

## 20 YEARS OF *Animation in Motion*



Photos by KELLY HUMPHREY | Daily News

Debbie Lewis, aka "The Christmas Lady," makes some last-minute adjustments to a display before the opening of the 20th Annual Animation in Motion Christmas Display in Niceville.

### Debbie Lewis and her team again are ready to celebrate Christmas in all its glory

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**NICEVILLE** — It's 11:30 a.m. and counting until the grand opening of the 20th Annual Animation in Motion Christmas Display, and Debbie Lewis is a woman on the move.

Dressed in shorts and a T-shirt and with her long hair pulled back in a braid, the woman known as "The Christmas Lady" has a .01 last-minute details to attend to — animated Christmas characters need new light bulbs; a Santa Claus needs to be moved from one display to another.

As she makes her rounds, Lewis records quick voice memos to herself.

"Move Mama's nutcracker," she says into her cellphone before something else catches her attention.



Charles "Kevin" Payne, who founded the annual Animation in Motion Christmas Display with his wife, Debbie Lewis, adjusts a lighted Christmas village.

While the stress might get to a less experienced organizer, Lewis takes full stride.

"It's all come together nicely in the last week," she said, spreading her arms in

the general direction of the cavernous former Kmart that she has transformed into a winter wonderland. "We've

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#### CHECK IT OUT

The 20th Animation in Motion Christmas Display is open from 5 to 9 p.m. every day through Dec. 27 in the former Kmart at Oak Creek Shopping Center at 1104 E. John Sims Parkway in Niceville. Admission is free, but donations are accepted.

#### TO LEARN MORE

For information on nightly entertainment to find out how you can volunteer to help with the display, visit [thenicevillechristmaslady.com](http://thenicevillechristmaslady.com).



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Debbie Lewis, one of the founders of the Animation in Motion Christmas Display, checks out a reindeer display.



Ray Follacchio, a member of the Miracle Strip Model Railroad Club, points out details of one of the electric train layouts at the Animation in Motion Christmas Display.

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known since Labor Day that we would be able to use this space again this year, and we've been working full throttle since Mullet Festival Weekend."

"That's about six weeks, for those who aren't familiar with Niceville's major events calendar.

As it has grown over the past two decades, the display Lewis and her husband, Charles "Kevin" Payne, and their band of volunteers pour so much time and effort into each year has become one of the city's most beloved Christmas traditions.

The Christmas Lady's display features more than 600 animated dolls in themed scenes, a Christmas village with more than 1,000 pieces, electric trains, decorated trees, hundreds of nutcrackers and much more.

"We will have entertainment every night this year," Lewis said. "We've got school choirs, story times, and Queen Elsa and Anna from Frozen." We'll also have the opportunity for families to get their picture taken with Santa."

Visitors also can write "Happy Birthday" messages to Baby Jesus, send Christmas greetings to deployed military folks and wounded servicemen and women at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, watch nightly Christmas movies and enjoy holiday snacks.

Admission is free, although donations are accepted to help with the cost of electricity.

Lewis and Payne are quick to credit their volunteers for helping to make the Herculean effort possible each year.

"There's always something that needs to be done," Payne said as he climbed atop a huge Christmas village display to make some adjustments. "It's a real team effort."

"We're actually in need of more volunteers this year," Lewis added. "We could use people to help with the concessions stand and with the Santa photos."

For volunteers like Ed Dice of the West Florida Railroad Museum, who travels to and from Milton each day during the season, and fellow model railroad man Ray Follacchio of the Miracle Strip Model Railroad Club, all the hard work and long hours are worth it.

"It's all about the looks of the little kids' faces," Follacchio said. "That's priceless."