

AROUND SAN RAMON: MONICA LANDER

Charity the holiday highlight for San Ramon family

DRIVING HOME EACH NIGHT after ballet and dance classes, piano lessons, Scout meetings and school functions and meetings, I find it's always a treat to see the beautiful and often elaborate displays of lights and decorations. Thank you to you homeowners for giving my family such a treat each night.

ONE SUCH LIGHT SHOW spectacular began back in October, when many of us were still carving pumpkins. It's a must-see this holiday season. Located at the very end of Old Ranch Estates subdivision off Old Ranch Road is a house that is wired for Christmas.

Four electronic controllers accepting wireless control signals from the house power 110 strings of colored lights on 64 separately timed circuits. About 7,500 lights blink and shine to the holiday musical beat specially transmitted on the radio. And you thought your blinking snowman was cool!

Drive down the cul-de-sac on Knollcrest Court, turn off your headlights and tune your radio to 95.5 FM. A repertoire of six holiday songs from traditional Dean Martin's "Let It Snow" to the Trans Siberian Orchestra repeat every 30 minutes.

Homeowners Glen Hamilton, his wife, Myra, and son Derek, 12, take credit for this light show, which plays from 5:30 to 10 p.m.. The program is narrated by Derek, a seventh-grader at Pine Valley Middle School. A Bay Area resident for the past 30 years, and San Ramon resident for two, Hamilton says that light shows like his are a tradition in his native Tennessee. He takes the time to set up this show to raise money for a charity they select each year.

This year, the Hamiltons chose St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tenn., as the recipient of the money they raise. St. Jude's provides treatment to severely ill children whose families cannot afford to pay for treatment. Their light shows have benefited Muscular Dystrophy Association and the Red Cross in past years.

"We don't pressure people to donate," says Hamilton. "If they enjoy the display and move on, that is OK. But if they want to help some children with serious medical problems, we graciously accept." Donations can be dropped off in the lock box in their front yard.

Hamilton adds that his family matches the amount they collect by Jan. 1 with their personal contribution and says that no portion of the money goes to pay for the display or electric bill.

If you can't drive by the Hamilton house, you can still enjoy a video of the house that includes one of the songs by logging onto www.metacafe.com/watch/330861/christmas_lights_timed_to_music. This Web site is used to distribute the video, raise awareness of the charity the Hamiltons support and generate revenue for the charity. The Web site makes a contribution to the charity each time someone logs on to view the free video.

The Hamiltons' house is also featured on <http://lightsofthevalley.com/>, a Web site that lists homes in the area with unique light displays.

Hamilton has spent the past 20 years as an engineering executive, involved in several start-up electronic companies in the Bay Area.

He says his "expertise" in creating elaborate music displays can be attributed to his present career as an electronics engineer and his past career as a musician.

It takes Hamilton a weekend to set up the lights and two hours to choreograph and program the lights to one minute of music. An average song takes about eight to 10 hours.

To answer any inquiries about the light show, to help promote the charitable cause, match contributions or donate, contact lights-of-hope@sturdylink.com.

YOU CAN'T TALK ABOUT HOLIDAY LIGHT DISPLAYS without mentioning Villa San Ramon's annual Luminary Light Show, which lights up the December sky so much that even Santa can't miss it.

Now in its 20th year, the neighborhoods of the Villa San Ramon subdivision across from the San Ramon Community Center off Alcosta Boulevard will switch on their spectacular light displays while more than 2,000 luminarias line the streets Saturday beginning at dusk.

"We're excited to bring some holiday cheer to the San Ramon community," says Jim Plewa, president of the Villa San Ramon Homeowners Association. "It's nice to share the spirit of the season."

About 150 of the 160 houses in the subdivision participate in this lighting extravaganza, which all started with a decorating contest between a few homeowners. Twenty years and thousand of lights later, you have a holiday tradition that, says Plewa, "has its own loyal following."

Decorations spill out of front yards onto street name signs, stop signs and light poles with many lights strung from neighbor to neighbor across the street.

If you drive through the neighborhood, please remember to drive slowly and with caution. Or better yet, Plewa suggests parking and entering the neighborhood at Overlook or Woodland drives. Walking along the streets is a great

way to enjoy all the decorations and holiday cheer. Who knows ... you might even bump into Santa himself!
Reach Monica Lander at 925-743-2205, or write to her in c/o the Times, P.O. Box 607, Pleasanton, CA 94566, or e-mail landerfamily@sbcglobal.net