

happy holidays

first, a caveat: There *are* men who worry about the holidays. Who plan and bake and shop and wrap. Who stress about what to get Uncle Phil. Really, there must be. § But for the most part, it is women who keep the traditions alive. “Without women, there would be no holidays,” says a friend. And certainly, if you compare the December issues of, say, *Good Housekeeping* and *Sports Illustrated*, there is a striking difference. Men, it seems, are not exhorted to make crafts, throw perfect parties, try 20 new cookie recipes, learn to apply glittery eye shadow or lose 12 pounds before New Year’s Eve. In fact, they are mostly required to buy a gift for their wife or girlfriend, something many choose to do—like a college term paper—the night before it is due. “I don’t like to be told when to give someone a present,” explains a friend’s husband. It has a certain logic to it. We’ve all had panicky moments in the middle of Macy’s when we wanted to shout, “Oh, just forget it!” § On the other hand, far from being coerced, most women admit to liking the holidays. Not the commercials blaring at us to buy our loved ones video cameras and diamonds, or the grouchy lines at Toys R Us, or the perfunctory office parties—what we cherish is the sweetness of pulling out the good silver, unwrapping the menorah, testing the holiday lights, frying potato pancakes or roasting a turkey. The surprise of Santa’s cookie *gone!*, a red bike by the tree, a song your mother loved coming from a choir across the cool night air. There are decades of happy memories built into this season—of your childhood, your own family—as well as a universal feeling of good will. It is this feeling we struggle to touch each December, fighting against a consumerism that starts right after Labor Day. Because we are the keepers of the torch, the bearers of tradition, women’s victory in this battle is important. Five local women share their secrets for a meaningful holiday season with a minimum of stress . . .

by thea marie rood • photography by roy wilcox



LINDA VAIL (pictured above)

Linda Vail understands the concept of “big kids,” because her four—ranging in age from 16 to 32—continue to insist on holiday rituals they’ve shared throughout childhood. “We always put out a cookie and a glass of milk for Santa,” she says, “and we still do it. They know Dad eats it, but they still want the same traditions.”

Another custom is stockings filled with little things: earrings, cosmetics, candles, soaps, cologne, manicure sets. When her el-

dest daughter married, Vail assumed she wouldn’t hang a stocking for her anymore. “You know what, Mom? Don’t buy me a gift; just do my stocking,” she recalls being told. Similarly, her 18-year-old will be home soon from her first semester at San Diego State. “If the house isn’t decorated the way it’s supposed to be, if I’m not baking the same cookies, I’ll hear about it,” she says.

In fact, Vail believes this is the importance of Christmas: The unvarying traditions offer kids a secure anchor well into adulthood. “We had a wonderful child-

hood,” she says of her sister and herself. “And I try to do a lot of the same things we did.” This includes opening one present on Christmas Eve, cutting a tree at Apple Hill and having a traditional Christmas dinner with a large group of relatives, which now includes her two grandsons, ages 4 and 1.

“Really, truly, the fun part of Christmas is the children,” she says.

KATHLEEN MURPHY

“Christmas has always been my favorite holiday,” agrees Kathleen Murphy, a com-

“without women, there would be no holidays.”

munity college English instructor, “which is why I got married on Christmas Eve.”

From girlhood, she’d imagined herself as a winter bride dressed in black velvet, a reality eight years ago when she married her longtime beau in a quiet ceremony in Sausalito. “I even incorporated one of the biggest Murphy traditions into my wedding day activities: Getting all dressed up and driving into the city to see *The Nutcracker*.”

Throughout her marriage, she introduced other childhood favorites from her large Irish-Catholic upbringing: hanging tin-foil-wrapped Rice Krispie treats on the tree, attending midnight mass, watching *White Christmas* and *It’s a Wonderful Life* on TV. “Holiday happiness became tied to my marital happiness,” she says.

The challenge this year is to untie that connection. For the first time in more than a decade, she faces Christmas as an unattached woman. “The temptation is to let the understandable sorrow [at the breakup of my marriage] overtake the happiness,” she says. “I have to find a new way to love those two days.” Murphy initially believed she had two options: either make Christmas so different that none of those painful feelings would come up—fly to Tahiti, for example—or make it exactly the same, in effect “defying the divorce.” But in the end, she decided to pursue a middle route: “This is the first Christmas of my new single life, however long that will last, and I plan to begin new traditions but hold onto the old as well.”

Old traditions include continuing favorite childhood activities, even though they now contain memories of her ex-husband. She also will hang the tiny silver ornaments the couple received from a friend each year they were married. “I love those decorations and I love that friend, and they will go on the tree, even though it will be painful,” she says.

New traditions will focus on other cherished people in her life. “I’m looking forward to having my sisters, my nieces and nephews, some close friends, over for a holiday dinner,” she says. “That’s the night we’ll put

up the tree, do some singing.” She also plans to spend the actual week of Christmas out of town, a guest at the home of friends she has known for 20 years, who share her love of ballet and Bing Crosby. There she will also have the distraction of a two-year-old who considers her “Auntie Kathy” and has a strong interest in Rice Krispie treats.

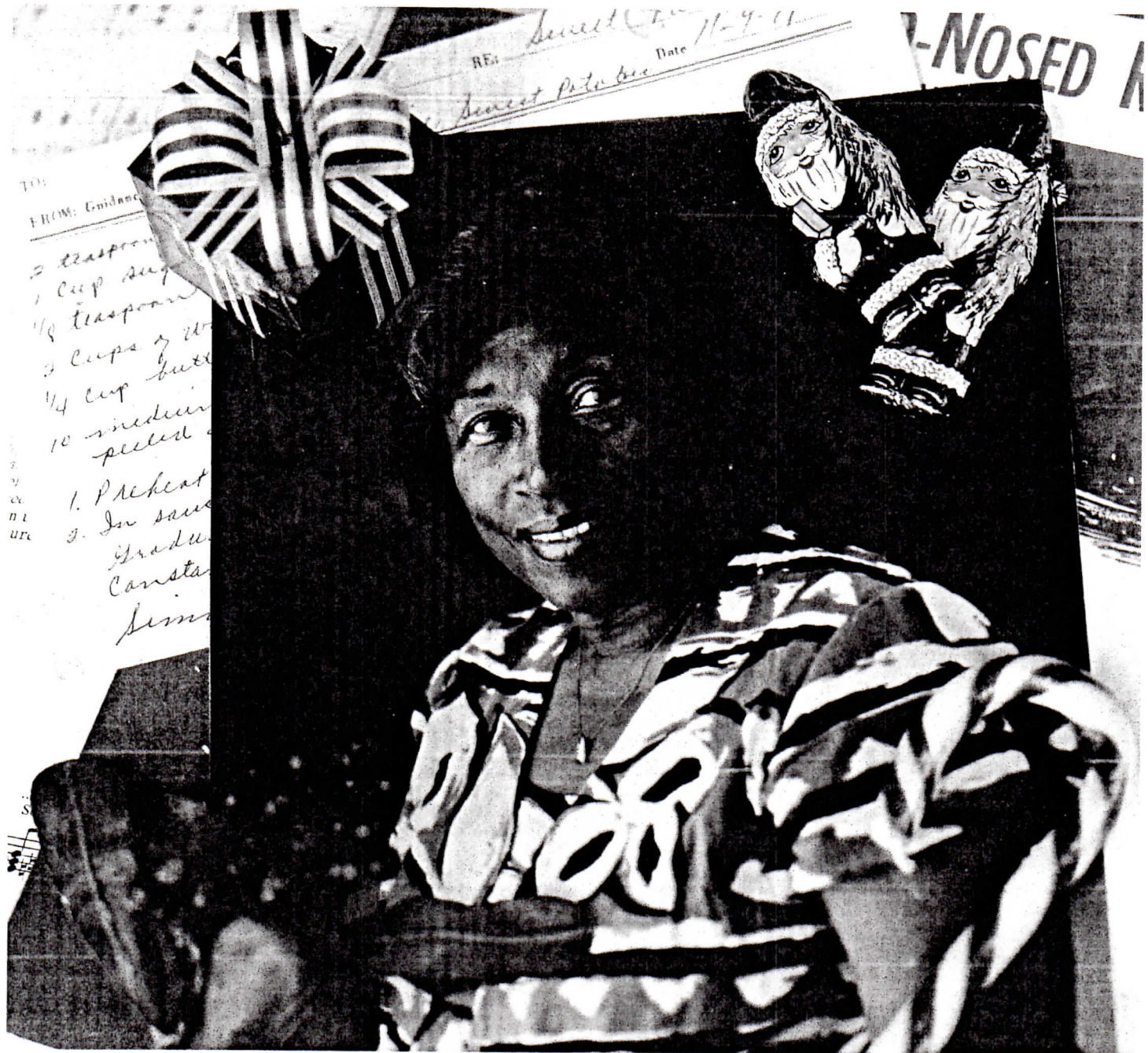
“As corny as it sounds, you have to look at the beginning of single life as an opportunity to create holidays that are full and joyous and warm,” she says. “It’s a wonderful time to take those things you’ve enjoyed since childhood and enjoy them in a different way.”

DONNA PEPPER (pictured below)

Avoiding chaos is one of Donna Pepper’s biggest goals. The mother of a 2-year-old and a newborn, she is committed to building lasting and meaningful memories for her daughters. “I want them to remember setting up the Christmas tree as a family, I want them to remember going to the Christmas musicals at church as a family,” she says, “as opposed to rushing to get it done, so we can say we did it and take some pictures.”

She also wants her children to learn the true meaning of Christmas, which for her means keeping presents small. She and her





husband have adopted one of her favorite childhood traditions: stocking stuffers. "On Christmas Eve, we'd pass around our stockings, and you'd stick your gift in it," she recalls. "They were little things: a toothbrush, candy, a CD. You'd get something from everyone, but the focus was off big presents."

The Peppers also make time for family-only activities, such as driving through decorated streets, attending a live nativity scene, cutting a tree at Apple Hill and watching the city tree-lighting ceremony in Folsom. "You have to pick and choose what you want to do," she warns. "If you try to do everything, you're going to be frustrated and burned out."

As her children get older, she hopes to incorporate a sense of charity. "There's a man at our church who every year has his

children pick a toy they don't use any more to give away," she says. She also participates in the Angel Tree Gift prison ministry, which identifies inmates' children who need clothes and a toy. Although she has yet to personally deliver the gifts, friends say it is an incredible feeling to go to the child's home. "It's all part of figuring out how I can teach [my daughters] to reach out to others," she says.

HELEN INGRAM (pictured above)

"Christmas has never stressed me out," says Helen Ingram, the principal at Tahoe Elementary School. "It's always been a happy occasion."

"Always" includes Ingram's childhood in Austin, Texas, where she was the seventh child in a family of 10, growing up on her parents' farm. "The main thing I loved was

the excitement of Christmas," she says. "And I truly believed in Santa Claus. I was pretty old when I found out it was my mom and dad and oh, how let down I was." Her father, the baker in the family, made tea cakes every year. They also had apples and oranges by the bushel, a giant Christmas tree and a houseful of family. "There were always plenty of children," she says.

Music also plays a large part in her memories of Christmas. "My mother started me [on the piano] at five," she says, "and I attended college on a music scholarship." She joined the school choir, which serenaded the governor on Christmas Eve. "I remember standing at the governor's mansion and seeing him at the second floor window looking out, seeing us singing," she says.

When she married and moved to California, her Christmases centered around

“I guess I’m just a big kid at heart, but there’s something magical about Christmas.”

her three daughters and her mother-in-law’s annual gatherings. “We were each assigned a dish to bring,” she says. “My dish was always candied yams—everyone loved my candied yams.” This house, too, was filled with children, boy cousins her daughters were thrilled to see. “Those were the good old times,” she tells her grown children now.

These days, Christmas for Ingram has changed and yet, subtly, stayed the same. She often vacations during her extended school holidays, usually with her daughters. One year, for example, they spent New Year’s in London; another year they were in Paris on Christmas Eve. But they are always home on Dec. 25, gathered at her sister-in-law’s home. “She insisted,” says Ingram, “on carrying on the tradition.” Ingram also sings in her church choir, which performs a Christmas cantata each year.

Her advice, particularly to mothers of young children: Help counteract what she calls the “gimme-gimmes.” She suggests getting involved with people who are less fortunate—singing at rest homes, baking cookies for people as a family project, visiting someone who is alone. She also disapproves of loading kids up with more than they need. “When our kids were little, we wouldn’t give big gifts,” she says. “We believed in giving them a lot of books because if you have imagination, you have a whole different perspective on life.”

Most of all, Ingram advises enjoying the season: “I guess I’m just a big kid at heart, but there’s something magical about Christmas.”

ADY LANGER

Ady Langer, a licensed clinical social worker, also put a new twist on her childhood traditions. Although her father is Israeli and the family lived in Israel until Langer was five, her Jewish religious experience was limited.

“My dad wasn’t into the holidays at all,” she says, “and my mother’s family wasn’t Jewish—they celebrated Christmas.” She adds that to most Israelis, Judaism is considered a culture rather than a religion. Her parents lit the menorah each of the eight nights of Hanukkah but didn’t say the prayers, and gift-giving was small: a piece

for her flute one year, “those socks with the individual toes” another. Later, the family moved to Fresno; Langer believes she was the only Jewish kid in her high school. She laughingly recalls, “My friends thought it was so neat that I got a present every night. And I’d think, ‘You get, like, 25 presents on Christmas Day. I’m left here with a bottle of fingernail polish, and you got a bike, roller skates . . .’”

Langer’s husband, who was raised in Van Nuys, ironically had a much more Jewish upbringing. “He went to Hebrew school, was bar mitzvahed, all those Jewish-American things,” she says. They have re-created many of his traditions for their own two children, ages 5 and 3, who look forward to Hanukkah in a way she and her brother didn’t.

“Our house is really decorated,” she says. “We have a menorah, dreidels, we do arts and craft projects, we put up what we call Hanukkah lights. It looks a lot more festive.”

The Langers are part of a synagogue, as well, which holds an annual Hanukkah party with skits, games and dancing, and Langer has presented short lessons on Hanukkah at her daughter’s school. “I spend maybe 15 minutes explaining it on a 3-year-old level, then we light a menorah and sing a song,” she says.

Other traditions include frying potato pancakes—latkes—and jelly donuts, in honor of the “Miracle of Lights”—when the lamp oil should have lasted one night but instead lasted eight. “Judaism as a religion always centers around food,” she says with a laugh.

In terms of gifts, however, Langer believes in keeping presents small and shops only for the kids, who receive flashlights, umbrellas, lots and lots of books. “I hear from friends, co-workers, ‘Oh, I still have to buy for so-and-so,’ and I think, ‘Why do they put themselves through this chaos?’” she says. ■

words FROM THE WISE

Despite the fact that the women interviewed range in age from 20-something to 60-something, there were surprising commonalities in their advice. Here is a sampling of their collective wisdom:

1. Shopping is universally the biggest stressor. Limit the stress by drawing names, establishing a Secret Santa policy—where half the fun is guessing who gave you what—or giving gifts only to the kids in the family. Also, keep gifts small. Surprisingly, it’s the little things that people remember and cherish.
2. Food is important and a big part of the tradition. It’s also fun, so get everyone involved. Bake cookies as a family project or have everyone bring a special dish to the big holiday dinner.
3. Pick and choose your activities carefully. Quality really is better than quantity. Avoid a holiday that is one mad rush; make family and close friends the priority, not perfunctory get-togethers.
4. Do things for other people, particularly those less fortunate than yourself. This teaches your children responsibility and empathy and takes the edge off your own tendency to gripe.
5. Expect family dynamics to be the same at the holidays as any other time of year. Find a way to put up with “those little comments”—and whatever else bugs you—or make new traditions. Go to Europe and learn how the holidays are celebrated in another country; make it the time you always get together with your best friend from college.