

BY LAURIE KAISER

When the television special *A Charlie Brown Christmas* first aired in 1965, our young protagonist confessed to his friend Linus that he felt depressed and empty, that the holidays had become too commercialized.

The show may have had a happy ending — with all the Peanut characters gathered around Charlie singing *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* — but Charlie may not feel better some 50 years later. The increasingly loud and ubiquitous ads for the latest gadgets and toys that begin before Halloween — and the unrealistic expectations fueled by social media — can easily distract from the deeper connection most of us hope to get out of the season. Sure, gifts are wonderful. But it is possible to infuse our holidays with more meaning. Here are seven suggestions:

### Volunteer

What better way to get into the spirit than brightening the day for someone who is struggling? While opportunities abound for adults to volunteer year-round with the Buffalo City Mission, the winter holidays provide two chances for everyone, including families with kids, to pitch in. The mission needs help delivering 5,600 Thanksgiving and 4,000 Christmas day meals to

Photos by Dave Janosz



Mary Ellen Gianturco of Clarence has created a new, healthy tradition for the holidays: an annual yoga class with her family.

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needy individuals and families.

"It's a wonderful opportunity for parents who want to make the holidays more meaningful and develop that service heart in their children," said Sue Cervi, the mission's volunteer manager. She noted that some longtime volunteers have become so attached to this annual tradition that they continue making deliveries as a family even after their kids are grown.

### **Create a new family tradition**

Mary Ellen Gianturco, a French teacher and Clarence mother of three, signs up for a family yoga class every year as a way to get everyone centered for the holidays.

"I know as a mother and a teacher that even teens want structure and family togetherness," she said. "And when you mask a healthy and/or spiritual activity as a holiday tradition, the kids look forward to it as something special."

### **Attend a spiritual service**

Basking in a spiritual service can be one of the most effective ways to feel the true significance of the holidays. Still, this ritual can ironically get lost in the busy-ness that surrounds it.

"Make time for a spiritual deepening. The more we bring things into consciousness, the more freedom we have in doing them," said the Rev. Patrick Zengierski, director of campus ministries at Buffalo State's Newman Center. If you haven't been to church in a while or don't have a religious home, visit several to find one where you feel most welcome, Zengierski suggested. During

Advent, churches often offer extra services and programming that are perfect for visitors.

### **Invite a lonely person to your celebration**

In the rush of baking/shopping/card-sending, it's easy to forget that many people are alone at the holidays. Consider inviting your widowed neighbor or an international student to your home for Christmas dinner. Beginning in 2002, Tim Chambers, executive director of Christian Counseling Ministries of Western New York, invited two Chinese students from the University at Buffalo's International Students Inc. to share Christmas with his family.

"These girls were like little kids. They were fascinated with every aspect of how we celebrate the holidays," said Chambers.

It was such a rewarding experience that the Chambers family participated in the international students program for 10 ensuing years. "One of the girls who came to our home ended up marrying an American guy and I officiated at their wedding. We're still in touch."

### **Give gifts that give back**

Instead of purchasing gifts in national chain stores, why not pour that money back into the community by shopping at local businesses? You also can find beautiful and meaningful gifts from organizations that help people survive, such as SewRedi Buffalo, which teaches refugees to make clothing and other items, and Serrv International

Inc. which sells handmade products from artisans and farmers in 25 underdeveloped countries.

"I'm a big believer in keeping a tangible symbol nearby that reminds you of what your priorities are," Zengierski said. "I keep a cloth cross in my wallet as a reminder of how I want to spend my money."

### **Put a new twist on an old tradition**

Just because you've always made snickerdoodles at the holidays doesn't mean you can't change it up. A couple of years ago, Gianturco and her 13-year-old daughter started baking a healthier version of traditional Christmas cookies, which they dubbed "nutritraditions." They distribute these creations to neighbors, friends, and teachers who don't notice the reduced sugar or whole wheat flour. Likewise, when people's lifestyles change — their children move out, they get divorced — traditions may have to shift to fit the new reality. Find something new to replace what's lost, Tim Chambers said, adding "If you've undergone a loss prior to the holidays, don't pretend it isn't painful. Embrace the loss and talk about it with a friend or professional counselor."

### **Celebrate loved ones**

As a way to lessen the pain of a loss, celebrate a loved one's memory with a holiday ritual. Gianturco recreates the traditional Italian la vigilia meal that her mother made every Christmas Eve until her death four years ago.

"I keep the exact same meatless dishes she served. It's just one more way to preserve her memory," explained Gianturco.

Cherished objects also can make us feel closer to loved ones who are gone. Zengierski displays a ceramic manger scene that belonged to his grandmother on a shelf in his office year-round. "It's both a reminder of her," he said, "and the meaning of Christmas." ■

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Rev. Patrick Zengierski, director of campus ministries at Buffalo State's Newman Center, keeps a cherished heirloom — a ceramic manger scene that belonged to his grandmother — displayed year-round as a reminder of the meaning of Christmas.