

PLEASANTON WEEKLY Online Edition

Holiday Magic
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This family's decorations grow year by year, Santa by Santa
by Dolores Fox Ciardelli

Christmas decorations are big at the home of Sandee and Malcolm Mc Neil - big, colorful, imaginative and joyous.

The outside of the house at 1279 Hearst Drive is a charming land of Christmas fantasy. Groups of carolers surround a gingerbread house next to a tree of green lights reaching to the heavens. On the roof, Santa plunges headlong into a chimney, his full sack of colorful toys nearby and little elves on the ladder dramatically showing their dismay.

"The best thing is when I see people's faces, whether they're driving by, or sometimes when they get out," said Malcolm.

The Mc Neils begin to decorate Nov. 1. The trick, agreed Sandee and Malcolm, is to have "lots of elves" to do the work. The outside lights are done by Lights by Ricco out of Manteca. Decorator Terri Carlson of Milfleur on Ray Street does the interior and is always on the lookout for new ideas.

In the living room, an elaborately decorated tree rises 13-1/2 feet next to the curving staircase, where Santa stands halfway up, checking his list.

"Terri found the Santa," said Sandee, explaining that Terri found just the plain Santa figure, then added the list - and the plumed pen for him to be checking it twice.

Resting on drums in the downstairs curve of the staircase is a collection of charming wooden nutcrackers. "Malcolm gave them to me as presents, for Christmas and for my birthday," said Sandee.

The Mc Neils always decorated for the holidays, they said, but it was 1989, when they lived in Foster City, that they became committed. That was the year of the Loma Prieta earthquake in October, and residents were still glum as the holidays approached. Sandee and Malcolm decided to go ahead with an outdoor light display, hoping to cheer up their neighbors, and the response was heartwarming. "They put notes in our mail slot saying that seeing the Christmas lights helped them enjoy the season," recalled Sandee. "From there it kind of evolved."

When the Mc Neils built their house in Pleasanton in 1995, they drew up the plans with Christmas in mind. They insisted on a banister rail that could accommodate a garland and mantels for stockings, much to the surprise of their architect and builder, noted Malcolm. Extra circuits were added to accommodate their Christmas needs, but even so they have had to tweak their power supply as their displays grow each year.

In the kitchen/family room, the walls have a ledge near the ceiling for lighting - also the perfect place to run a Christmas train around the room's perimeter. They used the same design in the bedrooms of their two daughters - Trisha, 19, who attends college in Los Angeles, and Kristin, 11, a student at Pleasanton Middle School - who have their own Christmas trains chugging around their rooms, with the Santa engineer calling out, "All aboard!"

The home has four standing trees and four table-top size. "The family room tree has all the sentimental ornaments," said Sandee.

That figure does not include a new aluminum tree that she recently purchased in honor of Malcolm's childhood in the 1950s when aluminum trees with spotlights and color wheels were all the rage. She said she might keep it, might return it, or might return it and re-buy it after Christmas when it's cheaper. But she bought Malcolm a small aluminum tree for his desk.

Each year the Mc Neils hold a Christmas party for their neighbors to mill around and enjoy the decorations, with a fire pit for warmth, hot chocolate and a brass band. Santa Claus is there, too, to visit with the children. "Letters to Santa come to our house," said Sandee.

Something new to enjoy this year are the balls of red and green lights on the curbside trees. Sandee found them at Costco, but Malcolm liked them only in green and red, so she went back and sorted through the stacks and boxes, she said, laughing.

Sandee said it's important to hit the stores early to see what is new and to get a good selection. And she recommends going after Christmas to get the best prices.

Decorations can be much less elaborate and still be effective, she said. "Hang a wreath and put a spotlight on it," she suggested. "Use any favorite decorations and a spotlight."

Christmas starts early for the Mc Neils and ends after New Years.

"By Jan. 2, I want it out," said Sandee, adding, "Everything is 'take-down' friendly."

But visions of sugarplums dance in their heads year round, and as fall gets under way, they are ready to call in the troops to put it all together again.

Lights on the Web (December 13, 2002)

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The Mc Neil home is among those chosen for display at <http://lightsofthevalley.com>, a Web site begun four years ago to promote the Tri-Valley's spectacularly ornamented homes. People can visit the site to enjoy their neighbor's creativity from the comfort of their own homes, or to get a list of addresses to check out in person. Alex Dourov, Microsoft Certified Professional, chooses only the best bedecked homes to go on his community service Web site, which 38,000 people have visited since its inception.