

Lamorinda to Become Grinch-Free - Mr. Christmas Is Comin' to Town

By Laurie Snyder



Bruce Mertz, aka "Mr. Christmas," enjoys his display of lights.

Photo provided

If you believe that Christmas is about way more than what's under the tree on Christmas morning, then Nick Palmer's *Mr. Christmas* documentary is the must-not-miss flic for you at this year's California Independent Film Festival. A short film which offers a ginormous, warm fuzzy, it tells the tale of Concord's own Bruce Mertz, the former farm kid who grew up without electricity who has been lighting up East Bay December nights with his 50,000-light Christmas extravaganza for more than 30 years.

Palmer's short, but deeply touching documentary will leave you believing that it really is possible for a single individual to make a positive difference in the lives of others. Palmer grew up driving around his Concord neighborhood each year with his family, scoping out the light displays - always saving the Mr. Christmas house for last. He was, he says, utterly fascinated by the reindeer which, somehow, magically ran across the roof of the home that annually attracts visitors from all over the country.

But he had never met the display's creator until just recently. While spending a mellow holiday in Concord, he and a friend stopped by a local bar one Christmas Eve. The

mythic man from his childhood came into the establishment - decked out in what Palmer describes as "full Mr. Christmas mode." As they talked, Mertz talked about how the meaning of Christmas for him changed following the death of his beloved wife in the early '90s - and about how he found renewed purpose in life by bringing joy to others.

Palmer directed, edited and produced the documentary in collaboration with Amanda Treyz, the film's cinematographer. He began making movies in fourth grade, first as a lark with his friends - and then by turning those friends into his cast and crew as he grew into a budding screenwriter and director. Stints at Diablo Valley College and then at UCLA as an English major were followed by training at the AFI Conservatory's prestigious directing program.

While teaching Lego Robotics at his day job, his big break suddenly happened. Palmer and his writing partner sold a script to Warner Brothers. Now, they're developing additional projects for that film giant as well as for Universal, including a possible remake of *The Bodyguard*.

But deep inside, there is still that wide-eyed fourth grader - still wondering how reindeer run - and what

makes humans tick. "No matter how big the movie, it's really important to find the small story," says Palmer.

For more information on this 2012 Aspen Shortsfest Special Jury Award winner, visit www.MrChristmasMovie.com, or follow Nick on Twitter at: @HouseOfPalmer. And be sure to catch Mr. Christmas and Nick Palmer in person at the film's screening at 3:15 p.m. November 11 at the Orinda Theatre.

Proposed Veterans' Memorial Garden at SMC to Honor War Vets and Families

By Sophie Braccini



Max Crowell checks the garden's spot.

Photo Sophie Braccini

Like many young people, Saint Mary's College (SMC) students Max Crowell and Alex Dulwick want to leave their mark on the campus. The two students are not afraid to dream big and don't let difficulty bog them down. Their project is to build a beautiful and significant Veterans' Memorial Garden in a prominent location on campus, but they need to raise \$80,000 to do it.

The idea came to Crowell after he joined the SMC Republican Club in 2011. Crowell had two grandfathers who served in the military during World War II and his father fought in Vietnam; he felt that despite the three commemorative plaques that exist on the campus, he wanted a more prominent place to

show support for those who served in the military.

He and Dulwick talked to the SMC facilities staff at the end of their sophomore year, and were told it was a "great idea," but still weren't given a location. Upon returning in the fall, Crowell and Dulwick went back to the facilities staff twice.

After months of presentations and discussions, the two ended up acquiring a centrally-located area on campus where students, faculty, and staff walk by every day, right off the main arcade. "Imagine a 4.6-foot stone Obelisk in the middle of a patio with plants and benches for respite and reflection," said Crowell, pointing at a large expanse of grass across from the dining hall.

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