

*Jeff Trykoski programming
the lights at Frisco Square
photo by Chris Frutchie*



Behind the Sparkle: The Big Business of Bright Lights

By Lynda Haschke

A FUNNY THING happened on the way to writing about the business of Frisco Square's Christmas lights...as it turns out, it's not really a business at all. In the way that Santa's Workshop isn't really a business...but more like a dream factory.

The foreman of Frisco Square's holiday lights dream factory is 32-year-old Jeff Trykoski. He is, quite simply, a man who loves Christmas. His expression of that love started innocuously enough: by decorating his parents' Houston home each year with lights. Then in 2001, Mr. Trykoski and his wife Bridgette, a

production coordinator for the Wall Street Journal, bought their own home in Frisco and, as he puts it, "took it to the next level."

First, it was just lights...lots and lots of lights. In 2004, the Trykoskis added music and synchronized it with the now computer-controlled light show. Their 2005 "Wizards in Winter" display became world-famous when it was posted on YouTube in August of 2006. Since then it has received almost 1.7 million hits.

Mr. Trykoski added more lights and designs each year, and in 2007 brought

out the big guns: a high-output snow machine that created an instant winter wonderland. But not every night...no, that would be too predictable. There's no surprise in that. And Mr. Trykoski is big on surprises. To him, adding little secret elements to his display each year serves to heighten the mystery and delight of Christmas, creating indelible holiday memories.

Pretty soon word spread throughout Frisco that the Trykoski's house was the place to take the family to experience a little holiday magic. He put up a website – www.friscochristmas.com – so folks could know when it was time to come by. This not being a business, there is no set schedule for when the lights will be up. It depends on when the couple's friends and family— usually 15 or more folks – can get together on a weekend to set everything up. Hopefully this year it won't conflict with the Trykoski's anniversary on December 11th – but if it does, as it did last year, that will be all right. After all, it's something they're in together; they both feel the responsibility that comes with being a part of so many children's Christmas memories.

In 2005, one of the cars driving past the Trykoski's home belonged to Jim Leslie, Managing Partner of Frisco Square. He went into work the next day and told Bob Shaver, his new Senior VP of Marketing and Community Relations, to "hire this guy" to consult on the first Christmas on the Square in 2006.

"Finding Jeff was my first job assignment," recalls Mr. Shaver. "Every year it is wonderful to contemplate what will be happening in the Square, and thanks to Jeff's ideas and the generosity of our sponsors and owners, each year brings something new and inspiring."

Planning for the annual Christmas in the Square display starts in March. Mr. Trykoski sits down and views video of the previous year's work and starts to

lay out ideas for the upcoming season. He uses autocad software and has scanned into his computer the schematics of all the Frisco Square buildings. He methodically plots the placement of each string of lights, each snowflake, each design element, including the routing of its power source.

The first year Mr. Trykoski did the Frisco Square lights – 2006 – a storm with 60-70 mph winds hit the week before, so he’s learned a lot about securing lights to buildings. Frisco Square Development management provides him with pieces of granite and stone so he can test adhesives. It is a testament to his thoroughness that this immense light show has never blown a circuit breaker or even a fuse because of too much load.

Once the design is completed and approved, the light elements are ordered. Then he concentrates on the task of choosing the music to accompany the light show, aided by his brother Greg and wife, Bridgette.

“We have hundreds of holiday music CDs and listen to hundreds of songs,” says Mr. Trykoski. “Greg puts in lots of hours on the headphones, and choreographs the music with the lights. We narrow the selection to ten songs or so, and present our ideas to Frisco Square management and the City, who have the final say.”

All the equipment ordered in the spring has arrived by July or August. Construction starts in mid-September and is directed by Bobbi Welsh, who heads up Frisco Square’s Retail and Office Management Department. Mr. Trykoski oversees everything, usually from a roof (at least that’s where he was whenever I called him).



Installing lights at Frisco Square

photo by Chris Fritchie

From October through November, lighting Frisco Square becomes Mr. Trykoski’s second full-time job. He does have a real job, which has nothing to do with lighting, and which we cannot mention here because his company has a policy against its employees telling people in the media where they work. It’s not a government job, but it’s close... Fortune 100.

During the October/November “crunch time,” Mr. Trykoski puts in evenings and weekends, and counts on some of the aforementioned family members to help as well. In fact, as he was being interviewed for this story on a Saturday in late October, his brother-in-law Keith strolled in to “lighting headquarters” (Frisco Square management office) with his son, three-year-old Brayden. With the construction crew completing its installation, the

next couple of weeks are set for “plug and play” to make sure every light works. That takes a lot of time...and a lot of relatives. Today, he’s got Keith and Brayden – and ten minutes after they arrive, it’s down to just Keith. Turns out Brayden got bored – but, like the rest of us, he’ll be back later when the job is done.

Much like his home display, Mr. Trykoski’s goal for Christmas in the Square each year is to take it to the next level. In 2008, that translates into:

- More than 150,000 lights, 11 miles of wiring and eight miles of extension cords
- A canopy of lights over Coleman Blvd. that contains more than 21,000 lights
- More than 200 lighted snowflakes adorning Frisco Square buildings
- And new for this year: a series of arcing, leaping lights in the Coleman Blvd. median plus snow machines that will turn

the square into a winter wonderland each weekend.

The 2008 Christmas in the Square kicked off on Friday, Nov. 28 and runs through January 1, 2009; the hours are from 5:30-10 p.m. nightly. Last year, more than 325,000 people visited the annual choreographed holiday lights and music display – the largest in Texas, according to Bob Shaver. This year, that number could burgeon to more than 450,000, especially considering the fact that Christmas in the Square is free.

“This will be a tough Christmas for lots of people,” says Mr. Trykoski. “We do this to create happy memories for kids.” Actually, the Trykoskis create more than memories – in 2007, they collected more than one ton of food at their home for Frisco Food Bank/Frisco Family Services. Those visiting the Trykoski’s home holiday light and music display this year

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will find a canned food collection box located next to their mailbox; everything they collect will again go to Frisco Family Services.

"We don't take cash, but we do ask that anyone who comes over to see us bring a can or two of food to donate to this great charity," Mr. Trykoski noted. "People have tried to give us cash, but we don't want to be responsible for that – if you have a little extra, send it directly to Frisco Family Services or purchase some canned goods to leave with us."

If all goes according to plan, Mr. Trykoski and his family will have the lights up on their house – located in Hillcrest Estates at 4015 Bryson Drive – after the first weekend in December. You can visit their website – www.friscochristmas.com – for this year's hours and the correct FM frequency to hear the music that accompanies the light show.

In his own quiet way, Mr. Trykoski has become somewhat of a nationally-known figure in holiday lighting circles. "The world of people who do this is pretty finite," he explains. "We all know each other." He has traveled to other states to consult with churches and retail outlets. And, next October, he will be prominently featured in a book about Christmas in suburbia by Washington Post reporter Hank Stuever.

"Jeff and Bridgette are fascinating to me," says Mr. Stuever. "They don't have any kids, yet just about every kid in town knows their house."

Mr. Stuever, a two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist, could be called the Jerry Seinfeld of journalism – not that he writes about nothing, but what he does write about usually passes for ordinary to most people. He is all about examining otherwise unexamined lives. His first book, *Off Ramp*, is a collection of his columns about what he calls "Elsewhere" – roller rinks, malls, interstate food stops – places and pieces of our lives



about which he weaves insightful, often humorous stories that hold a mirror up to an America going about its daily business.

Mr. Stuever chose Frisco as the focus of his new book – its working title is "Christmas Present" – because "it's a new place with a retail economy that has spurred tremendous growth and with families who go all out for the holidays. It's a great place for a writer to poke around and take a good look." Mr. Stuever spent nine months living in Frisco in 2006-07 and kept hearing about Jeff Trykoski, the Christmas lighting guy. He contacted the Trykoskis and wound up spending Christmas day of 2006 with the couple and their extended circle of family and friends.

"Jeff and Bridgette are just very unassuming people and the scale of what

they've taken on just blew me away," says Mr. Stuever. "I mean, here's a guy with a full-time job, who's also working on his MBA at SMU, taking on a project the size of Frisco Square. It's a lot of work and a lot of pressure; there's so much that can go wrong. They don't even like to go anywhere during the holidays in case something happens. It's a huge responsibility and I hope he knows how much people appreciate it."

When Mr. Stuever's book comes out next fall, there will undoubtedly be more calls to Mr. Trykoski for his services. He maintains, however, that he doesn't want to turn it into a business. "It just wouldn't be fun if it was a full-time job," he says. "Plus, I really like my real job."

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