

DECORATION DAYS

James O. Neal's Seaman Road house is a sign of every season

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There's nothing special about James O. Neal's house on Seaman Road. It's a small one-story place, old and weatherbeaten, with paint peeling off the sides.

But people stop in awe when they see it. They stare. Some even take pictures.

What gets their attention depends on the time of year. It could be a yard overflowing with Easter eggs or a Christmas display packed with more cheer than Santa himself. These days, the property is awash in red, white, and blue flags and pinwheels in honor of Flag Day, which was yesterday.

"I guarantee you there's over 100 up there," Mr. Neal said.

The 69-year-old retiree with white, cottony hair doesn't just decorate his East Toledo home for the holidays; he transforms it, nearly covering it with yard ornaments.

In a way, it's the realization of a dream Mr. Neal conceived as a child growing up in Springfield, Ohio. There, he always noted a particular house on a hill that was well-decorated for Christmas. It was achingly beautiful and so different from his own experience.

"When I was a kid, I didn't have no Christmas," he said. "The only Christmas I had, I bought it for myself."

So Mr. Neal made himself a promise as he admired that merry house on the hill.

"I said, if I ever own a house, that's what I'm gonna do," he said. "And I bought this house, and I own it, and that's what I do."

PHOTO GALLERY

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James Neal's home in East Toledo is currently decorated for Flag Day. (THE BLADE/HERRAL LONG)

It started with Christmas — with lights and ornaments, reindeer and toy soldiers, silver bells and snowmen — and grew from there. Now he decorates for Halloween, Easter, Memorial Day, Flag Day, and Independence Day, too.

The home at 2300 Seaman Rd. is like a giant calendar in Mr. Neal's neighborhood, changing its decorations with every season. Like the seasons, though, it's a gradual process.

"I have to start maybe two or three months ahead of time to try and get it done because I have a lot of work to do," he said. "As soon as I get done with one, I've got to go and do another."

That's what happens when you have hundreds of items from which to choose. A shed out back is chock full of knick-knacks and festive figures to plant in the yard. More are stuffed into the basement.

Mr. Neal, an Army veteran who worked for years at St. Charles Mercy Medical Center, said he spends about \$75 on new decorations every holiday season and gets donations from people too. It helps keep him ahead of the kids who are always stealing his stuff for kicks.

"People come and take things," he said. "All that stuff costs money, and people don't understand that."

His wife, Martha, who died earlier this year, used to say he put too much stuff out, but Mr. Neal said it keeps him busy and makes him feel good.

“By decorating it, it kind of makes the house look a little decent,” he said. “People from Michigan come over and take pictures of his little, raggedy house and tell me how pretty it looks.”

Across the street, neighbor Robert Groll said looking at Mr. Neal’s house can’t help but put you in the holiday spirit. Of course, it also makes it tough to try decorating your own house.

“You can’t match him,” he said.

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