

HIGHER CALLING

Arborist donates his services to ensure lights, and celebration, go on

By Sharon Noguchi

snoguchi@mercurynews.com

Sixty feet off the ground, Straun Edwards was lacing a strand of Christmas lights around a redwood branch, looking focused but as confident and comfortable as if his feet were firmly planted on the ground.

On Sunday, Edwards was putting the finishing touches on his job decorating a 90-foot coast redwood that stands sentry at the entrance to Willow Glen Elementary School at Lincoln and Minnesota avenues in San Jose.

The tree on Thursday will be the centerpiece of the annual Willow Glen tree-lighting ceremony.

Online Extra

See a slideshow at www.mercurynews.com/extra.

While the Willow Glen ceremony has been a tradition of the neighboring business district and community,

this year the tree-lighting almost was ambushed by the recession.

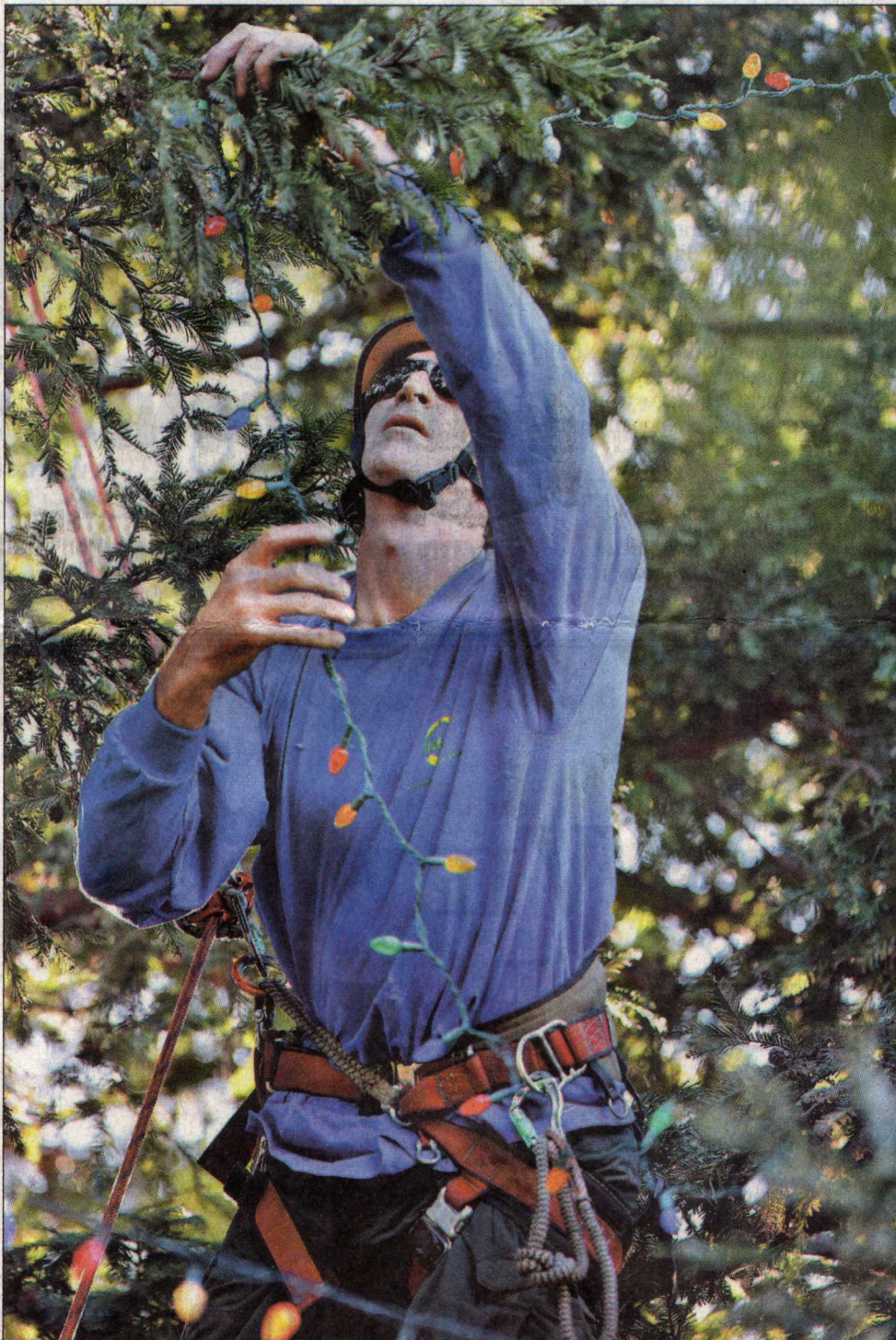
"We were worried we would have a tree-lighting ceremony without the lights," said Samantha Fein, a parent who heads the group Willow Glen Community Tree Lighting.

This year, no one had money to pay to string lights on the redwood. Lights from previous years, which had been left in the tree, had been vandalized.

Then Erika Friedman of the Willow Glen PTA approached Edwards, who had done work on her yard.

The 38-year-old Saratoga arborist volunteered to string the lights without charge, and without using a crane or cherry picker as in the past.

The Willow Glen Business Association arranged for Ace Hardware



JOSIE LEPE — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

See **LIGHTS**, Page 3

TREE-LIGHTING CEREMONIES IN SAN JOSE

■ The Willow Glen tree-lighting ceremony begins at 6:30 p.m. Thursday at Willow Glen Elementary School, 1425 Lincoln Ave., San Jose. It will feature a book fair and choirs from Willow Glen and River Glen elementary schools and Willow Glen Middle School. Homemade tamales, hot chocolate and churros will be sold. The Girl Scouts will conduct a winter coat drive. The festival is free and open to the public.

■ Another lighting ceremony, billed to be at the largest living tree in the area, will be held at 5:30 p.m.



Volunteer Straun Edwards, 38, world-champion tree climber, strings multicolor lights on a 90-foot coast redwood at Willow Glen Elementary School in San Jose on Sunday.

Lights

Continued from Page 1

on Lincoln Avenue to donate \$750 worth of lights.

Various contributions came in, Fein said. "It's interesting, when the economy is down, what comes forward."

Edwards cut short a Thanksgiving holiday at his in-laws' home in Orange County to return to the Bay Area. On Saturday, he and David Preciado, an employee of Edwards' Trees 360 Degrees company, took down the old lights and wrapped the redwood's trunk in tiny white fairy lights.

Hanging safety ropes 10 feet to 15 feet from the top of the tree to bear most of their weight, they laced energy-saving LED lights and caulked the connections between all 90 strands to protect them against shorting.

At a lanky 6-foot-8, with an equally long wingspan, Edwards appears made for tree work. It's no surprise to hear that he is a three-time champion of the California Arborists Association's tree-climbing competitions.

For a moment on Saturday, when winds picked up, he and Preciado wondered whether they could complete the job. "We work 350 days a year in rain, hail and snow, but if it gets too windy it gets dangerous," Edwards said. But the winds slowed, and they strung the strands they had. Edwards returned Sunday after Fein brought more lights to fill in some gaps.

Fein said this year's tree-lighting is particularly significant because the PTA is using the celebration to help heal a rift that opened when the San Jose Unified School District introduced a Spanish-immersion program at the K-5 school.

So English-speaking parents are pairing with Spanish-speaking parents to prepare tamales, decorate the Santa booth and arrange entertainment, Fein said.

Edwards' job is risky — workers' compensation insurance costs 50 percent of the value of employees' salaries — and it takes time to decorate a 90-foot tree. But Edwards said that being nestled in the branches high off the ground is exhilarating.

"I could never imagine working in an office," he said.

Asked why he was donating his labor, Edwards said he believes in contributing back to the community:

"It's a school. I've got kids," he said simply, although his 7-year-old daughter attends a different school.

Said Fein: "It's a huge donation."

Contact Sharon Noguchi at 408-271-3775.