

Dayton Daily News

Families capture holiday spirit, love

By [Meredith Moss](#), Staff Writer
December 23, 2010

MIAMISBURG — When it's time to begin the Christmas gift exchange, Teri Wagner and her family follow a precious ritual that dates back as far as she can remember.

“When I decorate with our manger scene, I do not place the baby Jesus in the manger,” explains the Miamisburg woman. When visitors question the missing figurine in the weeks leading up to the holiday she explains that Jesus hasn't been born yet.

“After everyone arrives for the big family celebration, I bring out the birthday cake, or sometimes cupcakes, and we sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to our savior,” says Wagner. “The oldest children light the candles, and the youngest child has the honor of placing baby Jesus in the manger. Then we all blow out the candles, and my husband tells the earliest of the Christmas stories or one that he has found and wants to share.”

Wagner loves the looks of awe on her loved ones faces as the true meaning of the holiday is shared with children and grandchildren. “That way they understand that exchanging gifts with each other is a way of sharing love.”

When it comes to fostering holiday spirit, the Wagners are on the right track. So are Amber McCurdy and her family whose favorite holiday tradition emanates from the love for their own beloved Santa and Cassano's pizza.

“That's always been Santa's special treat when he comes to Dayton,” McCurdy explains. “Our Santa, my grandfather, passed away 22 years ago, but he is remembered not only when we visit his grave but with a special dinner on Christmas Eve. We order Cassano's pizza — a Supreme — and leave some for him.”

McCurdy says her family's tradition demonstrates the strong ties of love being transmitted through the generations.

“Some people are no longer with us either because they've passed away or are not present, but they are still remembered with joy,” McCurdy says. “We pass on the love by telling the

stories of our Santa. His gift is that he continues to tie us together and to home for the holidays.”

Melissa Moody of Kettering believes it’s important to emphasize family togetherness rather than gifts or material things.

“A few years ago, my husband and I started a ‘friendly competition,’” she says. “When the Christmas music starts on the radio, we each pick a song. Starting the day after Thanksgiving, all the way through Christmas Day, whenever our chosen song is played, we all get a point. Whoever has the most points as of Christmas Day gets ‘bragging rights’ for the year. Now our kids do it, too, and it’s nice to have that time together where we’re just enjoying the feelings that the Christmas music provides and the time we have together.”

When Hindus celebrate Diwali each fall, it’s a time to celebrate life and strengthen relationships. Families visit one another during the festival of lights. Bringing people together is also an essential ingredient for the celebration of Kwanzaa, the week long holiday that begins Sunday.

“The spirit of Kwanzaa is a commemoration of heritage and togetherness,” says Dianne Turner-Ingham, education specialist for the Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilber Force. She says the primary goal is to understand the seven principles of the holiday.

“Most people choose one or two to celebrate,” she explains, “such as umoja (unity) or kuumba (creativity).”

“You might do that by inviting people and getting together with everyone bringing traditional harvest foods like beans and fruit or having children do crafts and puzzles,” she says. “The idea is to drive home the principles so that African-Americans build their communities. So it is definitely a commemoration and spirit that should be spread throughout the year.”

Author Richard Paul Evans, best known for “The Christmas Box” and his other inspirational novels, says Christmas is about creating those types of meaningful traditions and about being grateful for what we have. It’s especially important, he says, to transmit those values to children.

“It’s never too late to create traditions,” believes Evans. “It can be very simple things that bring you joy. Your children, for example, might give one of their own gifts to a child at a shelter.”

That's what happens in the Miami Valley each year when the local Jewish community sponsors "One Candle for Tzedacha" (charity). The idea is for children to spend one of the eight nights of Hanukkah giving instead of receiving by donating toys and books to the needy.

Rabbi Brad Hirschfield, author of "You Don't Have to Be Wrong for Me to Be Right," says it's always a choice for people observing a religious holiday to decide whether that observance will open them up to others or simply be an opportunity to segregate themselves.

"As a Jew I can look at Christmas and say 'That's their day,' or I can say 'It's not mine but I appreciate that it exists because it has gifts and beauty that can't be found elsewhere and I love living in a world that has such beauty and gifts.' There are profound similarities between every winter holiday — they all teach about hope, unexpected possibility and life in the coldest, deadest time of year."

The folks at Cross Creek Community Church in Washington Twp. agree with Hirschfield that the spirit of Christmas is the spirit of inclusion.

"Our world right now is so divided that we need to keep looking for things that bring us together," says Crosscreek's pastor Mike Castle who has made a tradition of inviting a rabbi to speak at services during Advent each year.

"That tradition honors our Jewish roots that gave birth to the Christmas story," he says.

Relationship expert Noelle Nelson insists all of the winter holidays are about peace and goodwill .

"It doesn't matter if it's Kwanzaa or Hanukkah or a traditional Christian Christmas or a New Age celebration," says the author of "The Power of Appreciation" and the creator of the "Do-It-Yourself Holiday Miracle Kit."

The first element in the free kit, she says, is your own smile.

"It's simple, it doesn't cost a dime and it takes a nanosecond of effort," explains Nelson." It doesn't matter whether you're smiling at your husband, your child, or the checker at the supermarket. Two things will happen immediately: The other person is automatically going to feel valuable, and you're going to feel good because you can't help it. And if you smile at other people, often they'll smile back."

“If you keep that up all year — when your husband comes home at night, when the kids come home after school, when you visit your parent in a nursing home — I guarantee you’ll have a happier life.”

The second ingredient in the kit is to remember to pay it forward.

“You don’t have to beat someone out for that parking space at the mall, you can let them have it,” Nelson says. “If there’s one item left on the shelf and someone else is going for it, let them have it. You’ll feel like a better person and some day someone will do that for you. You have to start that engine.”

Nelson also advocates giving of yourself whether it’s joining a group to sing carols, feeding the homeless, or visiting a nursing home or a cancer ward.

“If you really want happiness in your life, the best thing you can do is keep the spirit of Christmas alive all year round,” she concludes. “That spirit will bring you peace and a spirit of goodwill toward yourself and everyone around you.”

Nelson says whatever your faith or belief, it’s never too late in your life to get started.

“Be generous, think of others. December is a great time to start.”

Contact this reporter at (937) 225-2440 or mmoss@DaytonDailyNews.com.