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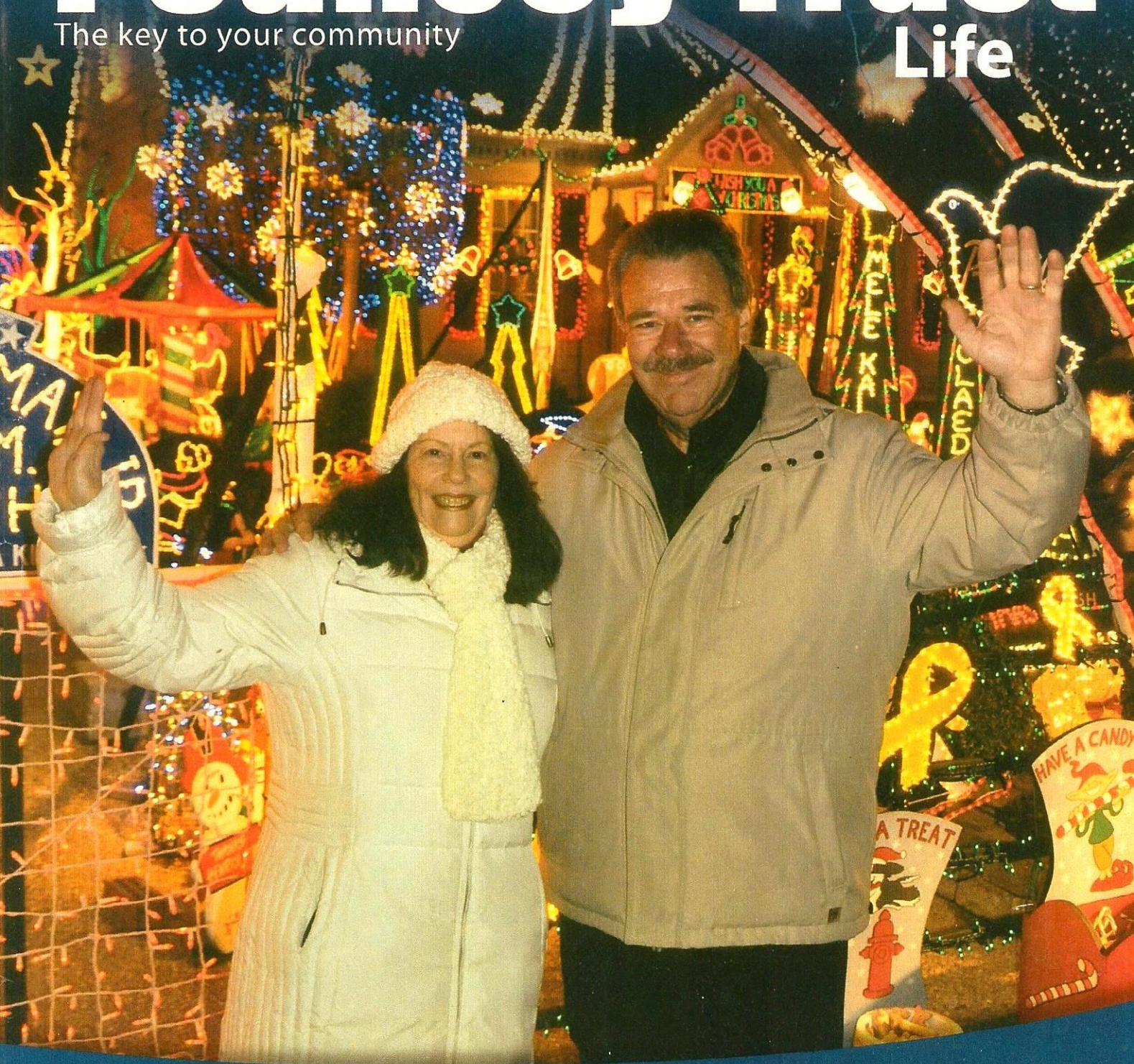
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Winter Wonderlights

Meet One of the Reigning Kings of Tacky Christmas Decor

A Festive Phenomenon and the Man Behind It

With his amazing Christmas display, Al Thompson has won awards and made connections around the world.

by Doug Callahan
Editor

When people think of the joy and struggle of putting up an elaborate display of Christmas lights, thoughts often turn to Clark Griswald's frustrating illumination in "National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation." Well, if you haven't been down Wendhurst during the holiday season, then you might be surprised to know that a house in our community is putting Griswald's to shame.

"It is an honor to be part of Richmond's Tacky Light Tour and watching Richmond's title of 'Tacky Light Capital of the World' grow throughout the years," says Al Thompson, the man behind the lights and decorations. "The Learning Channel, CBS Sunday Morning, Fox News, NBC Nightly News, USA Today, Businessweek, Forbes, AOL and NPR have been to Richmond over the past few years and it has been fun being a part of all of that."

The house, commonly referred to as "Christmas on Wend-

hurst," is like something out of a fairy tale, and that look is not one that happens easily. Thompson says it all started with a simple suggestion from his wife, one that he originally rebuffed. "Let's put some lights on the bushes." A sentence that changed our lives," says Thompson. "It was December, 1999. We had just completed a limo tour to see the Christmas lights of Richmond. Esther, my wife, was inspired and now eager to upgrade our candles in the windows and wreath on the door to new heights of Christmas decor. Working 70-80 hours a week, I said, 'No, where am I going to find time?' Guess what. Lights were put on the bushes! So much for 'no.'"

And as you can see, it didn't stop there. "From those first few lights, Christmas on Wendhurst has grown to our current display. Slowly at first with a single reindeer added in 2000, then a second reindeer and two spiral green trees in 2001. A few more decorations were added over the next couple years until 2004 when we had a major increase to 93,000 lights."

And with those lights, he suddenly noticed a new connection with the community around him. "With the added lights came something we did not anticipate; the human side," Thompson says. "When we switched on the 93,000 lights, we were excited to see people stopping and getting out of their cars. I said, 'Let's go out and talk to them.' We talked to those first visitors and have been out there almost every night since. We have spoken to people from down the street, across Virginia, the USA, and all over the world. Our Christmases have been made so special because of the people we have met and the friendships we have made."

For those keeping track, his current count is up to 170,000 lights, along with 726 homemade decorations.

Continued on next page



The display doesn't stop in the front. This is a view of the backyard.
Photo courtesy of Christmas on Wendhurst



Even the Grinch gets into the spirit.
Photo courtesy of Christmas on Wendhurst



All of the classic Christmas characters gather at Christmas on Wendhurst.
Photo courtesy of Christmas on Wendhurst



Christmas on Wendhurst boasts 170,000 lights and 726 homemade decorations.
Photo courtesy of Christmas on Wendhurst

Continued from previous page

So what is it that motivates this over-the-top decorating? Jeff Peters, web designer and photographer for Christmas on Wendhurst, thinks it's a combination of things. "I think, for him, it's a challenge," Peters says. "Since he's retired now, it's kind of like his second career. And he really enjoys that challenge. He really enjoys working with his hands on the homemade decorations. He's pretty meticulous, which you can gather. But I think it's also just seeing how it affects people. He talks a lot about how he has met so many people through the process that he

never would have imagined. People love it, and I think that's what keeps him going."

Indeed, Thompson does seem to be most passionate about the connections he has made because of the decorations. "Somebody from every state in the union has signed our guest book, as well as 111 foreign countries," Thompson says. "Each evening, we turn the lights on, and I walk out and stand right there and talk to people from all over the world. I've been doing this for years, and still, when we come back in and turn the lights off, I'm just amazed."

With these meetings and connections came a new kind of decoration, which no one would ever dare call "tacky." At first, the decorations just look like Christmas fun, but if you look closer, you'll find touching tributes and memorials throughout the display. "Close to 10 years ago, there was a neighborhood boy – at that time, he was seven years old – and his mother died right after Christmas," Thompson says. "So, I built a piece for him. It was an elf holding a sign that said 'Daniel's List,' and it was a list of things for Christmas. The little boy's name is Daniel. He's about 16 now. His family and us have exchanged Christmas presents every year since."

"Then another one was after the Virginia Tech Massacre," says Thompson. "One of the people that got killed in that was Rachel Hill from Henrico County. At the time, I was making a little snow girl, so I named her Rachel Hill. I put Virginia Tech on the back. Her family has been by to see it."

"Then, there was Annabelle Bryant," says Thompson. "I was

What about the electric bill?

\$1K

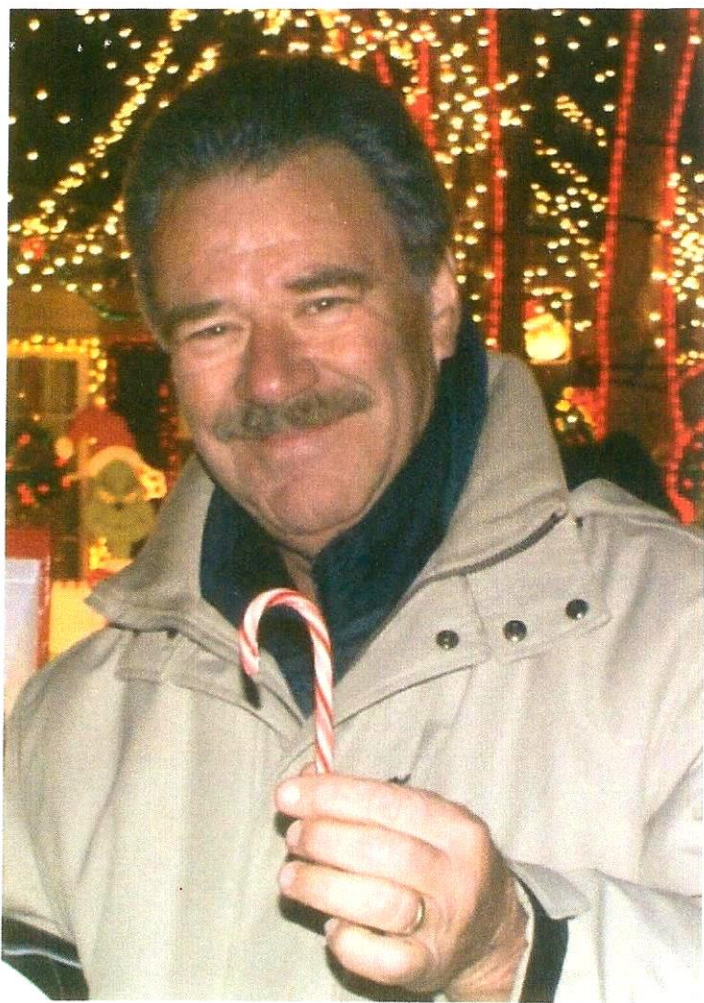
Al Thompson says the electric bill is usually a little over \$1,000 for the season, with last year's coming in at \$1,200.

365 Days of Christmas

As you might have guessed, this display doesn't exactly go up or come down in a weekend.

A year-round process

"Displaying 170,000 lights and 726 homemade decorations is not easy," says Al Thompson, the man behind Christmas on Wendhurst. "From the first week of September until Thanksgiving, we put everything up. It's about a two-and-a-half-month process. Usually about 500 hours. Then, we have it up all of November and all of December. Then, taking it down runs us into February. Then, from February into sometime in March, it's maintenance and repair. I go over every single light on every single strand and replace anything that's out. Any colored lights that might be faded get repainted. Anything that needs to get repainted gets repainted. That's about a month of work. This last year, it took us all the way into the first week of April. Then, we take a vacation. And when we get back from vacation, I start building things for the next year, all the way until I start putting it up again. We go year-round."

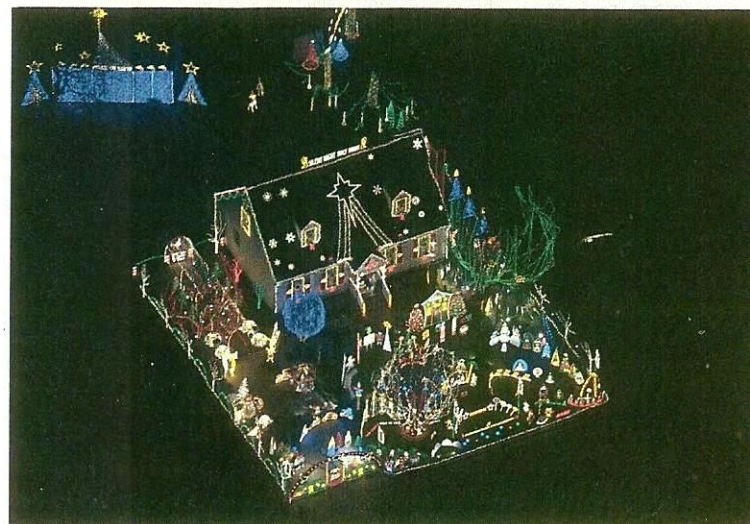


Al Thompson takes a much-deserved break to celebrate the season.
Photo courtesy of Christmas on Wendhurst

talking to the uncle of Rachel Hill out in front of the house. A friend of the Bryants overheard what I built for the Hills. So she asked me if I would do something for Annabelle Bryant. I told her I would like to meet the family first and get permission. And we did, and I built a piece for Annabelle. She was backed over in her driveway about six years ago. She was two-and-a-half years old. Her family comes by every year. I always look forward to seeing them and getting my hug."

"Then, about six years ago, there was a comment in my comment book, written by a lady whose son had gotten killed in Iraq," says Thompson. "She wrote in my comment book that it had affected her so badly, but standing in front of my house and looking at my Christmas lights lifted her heart and made it a little easier on her. I'm a veteran myself, and I contacted her. The arch that's in our driveway is now the Donald May Jr. Memorial Arch."

And with these memorials, as with his other decorations, Thompson has touched hearts and brought smiles to many. And isn't that what the season is all about? As Thompson puts it, "We did not have a clue when we began that this would bring joy to thousands and such satisfaction to ourselves."



The view of Christmas on Wendhurst from above.
Photo courtesy of Rick Kidd

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what you

THINK

hibumagazine.com/survey

Another Look at Christmas on Wendhurst

Every holiday season, Al Thompson and company put together a dazzling display of Christmas lights and decorations. The spectacle known as Christmas on Wendhurst is actually a year-round process of installing, removing, repairing and fine-tuning. For more, check out the story on page 14.

One of the many things that make Christmas on Wendhurst special is the fact that Al Thompson has built 726 homemade decorations by hand.

Photos courtesy of Christmas on Wendhurst



In addition to the homemade decorations, the display also boasts a staggering 170,000 lights.
Photos courtesy of Christmas on Wendhurst