

Florida Family's Christian Celebration Offends City

When it comes to holiday decorations, Kathy and Mark Hyatt go to extremes.

In December, they transform their home in Plantation, Florida, into a 200,000-light spectacle, with Santas, reindeer and candy canes blanketing the lawn, snowflakes and angels twinkling in the sky, and a sign over the garage beckoning visitors to "Believe in the Magic of Christmas."

The reaction of some neighbors and their city? Bah humbug!

"This is a war zone, all because of the ego of that guy," said neighbor Rafael Imbert, 65, who erects a plastic construction fence to keep the thousands of sightseers lured by the lights off his lawn.

Disputes over holiday displays go hand in hand with the annual tradition. One person's festive spirit can bring out the Grinch in others, leading to fines, strained relationships and – in rarer cases – lawsuits claiming that decorations have gone too far.

The Hyatts are the target of such a lawsuit: The city of Plantation, about 30 miles north of Miami, is seeking to shut down their display that it deems a public nuisance. The couple is not backing down.

"They believe it engenders goodwill and a bond between the community," said their Fort Lauderdale-based lawyer, James Helf.

In Ohio, a man has disregarded his critics by again erecting a nativity scene on his lawn portraying Jesus, Mary and Joseph as zombies.

A Maine homeowner used lights to spell out ISIS, prompting calls to police last week that the person might be a sympathizer of the Islamic State militant group. As it turned out, the display included a Santa appearing to urinate on the letters with a stream of white lights, local media reported.

The popular Osborne Family Spectacle of Dancing Lights display is ending its run this holiday season after two decades at Disney's Hollywood Studios in Orlando. More than 2 million lights that belonged to late Arkansas philanthropist Jennings Osborne found a home in Florida in 1995 after he was sued by neighbors and ordered by courts to take down most of his decorations.

"EXTREME CHRISTMAS"

In Plantation, Mark Hyatt, a mortgage banker and father of two, said he caught the decorating bug from his devout Catholic parents.

His family starts planning their "Hyatt Extreme Christmas" display in July, begins decorating in October and switches on the lights the day after Thanksgiving. On weekends in December, they welcome visitors inside the gates of their circle driveway for a close-up look at their collection, including a miniature Ferris wheel Hyatt built.

"I have kids who came here when they were little and now are coming back with their own kids," he said. "That's the coolest thing of all."

His neighbors are less enchanted. They say strangers knock on their doors asking to use the bathroom, cut through their property to see the display and leave trash in the street — complaints Hyatt contends are untrue or exaggerated.

Several residents on the cul-de-sac said they are forced to flee their homes when the crowds become unbearable.

The city of Plantation sued the Hyatts in 2014 on the grounds that the “carnival-like atmosphere” was incompatible with the neighborhood. A trial has been set for April.

A city spokesman declined to comment.

Recent visitors were happy to see the lights still shining.

“It makes me feel like a kid again,” said Chris Coburn, 37, of nearby Davie, Florida.

Dennis LaFrance, 40, who drove 30 minutes with his three kids to see the display, said he could understand the frustration of the Hyatts’ neighbors.

“But to make it go away altogether is kind of Scroogy,” he said. {eoa}

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