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Children giggling with delight is the reward that Cheri Krejci enjoys most

A Port Washington woman who loves Christmas has given an early gift to the community, donating her time and decorations to turn the windows of the former Lueptow's furniture store into fanciful

Christmas displays that have children running from window to window and people pulling out their cameras.

That's all the reward she needs, said Cheri Krejci, who created the displays from her seemingly endless collection of Christmas items.

"It's so much fun when I'm doing it and people come by and give me the thumbs up," Krejci said. "I love seeing kids running from window to window giggling and people taking pictures. One father shook my hand and said, 'Thank you,' with tears in his eyes.

"The best memories I have of Christmas were going with my grandmother to see the windows in Marshall Fields in Chicago. I want children here to have similar memories."

Krejci doesn't just love Christmas, she becomes immersed in it, covered from head to foot with glitter and snow. She enjoys decorating her home — which took a back seat to the Lueptow's windows — and other people's homes. The work is her gift to friends and family.

She also helped decorate the historic Ozaukee County Courthouse and Port Light Station for gala fundraisers.

But she most enjoys decorating storefront windows and watching people's reactions.

"The others are private homes or something people had to pay to see," Krejci said.

"People can just walk by these windows and it doesn't cost them anything to have fun. It gives a boost to people and spreads the Christmas spirit. It makes it fun for people to come down here, and hopefully they walk into the stores and give them more business.

"I feel good. I did something that impacts people, and that's a neat feeling."

Merton Lueptow, who owns the building with his brother Wayne, said some people have been thanking him, thinking he's responsible for the windows.

"Cheri does it all, and I'm glad she's getting some recognition. It wouldn't look like that if I did it," Lueptow said. "She does a wonderful job and has all these things.

"It makes the building and the downtown look great during the holidays. I see people stopping all the time to look at it."

His favorite is an Eskimo village with a large igloo and penguins skating and playing in the snow. That scene is in the window north of the entrance.

In the main window, Krejci put many of her favorite cartoon characters, several of them animated, at the North Pole, a ski resort or on a mountain train ride to visit Santa.

Winnie the Pooh characters are in a train headed for a candy-festooned tunnel that leads to the North Pole.

On the other side of the tunnel, reindeer flying school is in progress. One hapless deer didn't make it over a wire.
"You can't always make it on the first try," Krejci said.

Mickey and Minnie Mouse are welcoming people into Santa's home, which has a decorated Christmas tree.
A reindeer nods its head from the barn.

On the other side of the barn is a ski chalet. A myriad of characters, including Bullwinkle and Cookie Monster, are skiing, sledding or falling on a snow-covered hill.

In the forefront, Donald Duck is ready to play hockey, while a second Mickey and Minnie prepare to skate.

Large snowflakes, some with penguins, angels or elves dangling from them, hang on invisible fish line in all the windows.

Krejci found most of her decorations at rummage sales or second-hand shops. One object can spark a whole scene in her mind.

"I bought this little screen door at St. Vinnie's (Vincent De Paul Store in Port) and told my husband, 'Isn't this cute?' He said, 'Yeah, what about it?'" she said. "I told him, 'It needs a ski chalet.' We had always wanted a reindeer barn, so he made one end a ski chalet and the other end a reindeer barn. It comes apart, so we can store it flat."

The penguin scene was inspired by an igloo doghouse Krejci also found at St. Vinnie's.

"Bill (her husband) painted the igloo to look like ice blocks. I didn't know there were so many penguin, seal and walrus Beanie Babies until I started looking for penguins," Krejci said.
Her husband is a vital — although he claims reluctant — part of the operation.

"He keeps saying, 'This isn't my hobby,' but I tell him what I need and he does it. He hung the lights and snowflakes," said Krejci, who often worked past midnight to finish the windows in time for Port's Christmas parade and Christmas on the Corners event Dec. 4.

Krejci offered to decorate storefront windows in Port Washington three years ago when her house was being remodeled.She couldn't stand seeing the unopened Christmas boxes stacked in the house.
Bill had also lost his job and she needed to do something that made her happy, Krejci said.

That year, she decorated a smaller downtown Port store that had two windows. She put a Victorian Santa scene in one window and Disney characters sledding, skiing and skating in the other window. She also had a Cinderella display in Jung's Furniture Store window in Cedarburg.

Last year, the story of Cinderalla played out in Lueptow's windows.

This is Krejci's most ambitious project because the empty store allowed her to expand the depth of the displays.

She was innovative, turning canopy bed frames into Mickey and Minnie's house at the North Pole. A hammock stand is the base for the ski hill. Krejci doesn't know how many hours she put into the displays.

"I feel very peaceful when it's all decorated," Krejci said.

She doesn’t even mind taking it down.

“It’s the end of the season,” she said. “Last year, I was fine until two little heads popped up as I was taking down the last window. Their grandparents had seen the windows and brought them from Illinois to see them. I felt so bad. I wanted to put it back up for them.”

When she’s not decorating, Krejci is a health coordinator at Columbia St. Mary’s Ozaukee Hospital in Mequon.