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His holiday message: Lighten up

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LIVERMORE -- When Alex Dourov started his online showcase of the glitziest Christmas displays in the Tri-Valley in 1999, he had a 35-mm camera, a scanner and a new website: LightsoftheValley.com. His listing of about 30 houses in the brought out holiday enthusiasts who soon began arriving in droves.

Thirteen years and nearly 1 million visitors later, Dourov's operation has gone as high tech as the computer-generated cartoon characters and the multicolored light shows he advertises.

"It's been a blast," says Dourov, a professional web designer in Livermore, who calls this a "year of transition" for his site. "I worked with a couple of colleagues on the East Coast to help me come up with a more dynamic design."

His followers can now use his interactive website to find clickable photos of the nearly 500 houses he displays, locate them on a Google map, rate their favorite houses, find the "must see" houses on a drop-down menu, and "friend" him on his group Facebook page.

While the actual site remains the same, complete with floating electronic snowflakes, a new name more closely reflects the most comprehensive collection of the best and brightest displays in 125 cities across the Northern and Central state: CaliforniaChristmasLights.com.

"The website has grown so much," says Dourov, "that I needed to find a way to make it easier to work

with and a name to show how far it has spread." To keep his collection of houses fresh, Dourov follows the same routine each year. He sends postcards to people whose houses are already on the site asking for updated information, accepts submissions for new displays and scours newspapers for articles about award-winning displays to add.

"It's not always about the biggest display," says Dourov, whose own family's house at 467 Knottingham Circle is listed each year. "But it has to be something beyond a string of lights and a reindeer. I'm looking for something unique and very appealing to the eyes."

Widmer's World at 3671 Chelsea Court in Pleasanton is one of the most popular listings on the site with a fully decorated 9-hole miniature golf course, five model trains, merry-go-rounds, and a scavenger hunt for the kids.

"Lots of people come through saying that they heard about us from Lights of the Valley," says owner Bob Widmer, who has been running the full display on his one-acre lot for more than 12 years.

"Alex comes over every once in a while and scopes us out to see what we're doing." Word of the website has spread near and far, with promotions from local media (KKIQ has practically become its unofficial sponsor) to a TV station in Croatia (which subsequently showed the video in eight countries). But what touches Dourov the most are the hundreds of thank-you letters he receives and posts on the website from people who have called him a "Christmas angel" and "a virtual Internet Santa."

Sheldon Chang of San Jose has been one of Dourov's biggest fans for years. In fact, for the past few years he has helped him by finding new displays in his area and sending photos.

"Alex has a terrific site and he keeps it very up to date," says Chang, who rents a tour bus each year to



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take folks to the best-decorated houses in his area. "It allows me to target displays for my tour so I don't end up driving around aimlessly looking for them."

It's because of those kinds of comments that Dourov considers his hundreds of hours of work a labor of love. He doesn't try to make money from the site, except for a request for small online donations to help offset his costs. And, he says, his work comes with the added benefit of helping to support charitable organizations who bring barrels to collect toys and food at some of the larger sites.

"This is my contribution to the community and to society," he says. "I think a lot of people are looking to find something fun, easy and inexpensive to do to take their minds off other things like the economy. I'm glad I can provide a valuable service that brings tons of enjoyment to thousands of people's lives."

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