

GETTING IN THE SPIRIT



Umatilla County residents get into the holiday spirit with elaborate holiday displays

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

The Bunch house near Desert View Elementary School features a 14-foot illuminated reindeer that towers over the yard, as well as a variety of lighted orbs. Despite the outdoor display, the real magic of the Bunch House lies in the Christmas decorations that adorn every inch of the interior of the house.

By JESSICA POLLARD
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — It was only natural that Ron Bunch would spice up his home with a couple knick-knacks here and there during Christmas. After all, his mother always decorated during the holiday season.

“And then it kind of exploded,” he said.

The outside of the home Ron shares with his wife, Linda, is adorned with a 24-hour light display. It glows more brightly than the displays of the other homes in the cul-de-sac on West Sandpiper Avenue. But the real magic is inside the home.

“My friend tells me it looks like Christmas puked in our house,” Ron jokes.

The common area of the home is stocked, and it takes three days total for Ron to get the decorations unpacked.

There are 32 Christmas stockings hung throughout the home, four artificial Christmas trees, one of which is fiber optic, another which is adorned only in Oregon State University ornaments, and more than 30, 18-gallon totes of decor to boot.

There’s a stocking that Ron’s mom knitted when he was just a baby. A fleet of reindeer welded out of horseshoes. And atop an entryway shelf sits an unsettling-looking elf with unseemly long legs.

“When we find something with a lot of character, we get it,” Ron said. “If you can find it at Walmart, we won’t have a lot of it here.”

They said operating their outdoor display has become less costly since they purchased LED lights. The pair, two former postmasters with the U.S. Postal Service, said that having a Christmas display from the end of November till New Year’s costs just \$6 extra a month on their utility bill.

“It’s negligible,” Linda said. Ron and Linda are one of a few locals who take holiday decorating to the next level, much to the delight of passersby and neighbors.

Ron West in Umatilla, for instance, has been honing his handcrafted display for the last two decades. Glowing 10,000 lights strong, the display is visible from Highway 395.

There’s a sign attached to the chimney of his home, which reads “SANTA HERE.”

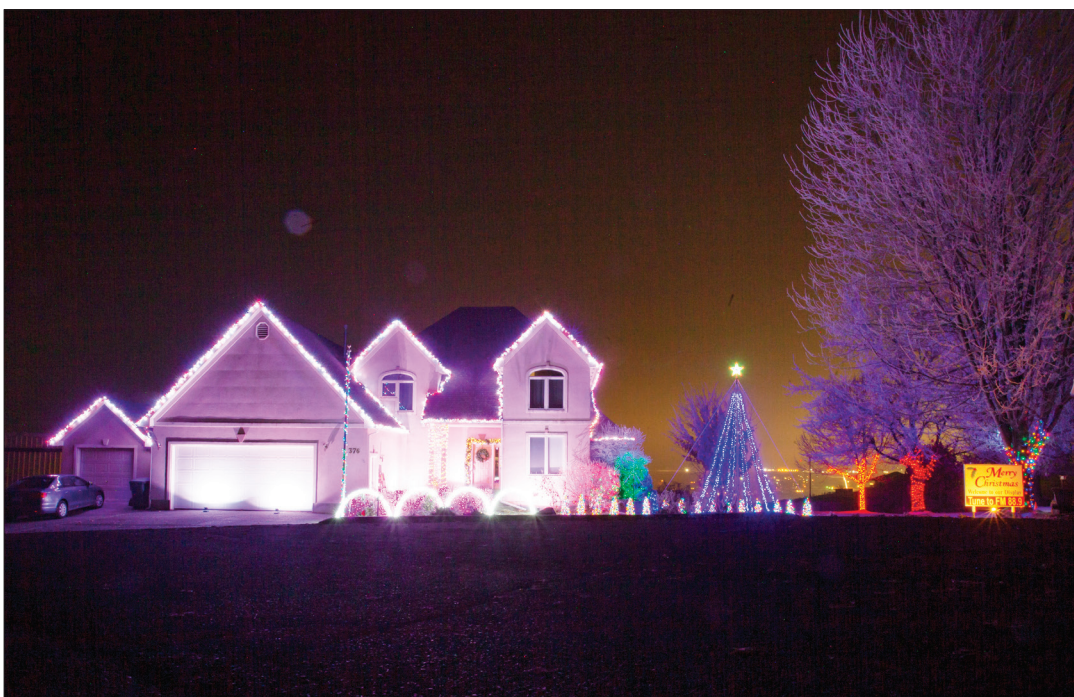
“That’s so he knows where to go,” West said.

West is the maintenance director at the Umatilla County School District. He starts setting up his Brownell Boulevard



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Ron West’s home on Brownell Boulevard in Umatilla features a variety of handmade decorations including hand-painted characters, such as Winnie the Pooh, Charlie Brown, and Snoopy. West said that the display features more than 10,000 lights and takes him several months to prepare.



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

At the Kim and Harper Jones home on Northeast Third Avenue in Pendleton, the lights dance to a different tune — the tune of Christmas songs, that is. The Jones’ home is carefully choreographed to music and drivers can tune in to listen on 88.9 FM.

Christmas display in September, and everything — from a towering tree made of lights to the moving Snoopy display — is handmade.

“Each year, I add something more,” he said. “Next year, it’ll be the Island of Misfit Toys from ‘Rudolph.’”

West, who grew up in Hermiston, started decorating his home about 20 years ago when his kids were little. When his wife passed away, he considered stopping, but continued the tradition on each year with his kids.

“I probably wouldn’t do it at this age,” he said. “But the

whole neighborhood loves it.”

West joked that his decorations take him “too long” to make. Karen and Mike Montegna on West Utah Avenue in Irrigon could say the same. Their vast front yard is jam-packed with all sorts of moving and stationary displays.

“Christmas is our favorite time of year,” Karen said. “We’ve always had a little bit of something, and it just grew.”

The pair has lived in Irrigon for 26 years, and retired from life in the U.S. Navy.

In the front part of the yard sits a rotating ferris wheel with hand-painted characters that

took three years to make, and a group of woodcut elves packing gifts on Santa’s sleigh. Santa himself is stuck on the chimney, his legs poking out.

It was only very recently that the pair opted to stuff the back portion of their yard with store-bought inflatable decorations. It wasn’t an easy decision.

“I am anti-blowup,” Karen said. “But they’re the only things that are visible back there.”

The couple’s secret to a yard that draws visitors despite its tucked-away location?

“We try to do a little bit at a time,” Karen said.

They start decorating the day after Thanksgiving and add something new to their repertoire each year. This year, all the kids from “Peanuts” are huddled under the flagpole in their yard.

Kim and Harper Jones on Northeast Third Avenue in Pendleton have a light display that rivals the one downtown. The lights are synchronized to their own personal radio station. Even on a weeknight, a car or two can be found sitting idle, listening and watching.

And according to Kim, the hours that go into crafting each individual light display are mostly put in by Harper, a Pendleton doctor who also sits on the Round-Up Board of Directors.

“He puts it all together,” she said. “He loves to give.”

Harper said the display started as somewhat of a technical exercise.

“Initially, I’m a technical person so I was interested in the electronics and how it all came together,” he said.

But now, he said, it’s more about keeping the 11-year tradition going for those who stop by to enjoy the lights.

“There are some people who go a little insane with their displays, like me,” he said. “But I think anybody who does something, like a string of lights, is putting in effort and doing a good thing.”

It takes three days and one together.

“Takedown is just six hours,” Harper said.