

Valley Families Share their Holiday Traditions

Written by Written by Melissa Larsen

From cookie-making and board game-playing to an elf named Shiny, five Valley families share their merriest holiday traditions and memories.



Photographed by Cassandra Tomei

THE WILLIAMS FAMILY Matt; Erika; and Madison, 8

At the house of Matt Williams, former Arizona Diamondbacks third baseman and his wife, Erika, of lifestyle Web site, www.thehopelesshousewife.com, and former 3TV anchor, the holidays wouldn't be the same without karaoke, Beef Wellington and one magical ferris wheel.

What's your favorite holiday tradition?

Erika: Decorating the tree with our whole family, playing old-fashioned Christmas music and drinking Christmas cocktails, of course! I always get a little crazy with karaoke and sing Christmas songs while Matt sits and listens in horror. It's pretty funny. We love to laugh!

Do you have any travel plans this season?

Matt: Every year we have big ideas in the fall about what exotic place we will travel to at Christmas, and we always end up staying at home since the weather is so spectacular here. Our house is the destination for most of our friends and family during the holidays.

What's the greatest holiday gift you have received?

Madison: My American Girl camper. It was set up with dolls inside and a mini campfire with a s'mores kit and everything. It makes me want to go camping in a big RV every time I see it.

What are you looking most forward to this season?

Madison: I love to bake cookies and treats for everyone, especially for Santa and the reindeer.

Erika: Cooking new holiday recipes and inviting people over to eat and drink. It's been a long and amazing year. We have lots to celebrate, and I'm ready to start.

Matt: Just having downtime with family. The baseball season brings a lot of travel, so it's nice to have time off to just hang with the family. And football, of course. Besides the Cardinals, I'm a long-suffering Chargers fan. Erika bought me a 'lucky' Chargers shirt. I'm hoping it kicks in this season.

How does having children shape the holidays?

Matt: Well, it completely shapes the holidays for us—we wake up at the crack of dawn since Madison can't wait another minute to see what Santa has brought us. We all get into the spirit even more having a young child in the house; it makes it even more fun.

What's on your wish list?

Madison: Mini English bulldog and a clothes-designing kit. Could I also put the new iPad on my list?

Matt: Could I ask to be 30 again?

Erika: Could I ask to be 20 again?

Favorite holiday...

Song: "Sleigh Ride" because it's hilarious to watch my family cringe when I belt this out while it plays. We all laugh when it comes on. I can't help but still love the 80's song, "Do They Know it's Christmas?" It brings back memories.

Food: Erika's Beef Wellington, Matt's world-famous mashed potatoes and Erika's mom's ambrosia salad.

Decoration: We have a great elf ferris wheel; it's pretty magical.



Photographed by Chadwick Fowler

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THE STOEGBAUER FAMILY Dan; Kim; Tommy; 7; and Kate, 5

Kim Stoegebauer knows a thing or two about decking the halls; she is a party stylist and founder of the ever-popular TomKat Studio. This Christmas, expect white twinkle lights, fresh-baked cookies and stuffed stockings from this Chandler family.

What's your favorite holiday tradition?

Kim: One of my favorite holiday traditions is Elf on the Shelf. While Shiny, our elf, has only been visiting us now the last two seasons, he creates excitement every morning until Christmas. The kids wake up so excited to discover where he has cleverly hidden each night.

Dan: One tradition that I loved as a kid was St. Nick's Day. On the night of Dec. 5, the kids put out their stockings and, sometime during the night, St. Nick fills them with candy and toys. We do the same tradition with our kids, and they absolutely love it.

What's the greatest holiday gift you have received?

Tommy: The best Christmas gift I have ever received was a basketball hoop. I love to shoot hoops with my dad and my friends in the backyard.

Kate: My favorite Christmas present was when Mommy and Daddy surprised us with our first trip to Disneyland.

What are you looking most forward to this season?

Kim: I love what the holiday season represents: a time for being with family and friends and celebrating the season. I am also looking forward to decorating for the holidays, as I plan on switching up our color scheme and style this year. Don't tell my husband that it won't be the traditional red and green, as usual. He always hopes for colored Christmas tree lights, but I don't think he'll ever win that battle!

What's been your fondest holiday memory?

Kim: My mom has always baked a variety of Christmas cookies each year. Now that I am grown with kids of my own, I really love baking with her and involving the kids. They love to sit on the counter and help with every aspect of the process, especially decorating the gingerbread cookies and sugar cookies with fun sprinkles.

How does having children shape the holidays?

Kim: Having children has made the holiday season better than I could have ever imagined. There isn't anything as priceless as their excitement for the season. Our kids love getting out the Christmas decorations and helping find places for everything. They love all of the classic Christmas traditions and being with our family.

Favorite holiday...

Song: "All I Want for Christmas is You" by Mariah Carey.

Food: Holiday desserts.

Film: "Love Actually."

Decoration: Our fireplace mantel with stockings.



THE JOHNSON FAMILY Wesley; Melissa; Wesley and Santana, 3 months

After welcoming twin boys just a few months ago, Wesley Johnson, of the Phoenix Suns, and his fiancée, Melissa, are looking forward to their first holiday as a family of four.

What's your favorite holiday tradition?

Wesley: When I was a kid, I always enjoyed opening presents. This year will be our first Christmas as a family, and I'm really excited to see my boys' smiling faces as they open their gifts.

Do you have any travel plans this season?

Wesley: No, we will be at home this year. Some of our family may come to visit us and spend the holiday with us here in Arizona.

What's the greatest holiday gift you have received?

Wesley: I think it was when I was younger and got my first PlayStation.

What are you looking most forward to this season?

Wesley: Spending time with my family. I have two new additions (twins, Wesley and Santana) this year so I am looking forward to spending time and creating memories with them.

What's been your fondest holiday memory?

Wesley: Having bounced around a lot over the past few years, I cherish the times I get to spend with my family, especially over the holidays. The holidays to me are a time for family, so any memory featuring them would be one of my favorites.

How does having children shape the holidays?

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Wesley: This will be my first Christmas with my children, but I am really excited to see their faces light up. I remember as a child all the fun that came with the holiday season. Now as a father it is my turn to offer that same experience. Seeing the joy and excitement on their faces will be the best present I could ask for.

What's your New Year's resolution?

Wesley: To make the NBA playoffs.

Favorite holiday...

Song: "Jingle Bells."

Food: Turkey.

Film: "A Christmas Story."

Decoration: Christmas lights.



Photographed by Cassandra Senei

THE GEBRAN FAMILY George; Abeer; Talia, 5; and Zaina, 3

With his four brothers, George Gebran owns the Valley's popular U.S. Egg restaurants. So it's no surprise that a big breakfast spread is as part of his family's Christmas morning tradition as opening presents in pajamas.

What's your favorite holiday tradition?

George: Christmas morning breakfast is my favorite tradition. It's every Gebran's favorite tradition because it's the one time a year we eat breakfast together. We're usually serving our guests breakfast. We all show up in our pajamas, eat a big breakfast feast, open presents and play board games. We fight and make up, watch movies, and then pass out on the couch, waiting for lunch. It's great.

Do you have any travel plans this season?

George: No. We like to stay at home over the holidays. It is a great time for all of us to be together since we work so hard during the year. My sister and her family will fly in, though, to visit us.

What's the greatest holiday gift you have received?

George: The homemade gifts from the kids always bring the biggest smiles. Last year, I received a pencil holder made from an old water bottle and a letter opener made from a butter knife. Those are the best gifts.

What are you looking most forward to this season?

George: It's all about the children: decorating the outside of the house, making cookies, wrapping presents, watching classic Christmas movies and setting up the nativity scene. The Polar Express in Williams is on our list this year as well.

What's been your fondest holiday memory?

George: It was 1985, I was 12-years-old and we had more than 70 family members reunite at my aunt's house for Christmas dinner/weekend. My newly befriended extended cousins and I played football and stuffed our faces for four days straight. We still talk and reflect about that weekend.

How does having children shape the holidays?

George: We were married for five years before having children and those Christmas seasons were great. However, once we had children, it only got better and more exciting. We now have our own traditions combined with both of our families' traditions. And for some reason, Talia and Zaina are super well-behaved all month, so that really helps shape the holidays. Thanks St. Nick!

What is on your wish list?

Talia: A pink pony and a pink grocery cart.

Zaina: A pink pony and a pink baby stroller.

Favorite holiday...

Song: I love all Christmas music, except anything to do with Alvin and the Chipmunks!

Food: Turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie.

Film: "It's a Wonderful Life" starring James Stewart.

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Decoration: The girls made some Christmas ornaments at school that make the house and tree shine.



THE PETERSON FAMILY Erik; Kimberly; Ridge, 9; and Noelle, 7

As a principal of PHX Architecture, Erik Peterson has left his signature design stamp everywhere from Idaho to Hawaii. This holiday season, though, this husband and father of two is heading back home to Illinois to celebrate Christmas with extended family and longtime friends.

What's your favorite holiday tradition?

Erik: One of our favorite holiday traditions is Christmas Eve. We get all dressed up and go to the children's candlelight service at our church. Kimberly crying happy tears is always a given when we sing "Silent Night." You can pretty much cue the tears, and the children always look at her to see that, yes, it is going to happen every year. After church we go to Uncle Phil and Aunt Nancy's house for the traditional 'highly casual' meal where we all (aunts, uncles and cousins) stand around in the kitchen and eat. This Christmas Eve tradition was always at Kimberly's mom's house and was taken over seven years ago after her passing by her brother and sister-in-law. While we eat, we are tracking Santa on the computer to see where he is and estimate his arrival. At last, we gather around the tree and exchange presents from each other. There is typically one person who plays Santa and, by the end of the evening, there is a pile of wrapping paper and many bows being worn on our heads.

Do you have any travel plans this season?

Erik: For the 15 years we have been together, I have always wanted to take Kimberly and the kids back home to Park Ridge, Ill., for Christmas where I grew up. Kimberly could never muster up the courage to be away from her mother, so we have never made the trip. After her mother passed away, Kimberly didn't want to leave her nieces and nephews. So here we are with children of our own, our nieces and nephews are growing up, and I think it's time to finally take the family back home for the holidays. We are looking forward to experiencing Chicago as a family during the holiday season. We have a great big extended family there and many dear friends so it will be nice to be together during such a fun time.

What's been your fondest holiday memory?

Erik: The holiday season of 2004 was the first Christmas with our first child, and our parents were both alive to celebrate with us as a family.

What's on your wish list?

Erik: New line of clothes from SJC.

Kimberly: Alaska cruise.

Ridge: Xbox.

Noelle: American Girl dolls.

What's your New Year's resolution?

Erik: Continue to keep my weight in tune and build muscle tone.

Kimberly: Health, happiness, long life.

Ridge: Become part of a swim team to train for the next Olympics.

Noelle: Advance closer to my black belt goal at USA Martial Arts.

Favorite holiday...

Song: "Christmas Song." Carpenters' version.

Food: Turkey, gravy, stuffing, candied sweet potatoes.

Film: "A Charlie Brown Christmas."