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See best-decorated homes on Web site

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MANY FAMILIES, I'm sure, share the seasonal tradition of bundling up, getting into the car and driving to look at the exterior displays of particularly well-decorated homes in their communities. Thanks to Alex Dourov, creator of "Lights of the Valley," the guesswork has been removed from this activity.

In 1999, after choosing what he felt were the best-lit homes in his area, he founded lightsofthevalley.com and published it on the Internet. The site, now in its ninth year, includes homes in all the Bay Area counties. In 2003, the site underwent a complete redo and had 36,679 users, its record so far. Featured in local magazines and promoted on radio stations, the site added homes in Antioch and Bethel Island in 2004. The following year, homes in Brentwood, Pittsburg and Rio Vista appeared on the site. In 2006, the second-best year for the site, it featured 122 homes in 32 communities and six counties.

This year marks the third overhaul of the site, with more than 300 homes in 75 communities and 14 counties. One added feature, "House of the Day," shows a "handpicked" house each day from Nov. 23 to Jan. 1. To submit a house, e-mail (with photos) lights@lightsofthevalley.com. Name, address, city of display and a summary about the display (including any special features) are necessary, along with any Web site or video links. Dourov notes that the best photos are shot at dusk; a tripod should be used (no flash), and a self-timer eliminates camera shake.

Dourov mentions that he is always looking for volunteers to find the best-decorated homes in their communities. The site is not affiliated with any outside organization. There is no voting for "favorites" and no prizes given, nor is there a charge for listing.

I feel fortunate that my family has never experienced hunger, poverty or homelessness. Our closets hold jackets, coats, sweaters and more, a testament to our ability to buy what we need. Many families, however, could use some help this holiday season. Now in its 17th year, Coats for Kids, a partnership between the Salvation Army and News 10, seeks coats for children and families. So far, 10,717 have been collected, but the goal is 30,000.

Gottschalks is the local drop site for Antioch, with Friday the final day to donate. All collected coats will be cleaned and then taken to Cal Expo. From there, they will be divided among the various local Salvation Army venues, with Jan. 3 designated as handout day.

Perhaps you can take a few minutes to survey your and your children's coats and jackets. Maybe you have one (or more) to spare (in good condition, of course), ones you have grown tired of but that someone else could use. Children grow quickly; what no longer fits your child may work for another. If you would like to make a cash donation in lieu of a coat, mail your check to Salvation Army Coats for Kids, P.O. Box 340699, Sacramento, CA 95834.

Or you can call the Antioch Salvation Army at 925-778-0808 to find out how you can help with this drive. A weekend stop at the Salvation Army Angel Tree in Somersville Towne Center confirmed my suspicion: Many families still need generous and caring residents to help make their children's Christmas a brighter one.

While doing your last-minute gift buying, stop by the tree, pick a name and contribute to the joy of the season for someone you will never meet. If you have a child, take him or her along while you shop. It is never too early to teach our children the spirit of giving.

Maris Bennett is an Antioch resident. Her column appears every Tuesday. Reach her at stuckinthe60s@sbcglobal.net.