

Valley Families Share Holiday Traditions & Memories

Written by Story by Nichole Brophy, Shala Marks, Elizabeth O' Malley and Christine Whitton
Photographed by Cassandra Tomei

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These seven Valley families share their most cherished holiday traditions and memories.



The Schnepf Family Mark and Carrie with children Connor, 16; Grayson, 15; McCall, 13; and Hayden, 11.

The Schnepf family knows a thing or two about down-home country roots. As the sole operators of Schnepf Farms in Queen Creek, the Schnepfs have kept their farm and home thriving for more 68 years and have made it a great place to create family memories for their guests.

What's your favorite holiday tradition? Mark and I have decided to enjoy Christmas by continuing with two traditions that were meaningful to us when we were growing up. They are Christmas morning breakfast (I brought this from my family) with extended family at the farm. Everyone comes to the farm for a breakfast of eggs, pork chops, cinnamon rolls, hash browns, juice and milk. (We have been having this breakfast for more than 50 years). Then we exchange gifts as a family, followed by a great game of flag football, outdoor fun and activities. Later that evening, we enjoy a beautiful formal Christmas dinner at our home with just our children and grandparents, Mark's long-time family tradition.

What is your favorite holiday memory? Decorating our fresh Christmas tree and hanging ornaments collected from our travels around the world. The children each have their favorites. The tree is full of memories.

Are you traveling this holiday season? We enjoy doing a skiing and snowboarding trip up to our cabin in Greer or Utah. But because the farm is open during the holidays with families creating their memories, we typically do our traveling over spring break and in June. Those include trips to Hawaii and France.

What is the best present you have ever given? For my husband, I worked with an artist for almost a year as he took photographs and painted on canvas [a portrait of] each child. They made beautiful pieces of art and now hang down our staircase.

Favorite Holiday Food: My mom's Waldorf salad.

New Year's Resolution: To simplify our lives.

Favorite Holiday Song: 'A Christmas Song.'



The Banks Family Dacun and Sarah with children Jackson, 9, and Elizabeth, 5.

Dacun Banks is the Group Sales Manager at Paradise Valley's InterContinental Montelucia Resort & Spa in Paradise while Sarah regularly volunteers for Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS) ministry at a local church in Scottsdale.

What is your favorite holiday tradition? Sarah: Family dinner time is very important to us, and we've found it's the best time to remind the kids about the real reason for the Christmas season. Each year we make our very own Advent wreath at La Casa de Cristo Lutheran Church on the first Sunday in Advent. In just one hour we transform a pile of fresh greens, pins, a Styrofoam circle and four purple candles into a beautiful Advent wreath for the family dinner table. The kids look forward to the lighting of the candles each evening.

How does having kids make the holidays more fun? Sarah: Everybody gets new pajamas every year; that's really fun. The children love decorating the tree. This year, they have a tree upstairs for themselves and we have ours downstairs.
Dacun: Having kids gives you the chance to act like a kid again yourself.

What are you most looking forward to this holiday season? Dacun and Sarah: Just being together.

Sarah: Not having to be anywhere except at home.

What's your New Year's resolution? Sarah: Dacun is running the P.F. Chang's marathon; I'm running the half. This year we're training better, so just to be healthier and keep things more balanced.

What is your favorite holiday memory? Sarah: Waiting for relatives to come and watching for them to drive up from Colorado because I grew up in South Carolina. And once they were here, just getting to spend that time with cousins and getting excited for hearing Santa on the roof, eating together and having fun.

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Dacun: I think my favorite was our son's first Christmas when we went to Santa Barbara.

What's the best gift you've ever received? Dacun: The Angel Tree. We're able to give a whole family presents at Christmas and our kids help pick out things for the kids who are their same ages and are less fortunate. They help wrap and deliver it as well.

Sarah: To be able to give to other people who need things with the Angel Tree; that's a good gift.

What is the most unique way you have celebrated a holiday? Dacun: We used to live in Colorado and that was the year we went out into the forest and were able to get a Charlie Brown Christmas tree. That was the most fun being there because that was the only time we had a white Christmas.

Favorite Holiday Food: Italian Nut Balls and Russian teacakes.

Favorite Holiday Song: The kids like anything with Alvin and the Chipmunks in it and the Charlie Brown Christmas music.

Favorite Holiday Destination: Aspen.



The Posorske Family Russ and Jen with children Ben, 13; Reagan, 11; Grace, 9; Isabella, 7; and Will, 5. And Grandpa Bill, 87.

As the senior vice president of retail for Scottsdale-based Continental Properties, Russ Posorske knows a thing or two about negotiations. One aspect the exec and wife, Jen, won't compromise on is time with their brood and tradition-filled holidays.

What is your favorite holiday tradition? Russ: Hanging up my mom's handmade Christmas stockings. She made [one] for everyone in our family and each stocking probably took 500 hours to make.

What are you most looking forward to this holiday season? Russ: We have an extended family and love to have everybody over. My dad is also an important part of our family; he's 87 years old and lives with us. All year round, but especially through the holidays, having him here helps our kids understand multigenerational responsibilities and the joys, richness and texture of his stories add so much.

What is your favorite Christmas memory? Russ: Every year, the kids write letters to Santa Claus and about four years ago, Reagan wrote a letter saying she wanted her gifts to be given away to a young girl who was dying of cancer. Jen, I and Santa Claus struggled with how to honor that. Christmas morning came and all the kids were opening up their presents but Reagan had none. So I told her to check her stocking. In it was a letter from Santa explaining the true story of an elderly man who couldn't take care of his pony. Santa realized that Reagan had a big heart and asked if she was kind enough to take care of this orphaned pony. In the meantime, Santa told Reagan her gifts were in the kitchen and asked that she take them to Phoenix Children's Hospital and give them to this little girl. So we spent that Christmas Day at Phoenix Children's Hospital.

What is the best gift your family ever received? Jen: The best gift that we've ever received was being told that Russ was free of colon cancer. It has been two years, and he is so lucky. We give thanks every Christmas.

Favorite Holiday Food: Posorske pistachio pudding.

Favorite Holiday Decoration: Real Christmas trees that are always six inches too tall.

Favorite Holiday Outfit: Coordinated Christmas clothes for the kids.



The Brian Family Waylon and Christina with twins, Maren and Maile, 5, and triplets, Christian, Wells and Bridger, 3.

When Christina Brian started her blog, Full House (vivafullhouse.blogspot.com), she didn't imagine her daily readership would be in the thousands. Turns out the Mesa mom of her own full house has a keen sense of relating life's happenings to home décor and her readers can't get enough.

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What is your favorite holiday tradition? My favorite holiday tradition is what we call the Palestine dinner; it's kind of biblical. On Christmas Eve, we get together, turn all the lights down low, put a fire in the fireplace and we eat very simple food like meat, cheese, grapes and soups. It models how it might have been [in] Jesus's day. For us, it's really special. Afterwards, we drive through the luminaries; we live in a festive neighborhood so there are blocks and blocks of luminaries.

How does having kids make the holidays more fun? Kids just make everything more exciting, especially seeing things through their eyes.

What is your favorite holiday memory with the kids? Last year, we got to spend Christmas in the snow and did a lot of sledding. They were all just so cute, bundled up in their little hats, coats and mittens.

What is your favorite holiday decoration? My Christmas tree. One Christmas, I was walking through Nordstrom and fell in love with the Christmas trees they use. I called to find out where they bought them, went through all these hoops and finally got the contact information for a company out of San Diego. The company really only sold to retailers, but I talked them into selling me one. I drove all the way to San Diego with my sister and picked it up. So I have a Nordstrom tree, and I love it.

Favorite Holiday Food: German chocolate pancakes.

Favorite Holiday Song: 'O Holy Night.'

Favorite Holiday Outfit: Matching pajamas.



The Matney Family Eddie and Jennifer with children Jacob, 10 and Gabriella, 7.

Things are busy this—and any—time of the year for the Matney family. Eddie is the chef- owner of Old Town's Eddie's House while his wife, Jennifer, is an active community member serving The Heart Ball, the Make-A-Wish Foundation and other local organizations.

How do you kick off the holidays? Jennifer: We start out at Thanksgiving and feed all the women and children at the Sojourner Center and also the homeless teens at HomeBase.

What is your favorite holiday tradition? Eddie: Our traditions center around food, family and fun. The Hanukkah food is really big whether we are braising brisket or roasting chicken, but one of the biggest things is potato latkes. Every family has a recipe that has been handed down from generation to generation, and Jennifer's grandma, Molly, is our latkes matriarch. She prides herself on making great latkes. Well, she makes good latkes. While she's napping, I get in the kitchen and make the really great latkes.

What are you most looking forward to this holiday season? Jennifer: In the restaurant industry, the holidays are our busy time. We make time with the family and block off a day. I also don't get to eat Eddie's dinners as often as I like but to actually get to sit down and enjoy his food is so nice. He makes all my favorites.

Eddie: Jennifer does all the shopping, and she is a great gift buyer. Whether it's a special doll for Gabriella or a basketball that Jacob gets, I love to see [the look on] their faces.

Are you traveling this holiday season? Eddie: We'll go up north for a couple of days to our house in Flagstaff and go skiing and have snowball fights. Last year, I went out to grab something, and my wife locked the front door on me in the freezing cold.

Jennifer: That's because you went outside in your boxers. I had to teach you a lesson.

Favorite Holiday Song: 'The Hanukkah Song' by Adam Sandler.

Favorite Holiday Decoration: Our menorah. The kids love to light the candles each night.

New Year's Resolution: To always find the silver lining in everything that we do.



The Boesch Family David and Jill with children Joseph, 16; Tommy, 12; and Cami, 10.

David, an emergency room physician, and Jill, an active stay-at-home mom, love to travel. In 2007, the Valley couple and their three children decided to see the world on a yearlong expedition (the fivesome spent the holidays in India that year) that is chronicled in their new book, "Pins On A Map: A Family's Yearlong Journey Around the World."

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What is your favorite holiday tradition? Jill: Christmas Eve is always spent at my mom and dad's. We have dinner and open gifts. On Christmas Day, we go to mass, open gifts and have a great big dinner. A lot of times, we'll go to the movies in the afternoon.

How does having kids make the holidays more fun? David: It is so much better with kids. It is more fun to buy presents for the kids and watch them open up gifts. Now, our kids are at the age where they are buying presents for one another.

What are you most looking forward to this season? Jill: I look forward to being all together. [I am] thankful that my parents are still around and we are all healthy.

How do holidays differ between here and abroad? David: Being in India on Christmas was very difficult because it is such a drastically different culture from our own. It is largely Hindu, and they don't celebrate Christmas.

Jill: Because we knew gifts were going to be pretty difficult to find, I thought we could go to the orphanage at the Catholic church and buy gifts for [the kids] only to find out that all of the kids go home for Christmas.

What's your New Year's resolution? David: After traveling abroad, [I'd like to] open our home to travelers or an exchange student.

Jill: I don't make [New Year's resolutions].

Where will you spend the holidays this year? Jill: Hopefully we'll go skiing or to Alaska where we have a cabin.

Favorite Holiday Food: Gig Harbour English Toffee Candy.

Favorite Holiday Song: 'Blue Christmas' by Elvis Presley.

Favorite Holiday Decoration: An ornament of a little drummer boy that was [David's] mother's favorite decoration.



The Guerithault Family Vincent and Leevon with children Daniel, 20; Nicolas, 16; and Christian, 14.

Celebrated chef Vincent Guerithault and his family own and operate Phoenix's 25-year-old Vincent on Camelback and the adjacent Vincent's Market Bistro.

What are you most looking forward to this holiday season? Daniel: On top of a busy holiday and busy Christmas for the restaurant, relaxation is what I look forward to.
Christian: A break from school.

How does having kids make the holidays more fun? Leevon: I like the energy in the house, the excitement when they were little, and the anticipation of Christmas. As they've grown, [it's fun] just having them involved in the business with us and doing things together as a family. They're all working together, and we just make it fun.

What is your favorite holiday memory? Leevon: The one year that we spent Christmas in Nice (South of France) with Vincent's parents. We haven't had the opportunity to spend a lot of Christmases with them; it's difficult for us to travel and be away from the restaurant. Being in the South of France and celebrating in the traditional French way was one of my most memorable Christmases.

What's the best gift your family ever received? Vincent: Our three kids.

Leevon: The gift of family. Last year, instead of exchanging material gifts, we decided to take a trip with my dad and that was a lot of fun. [It was the] gift of time, making memories and being together as a family.

When do you do your holiday shopping? Daniel: Last minute.

Leevon: I try to do a little bit all year long.

What's your New Year's resolution? Vincent: As a family-owned business, we just try to do a better job than the previous 25 years that we've been in business in order to stay another 25 years in business.

Favorite Holiday Food: Goose.

Favorite Holiday Movie: 'Home Alone.'

Favorite Holiday Story: 'The Night Before Christmas.'

Favorite Holiday Dessert: Yule log.