

The Break Room: Joel Autry, Assistant Manager of Grounds, November 12, 2024

Narrator:

You've tuned in to another edition of the Break Room, a weekly conversation about how the city of St. Augustine works from those who do the work every day. Hosted by the city of St. Augustine's communications director, Melissa Wissel, the break room offers a closer look at the different city departments and provides updates on current and upcoming projects and events. And now your host, Melissa Wissel.

Melissa Wissel:

Thanks for tuning in. You're listening to the Break Room. We're closing in on the end of hurricane season and it's looking good for things to remain calm now for Light Up Night. And that is great news for this week's guest. Joel Autry is in studio this week. He is the assistant manager of the grounds division and also the one who makes all that magic happen in the plaza with our lights. Joel, welcome back.

Joel Autry:

Thank you.

Melissa Wissel:

We're gonna, we're gonna just be honest. You got a heck of a day today.

Joel Autry:

I do.

Melissa Wissel:

And that's part of the challenge of Nights of Lights for you. So I do appreciate you coming and talking to us about Nights of Lights. Everybody loves it. They love to come down. They get a little frustrated with all the visitors. But so it happens when you put up a beautiful display in the plaza. Give us the, give us the 4, 1, 1. How long does it take, how many lights? You're dealing with some stuff right now, even, and share that with our listeners. So we understand, right.

Joel Autry:

We started October 1st hanging the lights. And of course, we had the storms come through again and we had to start over with three of the trees we had completed with the storms. Right now we are playing catch up and I believe we'll be ready just in time. I have very short amount of time to have everything finished, but I think we're going to be right on time.

Melissa Wissel:

You get it done. And who knows what your guys look like. They may be underneath something holding lines together and plugging stuff in. And you also do the lamps, the light poles.

Joel Autry:

Right. I have two crews right now going around and hanging wreaths and ribbon and decorating with bows and all the holiday decorations.

Melissa Wissel:

Does it frustrate you like when you go home and you're just like, I'm so over Christmas.

Joel Autry:

I don't decorate at home.

Melissa Wissel:

Okay.

Joel Autry:

I haven't decorated in 10 years at home. Yeah, it's, I do enough decorating at the city, but yes.

Melissa Wissel:

And we've got a Christmas tree.

Joel Autry:

We do have a tree.

Melissa Wissel:

And we have a menorah.

Joel Autry:

We have a menorah.

Melissa Wissel:

So we get everybody. Everybody gets represented correctly. Tell me about the tricks, if you will, of getting all of that coordinated and then the light up night itself.

Joel Autry:

Okay, well, I mean, getting everything coordinated is. It's not just. I, I have both crews. I have two crews that are doing all this and it's the help of eight different people.

Melissa Wissel:

Right.

Joel Autry:

And we also have Chris doing with the Nights, you know, angels in the.

Melissa Wissel:

Architect.

Joel Autry:

Angels in architect. Exactly. And we are just extremely busy. I mean, I have to train people to show them where the lights get hung and going over and we have to watch weather at the same time to make sure that our, you know, rain's not coming.

Melissa Wissel:

Explain that you were. You and I talked about that down the plaza one day and I never thought about that. How it's not just about the wind, but there's a, There's a method to the way they get hung.

Joel Autry:

Yeah. We hang them up with zip ties in the trees. So if the wind's blowing, we have to zip them up tight, obviously. But if you zip them up too tight, the wind blows and it breaks the branches off. So you have to have just enough slack in the lights that. To give them a little bit of wind blowing and account for rain also because the trees get weighted down and they sag down.

Melissa Wissel:

Okay. So you had to kind of explain that to me. So explain it again. The weight of the water. Right. You light the tree.

Joel Autry:

Right. If you, if you, when you. After you put the lights on the tree, when, after it rains, the. Between the acorns and the leaves and everything that's on the trees, the weight pushes down. And if you zip tie them while they're down, the. When they dry, they lift up and tear the wires. So you have to coordinate everything around the weather.

Melissa Wissel:

So you really. I mean, it's not. And the storms. Knock on wood. I'm going to knock. Because we have had that happen.

Joel Autry:

We have.

Melissa Wissel:

And days before.

Joel Autry:

Yeah. And like I said, we just replaced three total trees and it took a week to put them up and it took a week to repair them.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah. And that. And you don't just add days on the calendar. No, you can't.

Joel Autry:

No. I mean, we're hanging lights as we speak. Today we'll be hanging lights all the way probably till 9pm tonight.

Melissa Wissel:

And the, the switches, we can talk about that. We've got. Tell me about the legend of the single red light bulb. I mentioned it to some people..

Joel Autry:

we still get light bulb put in a red light bulb. Bobby Mangles has started the original and we try to get him to do it. Every year he hangs the red bulb on his own. He. He goes down and does it on his own. But we. We still tell everybody about the story and everything that's going on with it.

Melissa Wissel:

He started it when his daughter.

Joel Autry:

When his daughter was very little. She was young. She was. And he did it for, I would say, probably 10 or 15 years.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah.

Joel Autry:

And he still continues it even though his daughter's grown.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah. And I've seen it. But you do go down to the plaza. It's there.

Joel Autry:

It is there.

Melissa Wissel:

And you just have to find it. We've never really done any type of a scavenger hunt for it. I don't know that we can.

Joel Autry:

Yeah, we don't. He don't hide it, you know, he puts it in where it can be seen.

Melissa Wissel:

Yep. But you have to look for it.

Joel Autry:

You have to look for it.

Melissa Wissel:

It's not up high.

Joel Autry:

It's not up high.

Melissa Wissel:

So if you're just now tuning in, you're listening to the break room. I have Joel Autry with us. He is in charge of all the lighting around the plaza, around town, anything city decoration related. So on the flip side of it, how long does it take to bring it down?

Joel Autry:

I can take it all down in one week.

Melissa Wissel:

Even though it takes six or ideally.

Joel Autry:

Sometimes eight weeks, right up to the time for it to get hung. I can take it all down in one week.

Melissa Wissel:

And does it all get recycled? We save all the.

Joel Autry:

We recycle it. Yes. We recycle all the wires and they get put in a recycling bin and sent to the recycler.

Melissa Wissel:

Now let's talk a little about some of the other responsibilities. Outside of light up night, you've got people that come in. Have we gotten better about maintaining the integrity of the decorations? I know one year you came, we talked about it, and it was like every other day you were going to Home Depot to get decorations.

Joel Autry:

Right.

Melissa Wissel:

Have we worked that out that people don't.

Joel Autry:

Yeah, we. A lot of lights that we have that we put up in the tree have to be recycled every year between the animals chewing them and the damages. The rest of the decorations we store in a night to lights warehouse shed and they're protected year round.

Melissa Wissel:

And we put up like a little fence. Keeps people off the tree.

Joel Autry:

Yes. We have a new protective fence around the Christmas tree to try to keep people from climbing on it and tearing it up.

Melissa Wissel:

Taking stuff.

Joel Autry:

Yeah, We've had a lot of times where people come in and steal ornaments off the trees and take them for Souvenirs. Yeah. And so a couple years in a row, we had to go buy ornaments quite regularly.

Melissa Wissel:

Not so bad anymore.

Joel Autry:

Not so bad.

Melissa Wissel:

And the after light up night, you've got to replace all that sod.

Joel Autry:

Yes, we do. We end up having to replace all the sod in the plaza. Last year, we had a new program. Mark Hartley and I, we were able to regrow the grass. Not one pallet of sod was laid last year. It was all. We aerated the grass and fertilized it and worked on the irrigation and was able to restore all the grass in the plaza without purchasing one pallet of sod.

Melissa Wissel:

That's incredible. That. Okay. That's a big.

Joel Autry:

That's huge.

Melissa Wissel:

That's huge. I had no idea when I asked you

Joel Autry:

Several thousands of dollars worth of sod we were able to not spend on.

Melissa Wissel:

Is it a special kind of grass?

Joel Autry:

It is. It's called Celebration Bermuda grass, and it is very.

Melissa Wissel:

How appropriate it is.

Joel Autry:

It's salt tolerant, people tolerant, and it looks dead after nights of lights because of the millions of people that walk on it. But as soon as spring comes around and we put water on it and aerate it, it comes right back.

Melissa Wissel:

Wow. I might have to think about that in my backyard. That's really cool. So one other thing we've got, and I know, I don't know that we have a location, but I do want to share with folks about Arbor Day, because that's also your area of responsibility in January after the first of the year. So you come right out of Nights of Lights. And actually, Nights of Lights is still happening this year. Friday, January 17th will be Arbor Day. We are a tree city. Tell us a little bit about Arbor Day. I know we don't know where, but we plant a tree, we give out trees.

Joel Autry:

Right. And we encourage everybody to come out and get a baby tree. We give out saplings every year and information on the saplings that we give out.

Melissa Wissel:

Do we know yet?

Joel Autry:

We don't know yet. We don't know until right up until the time. It's usually whatever they can grow for the year from the nursery. With the storms that we've had, we don't know what we're going to get this year,

Melissa Wissel:

Do we know what we're going to plant?

Joel Autry:

we don't know pretty much any information of what we're getting, or it's a mystery this year. So.

Melissa Wissel:

And we will plant and we don't know the location yet.

Joel Autry:

We don't know the location.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, we'll just have to.

Joel Autry:

It's all a surprise.

Melissa Wissel:

It's all a surprise. We gotta get you through Nights of Lights first. We gotta get you through this week.

Joel Autry:

Yes.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, I appreciate you taking the time to come down and talk to us. A lot going on and we appreciate all the work that you do and your and your crews of people.

Joel Autry:

Well, thank you very much.

Melissa Wissel:

Thanks for coming in.

Joel Autry:

Thank you.

Melissa Wissel:

As we wrap up another edition of the Break Room, I hope we answered your questions about Light Up Night. We want to keep you informed about what's happening in and around the city and most importantly, that you hear from the people doing the work to make it happen every day. Follow us on social. You can see us on Facebook, Instagram and X @citystaug. Visit the website citystaugradio.com to hear this broadcast and others if you missed it. Until next time, thanks for tuning in.

Narrator:

You've been listening to The Break Room, a weekly program addressing projects and programs offered by the city of St. Augustine. Join us each week as the city's communications director, Melissa Wissel, has in depth conversations with the people who make our town work to meet the needs of our community. See you at this time next week for another edition of The Break Room.