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## Christmas cheer

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BY AMANDA CREASEY ON DECEMBER 18, 2019

COMMUNITY

### *Huge light display brings neighbors together*

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This time of year, Chester residents driving down Route 10 might be surprised to notice a large, white cross glowing above the tree line behind Thomas Dale High School. As the wise men of old are said to have followed the star to the manger, an inquisitive motorist might follow the cross in the sky to the home of Gary and Deanna Smith, where it perches 100 feet up in the boughs of a pine tree in the family's front yard.

Said motorist would be well rewarded for the detour: The location glows with close to 100,000 lights, according to Mr. Smith, who uses "lots of 300- to 500-foot spools" to decorate his property. "There are 300 feet of ultra bright rope lighting just on the cross," Gary said.

Gary, who owns Orleans Co. Tree Service, said the festive feat would not be possible without the use of his spider lift and other equipment, as well as the helping hands of his employees, who assist every year with the raising of the cross to the treetop. Gary and his workers also help some of the nearby

neighbors decorate their yards, too.

Erecting the display is no easy task. In fact, according to Mr. Smith, he had a new electrical system installed on the home just to support his light display. "We got a whole new breaker box," he said, "and installed electrical outlets all the way around house. Probably 20-some boxes."

Typically, Gary begins setting up his lights at the end of October, with a goal of lighting up the display Thanksgiving night. This year, having started just two weeks before Thanksgiving, he is still adding finishing touches and perfecting the details. "Wrapping all the trees takes forever," he said, "and weather plays a big role." If it rains, the lights stay off.

Aside from his team's help with the cross and other elevated elements, Gary mostly works alone, though his 6-year-old daughter, Layla, assists with some of the decorating.

Deanna said, "Layla always says, 'Daddy I'll help you-if Mommy will let me.'" She often hesitates to allow Layla out in the cold and dark, but when Layla is permitted to help, she "helps decorate the Christmas trees and lays all the lights on the ground. She sets up the mailbox and the letter-writing table. She makes sure there are materials there for people to write their letters to Santa," Gary said. Layla even hand-delivers letter-writing materials to some of the neighbors, and he estimates they collect roughly 100 letters to Santa each season.

According to Deanna, "We all love Christmas, but Layla has Christmas fever even more so than [we]." Layla's excitement when her parents would drive her around to see Christmas lights or watch "The Great Christmas Light

Fight” on TV with her initially inspired the Smiths’ display, now in its third year.

“It’s really great to see all her friends come over and run through the yard,” Gary said.

The Smiths’ neighbors seem as enthusiastic as the children who visit the display. Deanna said, “Gary has really gotten the whole neighborhood in the Christmas spirit. We noticed some of our neighbors are doing a little bit more than they have before.”

Gary agrees. “They’re upping their game, too,” he said. “We see more spirit, more decorations.”

“It has really brought the neighborhood together and united everyone,” Deanna said. “Everyone comes out and talks, and it gets people more in the spirit.”

Gary is already planning a possible joint effort with neighbors for next year’s holiday display.

“I’m not gonna stop, you can believe that,” Gary said of holiday seasons to come. Even cancer couldn’t hamper his holiday spirit. Last year, he was diagnosed with kidney cancer. “We caught it really early,” Deanna said. “He had surgery, and he’s all good now.” Gary will attend a follow-up appointment in the spring. To honor the survivor in him, as well as those the couple know who have been touched by the disease, the Smiths added a new decoration to their display this year: a lighted cancer ribbon whose colors change to represent the different types of cancer.

Another prominent part of the display is the word “LOVE” spelled out in colored lights on the roof. “He wants to fill the neighborhood with love,” Deanna said of her husband.

At this, Gary smiled. “I love my neighbors and my girls. I love my girls. My best friends,” he said, patting Deanna on the knee. Gary also loves seeing people come by and enjoy his Christmas lights. “People stop by to say ‘Thank you’ and ‘It’s good to have you here.’ I love to see the community come by and enjoy it. To see the kids all happy. It’s pretty cool.”

This year, the Smiths have a special treat for the community. Weather-permitting, Santa will be on site at 6 p.m. on Dec. 22. Community members are invited to follow the bright, white cross to the home on Kiefer Road behind Thomas Dale High School and spend an evening with Santa Claus. “We’re easy to find,” Deanna said. “Just look for the cross.”

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