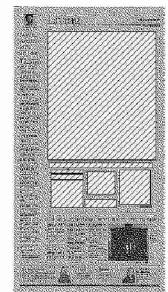


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When Christmas decorating becomes a contact sport

BY WILLIAM LOEFFLER
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Holiday disasters aren't confined to incinerated roasts, paroled relatives and regifted egg timers that are unwrapped by



the original giver.

For many families, the most spectacular holiday Waterloo begins when they attempt to deck the halls. Take a stressed and careless human being, a ladder and several strings of lights — and sit back and watch the fun. But make sure to warm up the car for the drive to the emergency room. And have your homeowner's policy handy.

Several area families have their own holiday war stories to relate. They include the tales of the lumberjack cat, a collapsing wall, and what might be the only case of a moving human being hitting a stationary train.

Janet and Paul Gieder knew better. The Avalon couple worked as respiratory therapists in a large hospital, where they would rotate into the emergency room at least once a week.

Janet Gieder, now retired, says she could tell when it was beginning to look a lot like Christmas because she'd see at least a half-dozen real-life Clark Griswolds hobbling into the emergency room.

"I'm talking broken legs, broken arms, broken bones," she says. "Those are only the ones that came in the hospital."

Paul Gieder didn't go to the hospital the year he fell off the ladder onto the couple's illuminated train set. The couple were stringing lights on their house during the coldest day of the season.

"I said, 'Just hold on a minute until I go in the house and get some warmer gloves. Of course, he got back on the ladder before I came back out. When I came back out, he was on the ground on the train. I started yelling at him, like, 'You just couldn't wait, could you?'"

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Part of her irritation could be attributed to the fact that she'd already been beamed by a chunk of ice that he'd dislodged from the gutter. Luckily, there was no bloodshed.

"Fortunately, I had gotten colder and, just minutes before, ran into the house to get a hat, couldn't find one, so I doubled a neck scarf and tied it, typical Babushka style, on my head," Janet Gieder says.

When they moved into their new log cabin in Cook Township last November after years of living in a cramped mobile home, Bev and Joel Jenkins relished the chance to bring home a huge Christmas tree for their

20-foot ceiling. In the middle of the night, they heard a strange whooshing sound, that roughly translated as "Timber!"

"Our cat Shasta decided the Christmas tree was meant for him to climb into, and his weight, approximately 15 pounds, was just enough to topple the tree," Bev Jenkins says. "We had to purchase a heavy-duty tree stand and nail the tree with wire to the wall and redecorate the tree. But believe me, it was worth it."

When Connie Close of Penn Township sent her son Gregory and his friend, Steve, to fetch a tree, they brought home one the size of a small municipality.

"We cut about two feet off the bottom," Connie Close recalls. "With the tree lying down, it stood about five feet high. ... We managed to shove it through the doorway while needles were flying everywhere."

Chris Crytzer of Robinson recalls the year the wall came down.

"I thought our 2-year-old son was jumping up and down, but I was wrong," says Crytzer, of Robinson. "It was the sound of the driveway wall crashing down."

Her husband, Bob, had gotten on top of their retaining wall to string lights on the house. The wall collapsed underneath him. He escaped uninjured, but that was the last year he ever put up outdoor Christmas lights.

Sometimes the pain is felt in the wallet. Gloria Calabro of North Union, Fayette County, never saw the appeal of erecting an armada of illuminated snowmen and reindeer on her front lawn.

Since her husband, Sam, passed away four years ago, she has lived alone, with only her English sheepdog, Freddie, as a companion.

"When I saw everybody else's houses one night, I

thought, 'Oh they look so beautiful. I really need to do something.' I thought, 'Sam would be so proud of me.'"

Calabro bought six boxes of plain white outdoor lights, at \$24.99 a box, as well as illuminated reindeer, candy canes and a 3-foot-tall candle. Her next-door neighbor said he would put up her outside lights for her. But there was a problem.

"He said I needed gutters," she says.

She had gutters and downspouts installed for \$750. But the white lights, strung along the gutters, didn't have the "oomph" she wanted. So she gave them to her neighbor and spent another \$158.94 on six boxes of icicle lights. With \$114 spent on extension chords, her bill for Christmas cheer came to more than \$1,100.

For three days, her house shone with a Christmas glow. Then she came home one night and saw that her icicle lights lining the roof were missing. Oh my gosh, she thought, somebody stole my lights.

Then she detected a faint glow and realized that the wind had flipped the icicle lights into the gutter. Her neighbor came back over and undid the wind's work, only to have the wind flip them back.

"All of a sudden, his phone must have broken, because he didn't come back," she says. "I think being a Scrooge is much simpler."

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Winning Griswolds

We randomly picked three contributors to our "Attention all Griswolds!" story to win a prize package that includes a special-edition DVD of "National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation," a set of "The Worst Case Scenario Holiday Survival Cards" and a first-aid kit. The winners are **Gloria Calabro** of North Union, Fayette County; **Jan and Paul Gieder** of Avalon; and **Chris and Bob Crytzer** of Robinson.

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CHRIS CRYTZER

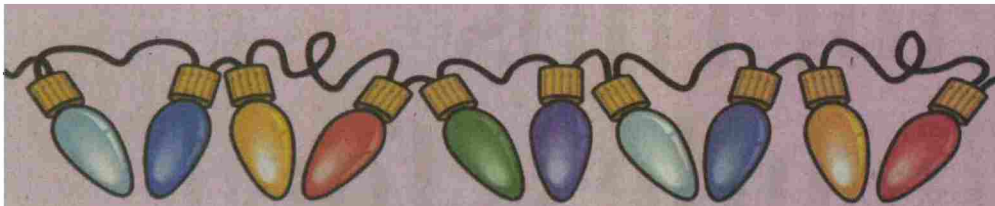
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Staying healthy and safe

The holidays can be hazardous. Shopping, baking, decorating and cleaning can amount to working a second job. The extra stress and lack of sleep can affect the immune system, increasing the risk of catching a cold or flu, especially during the winter months. We also risk overeating, slipping on icy sidewalks and straining a muscle while putting that star on top of the Christmas tree. Dry Christmas trees can create a fire hazard, and so can outlets overloaded with too many holiday lights.

- Take care when lifting packages and heavy shopping bags. Lift with the legs and not with the back. Keep your torso straight and bend your knees as you lift.
- Drink plenty of water, and make sure to get enough sleep. Maintain an exercise regimen, but don't overdo it.
- Wear supportive shoes when shopping, particularly if you'll be walking around malls and standing in long lines. Lighten your purse to avoid straining your shoulders or back.
- Have someone hold that ladder before you climb it. And don't try "the ladder hop" because you're tired of going down the steps and moving the ladder over. Also, don't stand on tiptoe or overreach on a ladder trying to put up that last string of lights.
- Make sure your kids don't eat too many sugary or fatty holiday treats. Give them ample low-fat, high-fiber foods.
- The holidays can be an emotional time. Remember what they're really about, and don't overschedule yourself. Drop a note to a friend or relative who might be spending their first Christmas without a loved one who recently died.
- Drink moderately.





Decoration safety

Christina Hansen, product specialist for CableOrganizer.com, a leading provider of cable, wire and equipment-management solutions, offers these tips:

- If you're planning to decorate outdoors, make sure that you use lights and decorations that are rated for outdoor use. Putting indoor-only products outside in the weather can result in electric shock and fire hazards.
- When shopping for lights, electric decorations and extension cords, purchase only the ones that are UL-listed.
- Before putting your new Christmas tree into its stand, cut a couple of inches off the

bottom of the trunk to expose fresher (and far more absorbent) wood. Taking a few minutes to do this will improve your tree's water intake and make it harder for your tree to catch fire.

- Inspect all lights, electric decorations and extension cords for signs of damage to wire insulation, plugs and bulbs. If the damage can be repaired (i.e. broken bulbs replaced), do not use the item until the repair has been made. If cords and plugs are damaged, discard and replace the decoration.
- Always unplug lights before changing bulbs, replacing fuses or making any other repairs.
- Always turn off all Christmas lights and decorations before going to bed or leaving the house.