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Parade, festive lights, outdoor decorations -- it must be the holiday season

Elaborate home decorations, colorful downtown parade help spread holiday joy

by Cathy Jetter / Pleasanton Weekly

If last week's turkey feasts and midnight-to-sunrise shopping sprees left you looking for ways to celebrate the holiday season with a little less impact on your wallet and waistline, consider continuing the countdown to Christmas this Saturday night at the Hometown Holiday Celebration in downtown Pleasanton.

The free, family-friendly annual event begins at 5 p.m. with the Amador Valley High School marching band leading an old-fashioned holiday parade down the middle of Main Street.

Featuring holiday-inspired entrants, the event brings together nearly 2,500 participants in a great mix of original Pleasanton favorites, including the ever-popular Balloon Platoon, dozens of community organizations walking, dancing and waving to the crowd, a wide variety of floats, hot rods and even a horse-drawn carriage to transport Pleasanton's Mayor Jerry Thorne and the City Council down the mile-long route.

Rumor has it a special guest in a red suit will be on hand to share the moment after the parade when Thorne lights the tree in front of the Museum on Main, signifying the official start to Pleasanton's holiday season.

For many, seeing the lights go up on trees and houses around the neighborhoods truly has become an integral part of the holiday experience.

No one knows this better than Livermore's Alex Dourov.

While the rest of us are struggling to keep track of Christmas lists and shopping notes, Dourov has been maintaining a growing database of nearly 400 over-the-top Christmas-lit homes since 1999. He shares his findings with the rest of the world on his year-round website, www.CaliforniaChristmasLights.com, which he also promotes through his Facebook page bearing the same name.

Dourov first recognized a need for a list of visit-worthy light displays back in 1992 when he and his wife, Cindy, moved to Livermore and found an article in the Tri-Valley Herald offering advice for Christmas light viewing.

"Unfortunately, what the paper was printing was just a bunch of addresses submitted by people or neighbors who claimed the houses were decorated," Dourov explained. "We mapped out a few to visit and ended up being disappointed too many times by houses that had nothing more than a couple of strands of lights strung around the roof. I was looking for displays well beyond the average. I wanted something interesting. Just an address didn't guarantee a display was worth a drive across town."



The Weber house on Gray Fox Circle is a popular stop for people touring decorated homes in Pleasanton during the holidays. (Photo courtesy of CaliforniaChristmasLights.com.)



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By 1999, Dourov owned a website development company, and it was a natural step to use his high-tech talents to take Christmas light promotion to the next level.

He set up www.lightsofthevalley.com (renamed in 2011 to reflect the site's expansion outside of the Tri-Valley) and began scanning the 35mm pictures he took at each house he visited, a time-consuming but integral process even for the initial online inventory of 25 homes across Pleasanton, Dublin and Livermore.

Even now, with 232 houses listed in 136 cities in 33 counties across the state, Dourov will not add an address without a photo and confirmation that the light display is up and worthy of a visit.

"I never post an address without verification," Dourov said. "I get about 120 submissions a year that end up being rejected."

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, Dourov admits, which is why the photos are so important.

"There are different themes, different types of decorations, and they all appeal to different people," he said. "Some people have very expensive synchronized light shows that are elaborate in what they do, not in the amount of decorations. Some have virtual Santa themes. Others have walking neighborhoods, with many decorated houses on the same block -- like Walnut Street in downtown Pleasanton."

"But if they are on my site, they have one thing in common: they are all over-the-top displays in one way or another. These are the houses and neighborhoods people will want to see," he added

This includes his Livermore home, where Christmas is definitely a year-round project. Aside from the 120-180 hours per year spent maintaining www.CaliforniaChristmasLights.com, Dourov and his wife spend at least part of every month of the year getting ready for December.

The truth of this is easily seen on Dourov's personal Facebook page, where detailed analyses of the watts saved when displays are converted to LED lights (this year 1,539) and updates on the latest display additions are posted between the family photos.

Hooks, supports and pulleys are camouflaged and hidden under eaves, on the roof and behind the chimney while the garage hosts a wealth of shelves, neatly organized and painstakingly labeled with last year's, next year's and this year's projects.

Though his house is a stunning display of Christmas both outside and in, Dourov estimates he's only spent \$3,000 to \$4,000 on his decorations.

"I do a lot of stocking up at the after-Christmas sales," he explained. "And many of my displays are homemade -- the three-foot-tall Peace On Earth sign is homemade; you couldn't buy that anywhere."

Even the Dourov's vacation time can get tangled up with the Christmas lights. "Cindy and I take road trips to see the best displays," Dourov said. "We like to meet these people. We've gotten to know quite a few of them."

Pleasanton's Tracey Weber certainly understands how Christmas lights can bring people together.

The Webers' house at the entrance to Gray Fox Circle has been one of Dourov's most elaborate listings since the family's first Christmas there several years ago. But it's only recently that she realized how much her family's labor of love means to those who come to see the house each holiday season.

"A few years ago, we hosted a holiday party at the house, and we had dozens and dozens of cookies left over," she said. "The next night, we grabbed some trays and decided to stand outside and share the cookies with the people who were coming by to see our lights."

This interaction changed everything. "I had no idea that people had made coming to our house a part of their family tradition," Weber said. "Talking with the people who were just walking around, taking it all in, to hear of how much joy it brings to people to return every year was just amazing."

After that, the cookies became a new part of the tradition, until last year when a death in the family meant the Webers would be out of town on Christmas Eve, the busiest night for light gazing.

"Some of our neighbors realized we wouldn't be home to hand out the cookies and asked if we would mind if they took our place to make sure the tradition continued," Weber said.

She said she has heard of some neighborhoods that get tired of the evening traffic -- Gray Fox gets 50 cars a night after Thanksgiving, at least 1,000 on Christmas Eve. "But our neighbors don't complain," she added. "They are out there enjoying it with us. We get thank you notes and cookies in our mailbox."

Dourov, too, has received numerous thank-you's from people expressing their gratitude for his website. It is these notes, he said, that make all the hours and attention to detail worthwhile.

"That my displays bring so much joy to kids and adults, when I hear families laughing outside my house, is a real gift," he explained.

It's not just the listings and the lights he puts up that make people happy. The website has pictures and videos and even aerial drone footage that bring a whole new perspective to the viewing of Christmas light displays, especially for those who can't get around so easily.

"I received an email from a lady in a retirement home who told me she can't get outside to see the lights anymore," Dourov said, "but she said she loves looking at them on my website. This is the joy I get from what I do."



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Must-see displays

What to see if you never leave Pleasanton:

- * 4148 Walnut Drive, also known as "Candy Cane Lane" (walking neighborhood)
- * 802 Gray Fox Cir.
- * 1279 Hearst Ave.
- * 2612 Calle Reynoso (Bob's World)
- * 3671 Chelsea Court (Widmer World)

Explore a little further:

- * 467 Knottingham Cir., Livermore
- * 644 Zermatt St., Livermore (park at 685 E. Jack London Blvd.)
- * 352 Hillcrest Ave., Livermore (Deacon Dave's Casa del Pomba)
- * 108 Dana Highlands, Danville
- * 106 Woodview Cir., San Ramon (walking neighborhood)

Best of the best:

Four Northern California homes are among the 20 nationwide that will be featured in "The Great Christmas Light Fight" on ABC this month beginning Monday. They were chosen to decorate their homes for Christmas and compete for prizes totaling \$250,000.

- * 3671 Chelsea Court, Widmer World (Pleasanton)
- * 644 Zermatt Street (Livermore)
- * 9855 Oak Ranch Place (Elk Grove)

* A Fremont house is participating but the addresses wasn't released by press time. Check www.CaliforniaChristmasLights.com for updates and a complete list of amazing houses to visit this holiday season.

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