

# Expect the unexpected during the holiday season

BY SALLY D. KETCHUM

Special to the Record-Eagle

Uncle Stan is snowed in at O'Hare. Surprise! The neighbors you just crossed off your gift list arrive with homemade fudge and the kids blew a fuse plugging in new toys. Emergency!

Do we call 911? No — not if your personal holiday emergency kit is stocked and back-up plans are in order.

Accidents and incidents that threaten holiday merriment seem to fall into categories — that fudge from the neighbor, of instance.

We all know the answer to empty-handedness, the universal present, small gifts, suitable for all ages and unisex. Here are some tips: stocking a bottle or two of wine, a unisex calendar—say of Ansel Adams's nature photographs, a chunk of white cheddar, nuts, candies, jars of cherry jam or salsa from local specialty stores, a luxury hotel bath towel, blank books, a small

bird feeder, or extra large cookies or muffins wrapped with a holly leaf and an American Flag sticker.

Remember to set aside gift wrappings for emergency gifts: paper, trims, and bows, and also stickers since even plain paper bags become special with Christmas stickers. (Stickers also make great stocking stuffers for kids.) Both paper lunch bags and plastic wraps now come in holiday colors to make festive wraps, and are useful post-holidays for more routine use.

Folks good at expecting the unexpected will even stock a rawhide bone or a can of cat food even if they are dog-less and haven't chased a cat for years. These just happen to be very touching token gifts to pet-loving friends.

Besides gift giving, areas to consider thinking ahead are first-aid, household, kitchen and food, and stress-management for self and family.

Now is the time to clean the medicine cabinet and throw out dated medications. It is also the time to fill the family's prescriptions and replenish anti-acids, anti-diarrhea medicines (that duck with peppercorns, those exotic drinks and Tex-Mex snacks can wreak havoc), antibiotic ointments, flu and cold remedies, Band-Aids, and such. Herbal and green teas help, too.

While stocking up on paper goods, consider that paper towels now come packaged in attractive square, holiday motif boxes for the bathroom and kitchen. Not only do paper towels eliminate use of fabric guest towels, but they also encourage hand-washing, the major defense against colds and flu.

Stocking up on toothpaste and other grooming aids used daily is smart; sample sizes are great to give visiting relatives or guests who forget their own items. Personal bath items,

whether invigorating gels, or soothing herbal salts or lotions, are needed more than ever during holiday stress. Offered to guests, they are very thoughtful hospitality.

Household items for the emergency kit are those items that are often invisible or at least out of mind, until disaster happens. These are fuses, batteries, candles, light bulbs (regular and Christmas light bulbs), extension cords, duct tape, and extra supplies of bath, laundry and dish soap — supplies that will be used later in any case.

Both garage and car might be more or less emergency-proofed. Is there extra gas for the snow blower? Is the car, van, or truck stocked with a device to pull out of snow banks, ice scrapers, flashlights, a blanket, travel pillow, and perhaps a couple of chocolate bars?

During the holidays, incidents add up to major stress: Christmas trees fall down, the dog pulls the ham

from the kitchen counter, or the baby gets colicky. Prevention of near-breakdown means calming music rather than frenetic rounds of offlying birds and jingling bells of carols.

Set aside a few good CDs for emergency playing. Also, make a small collection of the traditional holiday classic videos for adults and others for children. A newly released video for youngsters will engage children.

We have all heard tales of the burned bird or raw turkey, of the Christmas that sister left the ham somewhere at the mall. What to do? Home economists suggest that folks purchase, weeks ahead, two or three family-sized packages of quality frozen foods, dishes like lasagna, Swedish meatballs, stroganoff, and similar entrees that are generally pleasing to all ages and appetites.

With a bag of washed and torn greens and tubed din-

ner roll dough in the fridge, with frozen pies or brownies handy, a hearty meal is completed. Frozen cookie dough helps, too, in case there is an elf-raid on the Christmas cookies.

For late nights, when candles burn low and family tales or board games run long, traditional comfort foods, now available frozen and oven ready, satisfy and complete the evening. These are such things as stuffed potatoes (easily made even more glamorous by adding more toppings), "White Castle" Hamburgers, or pizza bites with the family's favorite flavor.

Important to the holiday emergency kit because they to they capture Christmas 2003 forever, are extra rolls of film, camera batteries (if needed), and blank tapes for camcorder.

Breathe easy, smile and be merry.

Sally Ketchum is a local free-lance writer.

## Minding your manners is a great gift to give

BY JENNIFER MASTROIANNI

Copley News Service

The holiday party season is upon us. No doubt you will be invited to celebrate at several social or work-related gatherings. When it comes to guest etiquette, do you know what's naughty and what's nice?

Kay Stephan does. She's a certified etiquette trainer, and holiday dos and don'ts are her specialty.

Stephan earned a master of education degree from the University of Akron and was a professor at Wayne College before starting Classic Protocol, an etiquette and protocol consulting company.

"The holidays are really the time when people should shine and be at their best," said Stephan. "But in all the holiday frenzy, it's easy to let manners slip."

So before you begin your merrymaking, better brush up on how to be a good guest.

### FOOD AND DRINK

Want to kill your career? Get sloshed at the company Christmas party.

"Nothing is more disgusting than a holiday lush," said Stephan.

But it's not just alcohol that people abuse at holiday events.

"Remember when eating, that this is not your last meal," she said. "You do not have to make a replica of Mount Everest on your plate."

Many people tend to overlook simple courtesies when eating at gatherings. A manufacturing company hired Stephan to consult with its professional sales staff about table manners.

When dining in the company of others, don't worry that you have to be Emily Post and master every minute detail about etiquette. But there are a few rules to keep in mind: Remember moderation, be on your best behavior and learn the layout of a table setting so you know basic things like which butter plate is yours.

Exotic foods and unusual drinks are often part of holiday celebrations. Caviar and smoked salmon on the buffet? Port at the bar? If you don't like it, mum's the word. If you don't know what something is, ask. And remember, faking it can backfire.

Stephan recalls a story about man who pretended to know wine protocol at a restaurant.

"The wine steward gave the cork to him and he didn't know what do with it," she said. "He took a bite out of it."

Even the most refined folks forget the golden rule at the appetizer table: No double-dipping. Yes, it's

tempting to nibble that chicken wing or tortilla chip and go back for additional dunking. It's a major no-no.

Many people celebrate the holidays with meals at restaurants. Be aware of the difference between a social and business dinner.

"The purpose of business dining is not the meal, it's about creating rapport. It's not really about the food," Stephan said. "If something goes wrong, or you don't like something, as a guest you should not make a big deal out of it."

### INVITATIONS

Honor your RSVPs. "This is one of the biggest holiday faux pas people make," said Stephan.

Many a host and hostess has put tremendous effort into a party, only to have people respond late, not respond at all, or say they are coming and not show.

"If the invitation says 'Regrets Only' and you don't call, they are assuming you are coming," she said. If you say you will attend, you must. Last-minute cancellations are unacceptable, barring major medical emergencies.

If you are invited to someone's home for dinner or a party, always take a gift. It should be a thoughtful token of your appreciation.

"Wine, cookies, and ornaments are very appropriate," Stephan said. If you can't manage that, don't throw something together just to have an item in hand. "It's better to give a really nice card than a cheap, poorly wrapped gift," she said.

### KNOW THE DON'TS

Don't bring anything that will create havoc. "Such as food that needs to be assembled or flowers without a vase," Stephan said. "The hostess has enough on her mind."

Don't pout if the hostess does not use your food or wine gift at the event.

"It might not fit in with what she has planned," she said.

Don't expect the hosts to open your gift. He or she may want to open it later, in private.

"Opening it might make someone else feel bad that didn't bring one," Stephan said.

### MIXING AND MINGLING

Try to talk with everyone at the party at least once. The whole idea of a party or open house is to socialize and spread good cheer.

"If you want to be able to make small talk with people, know the basics, know what's going on in the world," Stephan advises. "Read the paper, go to movies, watch the news." "I don't like sports, but I watch the last two minutes of important games just so I know I can talk about it," she said.

Don't whisper or point. Don't talk about income, sex or health problems. Don't share strong political or religious opinions. Don't tell off-color jokes. Don't spew about yourself, unless you want to be branded the party bore.

### TIMING

Do not arrive early. "The hosts are usually running around seeing to last-minute details," Stephan said. "They probably don't have time to entertain you just yet."

Do not be late for dinner. Many a Caesar has wilted, beef Wellington cooled and baked Alaska melted waiting for tardy guests.

Know when to go. "Don't be the last person to leave the party," Stephan said, "unless you plan to be part of the clean-up crew."

### ATTIRE

A "stylish-casual" dress code is often the assumed holiday attire, but you never know.

"If you aren't sure what to wear, call the hostess and ask," said Stephan. If it is a company party, think professional. Ladies, forget plunging necklines and micro minis, and guys, skip the T-shirt and tennis shoes.

Teens and young adults may need special guidance when dressing for holiday gatherings, Stephan said.

"Parents need to realize that dress protocol applies to kids," she said. "They should not wear jeans, have clean and neat clothing and boys should have collars, no T-shirts."


Show your appreciation. After the party, send a written thank you to the host and hostess. It takes just a few minutes to show how much you appreciate their generosity and hospitality.

## Giving thanks to the host

Be cool, be nice and thank your host with something that doesn't get put in the garage sale pile right away:

- An assortment of candles and beaded candle lamps, elegant holders and floating arrangements will be appreciated. Choose from scented pillar candles, candles in glass jars and svelte tapers.
  - Holiday linens can be packaged with festive napkin rings or used as wonderful wraps for baked goods.
  - Indulge your host with gourmet chocolates, coffees, teas, nuts or imported sauces packaged in jars, boxes and mugs.
  - Give a practical gift for people on the go. Fill a small travel case with cozy socks, fleece mittens and a head wrap to keep him or her cozy.
  - Remember the host with a beautiful tree ornament. Look for unique shapes in vibrant colors.
  - Holiday pillows bring a splash of color to a room.
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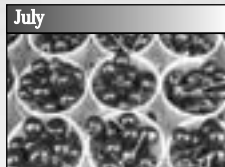
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