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### Mighty lights fuel 'friendship chain'

The 'Piedmont of East Oakland' continues a 60-year tradition with twinkling tributes to Christmas

*Chauncey Bailey, STAFF WRITER*

KEEPING UP with the Joneses on one East Oakland street means putting up lots of Christmas lights. It's been dubbed the "Piedmont of East Oakland" and during the holiday season "Christmas Tree Lane," said resident Millie Roe.

For 60 years, residents of **Picardy Drive** in East Oakland -- near Seminary and 55th avenues -- have come together to enjoy the merriment of Christmas as a community by putting up stunning decorations.

The tradition of lights has attracted thousands of gawkers during the years and now their story is being told in a documentary entitled "**Picardy Drive**," a 56-minute video that introduces the residents of this close-knit neighborhood.

One neighbor said she has more than 2,000 lights for her home.

The lights are linked from one home to the next as a "friendship chain." No-one talks about who pays the December PG&E bill. A community Christmas tree with more lights is paid for with neighborhood association dues.

The city provides lights for a big tree that is lighted during a special street ceremony a week or so before Christmas.

"They take pride in their street and the fellowship that has evolved and endured through decades of sometimes difficult changes," said M.T. Silvia of Oakland-based Smartgirl Productions, which produced the video.

The documentary has aired on KTOP, the city's cable TV station.

The 71 Tudor-styled homes were built in 1926 as Normandy Gardens -- "modest mansions" for the working-class. Some of the homes look like storybook castles.

During the years, the racial demographics have shifted from mostly white to predominately black to what is now a mix of races. However, it has remained a solid enclave of middle-class homeowners.

"When someone moves in, we give them a gift and a card," said Mattie Robinson. And then talk turns to what the block does for the holiday season.

Neighbors come with ladders to help string up your lights, said resident Esther Jones. And there are potlucks, sometimes on "the island" -- a grassy medium stripe that divides the street yet brings a village feel to the community.

"When I tell friends I live in East Oakland they say 'aren't you afraid?'" said one resident. "But this street is different."

A black and white couple with a child moved to the street in the late 1990s from a mostly white street in Montclair after getting several bomb threats.

Another family on **Picardy Drive** has had a home on the street since 1940.

There are regular neighborhood meetings. There have only been a few hot topics. Some say speed bumps should be installed, but others counter speed bumps would lower property values. Some residents want to see flowers planted on the island. Others want to see a minipark for kids to play.

And there's a debate on how to pronounce the name of the street where everyone greets everyone under the shining lights.

"You feel like you're in 'our town' when you visit," said Kristin Lono. "It's a throwback to the time when people weren't afraid of their neighbors."

Clyde Jones sees residents from other streets come with their children to gaze at the lights. "I wish there was a magic wand that could make the entire city like Picardy," Jones said.

For more information, go to [www.smartgirlproductions.com](http://www.smartgirlproductions.com)

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