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Can family decorations hold up to public scrutiny?

By Joanne C. McHugh

Decorating is one of my least favorite preholiday tasks. Maybe it's because of how important it is to me that our home look festive and elegant during Christmastime. So imagine how the pressure grew when the local women's club asked to feature our home on its annual holiday tour.

It's a great compliment that people find our old stone farmhouse charming enough to be included. Plus we felt honor-bound to help with the club's major fund-raiser for the year. And my husband and I have always enjoyed touring other people's old houses. So it was probably our turn to "host." Who knew I'd spend so much time dusting and pondering the meaning of our collection of decorations?

When you are asked to participate in the holiday house tour in

June, it's pretty easy to say yes. You're not thinking about all the work needed to get your home ready. I knew that most people wouldn't notice cat paw prints on the patio door or a little errant dust on a shelf. Still, an imaginary white-glove committee took up residence in my head as we prepared.

The tour was an incentive to do all of those little things we had let slide. My husband patched the drywall under the living room windowsill and touched up the woodwork in the dining room. I took every glass out of the china closet and made them sparkle. We reset the old slate walk so tour-goers wouldn't stumble on the way to our door.

The tension increased when it was time to decorate. The women's club was very gracious — they simply ask you to open your home, and decorating is up to

you. They said our regular Christmas decorations would be fine.

And we have some nice things. The living room bookshelves are home to a densely populated Dickens village with quaint houses and shops. The large Byers gingerbread house looks just perfect on our dining room's wide windowsill. The hand-blown glass ornaments, a souvenir from the Corning Glass Factory, glisten in a glass bowl on top of our living room table.

But putting your decorations on display for the multitudes does make you a little self-conscious. No one gets through two decades plus of marriage and three children without collecting a menagerie of decorations along the way. I wanted to keep it real, but I didn't want to be too homespun.

Would strangers appreciate the angels made out of used toi-

let-paper rolls, the semicrushed tissue-paper wreaths, or the snowman crafted out of a sweat sock in the same way that Grandmom, who knows the children who created these treasures, does?

And what about those 1970s "popcorn" plastic figures that I hang in the family room windows, my representatives of Christmas past?

I call them kitschy, but my husband considers them tacky. When Santa's arm broke off, I set him aside because I was sure I could meld it back on with the careful use of my iron. But I arrived home from errands one day to find broken Santa flat on the way to the trash can. My family had revolted, and I was forced to say goodbye to that Santa. But plastic Rudolph does still make me smile.

In the end, the toilet-paper-roll

angels and the sweatsock snowman made the cut, but my husband and daughters insisted we sequester the "popcorn" figures and the tissue-paper wreaths until after the open house.

How did tour day go? You would think that having 361 people drift through your house in one day would be stressful, but it was wonderful. People were in a jolly mood and thanked us for opening our home. One lady said that she especially appreciated how "homey" our house is. Sensing a kindred spirit, I thought about running upstairs to grab those tissue-paper wreaths. I resisted, but I hope she drives by sometime over the holidays to see my popcorn plastic angel hanging in the window.

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