

10,000 lights spread cheer

By Catherine Godbey Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, December 23, 2014 12:15 am

The decorations at Harrison Street Southeast started small — well, small by Thomas Terry's standards.

"There were about 10,000 lights on the house in 2005," Terry said. "The most incandescent lights that have been on the house at one time have been 26,000. You could get a sun tan in the front yard at night."

In the past nine years, Terry, his partner Tonya West and her son Desmond have maneuvered through blown fuses, broken light bulbs, handmade window frames and Christmas trees and synchronizing the lights to songs — something Weeks agreed to in 2008 as long as "I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas" made the song list.

The hundreds of hours Thomas spends every year, year after year, is worth the sounds and sights of delight emanating from outside the home.

"Like Tonya says, there are kids out there that never get to see a movie or get presents. This is free for people to watch and listen to. It is something people and community can look forward to each Christmas as long as I am able to do it," Terry said. "Hearing teenagers sing to the pop songs or the smaller children laugh, that makes me happy."

Songs range from "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" by Brenda Lee and "You're a Mean One, Mr. Grinch" by Boris Karloff to "Gangnam Style" by Psy and "Let it Go" from "Frozen."

"I put up the lights for my neighbors, friends and family and the community in general to hopefully produce a few smiles and give a little bit of free entertainment," Terry said.

The shows start at 5:30 p.m. and run until 10:45 p.m. Sundays through Thursdays and 11:15 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays at 2220 Harrison St. S.E. For more information, visit www.lights.tbonerex.com/Christmas.

Behind the scenes with Thomas Terry

What led to synchronizing the lights and music?

It was Christmas 2007, and Desmond and I were putting up a few lights in the freezing cold weather and I said it would be cool to animate all these lights to music and watch them in your car. I thought that would be more appealing to viewers than just staring at a lot of lights. There were no shows in our area at the time doing it. I asked Tonya about animating all the lights to music. By then she had helped put up some lights and some candy canes and stuff and realized I

was nuts when it came to projects. She said OK, as long as the “I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas” song was in the show. It has been in every year.

What is new this year?

I replaced all my tomato cages with PEX tubing rings. I put LED strips on them and used PVC pipe to make them appear in the dark to be floating in air. I made a 3½-foot star that has three smaller stars inside the larger one, so I can make it appear to explode out. The huge addition is the 16-foot smart pixel strip tree. It has been a spectacular success. The kids and adults alike seem to love it.

Why do you take on such a huge display year after year?

I like the challenge of making it all work. I just love hooking it all up and the satisfaction of a successful idea turning into something enjoyed by others. Tonya has made me quit all my other hobbies since this is such a big one. I still get to build cigar box guitars and model airplanes, though.

Do you have a favorite section of songs?

Tonya likes any of the songs on the new tree and so do I. I like whatever the hot new top 40 songs are that gets the kids excited. “The Fox Song” and the “Frozen” songs seem to get the best reactions this year. I also enjoy basically any of the traditional Christmas songs everyone knows the words to and can sing along with. It wouldn’t bother me to hear everyone jamming out in the front yard.

What holiday memory stands out to you from your childhood?

Putting up lights with my dad, going to my grandmother’s house and seeing all my relatives and eating way too much food. My mom loves family and loves sharing and giving gifts, so I remember how happy she was if her three sons were happy on Christmas Day. Going out to find a Christmas tree in the middle of nowhere in the family van stands out as a memorable adventure, although I am not sure we were supposed to be cutting the tree from where we were. I still insist on putting up a real tree every year. I am happy that Tonya likes that, too.

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If you go

What: Automated Light and Sound Christmas Display

When: Sundays through Thursdays, 5:30-10:45 p.m.; Fridays and Saturdays, 5:30-11:15 p.m.

Where: 2220 Harrison St. S.E., Decatur