

Snowman sets out for bright lights of a holiday lawn display

In Lithuania, a snowman is called "senis besmegenis," which means "an old man without a brain."

Well, I'm not old, but after spending two hours standing in the snow, braving an icy wind down the neck of my big-headed suit and doing the Robot to keep myself warm and entertain passers-by, I did feel pretty brainless.

Merry Christmas, *Chronicle* readers. I'm a snowman.

I'm a brother of the Yeti and second cousin to the Jack in the Box mascot. I'm made of water and I have a carrot for a nose. I'm a running gag in "Calvin and Hobbes" and, to a lesser extent, "FoxTrot." I am abominable.

For this temporary job, I was a lawn decoration in a holiday display. While not a traditional job — my co-workers, especially that plastic penguin, were standoffish and barely said a word to me — the "job," we felt, had what French people and pretentious Americans such as myself call a certain holiday *je ne se quois*.

Lawn order

My lawnmeister was Greg Parcell, 48, of 813 Cheever Ave., Geneva.

Each year, Parcell decks the yard with a panoply of high-tech yuletide cheer. Those driving up to the Parcells' house from 5 to 10 p.m. see a sign directing them to tune their car radios to 88.5 FM. They then hear a selection of holiday songs broadcast from a low-level transmitter inside.

The almost 50,000 lights on Santa's workshop, the Polar Bear Cafe and the rest of the display are synched to the music. Parcell said programming the lights took about 20 hours per song. He plays 14 songs but has 18 prepared.

Streaming Web cams and live audio display the show at www.twasthenightbefore.com.

Parcell said a storage shed on his family's former house inspired the first display 12 years ago.

"That year, we put a plastic Santa in the window, put some lights around it and put a sign up that said "Santa's Workshop,"" he said. "Gradually, our display grew and grew over time."

Our columnist Bill Page gave me Parcell's name.

Once a year, Page devotes a column to reader picks of local home displays that go the extra mile.

Page said the decoration bug bites some people and does not let go.

"Once they're nuts, they stay nuts," he said.

Mascot in an ascot

This was not my first time in a big suit.

I was my high school mascot (go Knights!) and once, because of circumstances beyond my control, I spent half an August day in 2004 as Equidog, a large puppy in a cape offering interest-free loans for home improvements in southside Chicago neighborhoods.

I don't like to talk much about that time in my life.

Anyway, here is how I ended up returning to the world of big hats that look like heads. I called Parcell, who took to the idea immediately.

"If you want to dress up as a snowman or a penguin or a polar bear that would fit in really well," Parcell said, not missing a beat. "We could fix you up with lights."

My girlfriend was mortified by my decision to go out in public dressed as a mighty penguin, scourge of Antarctic sea fish. She thought I should dress as a polar bear.

The decision was made by the stockroom of All Dressed Up in Batavia. They were fresh out of penguin costumes and some inconsiderate renter added floppy ears to the polar bear head, turning it into a puppy. Owner Julane Sullivan said the head could easily be re-polarized, but I was on a time frame.

So I walked into the Chronicle newsroom bearing a fuzzy suit and severed, button-smiled snowman head I named Ichabod.

All lit up

"I have a lot of experience wrapping polar bears and trees in lights, but not a person," Parcell said.

But Parcell was wrong. I was not a person. I was a lawn decoration synched to music.

The experience of being wrapped in blinking lights that you can only see from below your giant foam head/hat, is akin, I imagine, to someone hiding a squad car in your shirt and flipping on the siren.

Despite Parcell's company — much appreciated, by the way — I was mostly left to muse on yule and to talk to my 13-year-old cousin Rob and his friend Alex via my cell phone's hands-free attachment. They were watching me in Miami via the Internet and made me dance for the Web cams.

Alex threatened to melt me.

Mostly, I pondered the funniest way to entertain those walking and driving by Parcell's holiday spectacle. For some passers-by I stood very still, then frantically waved as they drove into the night. For others, I pretended to be animatronic, like that purple monster in the Chuck E. Cheese robot band or Lincoln in Disney World's Hall of Presidents. For some, I pretended to be animatronic, then waved.

I don't know what I was expecting.

"Hey, nice lawn display," my imaginary passer-by would say. "What a nice (animatronic or model) snowma ... OH GOOD HEAVENS! It's real! This has shocked my pre-conceived notions of yuletide bliss into oblivion, thus allowing me to create new, rejuvenated opinions of the meaning of the season. My holiday is complete!"

Back in reality, a few people got a kick out of it, but I don't think I changed anybody's life. I was sort of sad.

I don't know who the little boy was. A neighbor, I suppose, walking by with his mom. Short story short, he smiled and waved a little "I'm 3 and a half" wave.

As a card-carrying Hallmark-hater and despiser of all that is sweet and good, I was disgusted with myself for feeling the surge of, ugh, genuine emotion. But I did. I liked that boy and I smiled under the button-smile on my big foam head.

Miracle of the season? Cold-induced delirium? Make your pick. I know what I think it was.

Merry Christmas.

Infobox:

Parcels' breakdown by numbers

- * 50,000 lights
- * 14 songs broadcast
- * 10 other snowmen
- * 30 waddling penguins
- * 6 pooooooolar bears
- * 5 reindeer
- * 4 Santa Clauses
- * 3 Web cams
- * 1 Toys for Tots collection point