandfather tinker with electrical cords and bring life to Christmas lights.

These memories give him the motivation to set up his own decadent display year after year.

The now 50-year-old hangs red, green and white lights — just like his grandfather — to decorate his home, but Grundman doesn't stop there. He also makes sure the street he lives on — Northwest 36th Terrace — is glistening with lights, earning him the neighborhood title of Chief Elf.

Since around 2009, when the neighborhood decided collectively to build up its outdoor displays, Grundman and a few of his neighbors go around helping others who need assistance decorating.

"We're sort of the little band of elves (who) do all the elf labor that it takes to do such a big display," he said.

Holiday decorations and displays can bring people together, whether that means putting the finishing touches on the family tree or driving through town admiring lawn displays.

The people committed to spending hours decorating their homes take pleasure in spreading the Christmas spirit to others, even if it means paying a little more in electric bills. Their gratification lies in watching cars filled with wide-eyed children and adults drive by each night as Christmas draws closer, Grundman said. It makes all of the hard work worth it. And then there's the personal satisfaction.

"It's the joy of standing in the street at night and marveling at what you've done," said Grundman, who this year added nine handmade street lamps to unify the neighborhood. "It's an indescribable high."

Bill Gustafson describes his decorations as a scene of what Santa and the elves do after Christmas: go to an island and unwind. The 54-year-old draws, paints and cuts out his handmade decorations, which are set up on his lawn the day after Thanksgiving.

Passersby can expect to see Santa in a speedboat being pulled by manatees and dolphins, elves in bathing suits lounging at a tiki bar and reindeer climbing out of a six-foot margarita glass.

"It's just kind of like Christmas gone wrong," he said. "People drive by my yard and go, 'That's fun, but it's just kind of wrong,'" he said.

Gustafson said he grew bored with traditional Christmas decorations a few years ago. That's when he started setting out edgy scenes in his yard during the holidays.

He encourages people to park their cars and walk up on the yard. He said many of the scenes require people to pay attention to the details to truly enjoy them.

Some may view his display as disrespectful, but he said he does it for his own amusement.

"I don't really care if people like it or not," he said. "I just have fun doing it."

While some spend their Thanksgiving holiday relaxing, Bill Holmes uses that time to prepare for his annual Christmas light show.

He has been decorating his lawn with colored lights, a nativity scene and miniature Christmas trees for eight years. He also has a 40-foot flag pole draped with lights that transforms into a giant Christmas tree once lit.

"I just have a party every night, and anybody who wants to stop by can stop by," he said.

This year, his show includes a message board where he shows graphics to go along with his holiday music. Through software on his computer, Holmes is able to choreograph the lights to synchronize with his playlist of holiday music. He has an FM transmitter, which allows him to have his own radio station to broadcast the songs.

He said during the week of Christmas, the street in front of his home turns into a parking lot. People park their cars, turn the radio station to 95.9 FM and enjoy the 45-minute light show, which runs from 6 to 11 p.m.

In 2005, Holmes said he saw a man from Ohio featured on "Good Morning America" for his holiday light show. Holmes said he was intrigued. He researched the technology and soon decided to take advantage of the after-Christmas sales.

He went to CVS and bought six or seven shopping carts full of lights.

"I practically wiped out Gainesville and Ocala," he said. "I bought 30,000 lights in one night."

He said he's been adding ever since. He now has about 100,000 lights on the property.

Putting on a light show of this scale isn't cheap. He said the lights, technology and other decorations cost around \$30,000.

Holmes is often asked about a donation box. He said people want to donate as a way to show their appreciation, but he refuses to take any money.

Still, Holmes is motivated to continue his light show despite the costs. He said it's important to him because it makes others feel better.

He said people, especially families, look forward to the show every year and enjoy it.

"I don't know how many times I've been told that I have become part of their family tradition," he said.

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