

Christian Homeowners Win Legal Battle Over Nativity With 200,000 Lights and a Camel

Jeremy and Kristy Morris believe telling the story of Christmas is a ministry.

So they drape their home in Hayden, Idaho, with more than 200,000 lights and set up a live nativity – complete with a real camel – on their lawn.

Santa makes an appearance, too. So did some Roman centurions, who collected donations for charity.

The live nativity has been so popular that the couple pays for a shuttle so people can see the show.

And the people come, hundreds at a time. They take photos, drink cocoa, sing hymns and hear a short Christmas message before making way for the next group.

None of this, however, thrills their neighbors.

The Morris family and their homeowners' association landed in a legal battle over the issue, and although the dispute was recently resolved in favor of the family, this year's live nativity is on hold.

It all started in 2014 when the Morrises put on their first show, which then was in a different part of Hayden, about 45 minutes outside Spokane.

"At that first show we saw God's hands move," Jeremy Morris said.

Morris said he always struggled with what he was supposed to do for his Christian faith. Seeing families turn out in droves for his Christmas display helped him understand: this Christmas show was his calling. He could use it as a way to witness to people, he said.

So the couple decided to buy their current home, which is almost twice the size of their former home and had more room for the Christmas show. They told the West Hayden Estates Homeowners' Association about their plans so the neighborhood could start preparing for the 2015 display.

That did not go well.

The Morrises received a letter warning that the Christmas lights show could lead to "expensive litigation" because it would break neighborhood contracts regarding lighting, property uses, sound and traffic.

The Morrises claim they aren't breaking those rules.

One line in the letter made them suspect the dispute was also about religion.

"I am somewhat hesitant in bringing up the fact that some of our residents are non-Christians or of another faith, and I don't even want to think about the problems that could bring up," the letter from the HOA read.

Jeremy Morris, an attorney who once interned for a Christian legal firm, knew that fighting the HOA would be costly and time-consuming. After praying, the couple decided to fight.

"I made a big deal out of it because it happened to me," he said. "But how many (other cases) are there that no one hears about? Maybe it's a Christian flag or a statue of Mary."

In 2017 the Morrises sued the HOA in U.S. District Court in Couer d'Alene, Idaho, for allegedly trying to block their Christmas display.

The HOA countersued. The jury found the association guilty of discriminating against the family during and after the purchase of their home. The Morrises were awarded \$60,000 in compensatory damages and \$15,000 in punitive damages in November by a federal jury.

Representatives from the HOA declined to comment.

The association is submitting papers to have the judgment dismissed, according to the court. The Morrises, meanwhile, are seeking to have their home de-annexed from the subdivision.

Richard Mast, an attorney with Liberty Counsel, the Christian legal organization where Jeremy Morris interned, told the Couer d'Alene Press that the Morris case is of great significance because it's one of the first times when the free exercise of religion around Christmastime has gone in favor of the homeowner, adding that the case will have nationwide effects.

The father of two has decided to dedicate his life to fighting cases like his own, he said.

"So many Christians are saying, 'Thank you for standing up – let me tell you what happened to me,'" he said.

Meanwhile, the couple is making plans for the future. This week, Morris posted photos of sets for a future version of the nativity on Facebook.

"Big plans for our Christmas show as soon as we move out of this anti-Christian HOA," he wrote. {eoa}

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