

Homeowner mixes holiday tunes with light show

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By Mike Shaw

DUBLIN David Allen Kinder doesn't walk around wearing an elf costume like actor Will Ferrell in the movie "Elf," nor does he stick to the four main food groups of elves: candy, candy canes, candy corns and syrup.

But Kinder, a 28-year-old software engineer, admires Ferrell's elfin movie character "Buddy."

"His famous quote is, 'the best way to spread Christmas cheer is singing loud for all to hear,'" Kinder said. "I can't sing worth a lick, so I decided playing the radio was the next best thing."

For three years now, Kinder has been broadcasting Christmas music on the 103.9 FM frequency within a few hundred yards of his home on Pine Grove Drive in Dublin. He brings Christmas cheer to New River Valley residents with his Christmas light show programmed to the beat of the songs he broadcasts during his show "DAK Lights."

This year, Kinder's light show includes songs from Michael Buble, MercyMe, Mariah Carey and Trans-Siberian Orchestra. In the past, the show has included Metallica's "Enter Sandman," among other songs.

The show usually begins on Thanksgiving night and continues through New Year's Eve. That means for the 2012 season, the light show will run for 40 days from 6 to 10 every night.

Kinder has always loved Christmas decorations, according to his mother, Kim Kinder of Dublin.

"As a little boy, he would decorate his room with paper chains that he would spend hours making and hanging from the ceiling, around the furniture, and over the doors," she wrote in an email. "As he got older, he decorated our home, would put up the Christmas tree for his grandparents and decorated the church."

His love for the holidays has made him somewhat of a celebrity around town.

"I've had kids at church or around town come up to me and ask me if I'm really David's mom - then they tell me how much they loved the Christmas lights," Kim Kinder said.

The idea for the light show was introduced to David Kinder a few years ago as a joke.

"I saw a YouTube video sent to me by a friend as a joke and recommended I do that for my new house," Kinder said. "I always told myself I'd give it a try when I owned my own home, so it was now or never."

Kinder thought putting together a light show was going to be too difficult for him to pull off, but given his background in software he found the project to be right up his alley.

"I found a company online that specializes in Christmas light displays," Kinder said. "They had everything needed to start from scratch and a plethora of tutorials, instructions and videos for a newcomer like me."

Kinder began with a basic bundled package of software, two controllers and 32 circuits.

Now, Kinder has three times the circuits and controllers, as well as a number of software programs to run the show.

For the radio broadcasts, Kinder purchased a FCC Part 15 Compliant "whole house transmitter" online for about \$120, which allows him to broadcast within a few hundred feet of his house without a license.

But the work begins months before Christmas when Kinder begins planning and assembling the show.

Kinder's programming begins in August, and the amount of hours spent on each song depends on how complex that song is. A simple song with four beats per measure could take just a few hours.

A more complex song like Trans-Siberian Orchestra's "Wizards in Winter" usually takes between 30 and 40 hours to program because of its fast tempo and usual pairing with chasing lights, Kinder said.

The process is much more involved than programming one song at a time. In fact, Kinder has to plan for an 18-22 minute loop of songs that is both audibly and visually appealing to a wide range of visitors.

"I start thinking about it during the summer and solicit suggestions from family, friends and Facebook followers, who normally generate a pretty good starting list," Kinder said.

Kinder said he also takes suggestions from those who stop by to see the lights but has to remember the limitations of his house in regard to the amount of power and space involved.

"Planning and prep work is key and usually takes several weeks," Kinder said. "I diagram everything out on posters and assemble as much as I can indoors on PVC pipe segments for easier installation outside."

Once Kinder has the final layout, he begins installation and testing, which takes about 20 hours. For installation, he takes a few days off work before Thanksgiving to get it ready for the season premiere.

If programming, designing and installing the light show weren't enough, Kinder has to be conscious of his annual costs. But the light display doesn't cost as much as one would think, he said.

"After the first year, I got smart and decided to buy everything I needed for the next year right after Christmas to save 75-90 percent off," Kinder said.

Kinder said most of this year's raw materials such as C9 bulbs and thousands of feet of wiring were purchased during a Memorial Day clearance sale from an online Christmas light retailer.

"I won't speculate on what the total cost has been over the years," Kinder said. "Then, I'll realize I can't afford to add more next year."

Other costs include the electricity required to power his light display.

But Kinder estimates his power bill for the month of December only increases by about \$40-\$50.

"Once you've seen the show, you'll understand that all the lights aren't on all the time," Kinder said. "They flash on and off to coincide with beats of the music. If all the lights were on simultaneously, it would be about 6,800 watts of consumption."

Kim Kinder said her favorite song in the show this year is from the Christmas classic film "Miracle on 34th Street," a family favorite.

David Kinder said the number of visitors varies from week to week, but attendance will likely increase closer to Christmas.

Sometimes, he can't even make it into his driveway and said he does a few laps around town before he's able to return home.

But that's OK with him.

"The best part is hearing from everyone who visits that it helped to put them in the Christmas spirit," Kinder said.

"Christmas is about sharing the joy and the love that Christ has given us, so to hear that the light show has done that for someone else makes it all worthwhile."

For more information on the light display, visit www.daklights.com.