



COURTESY RON KOSEN / KAUAI FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

Treasured tradition

HAWAII



LEE CATALUNA

Kauai's old County Building comes to life with a vision started by Josie Chansky

For decades now Kauai has had a Christmas display that rivals any store window on Fifth Avenue. It's been written up in the Los Angeles Times, has its own Instagram account and is designed, curated and managed by an art director who keeps alive a tradition started by a sweet old Portuguese lady who loved to

decorate her yard.

Joe and Josie Chansky's house in Kapaa was known as the "Christmas House" for many years. Josie made every ornament by hand, and Joe dutifully put up every glittering egg-carton star and lit-up beer can wreath. In the evenings during the holidays, hundreds of people from around the island would travel to Kawaihau Road to walk through the extravaganza.

Josephine Silva Chansky's house was like something out of Disneyland. She and Joe started putting up Christmas decorations in the 1950s, long before there were big inflatable lawn decorations or store-bought net lights with strobe effects.

Elizabeth Freeman, who studied art, architecture and design at UCLA, discovered Chansky's Christmas House when she moved to Kauai in the 1980s. She'd take her son to marvel at the profusion of Christmas joy that she understood to be "folk art," though nobody on Kauai thought of Josie Chansky's wire hanger chandeliers and flashbulb garlands as anything more than extra-fancy crafts



COURTESY RON KOSEN / KAUAI FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

KAUAI FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

- >> **Where:** County Building in Lihue
- >> **When:** 6-8 p.m. Friday-Monday through Dec. 29
- >> **Information and photos:** kauai.festivaloflights.com



COURTESY RICHARD FATEMAN / KAUAI FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

Elizabeth Freeman, top, has been the volunteer art director for the Kauai Festival of Lights for the past 23 years, curating, designing and teaching volunteers how to turn trash into elaborate displays like a sea anemone, above, made out of used drink bottles or painted plastic spoons, left, to represent raindrops.

Please see CATALUNA, B3



COURTESY ELIZABETH FREEMAN

Students from Kapaa High School helped to create treasured ornaments out of trash in Elizabeth Freeman's "Santa's Workshop" in the weeks leading up to the big Kauai Festival of Lights.

CATALUNA

Continued from B1

from a lady with a great imagination and a supportive husband.

After Joe Chansky died in 1996, Josie felt she couldn't keep the Christmas lights going anymore, so she held a garage sale to pass on her decorations. Freeman showed up and bought as many of the pieces as she could. Before she realized the enormity of what she was doing, she secured space in the historic County Building in Lihue for an annual show and got Josie Chansky's blessing to continue the tradition.

For the past 23 years, Freeman has kept Chansky's Christmas gift to Kauai alive while adding to the original collection. Every ornament is made from recycled or re-

used material, in keeping with the "trash to treasure" aesthetic of the Chanskys' display. Every year there are new pieces, like this year's "fire and rain" tree, representing the Kauai deluge of 2018 and the eruption on Hawaii island. The raindrops on the tree are made from recycled plastic spoons and were created by Kauai high school students who attended an art workshop Freeman leads every year in preparation for the monthlong show.

There is so much to see around the corners and up the stairs in the old County Building, but it's all curated with Freeman's designer eye. This year high school students studying tourism and hospitality will serve as docents explaining how each tree was made. "We found that people would look at everything and go, 'Oh, it's so beautiful,' but they didn't understand what

it's about. So the docents will say, 'You know what this is made of?'"

One thing the display doesn't have is a donation box. "Some people do offer to make donations, but I don't keep a box out," Freeman said. "I want it to be free. It's not a commercial venture at all."

Freeman does put out a guest book, though, and that's one of the ways she keeps count, more or less, of the people who come to see the lights every year. This past Sunday, 400 people signed the guest book. The other way Freeman estimates crowd size is by the number of candy canes she buys. Every visitor gets one and she has purchased thousands. Some Kauai families have been coming for generations. Some visitors plan their Kauai vacation to see the Festival of Lights.

The Hawaii Tourism Au-

thority and the County of Kauai have given grants to the project. Kauai restaurants donate meals to volunteers during the long hours of installation. The Kauai Fire Department, Kauai Island Utility Cooperative and Spectrum help to string the lights in the trees outside the building.

Josie Chansky died in 2009, but Freeman carries on not only the annual tradition of inviting people to enjoy the lights, but also Chansky's love of crafting magical things.

"I hope it inspires people to see how to create something from nothing," Freeman said, "and how to use what you have at hand — to inspire the confidence to do that."

Reach Lee Cataluna at 529-4315 or lcataluna@staradvertiser.com.