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Lighting the night sky
High-tech winter wonderlands capture the Christmas spirit

by Emily Atwood

T

he Tri-Valley is illuminated once again this year as more and more residents "deck the halls." Instead of bows of holly, houses are trimmed with oversized, animated toys and rockin' lights shows.

One of Pleasanton's more famous Christmas displays is put together by "Santa Bob" Stanley at his home at 2612 Calle Reynoso. He has been decorating his house--and dazzling young and old alike--for about 20 years. For five weeks of the year, he embarks on a solo mission to outdo previous displays with the lighted, animated wonderland called Bob's World that sprawls across his corner lawn, garage and side yard.

Viewers can be seen gazing in awe as lighted Christmas trees, reindeer and even jumping frogs dance along to the sounds of Alvin and the Chipmunks. Most often they comment on the colors and the beauty of it all.

"They say, 'I never thought you could outdo last year, but you did!'" Stanley said.

Each year is different and he has found something unique and new. This year, Stanley added a snowman that blows real snowflakes out of a top hat. In the months leading up to Christmas, he scours the Internet looking for anything new and exciting. His collection also includes dozens of animated miniatures like skiers coming down mountains, trains and a complete circus theme park.

"It just keeps growing," he said. "Each year I try to make it different. With all the positive comments, the job is being done right."

While it's hard to judge the number of people that come to see Bob's World, he refers to weeknights as slow, with only about 75 to 100 people checking out the lights before they turn off at 9 p.m.

Stanley said traffic has increased since being featured on LightsoftheValley.com. The Web site, run out of Alex Dourov's Livermore home, started in 1999 as a go-to guide of the best decorated houses in the Tri-Valley. Since then, the site has expanded significantly to include other Bay Area cities and beyond, from Alameda to Watsonville.

This year, Dourov and his team of programmers worked feverishly to give the site a fresh look and features that makes finding bedecked houses a piece of cake. The home page now shows a house of the day, a drop down list to the "must see"

houses and links to houses by city. People are encouraged to list their house on the site and add pictures and even videos to entice local viewers.

While also working full time at his own Web design company, updating and maintaining LightsoftheValley.com is like a part time job for Dourov. He and the programmers volunteer their time and take in no profits. So far this season, he has spent more than 50 hours of work to put up the site.

The work has paid off as local radio stations have helped promote the site on the radio and on their home pages. This year, the site's popularity has skyrocketed, as the number of daily unique visitors is reaching 4,000 as of Dec. 14, compared to 2006's peak of about 2,300.

Visitors to the site are seeing more houses going all out with holiday decorations. Dourov said technology is really upping the ante in Christmas decorations. Like a popular video circulating on YouTube featuring a song by the Trans Siberian Orchestra, synching lights to the beats of music to create a Christmas light show is gaining popularity here.

Stanley utilized the technology this year for Bob's World with six Christmas tunes, choreographed to a light show on half of his lawn. Dourov said one house has 12 songs in rotation. For spectators not wanting to get out of their car, and decorators who may not want to bug their neighbors, the synched music is available through an FM transmitter. There will be a sign in the front telling drivers to tune to a certain FM station to hear the accompanying music--similar to going to a drive-in movie.

Another new trend gaining popularity is the use of LED strand lights as a replacement for incandescent lights. These use 90 percent less energy because they draw their energy from sunlight and have about 50,000 hours of bulb life. They are available in most colors and people find these to shine just as bright and to be a significant savings on the electric bill.

Stanley used to have to run a generator to support all the lights. Since switching to mostly LED lights, he has been able to forego the generator.

The animations and large amount of lights is what Stanley believes keeps people interested and coming back year after year.

As for Dourov, decorating for Christmas has been a necessity for the holidays. He and his wife lived in a condo in San Jose before moving to Livermore in 1992. In the condo, he would hang five or six strands of lights. But Dourov planned ahead for his Livermore house. As it was being built, and before the landscaping went in, he trenched underground piping and put in electrical boxes under the front yard.

While inflatable decorations have become more popular, Dourov said he likes to stick to the "old school" Blowmold plastic displays of yesteryear. Yet, with the cost of creating an illuminated winter wonderland, he too appreciates the energy-saving LED lights.

Next year marks the 10th anniversary for LightsoftheValley.com and Dourov said visitors can expect an even better site. He said he's looking into possibly using Google maps to create routes. It's a simple site and he wants it to be enhanced, but remain easy to use.

"I make nothing from this site," he said. "I spend money in order to make this happen. The more people that visit it, the better I feel. My payment is the feedback. Go and read some of the letters I've gotten. Those letters truly make me feel great."

He recalls one letter from someone unable to leave their home, who said LightsoftheValley.com allowed them to see Christmas lights for the first time in a long time.

Stanley has the same motives for creating an enchanting Bob's World year after year. When asked his favorite part about the whole ordeal, he said it's making people happy.

"It's about making people smile," he said. "Not only the children, but also the adults."

Come Dec. 29, Stanley will turn off the lights until next year. He methodically packs up the lights, trees and oversized toys, checking light bulbs before they go away into a storage facility. Since he starts decorating right before Halloween, he is ready to take some time for himself. Where does "Santa Bob" and his wife go to take a break? They skip the snow and head to the beautiful beaches of Cabo San Lucas, naturally. •

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