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Big spirit, cool lights illuminate the holidays

Homeowners go all out transforming their houses into visual extravaganzas

By Scott Steinberg, STAFF WRITER

EVERYONE HATES to see Christmas lights before Thanksgiving -- to witness the holidays colliding, said Irma Ratliff of Danville.

But the Ratliffs -- Irma, her husband and three children -- could not resist setting up their Christmas display the weekend before Thanksgiving. They were a bit daunted by the fact that there were a couple of thousand lights to tack up.

The display took four days to assemble, said Ratliff, whose family display used to feature a 1953 fire truck and still has a full-size Nativity scene, fake reindeer and an inflatable snow man.

A few years ago, a passer-by stole baby Jesus from the Nativity scene.

"Nobody will be taking baby Jesus this year," Ratliff said. "He's bolted down."

Why do hundreds of Valley residents draw so much attention to their homes with luminescent Christmas displays, risking electrical catastrophes, encouraging complete strangers to traipse through their yards and chancing the theft of baby Jesus?

People want to get into the spirit of Christmas, and those people want other people to notice that, said Livermore's Alex Dourov, who operates lightsofthevalley.com, a Web site dedicated to Christmas displays in the Valley. "You take a risk something may be vandalized or stolen, but that's the cost of business."

For this holiday season, Dourov reviewed more than 150 displays. He said he tried to be objective but added that "98 percent of the Web site is my opinion."

His tastes are particular. He's not wild about icicle lights nor what he called the latest trend: rope lights. "Too sterile," Dourov said.

"If it looks to me like a cool-looking house, I'm happy to put it on the Web site," he said.

The Web site features some of the standard Valley Christmas celebrants: Deacon Dave Rezendes of Livermore, who uses his own PG&E generator to power more than 200,000 lights, and Bob Stanley of Bob's World in Pleasanton, who has more than 30,000 lights and a display that Stanley estimates is worth about \$40,000.

"It's strictly a hobby now, I guess you can say," said Stanley, a retired furniture installer.

Stanley has decorated his home for 12 years. The project gets larger every year but always has been a sincere, noncompetitive Christmas gesture, he said.

"For anyone who gets involved in this kind of project and keeps it going, it's surely an act of love," he said.

"I really do enjoy doing this," said Stanley, who takes one month to assemble his display.

Across town, Bob Widmer has created Bob's World Two, which his family said is not competing with the original Bob's World.

Widmer has decorated the house for more than 20 years but just recently coined his display. He stores the equipment in four sheds during the off-season. Like most avid decorators, the Widmers said the display is for the children.

The computer software assistant had surgery in July to remove prostate cancer. His recovery has been emotional and stressful, said his wife Susan, who sometimes dresses like an elf during Christmas to the delight of her two children and three grandchildren.

"Everyone counts on the display," said Susan Widmer. "It's been harder because he doesn't have the energy. ... But he's not going to slow down. He will keep doing (the display) forever."

A large Christmas display is intended for children, agreed Daniel Wittern of Livermore. The retired certified public accountant peppers his annual display with animated figurines.

Wittern has a snowman that tips a hat and elves that ski down his roof. Next year he hopes to add Santa Claus in a helicopter on the chimney.

"I never really paid attention to how this affects the electricity bill," he said, "and I would hate to even go out and count the amount of lights.

"During the daytime, you see nothing but extension cords and light bulbs. It's kind of unsightly. But at night, we get a constant stream of cars coming by. The closer to Christmas, the bigger the stream."