

Let there be light's

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Frontiersman

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MAT-SU — Jeff Mitchell wanted to celebrate the holidays with more than just a few twinkle lights around his windowsill this year.

A holiday fanatic, Mitchell began stringing up his Christmas lights outside his one-story home the day after Halloween, adjusting the final strand at midnight Thanksgiving Day. Mitchell asked his reluctant friend, Mike Houston from Totem Rentals, to lend his 66-foot boom lift to assist in the installation process, then he then began days stapling long strands of white, red, blue, gold and green twinkle lights from the roof-line down, hanging candy canes as he went.

Overall, with 6,500 boxes of light strings and more than a mile of extension chords, along with large greeting signs and numerous oversized candy canes on the lawn, Mitchell had finished. The massive 65,000-light display was then carefully plugged into a computer terminal inside, what Mitchell calls the “brains of the show.” Now it’s show time.

Throughout December, Mitchell is sharing his electric light show with anyone willing to make the pilgrimage to his home, granted they have a car stereo and some holiday cheer.

“It’s been a trip,” Mitchell said of creating a modern holiday light show. “But I love science and wanted to share it with the community.”

To accomplish his music and light synchronicity, Mitchell used Light-O-Rama, a computer software program that allows each twinkle of a tiny bulb to respond to sound. Mitchell found that holiday songs less than 3 minutes long are easier to work with, as each minute of music takes eight hours to program its commands into Light-O-Rama.

Once the lights were individually programmed, untangled and stapled into place, Mitchell got his tiny radio transmitter up and running and checked all the plugs. He flipped the switch, turned his radio to 91.5 FM and waited.

The result? A well-conducted symphony of melody, lights and holiday wonder that can be seen for blocks.

Mitchell estimates he’s spent more than \$5,000 on his Christmas light show project, but said it was worth every penny. Giving the show to the community is satisfying and he knows where to find a bargain.

“The day after Christmas is my Black Friday,” he said. “If I can get 89 boxes of lights for 17 cents apiece, then it’s worth waiting in line for. I took everything off the shelf last year.”

During a Boy Scout tour Friday night, Mitchell and his wife heard the standard questions.

- What do the neighbors think?
- How much is your electric bill?
- How long did it take to put them all up?

Mitchell's standard response to the electricity expense is easy: "It's irrelevant. It's a gift to the community."

Mitchell spoke with neighbors before launching his mammoth project, who all gave him the nod to proceed when they heard the cause was to help the Boys and Girls Club of Mat-Su.

Mitchell conducts his business as a mad scientist for Mad Science, the world's leading fun science provider for birthday parties, after-school programs, in-school workshops, camps, assemblies and corporate events. As a mad scientist, he sets up mini-labs of entertainment at the Boys and Girls Club in Wasilla, parties, local schools and other venues so children can experience unique, hands-on science activities that spark their imaginative learning.

"We go to the Boys and Girls Club during the day when it's closed to run the after school program, put on workshops, run school assemblies and give out information at our booths," he said. "It's our way of giving back to the community. They're always needing help."

Mitchell moved to his home off of Knik-Goose Bay Road in 2003 from Fairbanks, where he had worked as a 911 dispatcher.

"When we got down here, we were looking for something in the Valley for the kids to do," Mitchell said. "It was kind of sad because there wasn't a whole lot. I started looking online and found that Mad Science was set up in 201 locations around the world and was going strong. It got going from there."



ROBERT DeBERRY/Frontiersman Mad scientist Jeff Mitchell stands inside his 20-foot Christmas tree made of twinkle lights at his Tennyson Court home off Knik-Goose Bay Road. Mitchell has created a Holiday Light show set to music as a way to help raise funds for the Boy and Girls Club of Mat-Su. His light extravaganza boasts more than 65,000 lights.

Mitchell contacted the corporate headquarters and requested a starter kit to spark his vision of bringing his brand of education and entertainment to the Valley.

“So now I go to the schools, present workshops, summer camps, weddings, funerals, any place you need a kid to get an education and have a good time,” he said. “I can do just about any kind of event.”

Mitchell said kids enjoy the hands-on booths in particular when he brings his zany show, mixing fun with a lesson. Rocket launches teach about gravity, plasma balls teach the properties of protons, tornado tubes teach about creating a vortex and the hair-raising VanDeGraaf generator about static electricity.

“Our goal is to get it to the kids table so they can have fun and learn,” Mitchell said. “The Christmas lights get that message across, I hope.”

Mitchell fancies himself to be quite the holiday junkie, relating his handiwork to that of Clark Griswald, from the film “Christmas Vacation.” Like Griswald, who fumbles and bumbles his way through Christmas to bring cheer to others, Mitchell has had a few unexpected mishaps with his electric light show.

“I’ve blown a lot of fuses, yes,” he said. “I stocked up though. Christmas lights have always been my drug of choice. Last year we did a much smaller display, but I knew that we were going to a fully computer animated project this year, so we wanted to put everything I could into this show — especially for the Boys and Girls Club and the community as a whole.”

Mitchell said those who come to check out his light show display will most likely be greeted by himself or a family member, bearing a candy cane and holiday cheer. Visitors also have the option of giving back to the Boys and Girls Club with a cash donation, but it is not required.

“I’m having fun with this, for sure,” he said. “This is my gift to you, so please enjoy it.”

Mitchell’s house is located at 5270 S. Tennyson Court in Wasilla. To get to the house, turn south onto South Vine Road off the Parks Highway to Kink-Goose Bay Road and turn right. Then turn right at Wellington Drive, left at Gladstone Lane and right onto South Tennyson Court. For more information on Mad Science or to generate a Google map with directions to Mitchell’s home, visit Madscienceak.com.

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