

Lighting the Way for

Nothing declares the yuletide better than a crisp evening lit by gaily bedecked houses that sparkle and twinkle in the night. But for many of us, the Scrooge inside dreads the undertaking of hauling out the ladder and untangling those strings of lights that somehow managed to curl and twist among themselves while they lived (you thought quietly) in the attic during the offseason. And for many, it's hard to even find the time to get the job done, much less actually take them down before spring.

For those people, there's an ever-growing cottage industry that has sprung forth that offers all of the "oohh ahh" wonder of having a fully lit house to herald the season, without any of the hassles. One such business, Lakeside Twinklers LLC, wants you to know that they are your Christmas light installation specialists. They come in the dead of winter, just like Santa, or probably more aptly, like Rudolph, to spread Christmas magic to the hills and dales of East Texas.

Lakeside Twinklers, the brainchild of two Dallas firefighters, Lt. Lance Cockrell and Capt. Jason Cook, was formed back in 2004. They were taking a class together and heard from another firefighter who had started a holiday lighting business and he was doing pretty well with it. It seemed ideal for them, since firefighters generally have blocks of time open with their typical schedule of one day on and two days off. So, initially, Lance and Jason researched the industry and decided it would be a great way to earn some Christmas money. That first year, they started off quite slow, with Jessica, Lance's wife, hand-making a few fliers and concentrating on the residential market. Since then, they've secured a growing customer base of both residential and commercial customers, which include a diverse

mix including churches, car washes, homeowners associations and others. And like the jolly man in the red suit, they do get around, with installations anywhere from Dallas to Tyler to Lindale to Greenville, and almost all points in between, such as the Lake Fork area and around Mineola.

Lance's home base is in Mineola, so on his time off from the fire department, he really enjoys doing jobs close to home so he can spend more time with Jessica and their lively bunch of boys, 6-year-old Connor, 3-year-old Nathan and 1-year-old Evan. And Jessica explained that it adds joy for the

some of their dad's handiwork.

Lance says the first thing he and Jason do when serving a customer is give an estimate. They listen to what people say and give suggestions to those who want them. Then they come up with an estimate that either includes using the customer's lights or new commercial-grade or residential-grade lights that Twinklers sells. Lance said they offer high-quality lights inexpensively, since they buy in bulk, and they carry all the replacement bulbs. For first-time customers, buying from them prevents many front-end problems and saves the customer trips to



whole family because, "The boys absolutely love Christmas lights." So, she says, one of their family traditions during the holiday season is to take the long way home after church to view the various neighborhoods that are known for decorations, and to possibly see

the store for more lights or bulbs. It also ensures good compatibility with the various strings of lights, thus avoiding mistakes that many make, like plugging various-sized strands together. For example, a 50-light strand plugged into a 100-light strand



Santa

will cause the 50 count to burn out much quicker.

Right now, Lance says, increasingly when customers are making a lighting selection, they choose to go with the newer technology LEDs. He's says they've finally become much more prevalent, and thus affordable at only about 25 percent more than conventional lightbulbs. But, because they require about 80 percent less electricity, it's a smart choice, and customers will likely recoup that investment their first holiday season in electricity savings. He says another great feature of the LEDs is that they are much more durable

safely, as opposed to just about 400 feet for regular bulbs.

Once a customer has agreed on an installation project, Lance and Jason carefully map out a custom plan, which is provided to the customer at the end of the job, in the event that those customers want to try their own installation the next year. Lance and Jason suggest that customers also invest in plastic storage containers for their lights. And if they do, the pair will pack the lights along with the plan when they come to take down the installation.

Also, whether a potential customer decides to go with their business or another, both Lance and Jason encourage them to ask for references and to hire only insured installers. References are particularly important, Lance says, because many new businesses spring up each year around the holiday season. And while they may get your lights up, they could fail to return and take them down and pack them for storage—and they've already been paid.

Being firefighters first, and also having paramedic training, Lance and Jason also bring an important set of knowledge and skills to their seasonal business. With their training and experience, heights are not a "fear factor" for them, and they can easily accomplish two-story installation jobs quickly and safely. Lance says that one of the most frequent injuries at holiday time involves falls, especially from ladders. And, he added, that's why he always works with a partner, and he recommends that practice to others any time a ladder is in use.

On Christmas safety in general, both Jason and Lance are experts with their years-long experience and professional training as first responders. In that vein, Lance offered some great advice about some actions to avoid fires, shock, electrocution or other

tragedies. He says his No. 1 tip for celebrators is that if you decorate with a live Christmas tree, it's extremely important to keep it watered. Natural live-cut trees get very dry and, he remarked, "It's amazing how fast they burn and how hot they get so very quickly." Another common mistake, he said, is those who decorate with candles and put them near curtains or other flammable materials. Extreme care should be used with placing candles, he said, and lighted candles should never be left unattended. Also, back to the lights, he said, "People really need to pay attention to amperage. Go by what's on the box, and don't overload with lights."

Beyond the satisfaction of doing a job safely and with integrity and pride, Lance says he derives a great amount of satisfaction from this job because most people put up lights as something joyful for their kids or grandkids.

"It's just a special time of year," he said. "It's nice to know that you are adding to people's holidays and that it will be a fond memory for them, and maybe even part of a tradition."

The topic of lights brought out his own childhood memories: "Dad somehow always picked the coldest and windiest day for us to put up the lights," he said with a chuckle.

If you live in East Texas and want to recapture a little of the wonder and magic of Christmas, but are afraid to face that tangle and mangle of lights in your attic, or just don't like heights or are not inclined to face cold and windy days on the rooftop, Lakeside Twinklers hopes you'll give them a call, since they are used to it all.

Lakeside Twinklers has headquarters in Mineola and serves all of Wood County Electric Cooperative's service area. To learn more, go to the website at lakesidetwinklers.com or contact them at (903) 569-4048.

Jessica and 3-year-old Nathan Cockrell help Lance perform a light check at their house before the busy season kicks in for Christmas installations by Lance's business, Lakeside Twinklers.

with their fade-resistant and shatter-proof polycarbonate bulbs. Owners won't likely ever need to replace the bulbs over the life of the LED strand—another cost saving. Also, he says, LEDs are so much more flexible, because about 5,000 feet can be strung together

How Is Your Home's 'Physical Fitness'?

The “physical fitness” of your home can make the difference between soaring energy bills or comfortable savings this winter.

An energy-efficient home is a strong defense against winter winds, rain, sleet, snow and chill while also protecting the environment by cutting wasteful energy use. A home “energy diet” benefits your pocketbook and the planet, notes the Alliance to Save Energy, which offers consumers step-by-step home physical fitness tips to cut energy bills and increase comfort:

Plug Energy Leaks

- Plug air leaks with sealant, caulking and weatherstripping to increase your comfort, make your home quieter and cleaner and reduce your cooling and heating costs.

- “Insulate” yourself from price shocks. Appropriate insulation can increase your comfort and reduce your heating costs up to 30 percent. Start with attic insulation, followed by exterior and basement walls, floors and crawl spaces. Insulate and seal attic air ducts.

- Go “window-shopping” at www.efficientwindows.org to discover how high-performance Energy Star-labeled windows can cut heating and cooling costs by as much as 30 percent while increasing indoor comfort and keeping your home furnishings from fading.

- Refinancing your home or obtaining a home equity loan to remodel? The big news is home decorating and remodeling. Consider wrapping in energy-efficiency home improvements to your refinancing package. Interest could be tax-deductible, and you could reduce your monthly energy bills comfortably.

Use Heating Wisely

- Consider replacing a faulty or inefficient HVAC system with a unit that has earned Energy Star certification. Installed correctly, these high-efficiency heating and cooling units can reduce heating and cooling costs

by up to 20 percent.

- Let a programmable thermostat “remember for you” to automatically coordinate the indoor climate with your daily and weekend patterns. This reduces heating costs by some 10 percent when you’re home and saves energy when you’re not.

- Open curtains and other window treatments during the day to allow sunlight to naturally heat your home; close them at night.

- Look for the Energy Star label, the symbol for energy efficiency, when replacing your heating and cooling systems—as well as appliances, lighting, windows, insulation and home electronics. Find retailers near you at www.energystar.gov.

Lighten Up Efficiently

- Popular halogen torchiere lamps are relatively inexpensive to purchase but are expensive to operate and can cause fires. Consider safer, more efficient Energy Star torchiere lamps instead.

- Don’t like coming home to a dark house on short winter days? Instead of leaving lights on, put timers on a few of the lights in your home, or install motion detectors and daylight sensors. Motion detectors on exterior floodlights improve your home security at a lower operating cost.

- Replacing four 75-watt incandescent lightbulbs with 23-watt compact fluorescent lightbulbs that use two-thirds less energy and last up to 10 times longer saves \$190 over the life of the bulbs. If all our nation’s households did the same, we’d save as much energy as is consumed by some 38 million cars in one year.

- Turn off everything not in use: lights, TVs, computers.

The Alliance to Save Energy is a coalition of business, government, environmental and consumer leaders who promote the efficient and clean use of energy.



Buy the Ultimate Gadget for Your Electronics Lover

There’s always one person who seems impossible to buy for around the holidays: the electronics lover who already has every TV, DVD player, sound system, computer, printer and handheld gadget you can think of.

Rather than add to the collection, try a creative gift that will help the technology lover on your list manage and protect those expensive electronics.

For someone who has the ultimate home theater or office, buy a smart power strip that cuts down on “phantom” or “vampire” power—the small amount of electricity that electric devices use even when they are turned off or put in sleep mode. The strip will have one control outlet for a computer or TV and additional outlets for printers, fax machines, speakers, DVD players and the cable box, for example. When the TV is shut off or the computer enters sleep mode, the strip will cut power to the other outlets. This not only makes it easier to shut off all electronics at once, but it will also save the lucky recipient money on power bills, effortlessly. Most strips come with separate outlets that don’t shut off with the others—for devices like clocks that need to run all the time.

To encourage your gadget lover to save money on larger appliances like refrigerators and flat-screen TVs, give a watt reader, such as the Kill-A-Watt, which will reveal the home’s biggest energy guzzlers. Plug the device into the wall and plug appliances in one by one to find out how much energy each appliance is using in real time. By multiplying the electricity used by the cost of electricity (which can be found on the monthly power bill), your electronics whiz can find out how much money it costs—or saves—to flip each appliance on or off.

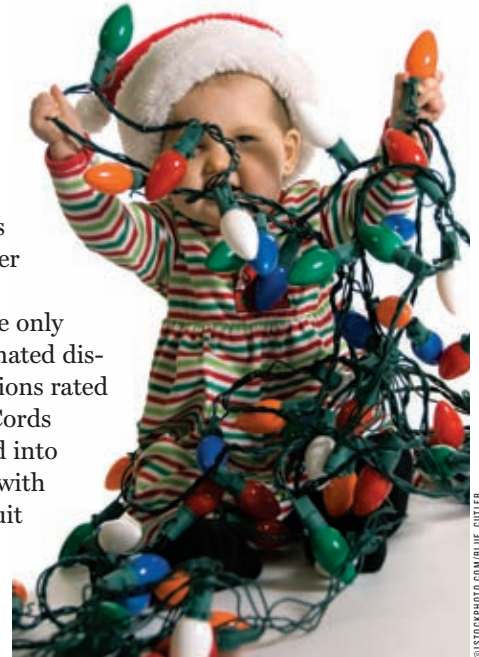
KEEP HOLIDAYS LIGHT AND MERRY

Countless celebrators enjoy decorating for the Christmas season. And along with the tinsel and ornaments, most add a bit of flair with electric lights. There's almost nothing more satisfying than enjoying a day of decorating with friends and family, culminating in that moment of wonder when everyone gathers and the lights are illuminated. At Wood County Electric Cooperative we want to ensure that none of that joy is diminished, so we offer some important tips and precautions from SafeElectricity.org and Texas Electric Cooperatives. Keeping safety first and foremost will ensure your lights shine brightly while all remain safe and your property remains sound.

- Use only lights that have been safety tested and have the official UL label. Buy these lights from a reputable company, as some cheap imports can masquerade as UL rated when they are not.
- Before use, check each light string for broken sockets, frayed cords or faulty plugs. Replace, don't repair, damaged strings.
- Extension cords should also be in good condition and UL-approved and rated to carry the electrical load connected.
- Always unplug light strings while replacing bulbs.
- Never string together more than three standard-size sets of lights.
- Match plugs with outlets. Don't force a three-pronged plug into a two-pronged outlet or extension cord.
- Do not overload outlets. Use surge protector strips if multiple outlets are needed.
- Keep electric cords away from high-traffic areas, and

don't run them through doorways or hide them under rugs or carpets.

- Outdoors, use only lights, cords, animated displays and decorations rated for outdoor use. Cords should be plugged into outlets equipped with ground-fault circuit interrupters (GFCIs). Use a portable GFCI if your outdoor outlets are not so equipped.



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Be sure to use holiday decorations safely.

- Never staple or nail through light strings or electrical cords or attach cords to utility poles.
- Don't let children or pets play with light strings or electrical decorations.
- Place fresh-cut trees away from heat sources, such as heat registers, fireplaces, radiators, and televisions. Water them frequently.
- Never throw holiday lights or other decorations into trees near power lines.
- Always unplug lights before going to bed or leaving your home.
- For more information on electrical safety, visit www.safeelectricity.org.



MERRY CHRISTMAS

from

WOOD COUNTY
ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE



WE WISH YOU A BLESSED AND
JOYOUS CHRISTMAS SEASON.