

A (Christmas) tale of two Bobs

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PLEASANTON -- Welcoming families to his Pleasanton home, "Santa Bob" Stanley stands on his front porch, passing out candy canes and glowsticks to children enchanted by the flashing lights and animatronic residents of "Bob's World."

Across town, retired software engineer Bob Widmer greets a line of bundled-up visitors to his brightly illuminated backyard. They walk the pathways through the production--formerly known as "Bob's World Too"--and are awed by its intricately detailed winter scenes, inflatable Santas and elves, and miniature golf course.

Two Bobs; two popular Pleasanton Christmas displays. Separately, they've come to be known as the top must-see holiday attractions in town.

Bob Stanley says he's been the caretaker of "Bob's World," but it's somewhere around 30 years. After his kids had grown, Stanley needed something to fill his time, and put out a few plywood decorations. It turned into a friendly competition with a neighbor.

"He gave up, and I kept going," Stanley said with a laugh.

Over time, Stanley added animatronic characters, miniature snow scenes, a nativity, and more than 50 wire-frame light-up pieces to his collection. The white-bearded Stanley also began dressing up as Saint Nick for neighborhood children. Today, his home is a holiday destination.

"Bob's World has become a city gathering place," Stanley said. "We get a lot of kids here."

Around the time "Bob's World" was taking off, Bob Widmer started hanging wood cutouts. Over time, he fashioned 20 unique scenes, opening his entire backyard up for guests to view them. Widmer and his family worked on this year's display since August, racking up hundreds of hours installing the lights, model trains, and miniature villages. There's a scavenger hunt to find hidden items in the displays, and the garage opens up for portraits with Santa Claus on weekends.

"It's not like we're Christmas nuts or anything," Widmer said. "We just kind of got into this thing by default. We just started building and never stopped."

Widmer's display was nameless at first, but then he started calling it "Bob's World Too," a reference to, but not to be confused with, the other popular Pleasanton home.

"Because I'm Bob and he's Bob, it's kind of strange," Widmer said with a laugh. "People thought we were brothers ... We'd see each other once a year to see what we could steal from each other."

When he found out there was a second "Bob's World," Stanley said he wasn't bothered.

"We don't try to compete with each other at all," Stanley said. "There are no trade secrets in this business."

To avoid further confusion, Widmer changed the name of his display to "Widmer World." He doesn't charge admission, but does accept donations to pay for his electric bill, and for charity. He estimates he draws 6,000-8,000 visitors annually.

Both men said they've received more traffic since being featured on CaliforniaChristmasLights.com, a website ranking light displays throughout the state run by Livermore resident Alex Dourov. Dourov said the two Bobs have a had a "friendly game of one-upmanship" going on, contributing to their popularity.

Proud of his annual production, Widmer said he's asked PG&E for a bigger transformer, but was denied, and says he's "run out of land and power."

With a corner house, Stanley is restricted from further expansion. Nearing 67, Stanley said though climbing the trees isn't as easy as it once was, as long as he has his health, he'll keep going.

"I enjoy all the smiles and making people happy; you don't have anyone coming by in tears." Stanley said. "That's why we do it."

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two guys named bob

BOB'S WORLD, 2612 Calle Reynoso Rd., Pleasanton, is open Monday-Thursday 6-9 p.m., and 6-10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays through Dec. 28. See a video at

<http://bit.ly/SlqbQS>

WIDMER'S WORLD, (also known as Bob's World Too), is at 671 Chelsea Ct., Pleasanton. It is open 6 to 9 p.m. daily through Dec. 31. For details, visit <http://www.widmer-world.com/>