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'Snoopy House' Finds a New Home, and Other Holiday Tales



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The National Christmas Tree on the Ellipse across from the White House

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STEVE EMBER: Welcome to THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

BARBARA KLEIN: And I'm Barbara Klein. This week on our program, we talk about holiday celebrations in America. We also look at the seasonal debate over the limits to religion in public life.

(MUSIC)

STEVE EMBER: Christmas stories are usually about hope and renewal. The real-life story of "Snoopy House" is no different.

Snoopy House is what people call a house in Southern California known and loved for its Christmas displays. Jim Jordan created the display of Snoopy and other characters from Charles Schulz's "Peanuts" comic strip more than forty years ago.

Mr. Jordan is fifty-nine now. He started the project as a teenager in the yellow, single-story house where he was raised. The house is in Costa Mesa, in Orange County -- better known to TV fans as "The OC."

Little by little, Jim Jordan expanded the display until it included Charlie Brown ice skating and Schroeder playing his piano to Lucy.

The display became a holiday tradition. Tens of thousands of people came each year to see the Christmas lights, the artificial snow -- even a Santa Claus that flew through the air and down a chimney.

Snoopy House became so popular that busloads of visitors and school groups came each year. Some people who grew up visiting the display were now old enough to take their own children.

MAN: "I've been going to the house since I was a kid, seeing Santa and all the stuff when I was a baby."

But last year Jim Jordan lost the house. It was foreclosed because he stopped paying his mortgage loan. The repossession looked like the death of a tradition. Mr. Jordan says he felt terrible.

JIM JORDAN: "I was absolutely devastated that we couldn't bring this to the community."

BARBARA KLEIN: Several years ago, Mr. Jordan's business as a remodeling contractor fell along with the economy. He says he asked for changes in the loan terms, but was denied because he was still paying each month. He admits he followed poor legal advice and stopped paying the mortgage. He was hoping he could then qualify for loan modifications. Instead he lost his family's home. It was foreclosed in November of last year.

When neighbors learned the news about Snoopy House, they called reporters. They also collected donations to try to help Jim Jordan fight to recover the house. Mr. Jordan says he has filed legal papers to try to get his house back.

But what about the display? Earlier this month Costa Mesa city officials offered to host it on the lawn outside City Hall. Gary Monahan is the mayor of Costa Mesa.



AP

Snoopy greets 1-year-old Raeghan Thompson at the relocated "Snoopy House" display on the lawn outside City Hall in Costa Mesa, California

GARY MONAHAN: "My phone was ringing off the hook, the city's phones were ringing off the hook and at the end of the day this is the wonderful thing that happened, and it's just been phenomenal to our city and our community."

The lights went on last week in a song-filled ceremony attended by a large crowd, including this

woman.

WOMAN: "I'm very happy that Costa Mesa came forward and did this."

At least for now, the display has found a new home at City Hall -- temporarily called "Snoopy Hall." Jim Jordan's wife, Linda, had the same reaction he did.

LINDA JORDAN: "It's a miracle."

We have video of the display at voaspecialenglish.com.

(MUSIC)

STEVE EMBER: The Christmas season often brings debate about the extent to which public schools and government offices should recognize religious holidays. The United States Constitution separates government and religion. But some forms of religious expression have never been excluded from public life. Congress opens each day with a prayer -- an example of what is sometimes called "civic religion."

One of the most recognizable symbols of the holiday season is a Christmas tree. But this year the governor of the northeastern state of Rhode Island changed the name of the official Christmas tree. Governor Lincoln Chafee changed it to "holiday tree."

LINCOLN CHAFEE: "Times are changing and that's just the reality. The world's getting smaller. People are moving around. Religions are more accepted in our society and that's just the evolution that's occurring."

Thousands of people around the country called the governor's office to denounce the change. One state lawmaker even decided to hold a "Christmas tree" lighting

ceremony in the State House at the same time as the governor's "holiday tree" lighting.

BARBARA KLEIN: Janice Crouse is the spokeswoman for Concerned Women for America, the nation's largest public policy organization for Christian women.

JANICE CROUSE: "You know when it comes to Christmas time, the people who talk about inclusion and diversity and all those clichés of the left, they're the first ones to want to shut down Christmas."

Nearly eighty percent of Americans identify themselves as Christians and celebrate Christmas to mark the birth of Jesus.

JANICE CROUSE: "We celebrate other faiths, we ought to celebrate Christian faith as well. And there ought to be symbols in our public square. It's very much part of who we are as Americans."

STEVE EMBER: Erika Seamon teaches religion in American public life at Georgetown University in Washington. She says the Christmas tree highlights the debate over the separation of church and state in American society.

ERIKA SEAMON: "The importance of this is it's not taking Christmas or taking religion out of American society. It's specifically the concern that this tree and this language is associated with government property and government endorsement."

Christmas is a federal holiday, meaning the government gives most of its employees the day off. So do most private employers.

The courts have ruled that Christmas trees have become a secular, or non-religious, symbol of the season. But not everybody sees the Christmas tree as secular. Janice Crouse of Concerned Women for America is among them.

JANICE CROUSE: "All the symbols of Christmas point back to Christ for me -- the reason for the season, we so often say."

BARBARA KLEIN: Erika Seamon at Georgetown says Rhode Island's governor may have just been trying to avoid dictating the meaning of symbols.

ERIKA SEAMON: "One could argue that what the government is trying to do in a multicultural, diverse society is just move to the sidelines and not be involved in religious discussion or symbolism or language."

(MUSIC)

STEVE EMBER: President Obama and his family lit the new National Christmas Tree on December first. The tree is planted in the Ellipse, the grassy open space between the White House and the National Mall. The tradition began in nineteen twenty-three with President Calvin Coolidge. But the tree itself, a blue spruce from Colorado, is new. Strong winds brought down the former National Christmas Tree in February. The tree had stood since nineteen seventy-eight.

Reporter Kelly Nuxoll spoke with some of the people at the ceremony to get their thoughts on the new tree.

ALISON COOK: "It's a little deformed, I think."

And to find out what they will be doing to celebrate the holidays. Alison Cook from Snowhill, Maryland, will be spending Christmas morning with her daughters. Later they will drive to New Jersey to spend the day with more family.

REPORTER: "What are your girls looking forward to most?"

ALISON COOK: "Presents [laughter]. Santa Claus coming."

BARBARA KLEIN: Wei moved to the United States from China about fifteen years ago. He lives in Washington and brought his wife to the tree lighting.

WEI: "We came here to see the National Christmas Tree. This is one of the top attractions for DC. I come here every year."

What does he think of the tree this year?

WEI: "[Laughter] It's smaller than usual. It's half the size of other years."

BARBARA KLEIN: Wei also talked about what he and his family do on Christmas.

WEI: "We usually go to church every year. It probably is the most important thing for us. And then the kids get out of school, and they're looking forward to the toys."

STEVE EMBER: Sixty-three year-old Michael Swar of Maryland was not a big fan of the new tree.

MICHAEL SWAR: "Well, it's draped over in a net. And the net has ornaments attached to it. It doesn't seem to have much character for a National Christmas Tree."

And what about his holiday plans?

MICHAEL SWAR: "The biggest part of Christmas for us is having the family together and having a meal and just enjoying each other's company."

As for what they will eat:

MICHAEL SWAR: "My wife is Greek, so it's pretty much Greek oriented."

Jason and Karen Fischer came from Chicago, Illinois, to see the tree-lighting ceremony.

KAREN FISCHER: "Well, we walked through Santa's workshop first, which was really cool, and the performances were all holiday themed. Very fun."

Jason says, like a lot of people, their holiday traditions center on family.

JASON FISCHER: "We have two young children so we're forming our own traditions as a family. But it always involves an early morning on Christmas morning with hopefully a tree and festive spirits.

"We certainly have the Santa and the commercial aspect, but the beautiful thing about Christmas is that it just lifts the whole country's spirits. So as people are in Washington here, everyone's in a better mood with the season."

BARBARA KLEIN: Some younger visitors also had a few things to say.

DEVON DUNN: "My name is Devon Dunn, and for Christmas this year, I might be going to my friend's house."

HERBIE BANKS: "My name is Herbie Banks. I'm eight years old. I'm just going to do what I always do at Christmas."

REPORTER: "What is that?"

HERBIE: "Just lay in the house. [laughter]"

STEVE EMBER: The "holiday season" includes Christmas, which most Christians celebrate on December twenty-fifth, and New Year's Day on January first. Other holidays also come late in the year but, because of different calendar systems, their dates change. For example, this year Jewish families celebrate Hanukkah, the eight-day Festival of Lights, starting at sundown on Tuesday. Muslims celebrated Eid al-Adha, the Festival of Sacrifice, in early November.

Some black Americans celebrate Kwanzaa, which begins the day after Christmas. This weeklong celebration was first observed forty-five years ago, in nineteen

sixty-six. The name comes from a Swahili phrase that means "first fruits." The festival celebrates African culture and is based in part on ancient harvest celebrations.

Maulana Karenga, a scholar and activist in the United States, developed Kwanzaa during the black nationalist movement of the nineteen sixties. At first he called it an alternative to Christmas, which he said was a holiday for white people. But it soon became a mainstream celebration of family, community and the African roots of black Americans.

STEVE EMBER: Kwanzaa festivities can include stories, poetry, music, feasting and gift-giving. A candle is lit on each of the nights to represent seven traditional values. These are unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity and faith.

(MUSIC)

BARBARA KLEIN: Our program was produced by Brianna Blake. I'm Barbara Klein.

STEVE EMBER: And I'm Steve Ember. You can comment on our programs and find transcripts, MP3s and podcasts at voaspecialenglish.com. Join us again next week for THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English.

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