

Elves untangle holiday chore

Customers can hand over a check and flip a switch for a warm glow.

By PAUL SWIDER, Times Staff Writer
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Decorating Elves designs, hangs, services and stores Christmas lights for its customers, who pay for the convenience and wow factor. Palm trees are a specialty in the decorating business, Nick Schriver says.



ST. PETERSBURG- Nick Schriver remembers untangling Christmas lights in the cold on the farm in rural Ohio. His family would always put a big star atop the grain silo 40 feet in the air so the decoration could be seen by neighbors miles away. He also remembers checking strings of lights for that one bad bulb.

"I can't believe we ever did that," said Schriver, 28, who now runs Decorating Elves, which decorates people's houses for them. "Lights have come a long way since then." So has Schriver. In 2002 he decorated 66 homes in Columbus, Ohio. Today he's in the midst of the pre holiday flurry to serve about 150 area clients. With projected sales of \$250,000 and 50 percent growth per year, Schriver is hoping to franchise the business, but first, he has to hang 2-million lights.

Schriver, 28, got the idea for Decorating Elves while looking at exotic displays on huge homes. He figured those rich people couldn't have done that work themselves. He created fliers and promised neighbors a no-hassle experience for a few hundred dollars. "I didn't charge nearly enough," Schriver said. "If I did that now, I'd be out of business."

The typical customer pays about \$1,200, Schriver said, but that includes a custom design with 10,000 to 15,000 lights. The elves bring the lights, set them up, fix them if they break, and take them away after the holidays. Schriver said most customers are busy people who already farm out things like landscaping and laundry.

"They don't have time for this, but they want their kids to enjoy it," he said.

Judy Holland fits that description. She's raising two children while her husband works long hours as a lawyer. They decorated their Allendale home themselves until four years ago, when they were struggling with some lights just as Schriver drove by for a job down the street. "We were still working on our hedges two hours later and he was done," she said. "I called him the next day." Holland says her family doesn't have an extravagant display, just something to accent the Santa Claus she paints on their picture window. "They do it and it's creative and they're gone," she said. "And the lights just work."

Schriver is running his 15 elves ragged right now, especially before Thanksgiving, when most people want their lights arranged. That weekend he gets most of his service calls after everyone turns their lights on for the first time. He keeps working feverishly until the middle of December, after which it's no longer worth putting up a display.

Schriver will do \$600 jobs on small homes, but he'll also decorate several mansions with as many as 80,000 lights each. Most of his clients are residential, but about 20 percent are businesses or organizations like condominium associations.

"We went through a couple companies before we found Nick," said Linda Belote, the social chairman of the Bacopa Bay condo association. "I can't tell you how difficult it is to find someone to do this." Schriver has put some lights on Bacopa Bay's guardhouse, but Belote said budget shortfalls did away with decorating the palm trees. She said the \$500 job will still look nice, but she was hoping the association could do more.

Palm trees are something of a specialty in the decorating business, Schriver said. They're not as hard as they look, just time consuming, but there are some secret techniques he has learned over the years. "I can't give away all my tricks," he said, "or I'd be out of business." Schriver was asked about those tricks at a recent convention of amateur decorating enthusiasts who make up planetchristmas.com. The group helps others figure out the details.

Everyone wants the picture-postcard layout, but most people can't get it done, he said. And some don't need it.

Paul Swider

Fast facts

Decorating Elves

Call: (866) 445-6202 or (727) 418-4127.

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