

Tim Kenny and his wife, Debbie, decorate their Main Street home with "A Christmas Carol" theme every holiday season, hoping to inspire "charity, kindness, love and celebration."

# What the Dickens!

*Inspired by 'A Christmas Carol,' Lancaster couple fill their home with holiday spirit from top to bottom*

BY ANN CONNERY FRANTZ  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTINE PETERSON

**I**t was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well."

The closing words of "A Christmas Carol" reassure all that the Christmas spirit remains in Charles Dickens' reformed Scrooge for the rest of his life.

They're equally applicable to the Main Street, Lancaster, home of Tim and Debbie Kenny, which they've infused with the spirit of Dickens' 1843 novel. Built in 1889, the original Forbush house became the Browns' and, in 1972, the Kenny family's. While it appears small from the street, the house contains multiple spaces inside,

thanks to redesigns and additions.

To enter is to leave behind the business of everyday living, suspending the present for a visit to childhood joy. The house showcases a collection of holiday passion borne from Tim's passion for Christmas and Dickens.

"The story's vivid images of family and friends gathering to celebrate the holiday, no matter their circumstances, were an inspiration, as were the themes of charity, kindness, love and celebration," he said. "Decorating our home with all the different trees and opening it to friends and local seniors was a natural way to bring Dickens' ideals to life."

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This year, the Kennys' Main Street home will host smaller gatherings because of coronavirus guidelines. For the first time in 25 years, the annual holiday open house will not be held.



The postcard tree is full of early, colorized photos from Lancaster.

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For years, the Kennys have carried off this labor of love, decorating 30 trees and the nooks and crannies inside their Victorian-style home. Each tree is different. In most years, their friends help, decorating the trees the day after Thanksgiving; the trees stand decorated for two to three months before being returned to storage — each theme's ornaments kept in neatly labeled plastic bins in the basement. (There are Independence Day-, Easter- and Halloween-themed ornaments too, but Christmas is the biggie.)

Some steps are changed for 2020. In the past, a big Thanksgiving dinner preceded the decorating, with nearly three dozen friends coming in to help. An open house for neighbors, acquaintances and senior citizens followed. This year, there's a new approach.

"We are planning to decorate the house in its full holiday splendor," Tim said. "Keeping up traditions and bringing



Some of the more than 1,000 copies of "A Christmas Carol" Kenny has collected over the years.

the light and beauty of Christmas into our home seems more important this year than ever as we close out 2020 and welcome in what will helpfully be a better year.

"We'll need to do more of the decorating ourselves and modify some of our traditions to adapt to coronavirus restrictions. Rather than our large tree-decorating event after Thanksgiving, we'll have some small, intimate gatherings with just a few socially distanced friends or family to focus on trimming one or two trees at a time," he said.

"For the first time in 25 years we won't be having our large annual holiday open house. Instead, we'll celebrate with small, focused get-togethers, many on Zoom, to share the trees and holiday cheer with as many people as we can."

While so many trees may seem a riot of excess, it does not appear that way once one enters. Handy with a hammer, Tim has added on rooms and designed space to accommodate both living and gazing. He's quietly energetic, enthusiastically describing the collection as we speak. He guides visitors from one room to the next, pointing out his favorites and patiently answering their questions. From the smallest item to the grand plan, he willingly discusses the holiday house.

Thematically decorated trees highlight



The family's original Victorian tree in the front parlor, one of 30 throughout the home.



The den decked out for the holiday.

all of the Victorian-style rooms.

"People who haven't visited sometimes think it's over the top or gauche, but when they come, they realize it's cozy and comfortable; they're not tripping over things."

Their predominantly Victorian decor, with beautifully upholstered or print-covered furniture, increases its warm appeal. Each treetop reaches the ceiling, but the tree itself may sit on a piece of

furniture, halfway up the wall. There are two to three in each room, perched on tables, an antique music cabinet or the floor.

*"The crisp leaves of holly, mistletoe, and ivy reflected back the light, as if so many little mirrors had been scattered there."* — "A Christmas Carol"

Tim's favorite is the family's original Victorian tree in the front parlor by the

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fireplace. “It is the first tree that guests see after being invited in through the front foyer, and the one around which our close friends gather to exchange presents after the annual holiday open house,” he said.

Standing 9 feet high, its abundant branches are lovingly decked with over a thousand period ornaments and topped with a porcelain angel in a flowing red papier-mâché gown. The tree sparkles with vintage blown-glass ornaments, crocheted snowflakes and glittery Victorian holiday images of Saint Nicholas, boys dashing down hills on sleds and girls sporting fur muffs to warm their hands. The final touches are gold Victorian icicles hung on the branches one by one, white dipped candles draped in pairs everywhere you look, and a spirited holiday train circling beneath. The tree stands adjacent to a Bavarian pipe organ, with pedals and bel-lows. The effect is captivating and viewing it one understands why more than a single visit to the house is tempting.

Debbie’s favorite is their “family tree,” added to the house during the year of the couple’s Christmas wedding. It’s filled with hundreds of colored lights and strung with red and gold beads. “The 9-foot-high family tree is a holiday companion in the great room, where we spend most of our time,” she said. “It is a place for all the special ornaments passed on from childhood, given by friends, or commemorating life’s special milestones.”

The family tree has no rules; each ornament has a special meaning for the Kennys or evokes memories of Christmases past. “There’s a glass-blown vintage white Rolls Royce like the one we used on our wedding day, little gingerbread spice ornaments handmade by a friend, souvenir ornaments from vacation trips, and many more happy memories.”

There’s a collection of Santa dolls around the family room and, for added atmosphere, a wide-screen TV can be transformed into a crackling fireplace. There’s even a “tree” tree decorated with Christmas tree ornaments. Near the ceiling is a Victorian picture rail running across several walls, which Tim built to display family photographs.

In the large Tudor-themed dining room added in recent years, a 12 Days of Christmas tree glows brightly in the bay window; the room features a 14-seat



The Tudor-themed dining room added in recent years, with seating for 14.



The dining room includes a full suit of armor and a “12 Days of Christmas” tree.

dining table and a full-sized suit of armor. Tree ornaments include drummers drumming, lords a leaping, ladies dancing, and all the traditional gifts from the song, right down to the partridge topping the tree. The tree is garlanded by a chain of golden rings and lit with traditional candles, electric for safety, but still dazzling on a dark winter day.

A Belgian country cupboard dominates one wall, part of an intimate assemblage in a room adequately sized for a small restaurant. A life-sized nutcracker stands at the far end of the room, and on a nearby hearth, the cricket of Dickens’ fiction perches near a copy of the book itself. (“The Cricket and the Hearth” was one of his early Christmas books, his second,”

Kenny said.)

His office is dedicated to Dickens memorabilia, in addition to the requisite Dickens tree. A collection of 1,067 copies of “A Christmas Carol,” including one in Braille, lines one wall; a collection of Dickens-era miniature houses, a themed tree and even a period tall hat, which he sometimes wears to presentations, almost crowd the small room.

In love with Dickens’ classic, Tim began to collect books decades ago. As he traveled for work in his early career, he looked into old bookstores and found what he sought. He has them all in a database dating back to 1843. The first edition of “A Christmas Story” — about 6,000 books — sold out within a week



The brightly decorated sunroom.

that year, he said. Dominating the desk wall is a large wreath, made from actual pages of Dickens’ story, curled around Marley’s doorknob face — a 2018 gift from his parents and made locally. There’s not much one can give the Kennys now, Tim said; they have acquired a lot during their 25-year marriage.

The Kennys’ cozy blue kitchen contains a Hanukkah tree. Sleds used in the family for three generations are mounted on the walls, along with snowshoes from years past, now decorated with small ornaments. “Everything gets repurposed,” he said.

On the sunporch is a bird tree, decorated with bright red cardinals and other wild birds. Circling the room from an upper shelf are bird houses. There’s a nautical theme inside the entry foyer.

The collection grew to 30 trees after the Clinton Item ran a piece that claimed the couple had 30 trees. To make it so, they ran out and got more. “It’s a little craziness,” he agreed.

Sound and motion filter through the rooms. A CD player creates the effect of crackling wood in more than one fireplace, the light shown on a monitor fitted inside a fireplace frame. There are no real fireplaces, but Tim created several in cleverly designed wood frames around computer and TV screens.

Many more decorated themes appear here and there: children’s toys; sports memorabilia, a gift tree with ornaments the Kennys give to visitors and friends; a

Sherlock Holmes tree with 53 ornaments, each from a different Holmes story; a “Star Wars”-themed tree and another for sports fans with Patriots nesting dolls. The Super Bowl is well represented upstairs in “Mantown,” with its bar, pool table and comfortable seating ... a solar aluminum tree up there has aluminum wheel ornaments and there’s a tree with “characters from all the shows we watched as kids,” Tim said. The nearby Vegas tree is fairly predictable: it has gambling ornaments.

In the garage, Tim even assembled a tree to brighten his wife’s return from work, decorating it with miniature jumper cables, WD 40 cans and lights.

No space is overlooked, nor any theme neglected. In a hidden nook downstairs dwells Krampus, the half-goat, half-demon of Norse mythology. It’s an eerie space, yet still intriguing.

(Of Fezziwig) “He has the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil.” — “A Christmas Carol”

Eternally creative, with supportive energy, Tim has incorporated his imagination into his work, even been designated “vice president of culture” at one company. There, he says, he applied elements of “A Christmas Carol” to his work. “I’m Fezziwig,” he said: “he has the power to make work a toil or a pleasure.” At work, he studied different employee groups and how they might work best together. “And I watched out for landmines, getting in



Tim and Debbie Kenny



The Kennys bought this edition of “A Christmas Carol” on their honeymoon.

front of them to course-correct.” Though retired, he still consults, creating innovative ways to discard dated ideas of setup and work structure.

The couple has deep local roots. Tim is a graduate of Nashoba schools, Fitchburg State and the UMass system. His wife graduated from schools at Acton, Holyoke and Northeastern. At home, they love visitors. “I was raised to have parties,” Tim says, a spark of glitter on his cheek. “My mother enjoyed social events and as the house increased in size, more people were invited.”

Coronavirus, for the time being, interrupts that pattern. But only temporarily. The show will still go on, he says.

“You could do worse things with our time than making people happy.” ❧





# *Be good, for goodness sake*

**F**or more than two decades, Tim and Debbie Kenny have filled their Lancaster home with Christmas trees and other decorations inspired by Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." It's not all comfort and joy, however, as one tree tucked away in a basement nook is dedicated to Krampus, a half-goat, half-demon figure of Norse mythology who punishes and sometimes steals naughty children.

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