



# NYC's holiday magic brought to you by Westchester

Bill Cary, The (Westchester County, N.Y.) Journal News *December 13, 2014*

WHITE PLAINS, N.Y. — All but the most jaded of New Yorkers would agree that there is something magical about the city at Christmastime. The lights glow a bit brighter, the standard bling turns every shade of red and green, the bars and restaurants are packed (and fun), even the crowds seem nicer and better behaved.

From Peoria to Poland, people across the globe have discovered just how great New York City can be for the entire month of December.

It turns out that many of the most iconic Christmas displays and events are run by folks from Westchester County.

Karen Daubmann of Tuckahoe is in charge of the Holiday Train Show at the New York Botanical Garden.

American Christmas, Fred Schwam's Mount Vernon company, produces most of those fabulous displays at city landmarks and department stores like Saks Fifth Avenue, Radio City Music Hall, Harry Winston and the Time & Life Building. He lives in Armonk.

Bronxville's Tom Madden is the managing director of Rockefeller Center for Tishman Speyer, where the 85-foot-tall Christmas tree serves as an irresistible magnet for hundreds of thousands of visitors every year.



A view of the boutique-style holiday shops at Bryant Park Dec. 11, 2014 in Manhattan. (Photo: Tania Savayan/The Journal News)

Another huge holiday draw in midtown is the totally refurbished and decked out Bryant Park, where Dan Biederman of Chappaqua is in charge, as president of the Bryant Park Corporation. A nationally recognized expert and pioneer in the field of using public-private partnerships to restore and maintain ailing urban areas, Biederman co-founded the corporation in 1980 as a way to rescue the crime- and drug-riddled mess the park had become in the 1970s and remake it into a shining symbol of the city's return to international greatness.

Daily attendance counts in Bryant Park often exceed 800 people per acre, making it the most densely occupied urban park in the world, Biederman says.



Daniel Biederman, president of the Bryant Park Corporation, is photographed Dec. 11, 2014 at Bryant Park in Manhattan. (Photo: Tania Savayan/The Journal News)

In 2002, Biederman introduced dozens of outdoor shopping kiosks to bring Christmas shoppers into the park, especially in the evening hours. Then 10 years ago, he and his team installed a free-admission ice skating rink that has become a holiday classic.

"We wanted to keep the momentum going, from October to March," he explains, making the park a year-round destination instead of one that was only busy for seven months of the year.



The display of giant colored lights at the McGraw-Hill Building on 6th Avenue is American Christmas CEO Fred Schwam's personal favorite. (Photo: submitted)

He's been amazed — and thrilled — with the constant flow of crowds pretty much all winter. "We've convinced New Yorkers that you never need to go indoors," he says with a laugh. By all accounts, each of these Westchester Christmas stars is extremely well organized and detail oriented.

"It's one of the most important attributes we offer, that we are incredibly organized and incredibly accurate," says Schwam, whose company does about 525 major installations in November and December, along with decorating about 2,000 stores nationwide. "Every job is unique and custom and it's imperative that we pay attention to every little detail."

"Every order has 1,000 different notes about specific details about that installation," he says. As in years past, the first round of decorations out of the company's two-story, 110,000-square-foot Mount Vernon warehouse, on Oct. 21, was for Radio City Music Hall because their Christmas show starts in November. The decorations include a 72-foot half-round tree with blinking red and green LED lights for the Sixth Avenue exterior and a dazzling 35-foot-tall Christmas tree made of 11,000 Swarovski crystals that hangs from the ceiling of the famous art-deco lobby.





Fred Schwam of Armonk, CEO of American Christmas in Mount Vernon Dec. 9, 2014. The company provides the holiday decorations for Radio City, Saks, Rockefeller Center and other buildings in Manhattan. (Photo: Peter Carr/The Journal News)

One of the most labor-intensive projects his team of craftsmen puts together is for the flagship Bergdorf Goodman on Fifth Avenue.

To create the stunning in-store trees and miles of garland for Bergdorf, American Christmas craftsmen buy natural wood branches and then strip and sand them before adding pure white paint and iridescent glitter.

Each tree is built for a specific site in the store. For the installation, 50 decorators spend four long nights in the store, accompanied by 15 trucks.

Daubmann's organizational skills go way back, from the way she stored Barbie's outfits to strict sorting of Legos by color and size. Planning for the big shows at the Botanical Garden, including grant applications and extensive plant lists, is done way in advance.



Bridges over the walkway at the Holiday Train Show at the New York Botanical Garden Dec. 9, 2014. (Photo: Peter Carr/The Journal News)

"We try to be five years out in the calendar for the major shows," says Daubmann, the associate vice president for exhibitions and public engagement at the Botanical Garden.

The train show, which drew 217,000 visitors last year, showcases replicas of New York's best-known landmarks, including Yankee Stadium, Radio City Music Hall, the Brooklyn Bridge and Rockefeller Center, all made of natural materials such as bark, twigs, stems, fruits, seeds and pine cones.

And Daubmann? She's already turning her laser focus to the annual Orchid Show, which opens on Feb. 28 at the Botanical Garden.