



More than 30,000 Christmas lights illuminate the Burlington Township home of Ron Murdza, pictured, with his family — wife Marie and children, Joey and Alexis.



Ron Murdza

USED TO BE LIKE MOST of us, come the holidays. He would place a string of lights here or there on his house, then return to the warmth of the indoors. That changed seven years ago, when Murdza, a fire captain in Mercer County's Hamilton Township, decided a strand or two wasn't enough. His Burlington Township home is now outfitted with more than 30,000 Christmas lights, transforming it into the kind of place Santa would want to put first on his list for a visit. If you feel the same way, directions to the Murdza house and info on when the display will be running can be found at burlingtonlights.com.

1 | Besides a huge dose of the Christmas spirit, what inspired this display?

It began with me just putting up lights — that was when my wife and I were first married 19 years ago. But then it got to the point where I wanted to do more. One day, I got this thing from Home Depot. It was a little speaker called a Show Box. Basically, you plug six strands of lights into it and it blinks, with music coming out of the speaker. That's

what led me to go bigger and get into more technical lighting displays, and doing my own programming for the songs and lights. It's odd because I have no background in lighting. I'm a firefighter.

2 | What has the evolution been like? I assume seven years ago your house decorations were nothing like what visitors will see this Christmas.

Every year, we've added songs. We started with about four or five songs and now we have about 25 songs on our list. The amount of lights has gotten bigger, too. Now, I have more than 30,000 lights on my house come Christmas time. It's hard to say how many people roll by the house, but we accept donations for the Burlington Township Food Pantry from visitors. So, I use that as a basis for the crowds. Every year, we collect more money — we usually get at least \$2,000 a season — and the amount of food that comes in, now I load my truck up and take it to the food pantry pretty much every day.

3 | The way your display synchronizes with music is an interesting component.

Yeah, that's one of our calling cards. You can sit in your car and keep the windows up because there are no speakers outside the house. You turn your radio to a specific frequency that I have on a sign out front and basically listen to the radio as you're in your car and watch the lights as they sync with the music. ... People think I have my own radio station. I have an FM transmitter, but I can't use so much wattage because, if I did,

I'd actually have to clear it with the FCC and get a license. The range on the transmitter is three or four blocks and, once you're in front of the house, you can really enjoy it.

4 | We've all struggled to untangle a knotted-up ball of Christmas lights. How do you organize and store 30,000 lights?

Well, I'm a very organized person. But I've tried to do as much as I can to make things easier. For instance, I have lights around every window — a set of red lights, green lights, a set of multicolor lights and a set of blue lights. So, what I found was easiest to do was to build frames out of PVC and the lights are mounted on those frames. I can take the frames up on the roof and secure each, and the whole window is done. The gutter lights — I have thousands of lights just on my gutters. So, I found it easier to mount on special piping that attaches right on my gutters. As far as storage in the off-season, my whole garage is filled right now and the basement is filled. There are a lot of Rubbermaid containers filled with Christmas lights, no doubt. That image of someone struggling with a ball of lights? I was like that for the first couple years. By taking it to the next step and making it easier to install and take things down, that really made it easier on me. To put all the lights on my gutters used to take me six to eight hours. Now, it takes me an hour and 15 minutes. I still start putting things up in October, so there is time involved — just not as much.

5 | What about that situation where there is one light on a string that is burned out and the whole setup needs to be rewired? I'm thinking of Clark Griswold here.

That's funny because Griswold is my dog's name. Most of the lights I have, I've made myself. I don't have that problem where one bulb causes them all to go out because I buy bulk string that has the sockets ready for the type of bulb I use, like a C9, which is the larger Christmas bulb. I put my own plug-ins on all of them, so I can have the exact lengths I want for a specific part of the display. A lot is homemade. Every light has a channel and a plug. I don't just make Christmas lights, I also make all of my own extension cords.

Next issue: John Gallucci Jr., chairman of the New Jersey Council on Physical Fitness and Sports