



# ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

## Winning words from war front

### A soldier's essay warms family with holiday lights



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Jaclyn Duhachek, wife of Staff Sgt. Chamous Duhachek (above) with her children, Madison (left), 10, C.J., 3, and Caitlin, 12, in front of their Highland home Friday after employees from the Garden Kingdom decorated it free of charge.

**HIGHLAND** • Jaclyn Duhachek never imagined Christmas lights would grace the outside of her home this year. After all, the guy who usually puts them up is fighting a war on another continent.

"It's depressing," Duhachek said. "You just try to push through for your kids."

Staff Sgt. Chamous Duhachek has spent about half of the couple's 14-year marriage away from home on deployment with the U.S. Marine Corps.

"He re-enlisted the day of 9/11," Jaclyn Duhachek said. "He was walking into the Federal Building in St. Louis as it was being evacuated for security."

That day marked the beginning of Chamous Duhachek's three tours — two in Iraq and his current one in Afghanistan.

But those tours haven't deterred him from seeing to his favorite household chore.

On Friday, several trucks arrived at

his modest Highland home with boxes of white Christmas lights and green garland. C.J., the Duhacheks' 3-year-old son, ran around the front yard and greeted nine decorators as if they were Santa Claus himself.

Chamous Duhachek wrote an essay that nominated the home he shares with his wife and three pre-teen children for the Decorated Family program,

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in which volunteers donate their time to decorate homes of military families. The home was one of 100 nationwide selected this year.

Christmas Decor, a national holiday decorating franchise, sponsors the 8-year-old program. Garden Kingdom, a landscaping firm based in Glen Carbon and the local Christmas Decor franchisee, donated the lights and labor for the Duhachek project.

The program has garnered national attention. On Friday, a crew from NBC Nightly News was at the Duhachek home for a feature story as several men strung lights around the outside frame and along its walkways.

A prominent blue star flag offered a reminder of why the decorators were there.

"I can't imagine not being with my kids on Christmas," said Ken Noll, who owns Garden Kingdom. "This is the very least we can do for someone who is keeping us safe."

After Christmas, the guys will return and take the decorations down.

The local franchise does about 75 paid jobs a season. "It's a good way to keep our

guys working," Noll said.

The company's decorating services include display design, installation, maintenance and removal of holiday lighting and decorations.

"Our typical jobs run on average from \$800 to \$1,000," said Will Young, the project's general manager. "Each project is customized for a specific house, so it's hard to estimate."

Young said the Duhachek project would normally cost on the lower end of the range.

While proud of his company's program, Young said it "pales in comparison" to Duhachek's overseas service.

The decorations brought comfort to Jaclyn Duhachek. She said her husband is akin to Clark Griswold, the dad whose over-the-top holiday decorations are part of the comic story line in the movie "Christmas Vacation."

"My husband loves decorating outside," Duhachek said. "This makes it feel like he's back home."