

## PEOPLE

# Holiday elaboration

Gay couple's decorations yield donations

BY TIMOTHY KRAUSE • PHOTOS BY MARTY DAVIS

**W**hat started out 14 years ago as merely a holiday open house has grown into an annual party that gives a Portland queer-friendly food bank reason to celebrate—and a gay couple reason to decorate.

Every November around Thanksgiving, Bill Bender and Ted Mistler begin pulling down from the third-floor eaves of their 1907 Sears Roebuck catalog house more than 900 ornaments, yards of garland and at least one Christmas tree for every room.

The couple, who have been together for 19 years, deck their house top to bottom to host an annual holiday party for 300 or so family, friends and neighbors—each summoned by Mistler's hand-addressed invitations.

"It started out with just having an open house in the living room," says Bender, a Gresham native who is a retired Multnomah County parole and probation officer. "Then it got bigger and bigger, and we'd decorate another room, and now we decorate every room."

Guests are asked to bring a nonperishable food item to benefit Esther's Pantry, a program of Portland's Metropolitan Community Church that helps people living with AIDS to maintain themselves independently.

The festive get-together also gives the couple a chance to show off their restoration of a North Portland home that had fallen into disrepair after being used as a warehouse. Bender and Mistler renovated with contemporary conveniences but made sure to maintain its historic character, even consulting with the original owner's daughter, who grew up in the house. The home now is filled with family heirlooms, antiques and collections ranging from wall clocks to ceramic chickens.

And holiday décor galore.

"I sit down in October and decide what color lights I want in each room and whether I want a tall tree or a tree on a table.... And then I decide what kind of ornaments I want," says Bender, who explains that each room has its own theme and every year it's different.

As soon as you open the front door, you see the first tree—majestically towering up from the red and white themed foyer, housed by the wrap-around staircase, next to an antique fountain from a Catholic church where Bender and his mother were baptized.

To the right is the living room, with silent-movie piano, inviting fireplace and a chair big enough for Santa to hold kids of all ages. Strung on the trees and around the room are more than 700 antique ornaments.

"Some of them are really fragile, and something like this," Bender says, cradling a small globe with simple decoration, "is not necessarily really beautiful, but it's probably 100 years old or more. To us, they're all pretty."

Others have particular sentimental value.

Bender points to a little Christmas sock. The burgundy velvet was once the material of his grandmother's dress, which later was turned into a jacket for his uncle. When his uncle passed away, Bender's aunt used the material to make a pair of large Christmas stockings for him and his partner, along with smaller stocking ornaments.

On the opposite side of the entryway is the dining room decorated with an angel-themed tree. The evergreen is flanked by two trumpeting angels of plaster that Mistler retrieved from a church in Albany and restored from damage suffered by an arson fire.

At the rear of the house is the candy-themed kitchen, which also is the only room that has been completely gutted and modernized.

"We redesigned it into a modern kitchen but tried to keep it full of old," notes Bender as he passes by a wood-fired kitchen cook stove that warms the air. He highlights more collections: rolling pins, graters, sifters and in the corner a string of shiny metal balls.

"That started as a project: I was going to do a wreath one year with tea balls...and it just kind of got carried away," admits Mistler, who grew up in Garden Home and is retired from the dietitian's office at University of Oregon's medical school.

Upstairs, a cozy TV room takes on the feel of a snug winter lodge holding a pine decorated with teddy bears and sitting atop a bearskin rug. Across the hall is a nutcracker suite where little uniformed men climb a tree perched on top of a bass drum. Another room next door is home to antique dolls and a tree elaborately decorated pink and white with bows, toys and ladies' pocketbooks. An enormous four-poster dominates the final bedroom, crowned with branches that Mistler wove along the bed's top and decorated in the playful theme of tassels.

Tucked away in a basement room, carved out of the house's original Model T garage, is the Harley Room. The tree here sports Harley-Davidson motorcycle miniatures, logos, ornaments and even black-and-orange candy canes—all illuminated with thickly strung orange lights. The centerpiece, of course, is Bender's bike, itself sparkling like a kid's Christmas morning surprise.

But there's more.

The attic is a child's rainy-day dream, with nooks and crannies filled with intriguing collections, surprises and treasures. The room has a country-western feel, including the background music wafting through the rafters. But the large tree, which appears to be breaking through the roof, holds more I-Spy discoveries than *Antiques Roadshow*.

"An attic tree with everything out of the attic," jokes Bender, pointing to a cigar box, a clock, even an old camera. "You can't have too much. Enough is never enough." 

Donate money, nonperishable food items or personal care products to ESTHER'S PANTRY at 2761 N.E. Halsey St., 503-493-2222.



Ted (left) and Bill's red and white tree goes up through the middle of the 1907 home's wrap-around staircase



The kitchen tree provides plenty of eye candy



What home would be complete without a traditional holiday Harley tree?



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