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LED Christmas Lights Gain Popularity

By *MICHAEL RUBINKAM*, Associated Press Writer

PHILADELPHIA (AP) - After spending hours wiring the house with multihued Christmas lights, David Allen took his 4-year-old daughter to the base of the driveway to see the fruits of his labor.

It was a bust. As many as 20 percent of the bulbs didn't work, even though some of the sets were new out of the box.

Allen was outraged and disgusted. "It's something that would happen every year," he said.

Five years later, Allen's suburban Philadelphia company, Fiber Optic Designs, has developed a line of Christmas lights that he said are more reliable than the old ones ever were.

Dubbed "Forever Bright," the indoor/outdoor lights use patent-pending LED technology instead of conventional light bulbs. The LEDs last much longer (Allen claims 200,000 hours), cost less to operate, run cool to the touch and feature sturdy epoxy bulbs that won't break even if stepped on. The sets run on standard AC current and can be used indoors or out.

LED, or light-emitting diode, technology has been around for decades, and LEDs are steadily replacing light bulbs in a variety of devices, including traffic lights, brake lights, automobile instrument panels and emergency exit signs.

Though LED Christmas lights account for only a fraction of total Christmas light sales, those in the lighting industry expect the technology to become an increasingly popular choice, especially as costs go down and quality goes up.

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David Allen, of the suburban Philadelphia company Fiber Optic Designs, smiles as his "Forever Bright" LED Christmas lights are strung on him Monday, Nov. 19, 2001, in Yardley, Pa. (AP)

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Lighting manufacturers are racing to develop LEDs. Their target is consumers who are fed up with having to replace malfunctioning light sets every year or two.

At stake is the \$1.9 billion retail market for Christmas lights and other holiday decorations.

"We think this is the way the market is going," said Brian Young, who owns a large Christmas store in San Diego and began stocking LEDs four years ago. "It's a better technology and they have far more durability."

Allen's Forever Bright lights are carried by several large retailers as well as the QVC home shopping network. They cost about \$10 to \$12 per set of 100 clear or multicolored lights; a standard 100-light string costs about \$4.

Allen, 45, an entrepreneur who founded and then sold a large ambulance service, said he was inspired by that exasperating day in November 1996.

"It happens to every guy every year," he said. "Inevitably, you take the wife and children to the bottom of the driveway to the lighting ceremony and the first thing your 4-year-old asks is, 'Why isn't this working?' And the veins in your neck stand out and you want to kill somebody. That was the motivation for this."

Allen discussed the problem with his brother, Mark, an electrical engineer who works in the aerospace industry, over Christmas dinner that year.

"We started talking about my experience, and I said, 'Mark, let's think of a way to improve this item,'" Allen said.

Mark began experimenting with fiber optics - hence the name of the company - from his base in La Jolla, Calif., but wasn't satisfied that he could develop a marketable product. So he turned to LED.

But while LED Christmas lights had been available for several years, their popularity has been limited because they required batteries or transformers and couldn't be strung together or used outdoors, according to David Allen.

"The technology is still a couple years away to really get it where it should be," said Ed Shelleman, a sales manager for Christmas light manufacturer Everstar, which manufactures store-label LEDs. "It is in its infancy, and it will take some time to get it done right."

The Allen brothers believe they already have it right. Mark Allen won't divulge how he got around the technical hurdles posed by LED, but claims his solution defies standard physics textbooks.

"Being an electrical engineer, I automatically assumed what was taught to me was true. So it took me a while to get over what I was taught," he said.

The Allens, who have spent between \$250,000 and \$300,000 of their own money on the company, hope to sell 1 million sets this year.

On the Net:

<http://foreverbright.com>

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