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Ron Kaye: Christmas lights and simpler times

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December 18, 2011

The spirit of Christmas past and present is alive and well on a modest, middle-class block in Burbank, where nearly everybody lights up their front yards with fantastic displays that would warm the cold, cold heart of the meanest Scrooge.

This Christmas Street isn't just strings of lights amid Santa Claus figures, sugarplum fairies and nativity scenes.

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There are animated displays, like a merry-go-round that turns, and trains that chug along, a Ferris wheel that seems to be rotating, thanks to flashing digital lights, a pop-up Santa jack-in-the-box and a 25-foot-tall Christmas tree made of wires and LED lights that glow in the night.

Welcome to the 500 block of North Florence Street between Clark and Verdugo, where Troy and Jennifer Fagnani and their kids Michael and Katherine won first prize in this year's Burbank Civic Pride Committee's Christmas display contest with their brilliantly lit Rudolph and reindeer on the roof guiding Santa through the night — the snow machine covering the grass in white fluff, the giant tree of lights and so much

more.

"This is a community effort, no doubt about it; friends and neighbors are always helping," Troy said as he showed a visitor around his magical masterpiece.

"I think a sense of community is something that's missing a lot today. It's gone, that's huge.... As much as I do this for my kids, for my family, for myself, the real reward is to see all the cars going by and the people who walk by and say some nice things."

This is the house Jennifer grew up in and bought from her parents 10 years ago because she "loved the community, loved the schools. I can remember as a kid seeing all the lights and how magical it was. It's still about as Mayberry as it is going to get."

Christmas on North Florence starts right after Halloween, when the displays start going up — a time-consuming task, given how elaborate so many of them are. They are also costly, sending electricity bills soaring and requiring extra circuit breakers and care to avoid blackouts.

"It feels so good to help put people in the Christmas mood, to sit here and watch them take it all in," Jennifer said. "We have carolers come to the front porch."

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Troy added, "It's kind of corny, but people from every walk of life come by and say thank you. It makes you feel you're giving something back."

The inspiration for the Fagnanis, and so many others, is Dick Norton, who lives across the street. Norton has been creating sensational Christmas displays for most of 40 years.

Norton and his protégé, Keith LaPrath, who learned the art of building animated displays as a teenager assisting his neighbor down the street, won the Civic Pride award so often they decided to stop entering the contest five years ago to give others a chance.

Now he helps neighbors with his technical skills with rope lights and motors and computer controllers to build their displays, and urges new arrivals to the neighborhood to uphold the tradition, "Thou Shalt Decorate."

"It goes back to being a kid growing up in Echo Park and my dad would take me out to the Christmas lights. I was mesmerized by the animated displays," he said, vividly recalling seeing a dental clinic display of a mechanical dentist with a drill in his hand swinging around to a mouth.

His front yard resembles an amusement park with all sorts of mechanical rides. There are even webcams visitors can connect to.

Many neighborhoods in the Los Angeles region that once drew huge crowds to see the Christmas displays are far less active today and Norton worries that is happening to the 500 block of North Florence.

"Ten years ago, almost every home was lit up. It looked like City Walk. The majority still are, but there's so much hustle and bustle today, so many distractions, so much anxiety and worry about the future ... I just don't know."

That is a sentiment so many of us seem to feel strongly these days, a nostalgia for simpler times when things seemed more stable and hopes for the future were higher.

The holiday season is a time to reflect a little on how we restore those feelings despite all the uncertainties we face today. Perhaps a place to start is a trip down memory lane to our own childhoods, when we were first mesmerized by the magic of Christmas lights.

RON KAYE can be reached at kayeron@aol.com. Share your thoughts and stories with him.



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