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Managing Editor, Becky Walker

Midlothian Editor, Betty Tryon

Editorial Coordinator, Sandra Strong

Editorial Assistant, Rachel Smith

Writers, Zachary R. Urquhart

Editors/Proofreaders, Pat Anthony

GRAPHICS AND DESIGN

Creative Director, Chris McCalla

Artists, Kristin Bato . Morgan Christensen

Martha Macias . Brande Morgan

Shannon Pfaff . Anthony Sarmienta

PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography Director, Jill Rose

Photography Coordinator, Amy Ramirez

Photographer, Vanessa Polozola

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ON THE COVER



The Salvation Army bells ring to awaken our consciousness to the needs around us.

Photo courtesy of The Salvation Army.

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Editor's Note

Merry Christmas, Midlothian!

The *Flor de la Noche Buena* or "Flower of the Holy Night" poinsettia will bloom brilliantly during the Christmas season. The vivid colors of the poinsettia flower bring an air of festivity to holiday celebrations all around the world. This flower is so special it has its own legend about a poor Mexican girl with nothing to give for Christmas. She was guided by an angel to gather weeds and lay them on the altar of her church as a gift offering. There

the weeds burst into the crimson colored leaves known as the poinsettia plant.

The little girl's desire to give a gift on Christmas is in keeping with the tradition of giving on that holiday. It all began when the Christ child was born and the wise men came bearing opulent gifts to honor His birth. Although Christmas is richly steeped in tradition, it is not about crowded malls, fanciful trees or brightly colored lights. To me Christmas is about celebrating the birth of the one for whom the holiday was created — Jesus Christ.

May your gift giving this season bring much wonder, peace and joy to others!

Betty

Betty Tryon
MidlothianNOW Editor
betty.tryon@nowmagazines.com

P.S. The publisher and staff of NOW Magazines wish you and your family a very merry Christmas and the happiest of holiday seasons!

**Merry Christmas!
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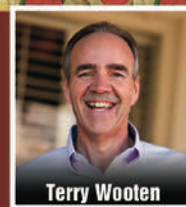
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Every year, thousands of stores and street corners around the world become donation centers for one of the most well-known charitable groups on the planet, The Salvation Army. The Salvation Army works year-round helping millions of people in many ways. Hearing the bells ringing and seeing volunteers has become as much a Christmas tradition as wassail and gingerbread houses. The money raised through the annual kettle program helps The Salvation Army assist thousands of children, families and senior citizens, providing gifts and food assistance, allowing them all to have a merry Christmas.

For Les and Linda Wheeler, Camp Hoblitzelle and The Salvation Army represent the best days of their lives. Les grew up in Mt. Arian, North Carolina, and he and his family

MOST GOOD

— By Zachary R. Urquhart



did not have a lot. “Because we didn’t have much,” he said, “there wasn’t a lot to do.” He first got involved with The Salvation Army because they had a Boy Scout troop. Eventually, he started taking part in other youth corps activities, and that would lead to his life changing forever. “I got a chance to go to the camp in South Carolina, and that’s where I was saved,” he detailed. “By the time I was 14,



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"AS A KID, I SAW THESE PEOPLE AS MY ROLE MODELS, I WANTED TO BE LIKE THEM. AND THEN WE SPENT YEARS WORKING WITH PEOPLE JUST LIKE THAT."

I knew I wanted to become a minister in the Army." After high school, Les went to The Salvation Army's version of seminary, Evangeline Booth College in Atlanta, Georgia. It was there he would meet the woman with whom he has lived a life of service.

Linda grew up in Texas, living around Ft. Worth before moving to Waco as a child. "I grew up in a family of five sisters, and we did not have anything," she admitted. "We got to know The Army because my mom would go get food from their pantries and shop at the thrift stores. They even made sure we had presents at Christmas. It wasn't a hand out, it was a hand up." The Salvation Army offered Linda's mom a job working at one of the stores, and the



family became more and more involved in the corps, including sending the girls to camp in the summer. "My first time at Hoblitzelle was when I was 8 or 9," she recounted. "I really grew up out there, I just love it." At an early age, she knew God was calling her into the ministry, and she headed off to school in Atlanta.

Les and Linda were only a year apart in their studies, and they met in 1967 at the school. "Back then, there were only a few hundred kids enrolled at a time, so you knew everyone," Les said. "We got married February 14, 1970, once we were both done with school." Upon finishing college, Les and Linda were both commissioned as lieutenants and ordained as ministers in The Salvation Army. They have two daughters, both of whom live in Midlothian. Angela is married to Joel, is mom to two boys, and is a dental assistant in town. Kristian



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has followed somewhat in her parents' footsteps. She works as an accountant at the division headquarters in Dallas.

They both had short commissions before they were married, and once together, their travels really started. They ended up with almost 20 posts over their careers that touched six decades, which is not unusual in The Army. "We came from the Methodist Church, so we follow their model of moving ministers every few years. You might have five or six in one spot, but most posts are only a couple of years," she added.

In their time as ministers, Les and Linda have loved being that helping hand up to people in need. "I remember after Katrina, Hoblitzelle opened as a refugee spot for the overcrowded Superdome," Les said. "And there was one lady who had been separated from her young son. Well, we found him in Tyler, and drove her out there to be reunited. And a month later, we got a call from this lady just wanting to thank us for helping."

In the summers, being an officer meant serving at one of The Army camps around the country. "I was really without direction until The Army reached out to me, so I loved being able to help others find their direction," Les admitted.

In addition to working with thousands of kids over their decades of service, Les and Linda got to serve alongside many individuals who share in their passion for ministry. "As a kid, I saw these people as my role models, I wanted to be like them," Linda explained. "And then we spent years working with people just like that." Though there are commissioning posts all around the world, The Army tends to be a small world. "You'll work with people for a while, then you move away, but you end up crossing paths at camp or doing

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disaster relief," she said. As a show of appreciation every year, The Army hosts a great Christmas event for officers and staff alike, so Les and Linda got to spend time seeing old friends and meeting new ones while reveling in holiday cheer.

As they neared retirement, Les and Linda started thinking about where to settle, and Midlothian was a top choice. "Angela met Joel at Hoblitzelle, and they were set on Midlothian," Les detailed. "Kristian was thinking about moving here, and when we started talking about it, she made up her mind, too." Once they had decided on Midlothian, they had a unique opportunity. "The Army wanted to have someone from headquarters living near the camp, so they bought this house," he enlightened. "So we lived here for the last few years of our commission, and then once we retired, we just bought the house from The Army." Les even works on the grounds crew a few days a week, and Linda helps coordinate special events.

It has been an amazing transition for them. They are close to family, and they still get to see firsthand the good The Army does year-round, but especially during the Christmas season. Though the average person may never know just how far the spare change they throw in a red kettle goes, Les and Linda have seen that change in their own lives. And since making Midlothian their home, they have seen a whole group of friends follow suit. "After we moved, our friends who were retiring from The Army started joining us," she laughed. "We weren't the first officially to retire here, but we were here first."

Now, Les and Linda represent almost 10 Salvation Army couples that have retired in either Midlothian or elsewhere in Ellis County. After a lifetime fulfilling The Army's motto of "doing the most good," Les and Linda are still seeing The Army do good in their own lives. **NOW**

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T H E

She is like so many people her age. She sleeps late when she can. She loves hanging out with friends, and usually has her phone nearby so she can reach them via text or social media. She finished high school not really sure of what was to come next. Masson Simmons is just like many millennial young adults today, except, she is not.

When Masson was 2 1/2 years old, she started having severe seizures, sometimes dozens a day. Four months of treatment at Children's Medical Center under the careful supervision of a neurosurgical team led to Masson being seen by Dr. Gerald So. Muscle biopsies were done. They were looking for a neuro brain deterioration disorder, but they found no cause



WAXAHACHIE
OF THE NAVARRO COLLEGE

NG GAP

— By Zachary R. Urquhart

of why her muscles were atrophying at such a fast rate. “They found she did have brain deterioration on the frontal lobe of her brain,” her mom, Tonya Hoffmann, explained.

Masson spent the next several years living in a wheelchair, wearing a protective helmet and spending many hours in physical therapy. At age 6, after many years of hard work on Masson’s part, she finally made it out of the wheelchair, and started relearning things that kids typically master in toddlerhood. While she made significant strides, stopped having



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visible seizures and was off medication by fourth grade, Masson was diagnosed with dementia on her frontal lobe. "Basically, she was about four years behind when it came to educational and developmental milestones," Tonya summarized.

In order to help her catch up in school, Masson was enrolled in special classes for kids who were far behind, but still functioned at a high level. "I went to Mt. Peak for elementary, but then I went to Walnut Grove because they had the classes I needed," she detailed. When she finally got to Midlothian High School, she was still well behind grade level, but was having something more like a typical teenage life. "Besides going to school, I like to fish and swim," she said. "I used to do basketball with the Special Olympics, and I'm about to start doing Jiu-Jitsu with Randy Clayton."





It was in Masson's high school years that she met McLissa Boler, one of the special education teachers in Midlothian. For years, McLissa had worked with students like Masson who faced an uncertain future after graduation. Because of this, she created the Bridges Training Foundation, an organization that helps high-functioning students with disabilities for two years after graduation. "They have classes to learn to transition into society through a coordinated program called Evaluate at Navarro College," Tonya said, also stating that Masson and her fellow students are still registered on their respective district rosters. "Then they also find local businesses where the kids can work, so they get used to having a job and being in the workforce."

"When I look at where Mason was a year ago,
I have seen her
GROW
and mature so much."

For decades, kids like Masson faced a tough transition after high school. She is higher-functioning than life skills students. On the other hand, typical special education students are only about a year behind educational markers, and Masson was not. While college is not immediately realistic for students like Masson, it is a goal that seems attainable one day. That is why McLissa created Bridges, to be a gap from high school to college, and to allow high-functioning

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students with disabilities the chance to get prepared for college or the workforce. "Masson is a fine example of what happens when a student is surrounded by individuals who are focused on what they can do, instead of what they think they can't do," MeLissa said. Midlothian only has a few students each year who fit the criteria, so MeLissa reached out to Masson and Tonya when she graduated in 2015.

Masson goes from the high school to Navarro College each day, where she joins kids from Ovilla, Red Oak and Waxahachie. They have classes ranging from math and chemistry to sessions on how to fill out job applications. They even take trips to banks, apartments and colleges to learn how to transition into society. "Mrs. Boler teaches most of it, but sometimes they have other people come in to help, too," Masson described. "They teach us how to dress and act when we go on interviews." Around noon, the students head off to their jobs at local businesses. "My dad works for Martin Marietta, so I did an internship there," she said.

While Masson had a unique experience in getting to work an office job, most of the companies who take on Bridges students are fast-food restaurants and grocery stores. "Unfortunately, a lot of companies are not willing to take on the kids from Bridges, but that is what we are trying to change." Tonya has talked to many local companies, and is hoping





to get more Realtors, insurance agents and businesses to give Bridges students a chance. "I will say, Brookshire's and Walgreen's have supported the program, and they pay the workers even though they don't have to," she added. Because it is considered a student program, the companies can have the kids work 10 hours a week without pay, though that is something else Tonya is trying to get changed. "Most companies are reluctant to bring them on. It's like McLissa says, they're looking at what could go wrong, instead of what could go right," Tonya said.

Currently, Masson is working at Pizza Inn, though she has greater aspirations for the near future. "I have a lead through Bridges with the Midlothian Police Department," she explained. And whatever she does in the next year, she already has plans once her time with the Bridges Foundation is complete. "I love babysitting, and I'm thinking about getting my nurses aid certification," she detailed.

"Aside from a specific job or trade school, I love seeing how Masson is more ready to be a part of the community," Tonya added. Along with getting the students ready, Bridges works to provide people within the community resources on people with disabilities and how they function. "When I look at where Masson was a year ago, I have seen her grow and mature so much," Tonya concluded. Thanks to this one-of-a-kind program and an amazing support team, Masson is bridging the gap. **NOW**



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A Festival of Lights

— By Zachary R. Urquhart

AT HOME WITH *Chad and Stacey Sumrall*

Christmas is all around us, and that means homes are adorned with lights, tinsel and decorations. For some, Christmas is a time to show off their holiday cheer. For others, it is a time to show off their decorative creativity. For Chad and Stacey Sumrall, Christmas is a time for family gatherings, ever-evolving traditions and lighting up their home to show their Christmas spirit.

Chad grew up in Watauga, graduating from Haltom High School before starting college at Texas Christian University. “I didn’t know exactly what I wanted to do, but I studied to be a paramedic and transferred to Tarrant County Junior College,” he explained. “After years as a medic, I finished at The University of Texas at Arlington and started med school at Midwestern University in Arizona in 1999.” Along the way, Chad met Stacey, and by the time he entered med school, they had been married almost a decade.

Stacey grew up in Maypearl, and went to EMT/Paramedic school straight out of high school. “I worked for Ellis County for a year, and then spent 12 years working in Ft. Worth,” she said. “I was working for MedStar EMS when we met. We dated for a few years and got married in August of 1992.” Stacey finished nursing school in 1995, and worked in pediatrics for just over a decade, before staying home with their children.

In 1994, Chad and Stacey welcomed their first child, Ashley. “She is kind of following in our footsteps,” Chad said. “After graduating from TCU, she enrolled in EMT school at Navarro. She knows she wants to do something in the medical field, but she isn’t sure what.” While Chad was working on his medical degree, they welcomed Brayden into the family. “He is a sophomore at Midlothian High School. He plays trombone in the band, and he’s almost done with his black belt in Tae Kwon Do,” Chad described.

After a three-year stint in Jackson, Mississippi, for residency, the family moved to Midlothian. “My family’s still in Maypearl, so we liked the idea of moving somewhere close,” Stacey detailed. “Early on, they helped with the kids a lot. Plus, we wanted to be away from the city, so this was perfect.” Stacey





grew up loving the one-lane bridges that headed to the south part of town, and she still likes the country feel they have living on the outskirts of the city.

Chad was working for the Baylor hospital system, and Midlothian was a good central location for him. They found a model home in Crystal Forest on the way to see another house, and they fell in love with it. Back then, Chad traveled to several Baylor sites, and coming from different hospitals on different days led to some funny stories. "I occasionally got lost at night and called Stacey when I came home from different directions," he laughed. Now, though, Chad is an ER physician at Baylor Scott & White Hospital in Waxahachie and has an intriguing side gig. "I was a college trainer with someone on the Dallas Cowboys' training staff, and I now work



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in the main first aid area and as a field airway physician at some home games,” he said excitedly.

When driving up to the house, curved lines that go from the house to the landscaping to the lawn give an almost exotic feel to a home with beautiful curb appeal. During the season, lights brighten

up the entry. “It takes some work getting everything set up,” Stacey mentioned. Each tree and large shrub has its own color scheme, and the walkways are trimmed in white light.

One of Stacey’s favorite parts of the house is the stone archway inside the foyer. “The unique appearance of

the stone really sets it apart from the other houses,” she said. They add LED icicle lights in the front hallway, which complement the lights and decor of their rich-wooded, open kitchen that overlooks the living room.

Chad and Stacey move some of their plush living room furniture to display the larger of their two trees in the living room, complete with every sentimental ornament the kids ever made. “We’ve always put the kids’ ones on display,” Stacey said. “One year, we tried making it fancier, but I didn’t like it.” They alternate





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white and multi-colored lights, so the tree can have variable appearances.

Past the kitchen and elegant nook, there is a smaller second living space that they consider their catch-all room. "And we have a second tree with a more traditional look in here," Stacey said.

"The kids have made wreaths that we use to decorate their doors for Christmas," Stacey explained. Ashley's room is adorned with blue and green, and an awesome ticket stub collection shows her love of live music. Brayden's room shows an evolution of hobbies, from sports, to gaming, to fancy cars that go fast.

The master bedroom is relatively simple, with a large bed as the visual centerpiece. "With my odd hours, the bedroom is really a place that stays quiet and dark," Chad laughed. "Sometimes I have a normal schedule, and some days I don't get to sleep until it's already light out." The more eye-catching room is Chad's office in the front of the house, as it is elegantly trimmed, and the walls are covered with autographs that range from Jimmy Buffett to professional athletes. "My favorite is the picture with James Garner," he recounted. "I was the paramedic specifically for James Garner on the set of the *Lonesome Dove* sequel. So I took this photo with him, had it developed and had another medic take it and get it signed. This was before the days of cell phone pictures," he detailed.

The backyard shows off their love of Jimmy Buffett, from signs featuring

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his lyrics to a tiki bar that seems like it belongs in one of his music videos, and even a portable bar made from the working parts of a pop-up trailer they take to see concerts each year. At Christmas, the backyard is a huge light-show display, and the rest of the year, a pool surrounded by vegetables gives a unique feel. "Most people would have a garden," Stacey said. "But everything grows so well right here, so here it is."

With the concert stuff, the pool and seasonal lighting, their backyard is a perfect picture of where Chad and Stacey are in life. As the family gets older, their interests fluctuate and they balance new stages in life while holding onto traditions of the past. "Last year, Ashley went on a trip, so we couldn't do exactly our normal thing, and Brayden didn't like changing the way we had always done Christmas morning," Chad concluded. While their customs may transform, nothing will soon change the joy they get from lighting up the Christmas season. **NOW**



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— By Betty Tryon

It was a daring move. Kaci Wiens, senior at Heritage High School, wanted to make her dress for the most important social event in high school — her high school prom. The plans for this occasion typically begin months before with great emphasis on finding the perfect dress. “I guess a lot of people don’t make their own prom dress,” Kaci acknowledged. “I’ve never heard of anyone in Midlothian doing that. I thought I would make my dress, love it and that would be the end of



it. But Mrs. Danielle Baze, family consumer science teacher, encouraged me to compete, and schools are recognizing me. I've gotten so much more out of this than I ever dreamed." Her dress was so well made that Kaci placed 1st in the Texas FCCLA State Leadership Conference for sewing the dress she wore to prom.

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As a Midlothian native and now a senior at Heritage High School, Kaci remembers getting a sewing machine for Christmas in the fifth grade. She played with American Girl Dolls and enjoyed sewing their clothes. "They're not as good as the ones in the store," she admitted, "but, I could sew straight lines and used Velcro and glued on rhinestones. It looked tacky, but I liked it!"

In her sophomore year in high school, Kaci took the regular fashion class offered and loved it. She later took advanced fashion during her junior year. "I felt like I was pretty talented," she shared. "After sewing my American Dolls clothes, I didn't sew for about three years, and then I sewed some pajama pants. They were pretty easy. For the next big project, I sewed myself a jumpsuit. I like to sew my own clothes and sew mostly skirts and shorts. It's such a good feeling when I'm done and think, *I made this!*"

Initially when Kaci decided to sew her own prom dress, she wanted the color to be emerald green, thinking no one else would have a green dress at prom. However, after going online to the site of a fabric store, she couldn't find the color of green she wanted. In her browsing, she chose black and gold fabric for the gown and purchased eight yards of the material. Kaci thought she would never sew another gown of that magnitude because of all the challenges and amount of time it took to complete the project.



"I felt burned out on it," she stated, "but, changed my mind because it was cheaper to sew my own. I could get exactly what I wanted and it would be an original. No one else would be wearing the same dress. Making my prom dress was huge to me, and everyone knew I'd made my dress and had gone to competition with it. Even though the dress is pretty, it is more of a compliment of my hard work. If someone likes it that means I did a good job."

After completing the dress, Kaci was touched by the reaction she received from her teacher. "When I tried it on for the first time, my teacher cried," Kaci shared. "It was a big deal to me because I had spent so much time on this dress. We

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Kaci's teacher, Danielle Baze, helped her achieve success.

added it up, and it was about 50 hours. I put quite a bit of work into it, and it was so worth it. I know a lot of girls love their prom dress, but I'm going to want to keep this project. When I visited fashion schools and told them I made my own prom dress, they were like, "What?"

Kaci liked the fact that sewing her gown was much cheaper than purchasing it in a department store. She did some research online and discovered that the average prom dress costs \$200 to \$800. The cost of all her materials together was \$167 — a substantial savings. "My parents loved that of course," Kaci smiled. "I have a time log of every minute I spent on this dress, and Mrs. Baze told me to charge myself \$8 an hour. That brought the cost to \$600. With work like this, it would probably cost at least \$10 an hour. I thought, *Wow, now I understand why they are so expensive! Someone had to stitch it, and someone had to put the beads on.*"

As a member of FCCLA, Family Career Community Leaders of America, Kaci competed in Fashion Construction with her prom dress. The competition is called STAR, Students Taking Action For Recognition. "My first competition was in Waco, and I came in second place. I listened to the judge's criticism and input and fixed what they asked me to fix. The critiques were easily fixable. Then I went to Dallas for the state competition and won first place. I competed against 21 other girls, and the top two get to go to



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nationals.” Kaci’s first-place win earned her a scholarship and a trip to nationals in San Diego in July.

During her previous judging experiences, participants were not allowed to be in the room when judges were inspecting the dresses, but Kaci, along with other students, decided to peek in when the door was open. “They look at everything on the dress,” she declared. “I had to give them a sheet that marked my skill set used on the dress, such as whether I used darts or had a lining. In general, they are looking to see if I had straight seams, if hand stitched seams are hidden and if the zipper works. They check to see if it looks like a dress where time was put into it, and if it is something I could sell and have it look as if it came out of the store.”


Kaci’s \$4,000 scholarship from Texas Tech University and \$3,000 scholarship from FIDM Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in California will give her options after high school. “I will also visit the Art Institute and other fashion schools,” she referenced. “I want to go into fashion for sure, like fashion journalism. The designing part sounds glamorous, but it’s a really hard job that becomes your life, and I want to have a family someday.”

Out of the many exciting moments Kaci had with her prom dress, perhaps her most satisfying experience happened at nationals when she scored the highest score in the southern region of the country and won the highest ranking honor — the gold medal. Kaci gives a lot of credit to Mrs. Baze. “This was not a project I could’ve done on my own. I’m not as good at reading patterns and knowing how much fabric to get. She was a huge help.” As a senior, there are no more fashion classes to take, but whatever Kaci decides to do for her future, fashion will be at its heart. **NOW**

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Christmastime is near, and you may already see adornment and trimming on your neighbors' houses. Many people have family heirlooms or other sentimental pieces inside their homes, but they are typically more open to trying something new on the outside of the house. Be creative, and let your house front be your pallet. If you are ready to change up how you dress your house for the holidays, here are some ideas to win your neighborhood decorating contest!

Lights, Decor, Action!

- *Know your options.* There are dozens of styles of light strings, with slight variations along the way. While regular



ND

— By Zachary R. Urquhart

indoor lighting has been moving away from traditional incandescent bulbs in favor of more eco-friendly models, Christmas lights are still offered in any number of styles. You can buy strands relatively cheap that will have the same yellow “soft-white” you have seen for decades, or you may opt for new light-emitting diode styles that will cost more up front but save money on electricity for years to come.

• *Bulbs are not created equal.* The other side of having plenty of options is that you have to be careful when buying new strands. When it comes to LED’s, especially, every company will have slightly different hues, so buy enough strands. Lights are categorized by size,

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but even sizes can fluctuate between brands. When you find the color and style you want, consider buying several extra strands. Spending a little now will outweigh having to start over in a few years just because a few strands are dead.

• *Plan before you hang.* When decorating, it is a major source of frustration to reach the end of your last



strand just before you get to the edge of your house. Measure your edge, and factor in losing a few inches per strand for the slack you will inevitably have and the inches you lose at each strand connection spot. If you end up with extra lights, you can either hide them in the gutter, or you can take out a bulb to cut the power to the excess lights. A professional Christmas light installation company can assist you in creating the look you are dreaming of.

Use the Yard

- *Less is more, sometimes.* Somewhere between an empty front yard and a Griswold-style Christmas, there is a happy medium, displaying just the right amount of holiday cheer. You want to avoid crowding too much outside, but think about adding lights to your trees or bushes. Companies even make light nets that make it easier than ever to cover your shrubs and small trees.

- *Include a statement piece.* There is much more than lights available for decorating your yard. There is an ever-growing list of variety in inflatable decorations, so you can be the first on your block with the latest trends.

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Reindeer made of wire or cut out of wood are a great addition, and you can even use hunting decoys with a few accessories for a truly unique look. A Nativity scene is a popular choice with lots of options. You can display something as simple as Jesus, Mary and Joseph, or opt for the entire scene, complete with wise men, animals and a lit up Star of Bethlehem.

- *"Spruce" it up.* Most people put either an artificial tree or a cut-down real tree in their house for the season. One fun option is to plant a Christmas tree in your front yard. There are many varieties of pine trees, especially, that will grow well, and their increasing size lets each year be a new decorating experience. This is especially great if you have young children who grow older as the tree gets bigger each year.

- *Plan your power.* If you are adding lights to your trees, make sure to start the chord at the bottom, otherwise, you will have to run power up into your branches. Also, have an idea of where you will plug each chord running into your yard. You want to avoid too many possible tripping hazards, and if you can, try to hide the cords so as not to detract from the yard's beauty in the daylight hours.

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Themes Bring Everything Together

- *Take it "light-ly."* There is no specific right combination of lights, especially when decorating the outside. You can go all white, colored or settle on a blend of the two. But, symmetry is usually more visually appealing, so try to have a pattern to your light and ornament setup. The key is to avoid one strand or section that looks out of place among the rest.

- *Your lawn needs focus.* If you have a hunting Santa next to a newborn Jesus, all behind a skeleton from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, your display may be sending mixed signals. Pick a genre and fit your decorations within that theme. Some great options include: gingerbread men, toy soldiers, Santa and his elves or religious themes. You can also get creative and add lights, red hats and jingle bells to any lawn motif to make a theme of your own.

- *Plan with the neighbors.* If you can get people on your block to agree, consider having an entire neighborhood theme. One option is to do something simple like coordinating your light color and placement. For something really special, work together to put on the 12 Days of Christmas, or you can even create an entire Dickens' Christmas village.

Whether you want a simple yard with well-placed, coordinated lights, or you want to transform your entire neighborhood into a white winter wonderland, use these tips and start with a solid plan to ensure your yard is full of holiday cheer! **NOW**

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Diana Younts helps to showcase the Midlothian Conference Center, as the city works to make Midlothian a destination for corporate trainings, meetings and conferences.

Midlothian's Great Amenity

Midlothian Conference Center is the perfect location for special occasions — from birthday parties to corporate meetings.

— By Betty Tryon

When walking into the Midlothian Conference Center, it is impossible to not be impressed. The atmosphere of the center is a perfect mix of elegance, comfort and professional business elements. “People often come in and are so surprised,” Diana Younts, director of the center, stated. “This is a state-of-the-art facility. There are several larger cities that don’t have a facility like this. To be able to offer this space for events at such an affordable rate, not only to Midlothian citizens, but to anyone in this area, is a really neat thing. That’s why so many people come here even from DFW. It’s a great amenity for Midlothian.”

Diana grew up in Midlothian and graduated from high school here. Her parents and in-laws live here, and her first job as an intern while in college was in Midlothian’s Parks and Recreation Department. Her

husband is a police officer in Duncanville, and they have a 1-year-old baby. She worked in Duncanville for seven years as the recreation supervisor at their center. Her last experience before coming to Midlothian was in Arlington, where she was the recreational coordinator for three years. “It’s great to be back here in a smaller city,” she shared.

Even though Midlothian is a comparatively smaller community, it boasts a beautiful hotel next to the conference center. The conference center does work with the hotel in bringing more business into the city. “We’re trying to get more people to come to Midlothian,” Diana said. “We want this to be a destination for corporates and are looking to getting them here Monday through Friday for their trainings, meetings and conferences. They can stay at the hotel and use their catering

services. We try to do a special rate for those who are corporate guests of the hotel because their taxes bring revenue to the city.”

Since the conference center is an event center, the Midlothian Conference Center's largest source of revenue comes from the weddings that take place there. Also hosted at the center are quinceañeras, anniversary celebrations and birthday parties. "Sometimes, you don't want to have your kid's birthday party at your house because you don't have the space," Diana explained. "This is a really good place to come. We have various room sizes that would fit from a handful of people up to 1,000. We are affordable and they can stay local."



The atmosphere of the center is a perfect mix of elegance, comfort and professional business elements.

The center hosts many annual events. There is the Daddy/Daughter Dance every June and a breakfast with Santa event in December. “We are the venue for events like Navarro Brilliance and SPCA Auction for Ellis County every year,” Diana stated. “We do the Chamber Auction every year and the Ellis County Quilters Guild. It’s fun building those relationships.”

The Chamber hosts vendor shows, such as the Heroes of Midlothian's Oktoberfest, proms from Maypearl, MISC school banquets, and FFA banquets for Waxahachie and Red Oak. Diana's primary goal with the conference center would be to continue bringing more revenue to the center and city and bringing people to Midlothian so it continues to grow. "We want people coming here instead of going to Mansfield or Cedar Hill. Our hotel with the Marriot brand, the Kroger complex and the shops that are coming will build the revenue that will help the city and will create more opportunities for us to do better things for the city of Midlothian." **NOW**

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December 2

All City Choir Christmas Performance: Midlothian High School, 923 S. 9th St. For information, email kerri_graham@misd.gs.

December 2, 3

Christmas Market & Gift Show: 6:00-9:00 p.m., **Friday**, preview party; 10:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m., **Saturday**, Waxahachie Civic Center, 2000 Civic Center Ln. The annual event is sponsored by the Waxahachie Junior Service League.

December 2 — 11

Bethlehem Revisited: **December 2, 3, 4**, 6:00-9:00 p.m.; **December 9, 10, 11**, 6:00-9:00 p.m.; 402 N. College St., Waxahachie, behind Central Presbyterian Church. Free admission. Donations welcome. Step back in time, over 2000 years ago, and walk the streets of ancient Bethlehem as Mary and Joseph did on the night of Christ's birth.

December 3

Southern Star Christmas Celebration, Annual Christmas Event, Light Up Parade: 1:00 p.m.-7:00 p.m., Tree Lighting Ceremony 6:00 p.m., Heritage Park, 234 N. 8th St. Event features vendor fair, entertainment, pictures with

Santa, activities in Heritage Park, Back Alley Plaza and Downtown shops. Rainout date for Tree Lighting Ceremony is **December 13** at Heritage Park 5:30 p.m.

December 9, 10, 11

Waxahachie Community Theatre's Christmas production of "You Better Watch Out": **Friday and Saturday**, 7:30 p.m.; **Sunday**, 2:30 p.m., Chautauqua Auditorium in Getzendaner Park, Waxahachie. All tickets are \$10 each and can be purchased online through the theatre website at waxahachiecommunitytheatre.com. (NOTE: A service charge will be added to the price of each ticket for online purchases.) Preschool children get in free with paid adult admission.

December 10

Bikes 4 Tykes: 8:00 a.m.-noon, Heritage Park, 234 N. 8th St. Please help Manna House provide a Merry Christmas to every child this year by donating a bike.

December 11

Ellis County Toy Run: 11:00 a.m., 8th St., Downtown. Annual Gryphons Motorcycle Club Toy Run. The parade of motorcycles leaves Midlothian at 11:00 a.m. sharp.

December 13

The National Active and Retired Federal Employees (NARFE) Chapter 1191 meeting: 11:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m., rotating between Ryan's Buffet in Waxahachie, Sirloin Stockade in Corsicana and the Grand Ennis Buffet in Ennis. Email rjcarey1@gmail.com or call 972-775-2463 for more info.

December 17

Pet Adoption Event: 9:00-11:00 a.m., Wal-Mart Garden Center, 400 U.S. 67 Frontage Rd. Monthly adoption event. Animal Shelter pets will be available for adoption.

December 30

One Way Church Necessity Closet: Noon-3:00 p.m., 716 W. Main. Open to help people on food stamps or who have a low income by giving them paper products and cleaning supplies. For more information, contact Jean Burns at (972) 978-7210 or by email at mybrokee@aol.com

Submissions are welcome and published as space allows. Send your current event details to betty.tryon@nowmagazines.com.

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In the Kitchen With Lee Allen

— By Betty Tryon

Lee Allen's inspiration to cook comes from those she loves most — her husband, Max Joseph; daughter, Alyssa, who is a pharmacy school student; son, Joe, who is a cadet at West Point; and youngest son, Max Joshua, who is an eighth-grader at Frank Seale Middle School. "I love cooking because it makes me feel good to feed people. My grandmother was always feeding us, and it kind of stuck. I love to get to your heart through your stomach. People often joke that no one is hungry in my presence."

Lee meets this need by cooking in bulk. She can spend the whole day making everything from meatballs to chicken pot pies to cookies. She saves some for the week and freezes the rest for another day. **NOW**

Tomato Basil Meatballs

Prep time: 19 minutes. Cook time: 11 minutes. Serves 12.

- 1 lb. ground beef chuck
- 1/4 cup grated Parmesan
- 4 Tbsp. fresh basil, chopped
- 3 cloves minced garlic (divided use)
- 1 egg, beaten
- 2 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 small onion, finely chopped
- 1 15-oz. can diced tomatoes
- 2 Tbsp. tomato paste
- 1/2 tsp. salt
- 1/3 cup fresh basil, sliced

1. In a medium bowl, mix beef, Parmesan, chopped basil, 1 garlic clove and egg until well blended. Shape into 24 meatballs, about 1 Tbsp. each, 1- to 1 1/4-inch round.
2. Heat oil in a large, nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add meatballs; cook 5 to 7

minutes or until evenly browned, turning occasionally.

3. Add onion and remaining 2 garlic cloves; cook and stir 1 minute. Increase heat to medium-high. Stir in tomatoes, tomato paste and salt. Reduce heat; cover and cook 4 to 6 minutes or until meatballs are thoroughly cooked to 160 F. Stir in sliced basil. (Note: Meatballs can also be baked for 25 minutes at 400 F and added to a Crock-Pot with all other ingredients. I substitute the ground beef with ground elk or venison.)

Spicy Penne With Sausage

- 1 red onion
- 3 cloves fresh garlic
- 2 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 Tbsp. fresh basil, sliced
- 2 Tbsp. fresh oregano
- 1 large bell pepper
- 1 cup grated Parmesan
- 2 jalapeño peppers, sliced

- 1 15-oz. can diced tomatoes
- 1 lb. sliced beef sausage
- 1 box penne pasta
- 1 cup mozzarella, if recipe is baked

1. Sauté onion and garlic in olive oil. Add basil and oregano. Stir 2 to 3 minutes.
2. Add remaining ingredients and serve over al dente pasta. (Note: Sometimes I mix it all together in a casserole dish and top it with mozzarella. Bake for 20 minutes at 325 F and serve.)

Sausage Stuffing

- 3/4 cup onion, finely chopped
- 1/2 cup celery, chopped
- 1 cup butter
- 8 cups soft bread cubes (divided use)
- 1 1/2 tsp. dried sage leaves or 1 tsp. sage
- 1 tsp. dried thyme leaves
- 1 lb. pork sausage, browned and drained

1. Cook and stir onion and celery in butter until tender. Stir in 1/3 of the cubes. Turn all into a deep bowl. Add remaining ingredients and toss.
2. Can be stuffed into turkey or baked until warm at 325 F.

Shirley's Vegetable Soup

Must have 13 vegetables! Choose desired amounts of each vegetable you want.

- 3 lbs. beef short ribs
- Beef bouillon, to taste
- Lima beans
- Green beans
- Peas
- Potatoes, diced small
- Okra
- Purple cabbage
- Jalapeño peppers
- Onion
- Celery
- Corn
- Diced tomatoes
- White cabbage
- Carrots, sliced

1. Boil ribs in water for 1 to 2 hours. Remove meat from bone and cut into bite-size pieces.
2. Add beef bouillon for flavor. Add vegetables and cook until vegetables reach desired doneness. Use more of the vegetables your family loves.

To view recipes from current and previous issues, visit www.nowmagazines.com.



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