

Alaska Dispatch News

Published on *Alaska Dispatch* (<http://www.adn.com>)

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December 19, 2014

Billed as “the largest light sculpture Alaska’s ever seen,” a uniquely Anchorage art installation will blink at -- and with -- visitors to Elderberry Park starting tomorrow. For the next three weeks the project by a collection of artists calling themselves the Light Brigade will line a portion of the path just east of the Alaska Railroad with interactive sculptures, sound and, from time to time, an unannounced performance.

The six large abstract floral sculptures that are the most visible part of “Follow the Light” are made from old Christmas decorations that adorned Anchorage streets during the pipeline boom. Work was still in progress when a reporter and photographer visited the workshop in an abandoned church on Spenard Road earlier this month.

“Every arts group needs to have its own church,” said Bruce Farnsworth, one of the Light Brigade’s “core four” organizers.

The group’s previous projects have included a lights and drumming performance at the Ship Creek Bridge and an equinox event at the Anchorage Museum that included music, cinema projected on the side of the building and aerialists suspended from the roof.

“We started thinking about stuff as we were completing our last project at the museum,” Farnsworth said. “Someone, I think it was (artist Sheila Wyne), said for our next project we should do something sculptural. Everything we’ve done so far has been a one-time thing, ephemeral. This is semi-permanent. We’re working with molecules, not photons.”

Old ornaments

“Follow the Light” had its roots in someone’s idea to brighten up downtown Anchorage during the holidays 40 or 50 years ago. Large images of Santa, bells, wreaths and tree shapes were made from half-inch-thick steel rods and covered with plastic frilling in seasonal colors. They were suspended from light poles, usually in November, and removed sometime before breakup. The annual hanging was often the subject of front-page newspaper articles and photos.

Farnsworth said they were used from the late 1960s until 1982. This reporter remembers driving past lines of them on Fourth and Fifth avenues but can’t recall when they disappeared from sight or who was responsible for acquiring or installing them. The Light Brigade folks say they can tell that they must have been reordered over the years because there were design changes. But they haven’t been able to identify the manufacturer. Readers with information about the old decorations are invited to send what they know to mdunham@alaskadispatch.com ^[2].

It’s somewhat ironic that the occasion for their recycling is associated with Anchorage’s centennial celebrations.

Whatever their genesis, the decorations vanished from public display in the 1980s and stayed vanished until they were discovered in shipping containers off Mountain View Drive after the city

began preparing land at the site of Glenn Square, now the home of Bass Pro Shops and other shops, in 2006.

Someone remembered Farnsworth's name, probably because of his previous association with the now-defunct MTS Gallery in Mountain View. The gallery featured large metal sculpture work at various times.

"I got a call from building maintenance at the muni and they asked if we'd be interested in Christmas ornaments," he said. "I said, 'No. Why would we?' and they said, 'Well, they're really big.'"

"Big" caught his attention. The next thing Sheila Wyne knew, there were two flatbeds with the things ready to be unloaded at her warehouse studio.

"I looked out and said, 'Bruce, what are you doing?'" she said. "I wound up storing them for five years until an idea for how to use them evolved."

Pedal power

"We've chopped them up and reassembled them," said Scott Pugh, a project volunteer who's taken a key role in developing the computer programs that will coordinate the strip LED lights that outline the curving metal.

The lights on the sculptures will be triggered by sensors when people walk by. The people-light interaction will actually start in the tunnel leading to the site. More lights will be projected in clusters of hundreds of six-foot-high acrylic rods between the sculptures.

"The lights will react differently depending on how fast people are moving," Pugh said.

The computer program features a 20-minute "loop" of changing light patterns that are influenced whenever someone is detected by the sensors. Pugh said there are 36 variations in patterns, depending on how the lights respond to the sensors.

The sculptures and the light rods were kept at just under six feet tall. "Any taller and they'd each need a permit, and each permit would need to have the stamp of an engineer, and that isn't going to happen," said Farnsworth.

Music by composer Chris Jette will be piped along conduits on the ground, following the curve of the path. "I think we may have invented that system," said Farnsworth.

The idea is to have the music audible to people on the path but not in nearby houses. Wyne said the designers were keenly aware that the installation is going into a residential neighborhood. "Bringing in noise or an extra 3,000 people would not be appropriate," she said.

Power to the lights and sound will be supplied by solar panels, which may not be too effective in the winter, and stationary bicycle generators, which the Light Brigade folks hope will be powered by volunteers.

There's a little incentive to pump in that the bikes will give members of the public the chance to "drive" the lights in a seventh sculpture near the "energy hub." The pedaling speed and number of pedalers will influence the lights of the energy hub piece as trail users will influence the lights of the main sculptures.

The sculptures will be held in place with temporary duckbill anchors, set in place before the ground froze. When the installation is removed in January, the anchors will be clipped and leave no trace

in the grass of the park.

A minimum environmental footprint is also seen in how recycled material is used throughout the installation. In addition to turning old street ornaments into newly imagined art, several other components are examples of what Wyne called “adaptive reuse.” The electronics are shielded in old coolers and mini-refrigerators covered with “snow camo” to blend in with the winter landscape.

“Even a lot of the cabling was scavenged from this church,” said Farnsworth. “It was part of the old security system that was no longer in use. This building’s like a giant ReStore Store,” a reference to the construction supplies resale shop operated by Habitat for Humanity.

The former Church of Love, near 36th and Spenard, is owned by the Cook Inlet Housing Authority, which is one of the project’s sponsors, along with the Anchorage Park Foundation, Out North, Municipal Light and Power and the Alaska Humanities Forum.

A small army of volunteers was needed to put everything together inside the church, then disassemble it to go out the double doors, transport it to Elderberry Park and reassemble it at the site.

“People have been coming in every day,” Wyne said. “For a project like this, it really does take a village.”

FOLLOW THE LIGHT will be on display for three weeks starting on Dec. 20 at Elderberry Park. The Light Brigade is still seeking additional funding for the installation with a [crowdsourcing website](#) ^[3]

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[1] <http://www.adn.com/author/mike-dunham>

[2] <mailto:mdunham@alaskadispatch.com>

[3] <http://igg.me/at/followthelight>