

Deacon Dave's 'Ministry of Lights' celebrates silver year

By Sam Richards, STAFF WRITER

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LIVERMORE: — It's one thing to get the ladder out, drag the holiday light string up to the roof and pound the U-shaped nails into the gutter. It's entirely another to have enough filaments and bulbs to need your own PG&E transformer to run them all.

A combination of carefully crafted themes, yeoman's work by a small army of volunteers and enough wattage to be seen by denizens of the International Space Station has made 352 Hillcrest Ave., on Livermore's east side, a popular stop among Christmas light display fans young and old from all over the East Bay.

This is the 25th year Deacon Dave Rezendes has turned his house into a bright, constantly-in-motion amalgam of lights, holiday messages and animated features. He calls it "Casa del Pomba," Portuguese for "House of the Dove," and it is a labor of love in more ways than one.

"I like to call it a 'ministry of lights,'" said Rezendes, who plans and designs the annual displays in part to touch people on a spiritual level.

Though he is also celebrating his 25th year as a deacon at St. Michael's Catholic Church in Livermore, Rezendes stresses his display is "interdenominational."

Deacon Dave's display has a theme each year — a closely guarded secret until the ceremonial unveiling. Last year's theme, for example, was

"Santa's International Visitors Center."

This year, the unveiling is at 7 p.m. Friday, to be attended by a host of Livermore officials, including Mayor Marshall Kamena and Police Chief Steve Sweeney. There will be a pre-ceremony parade, too, on the street in front of Deacon Dave's house. And at the moment of unveiling, Rezendes says — natch — "Let there be light!"

One thing he won't reveal: His December power bill.

Though there are plenty of sizeable holiday light displays in the East Bay — "Mr. Xmas" on Olive Drive in Concord is a popular example — it is thought by at least one holiday light luminary that Deacon Dave's may be the biggest, most elaborate presentation in the East Bay, and perhaps beyond.

"Thirty (thousand) to 40,000 lights is a pretty impressive display, but Dave's (displays) aren't just owing to numbers," said Alex Dourov of Livermore, who has operated the Web site <http://www.lightsofthevalley.com/> since 1999. "Quality, inventiveness and variety are important."

That Dourov and others have growing Web sites devoted to finding and showing Christmas light displays reflects the increasing popularity of such displays, he said.

Bigger, more creative, more technologically advanced, even shows that synchronize light displays with FM music broadcasts are finding more favor — and drawing more gawkers — in neighborhoods far and near.

"I am constantly getting

e-mails from people saying there are no light displays (on my site) from their town," Dourov said. "People just seem to be more interested than before."

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Though Deacon Dave's display likely draws few, if any, overnight visitors to the area, plenty of the estimated 80,000 visitors to Hillcrest Avenue last year came from cities all over the East Bay, and beyond. So even if these lights aren't a boon for area hotels and motels, other businesses feed off the energy of a quarter million bright lights.

"There are no stats directly related to this, but people come here from places like San Ramon and Pleasanton and make a night of it," said Alison Raymond, a spokeswoman for the Tri-Valley Convention and Tourism Bureau. "It's only common sense that people coming in are going to leave some money, at restaurants and gas stations."

Deacon Dave believes he probably gives a little spark to the local economy — nice, but far from the point of what he does. It's his gift to the community, he says, a spiritual one, above all. He said he hopes the lights touch people's hearts.

"One woman several years ago came walking through several times, and eventually talked to me about an abusive relationship (she was in)," Rezendes said. "She said, 'I was feeling really lonely until the lights really brightened me up.'"

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