

Person of the Week



Joe Petrowski's
using Christmas
lights in July to raise
money for Guilford
Food Bank2

Displaying American Ingenuity

Patriotic Display Supports Food Bank

PERSON OF THE WEEK

By Pam Johnson
Courier Senior Staff Writer

He's 16 years old, but Joe Petrowski can already put about 10 years experience on his lighting design resume.

"My mom says I've been doing Christmas lights since I was six or seven, when I decorated our mantel. I still don't know why I started, but every year, I did more," says Joe, an incoming GHS senior.

Last Christmas, word-of-mouth brought droves of viewers to a computer-programmed, multidimensional Christmas display outside Joe's Valley Shores Drive home—a 20,000-light dazzler, orchestrated to music piped into car radios via FM transmitter. By adding an announcement that the display sought to raise money for local charities, Joe gathered nearly \$800 in contributions. The money was donated to Guilford Animal Shelter and American Cancer Society's Shoreline Relay for Life.

Fascinated by the possibilities of using his lighting designs to help charities, Joe's branching out. His current focus is raising money for Guilford Food Bank, with an all-American Fourth of July display through July 21.

"It's all red, white, and blue, with about 6,000 lights set to five songs," says Joe.

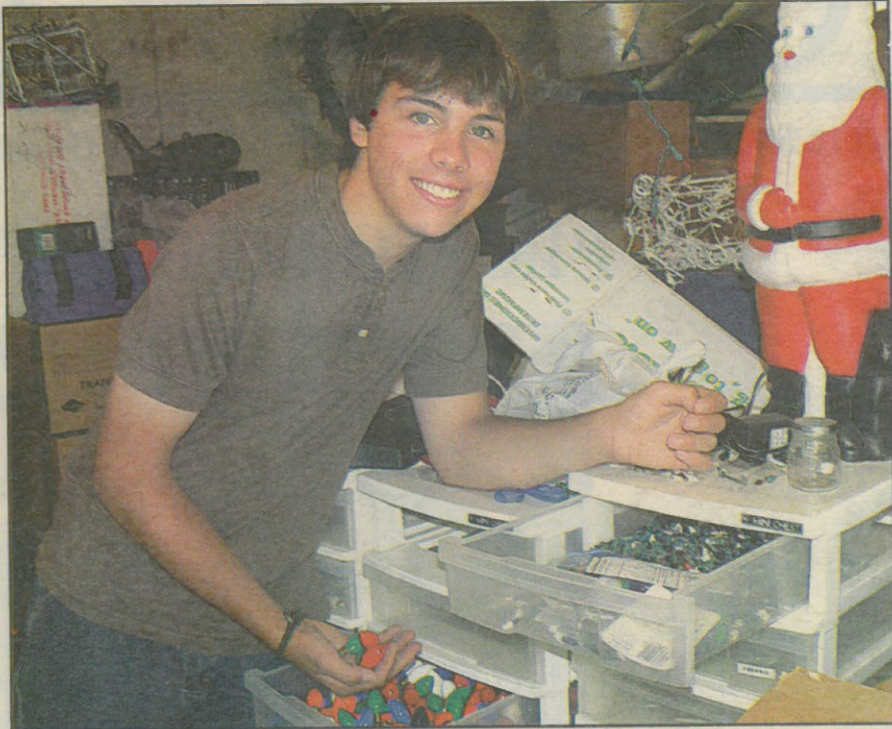
Aw, only 6,000 lights and five songs this time? Well consider this—every minute of music takes about an hour of computer programming to synchronize display elements that allow lights to dance to the tempo and react to certain lyrics.

"It does take a while to coordinate the lights," said Joe, who designs using commercial Light-o-Rama computer software, which runs from his laptop computer to three, 16-channel control boxes and a total of 48 circuits.

As Joe humbly describes it, "I just tell the computer what to turn on. It sends the message and flips the switches on and off."

Asked if neighbors enjoy the lighting displays, Joe notes quite a few lights are contributed by them, adding, "I think everyone's behind me."

Each design starts with a working sketch. Joe pulls ideas from an inventory of dozens of elements and thousands of



Outside his Valley Shores Drive home, Joe Petrowski's built a patriotic light and music display to help raise money for Guilford Food Bank. Through July 21, viewers can drive up, tune in to an FM station setting, and watch the lights dance to songs celebrating the U.S. Donations may be left in a collection box outside the home. Photo by Pam Johnson

lights in his design arsenal, stored and organized in the family garage and greenhouses.

"My mom and I go to a lot of tag sales and get good deals, and I think after Christmas is my favorite day to shop. This display has red, white, and blue lights I had my eye on at Christmas time."

This past Valentine's Day, for example, Joe produced a lighting display including red and pink Christmas trees found at Dec. 26 bargain prices. "Love Stinks" flashed across the family domicile, in time to the J. Geils Band tune.

As a one-man operation, building any lighting show is time-consuming, Joe admits. For his Fourth of July display, running since July 2, "I started at the end of school, about June 15," he says.

The Petrowski's house is currently draped with electrified strands of red, white, and blue bunting and the letters "USA." Patriotic light arches grow from the ground, stars hang in trees, and an all-electric American flag seems suspended in mid-air. Joe created colorful fireworks bursts and his red, white, and blue "America" sign by punching holes in boards and feeding lights through.

"It pops on all white and outlined in red and blue, at different times in different songs, like during Neil Diamond's 'America,'" he explains.

Joe guesses his "artistic concept"

approach is why people seem to enjoy his work, adding that he's inspired by cutting-edge lighting pioneers, Transiberian Orchestra.

"They put a rock twist on the music and they have a lighting palette that's amazing."

Joe's designs have led to invitations to create displays for others, including a neighbor's recent GHS graduation party. In 2006, his Halloween light and sound show ran outside the Guilford Lakes Haunted House of Juan Mogollon and Jeff Tusch, and was enjoyed by about 1,000 people.

Joe plans to attend college and study theater lighting design. This year at GHS, Joe will be running crew chief for GHS Theatre Arts, coordinating scene and set changes. But for now, Joe's just hoping people will come enjoy his latest creation and help support Guilford Food Bank.

"Even though it's after the Fourth of July, I'm sure if people know about it, they'll want to see it."

Joe Petrowski's patriotic lighting display and Guilford Food Bank fundraiser is at 163 Valley Shores Drive (off Nut Plains Road), Sunday through Thursday, 8:30 to 10 p.m., and Friday and Saturday, 8:30 to 11 p.m., through July 21.