

Web site lists 'must-see' houses with light displays

By Jennifer Gokhman, STAFF WRITER

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Thousands of people have found the Lights of the Valley Web site and some of the best places to look at lights in communities throughout Northern California.

The man behind the Web site is Alex Dourov. He and his family moved to Livermore in 1999. Being new to the area, they didn't know where to look for good light displays, so they checked local newspaper listings.

"Some were fantastic, but some were stinkers," Dourov said.

Dourov decided to start a Web site. He took the list of where to find lights from the newspaper, took photos and put them online. He contacted a friend, Jim Hampton, who worked at KKIQ and asked him to check out the Web site.

Dourov said the radio station staff liked it and promoted it on the radio.

The site started with about 25 houses and has more than 350 in communities in the Bay Area, Stockton and Sacramento areas and as far south as Fresno.

Dourov looks at newspapers and Web sites to see where the best lights are. He has people helping in various communities to take photos of houses to put on the site.

"I love it," Dourov said. "I love the joy of getting e-mails from people telling me how much the site helps them."

He wakes up at 5 a.m. each day,

makes coffee and checks the site to see how many unique visitors there were the previous day and where the traffic came from. People out of state visit the site and then e-mail him saying they're coming to visit relatives and asking which houses are his favorites.

Nine-thousand people visited the Web site the first year, and Dourov thought that was great. The number rose to 36,000 one year and is up to 50,000 unique visitors this year. Dourov attributes the rise to promotion from the radio stations and their Web sites, word of mouth and the press.

Over the years, Dourov, who owns a Web design company, has spent an increasing amount of time on the site.

Before the launch this year, he and his team of a couple of programmers spent 100 hours doing an overhaul of the site to add new features. This year they added a House of the Day. The featured home is displayed on the Web site, and there is coding available for people to put the House of the Day on their own Web sites. It is also featured at the top of three radio station's Web sites.

In addition, there is a key that goes with all the houses, so viewers can see which ones have an FM broadcast, more photos, video, and so on. Some are marked "must see," including Deacon Dave's, a perennial favorite in Livermore, and the Pleasanton rivals Bob's World and Widmer's World, aka Bob's World Two.

Also, people can type in their address and find directions to the home they want to see.

Dourov balances the Lights of the Valley work with his regular work.

"My family has gotten used to seeing a little less of me this time of year," he said.

He often works on the site on weekends and evenings. He does it all for free, and costs come out of his pocket.

"It takes a lot of time, but to me, it's worth it," he said. "I know from the comments that people enjoy having this service readily available to them."

When Dourov receives submissions for houses, he looks for those that are unique.

"Most people put up a couple of strings of lights and a reindeer," he said. "I'm not looking for just a Griswold house, but it can be a Griswold house. Or it can be elegant."

Bob Stanley's house is more than a Griswold house. Stanley, of Pleasanton, has put on a show called "Bob's World" at his home every year for 18 to 20 years. His home can be seen on the Lights of the Valley Web site, but it has to be experienced. He said that people can walk through his yard to look at all the displays. This year, he has animation going on in the garage and in a tent in his yard. A snowman blows snow in another area. Santa comes sometimes, too. Stanley estimated that 200 children and their families visited his home Saturday night.

"I've had a lot of new visitors this year," Stanley said, attributing the increase to Lights of the Valley, which he says is an important service for new people.

He also attributes the increase in new visitors to word of mouth, even from Bob's World Too, a display across town.

Stanley says there is no competition between them.

"We all try to do something different," he said.

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