

# Family togetherness can go beyond eating and napping

BY LYNDA TWARDOWSKI  
Special to the Record-Eagle

Whether you celebrate Hanukkah, Kwanza or Christmas, the true glue that holds together holiday celebrations is the same: family.

Beyond the gifts, the twinkling lights and the food, it seems a living room full of loved ones is the universal tradition no holiday celebration can be without.

But if your family is like most, once the meal is devoured, the gifts are exchanged and the pie is served, anyone who isn't clearing dishes from the table parks it on the couch in pursuit of another long-standing family tradition: a post-pie nap or a tune-out to TV land. The family may sit side by side, but it's hardly the picture of family togetherness ala Currier & Ives.

Whether your party is in two hours or two weeks, if you're determined to keep your family celebration from falling into that rut, you can. Simply pull the plug on the TV, and usher in some activities that engage and entertain everyone.

## Tonight's the Night

No time to plan? No problem. Instead of adding to the stress with added activity plans, combine two together: Rather than decorating the tree in time for the party, simply set up the tree and hang the lights before the party. Before or after dinner on the day of, crank up the carols, set out the ornaments, hot cocoa and a bowl of popped popcorn and cranberries (don't forget the needles and thread), then invite your guests to decorate together.

## Tomorrow, Tomorrow

If you've got a few days to plan, games that require minimal planning but maximum participation are a must. You can always go with tried-and-true standbys like Pictionary or charades, or pick up a few newer games while doing your holiday shopping.

Taboo is a great one for large crowds. Guests divide into teams and players take turns trying to get their teammates to say a word without uttering five words that could clue them in.

Loaded Questions is super for groups of eight or fewer; players take turns reading

questions for all to answer, such as, "If you were invisible where would you go?"

Answers are read aloud and players have to predict who said what.

Got lots of kids on the guest list? Dream up a winter scavenger hunt and let them burn off some steam around the neighborhood as they search in teams for items like pinecones, colored leaves, red berries, a feather, colored rocks, holiday ribbon, a branch of a Christmas tree, etc.

Afterward, drape some paper over a table, hand out some cardboard pieces and glue and let them design their own festive centerpieces.

## A Week Away

About five years ago Traverse City resident Shirley Martuch left her tree bare for her grandkids to decorate, but by evening's end, one thing was clearly apparent: The grandkids didn't like the ladder much. Left with a tree decorated only halfway up, Martuch decided the coming years would need a different activity.

Her idea? Decorating a gingerbread house. Although you can buy

ready-made kits at local grocery stores, such as Meijer, you can also bake your own as Martuch does. At least three or four days before her grandkids arrive, Martuch's husband cuts out a cardboard dummy of the four walls and two-sided roof, against which Martuch cuts the gingerbread dough to size. After baking the walls and roof pieces, she mixes a sticky glue of powdered sugar and water to cement the structure into its house shape, then lets the icing harden for at least 24 hours.

When the kids arrive Martuch mixes up a new batch of icing and pours it into small, plastic squeeze bottles (to minimize sticky fingers and big messes), then gives the kids a bowl of assorted candy, such as red hots, Wheat Chex (for roof shingles), candy canes, M&M's and gum drops.

"The kids pipe the icing to glue the candy to the house. It's not as messy as decorating cookies," she said, but that doesn't stop the kids from enjoying it more.

"I thought they might be getting too old for it this year," she said, "but they said, 'Oh no, Grandma, we

still want to do it!'"

This year Martuch says she is going one better by baking one small house for each grandchild rather than having them decorate one together.

"Otherwise it becomes a contest over whose side looks better," she said with a laugh.

## Two Week's Notice

Reminiscing at family parties is inevitable, but with a little glue and imagination, you can take those memories to a whole new level by building a family scrapbook together. When the invites go out, ask each member of the family to bring a small box or envelope of some favorite family pictures. Provide an album — 12-inch by 12-inch is a popular pick — then draw the family around the table and decide among yourselves which pictures deserve the honor of going in the photo scrapbook, says Debra Anderson, owner of Custer's Last Stamp, Inc. in Traverse City.

You can designate a few family artists to put together a few pages while the rest go through the photos or give each family or person their own page.

Whoever does it, make the job fun by embellishing the pages with dimensional stickers, shakers with beads and confetti in them, fun printed papers and paper punches in a variety of shapes. Anderson says to include household items — like newspaper clippings, ribbon, buttons, etc. — to add character to the pages.

"Giving one of these albums to a sibling that is serving the country in war or for a grandparent or even an older sibling who lives far away can be a meaningful Christmas gift from the family," she said.

But what matters most, she says, is not who gets to take it home, but the time shared by those who put it together.

"Doing it together will help you remember the dates that the activities in the photos happened, along with the names and places they took place in," she said. "And while remembering those great moments in your lives, it's very likely you'll have some great laughs and no one will even notice the television isn't on."

**Lynda Twardowski is a local freelance writer.**

## DVD classics for film buffs

BY DESSON THOMSON  
The Washington Post

Here are some DVD boxed sets for the hardcore movie buffon your holiday gift list:

**"James Bond 007 DVD Gift Set Box,"** Vols. 1 through 3. \$124.96 per volume. Why mess around with such imitators as "Austin Powers" and "The Bourne Identity" when you can go to the source? You can buy these James Bond boxes in three separate collections, sure, but why not go for the whole thing? The three-volume set gives you the whole 007 oeuvre, from the early, risqué classics of the 1960s starring Sean Connery, to the hardware-gizmo sendups of the 1970s starring Roger Moore and ending with the revved-up, state-of-the-art actioners with Pierce Brosnan. Though there are no bonus features, this is the action-movie collection to have.

**"The Bogart Collection."** \$99.98. No one had the hand-dog class, the hard-boiled diction and the straight-ahead coolness of Bogey, and people on the planet over 40 shouldn't need an explanation as to the lasting pleasures of his films. But what a great gift for those not yet in the know. This collection includes his greatest films: "The Big Sleep," "The Maltese Falcon" and "To Have and Have Not," plus two-disc special editions of "Casablanca" and "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre."

**"Lawrence of Arabia Superbit Collection."** \$26.95. David Lean's 1962 desert epic starring Peter O'Toole as a crazy, brilliant and enigmatic Englishman who leads Arab tribes to victory over their oppressors never fails to thrill. And what an amazing cast. Sir Alec Guinness as Prince Feisal, Anthony Quinn as Auda

abu Tayi and Omar Sharif as Lawrence's new friend Sherif Ali ibn el Kharish. The ultimate widescreen movie, "Lawrence" needs to have as many good things going for it as possible if you're going to even think of watching this on a smaller screen. Hence this remastered "superbit" edition which optimizes visual and audio qualities.

**"Werner Fassbinder's BRD Trilogy."** \$79.95. German director Fassbinder has become a cult enigma in a leather jacket. This four-disc set, consisting of "The Marriage of Maria Braun," "Veronika Voss" and "Lola" and a bonus DVD, offers three of his most acclaimed films, as well as (on the bonus disc) "I Don't Just Want You to Love Me," a feature-length documentary of Fassbinder's life and career, and "Life Stories: A Conversation with R.W. Fassbinder," a rare 45-minute interview with the director. Also included is "Dance With Death," a one-hour portrait of Sybille Schmitz, Fassbinder's inspiration for Veronika Voss. The extras include commentary from Fassbinder's inner and outer circles.

**"Tokyo Story: The Criterion Collection."** \$39.95. Japanese master director Yasujiro Ozu made an entire career and life of contemplative dramas that focused on family situations. This movie is considered one of world cinema's greatest masterpieces. It's about an elderly couple who leave a quiet village to visit their two married children in Tokyo, only to find themselves forgotten in the rush of modern life. The extra material offers commentary by Ozu film scholar David Desser; the documentary "I Lived ... But," about the life and career of Ozu; and a 30-minute tribute to Ozu featuring various filmmakers.

## PCs' new flash: Buying bells and whistles

BY MIKE MUSGROVE  
The Washington Post

After years in an identity crisis, the personal computer industry finally seems to have figured out what people want.

They want a digital camera. They want a digital music player. But they don't necessarily want a computer. To get the full use of such flashy new gadgets, however, many people are finding it's necessary to upgrade old desktop PCs.

"It's a case of the accessory selling the computer, not the computer selling the accessory," said Rob Enderle, principal analyst at the Enderle Group. "It's a bit backwards from what we've seen before."

John Long, director of product marketing at Gateway, says he has started to see the same behavior at Gateway's retail stores. Where cameras were once an "upsell" for customers buying a desktop, something the sales staff suggests to top off an order, it's often the other way around now.

"It's a very different demand-generation model than what Gateway has had in the past," he said. Sometimes it can look like the traditional desktop is being pushed into a corner, considering how many other products such firms as Gateway offer these days. No longer is the Poway, Calif.-based company a struggling computer maker; it's now a struggling consumer-electronics company, aggressively blurring the line between what belongs on a desktop and what belongs in a stereo cabinet with products such as its networked DVD player.

This device, in addition to normal DVD playback, allows users to stream music and pictures from a PC in the den to the home-theater system in the living room over a wired or wireless network.

Up at Gateway's Web site,

the company's top-10 list of suggested gifts for this holiday season includes digital cameras, camcorders and TVs, but only one plain old desktop computer. But thanks to consumer excitement for gadgets from digital cameras to MP3s, the personal computer business is growing again after years of stagnation.

The research firm Gartner forecasts that worldwide sales will climb 12.4 percent in the final quarter of this year over the same period a year ago, to 47.2 million units. The research firm largely credits consumer purchases for the growth.

"Desktops are coming back faster than we thought they would," said Tom Anderson, director of consumer PC marketing at Hewlett-Packard. "Notebooks were growing at the expense of desktops before; now they're both growing."

The popularity of digital photography has even changed how HP's computers look. Consumers tend to like anything that eliminates steps or cables, so HP has started building camera docks into the tops of its home-use desktop PCs; instead of having to snake around a cable, users can park their camera on top of the case to move their photos to their hard drive. (This feature is only available for those using HP-branded cameras, though the company says it might make docks that will be compatible with other cameras.)

Other computer makers are responding to the demand with special deals for consumers who want to get into this digital photography thing.

Dell and Gateway are both offering digital-photography package deals that allow shoppers to save a few bucks by buying their new computer, printer and digital camera in one sitting. Cameras aren't the only gadgets selling computers.

Anderson at HP credits the appeal of the slim, stylish liquid-crystal displays bundled with many desktops for some of the uptick. Digital camcorders may be another lure.

Now that DVD-recordable drives long billed as the Next Big Thing for the computer industry are dropping in price, consumers are starting to buy hardware that lets them make their own home movies with footage shot on those camcorders (themselves becoming increasingly cheaper).

Blank DVD media sold \$21 million last year, but that figure has soared to \$105 million this year, according to the NPD Group, a market-research firm. Likewise, DVD-burner sales have grown from \$29 million last year to \$131 million this year.

Mike Abary, director at product marketing for Sony's Vaio line of computers, says that transferring old home movies from videotape to blank DVDs is the "killer app" for DVD burners. The consumer electronics juggernaut is probably the most aggressive proponent of this tech-

nology of the company's six desktops, five come with DVD burners.

Other industry watchers say sales are growing just because computers and entertainment products are starting to overlap in useful ways, in the form of such products as the Microsoft Media Center, which tries to replace your old stereo, VCR and computer in one case.

"This is the first real year of convergence, with viable products crossing over from the computer space to the entertainments space," said Enderle. "This is the year when the PC industry decides they want to make a run at consumer electronics."

The times are relatively good once again for the computer business, but it wasn't so long ago that desktops were gathering dust on retail shelves.

Even though there are signs of life in the computer industry today, some industry vets who have learned that hitting a sales peak means a valley is not far ahead are still keeping their eyes trained on the horizon for the next downturn.

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