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O HOLY NIGHT NATIVITY EXHIBITION



Greg and Becky Livaudais took part in St. Clement of Rome Catholic Church's O Holy Night Nativity Exhibition.
Photos by Peter G. Forest

Everlasting joy

Annual event a way to celebrate the holidays



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It took Terri Hall a few minutes before she could express her feelings about what she had just experienced. The radiance on her face, however, spoke volumes. She didn't really need to use words.

"I'm in awe of the beauty," she said. "I feel like I've been taken to Bethlehem the way it was 2,000 years ago. It's all so personal. I've never experienced anything like this."

Hall and her friend, Sally Rees, had driven from Covington to Metairie on a Saturday morning in the middle of December at the urging of another friend.

Said Rees: "This is so inspiring. It reminds me of what Christmas is about. This is history, and if we don't respect history, humanity is in trouble."

Hall and Rees had just completed a tour of St. Clement of Rome Catholic Church's O Holy Night Nativity Exhibition.

At least 120 nativities — ranging in size from those that were painted inside oyster shells to those that had characters two feet tall — were on display Dec. 15 and 16 in the church's Vosbein Hall.

Some of the nativities dated back to the late 1800s. Nativities from at least 25 countries — including Israel, Russia, South Africa, China, Indonesia and Brazil — were displayed by almost two dozen collectors.

The exhibition has been a St. Clement of Rome and East Jefferson tradition since 2011. Greg Livaudais is the coordinator of the event. Livaudais is also the one who got it started when he was looking for a way to show people some of his nativities, especially his elaborate 700 piece Nativity Village.

Livaudais approached the Rev. Luis Rodriguez, pastor of St. Clement of Rome Church, to see if nativity collectors could exhibit their nativities at the church.

"Father Luis and the church have been so gracious and kind to allow us to do this," Livaudais said. "It has become an annual event that so many people



A Louisiana Oyster Shell Art nativity was created by Judy Bogartz Brockmann.

look forward to."

Livaudais began collecting nativities almost three decades ago. He now has about 100 in his collection, which he keeps in a room of his Metairie home that he calls the Nativity Room.

"I started collecting nativities when I inherited my grandparents nativity," Livaudais said. "I have so many memories of playing with it when I was a kid. After I inherited it, my interest in nativities grew and I started a nativity collection."

Livaudais wasn't content just to keep the nativities in his home. He wanted to share them with other people.

"Many nativity collectors feel the same way I do," he said. "We want to share our joy, and the O Holy Night Exhibition gives us an opportunity to do that. It's also a way to inspire young people and give them a visual of what Christmas is about."

That lesson wasn't lost on many of the children

SEE NATIVITIES, D2



Visitors check out the nativities at the St. Clement of Rome Catholic Church's O Holy Night Nativity Exhibition. Photos by Peter G. Forest

Nativities

who visited the exhibition, including Myla Cox, 7, a first grader at St. Clement of Rome School, who came to the exhibition with her grandmother, Barbara Storms. It was Myla's first time to see so many nativities displayed together in one place.

"I like the way they (nativities) have so many details," she said. "And I really like the ones that have lights."

Added Storms: "This is an amazing exhibition. It really brings us back to the meaning of Christmas, and it also gives us a break from the craziness of shopping."

Consuelo Hussel, a native of Colombia, has about 500 nativities in her collection, including ones from Europe, Africa, Colombia and the Philippines. She displayed five of her nativities at the exhibition.

"Nativities are such an important part of the Christmas tradition for so many people," she said. "No matter where you go in the world you can find nativities."

The nativities that Metairie's Robin Steele displayed were evidence of the ubiquitousness of nativities. Steele's nativities were from China, Indonesia, Peru and Guatemala. Each one had a personal meaning for her.

"My collection consists of nativities from countries where I've either lived or traveled," she said. "I've lived in China and Indonesia and traveled to Peru and Guatemala. Nativities remind us that Jesus is everywhere in the world."

Patty Gillen displayed 15 nativities including those that came from Medjugorje and Bethlehem.

"I've been displaying my nativities at the exhibition for six years," she said. "I look forward to it every year. Everybody should have a nativity."

Metairie's Charles Cabibi Jr. displayed a nativity, made with knee-high characters and constructed out of paper mache and porcelain, that became an important part of his life several decades before it became his own personal nativity.



Nativities drew a lot of attention at the exhibition.

"My aunt, who lives in Mississippi, gave it to me last year," Cabibi said. "She bought it at a gift shop in Picayune, Mississippi, in the early 1980s, and whenever I would visit her I would always admire it. And when she gave it to me, I wanted to share it with other people, so they could enjoy it as much as I have."

Seeing other people enjoy and appreciate the nativities is also what has motivated Judy Brockman to display her Louisiana oyster shell nativities for four years. Brockman

paints and designs nativity scenes inside oyster shells.

"I just enjoy painting the nativities," she said. "But what is more rewarding is when I see people enjoying them. I like the joy that it brings to people when they view them."

For some, such as Pam and Robert Pendzimaz, collecting nativities is a family affair. The Metairie couple have 10 nativities in their home. They displayed seven at the exhibition.

"We've been married 15 years, and for our honeymoon we went to Hawaii," Robert said. "While we were there we bought a nativity made out of coconuts. Nativities have become an important part of our family. It's a way for us to celebrate the ultimate gift of love from God."

Earl Hodges writes about people and events in East Jefferson. He can be contacted at earl-hodges@msn.com.



Cajun themed nativity



Waterford Crystal nativity

