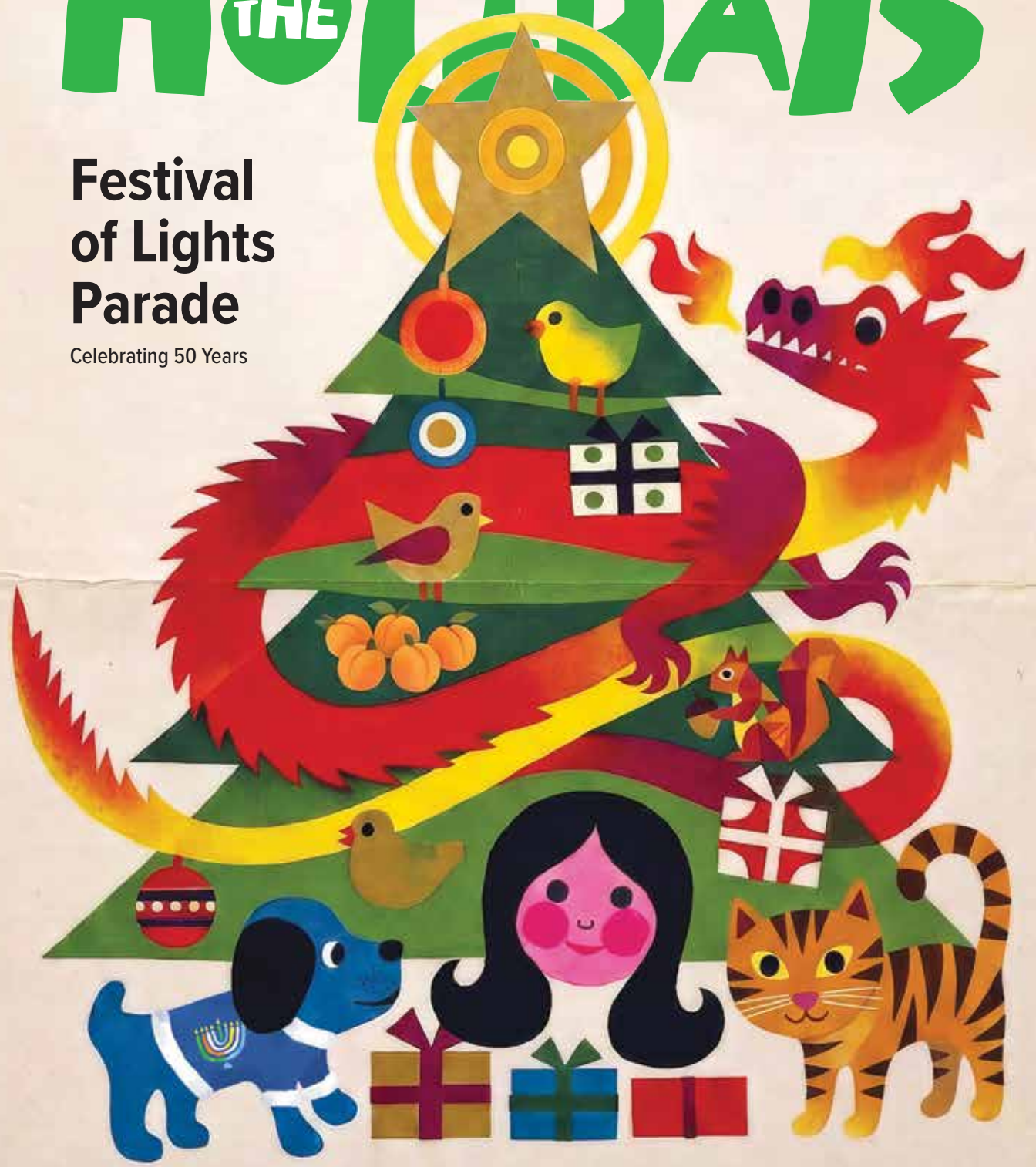
WINTER 2026

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Los Altos Festival of Lights Parade Celebrates 50 Years

AVA ACHARYA
Town Crier Staff Writer



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS PARADE ASSOCIATION

For half a century, the Los Altos Festival of Lights Parade has ushered in the holiday season, uplifting local businesses and fostering wintertime delight.

The parade's 50-year run is a testament to the power of community and tradition, showcasing the value of togetherness and joy, said parade association co-president Nora Haley.

This year, the Los Altos Festival of Lights Parade themes around bringing childhood holiday fantasies to life. The parade will take place on Nov. 29, starting at 6 p.m. on the corner of First and State streets.

"We're at a place where we have people who would come and bring their children, and now they're bringing their grandchildren to the parade. It's just a part of the traditional fabric of Los Altos," Haley said. "People feel it ushers in the holiday season in downtown Los Altos. It's just a really good feeling, it's a community feeling."

But this local tradition did not pop up overnight. While this year's parade features over 60 entries, including 25 floats and 10 bands, the parade's origins are much smaller.

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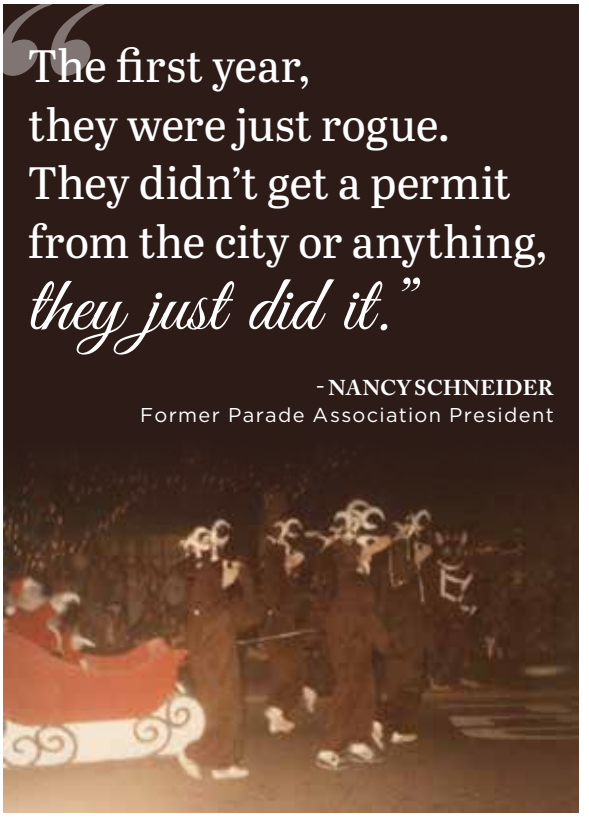
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ORIGINS

In 1977, Marion Jackston, Hope Higbee and Jack Huston donned costumes for an informal parade through downtown Los Altos. All three parade founders owned shops in the area, and felt a parade would help encourage business.

"The first year, they were just rogue," said former parade association president Nancy Schneider. "They didn't get a permit from the city or anything, they just did it."

Schneider added that the first parade was small and did not follow a clear route, and that the current association is unsure if they even had floats.

"It was a very loose parade," Haley said. "(They had) a few costumes. They were lighted, and then the parade just disappeared into the crowd. There was no beginning and ending, it just walked down Main Street."

Despite these informal beginnings, the parade captured the hearts of holiday shoppers, Schneider said.

"It was a big hit with whoever was around," Schneider added. "So the second year and third years, they did it with the help of more people and got a permit from the city and got the chamber conference … and it was getting better and better."

The next year, the parade included five floats and featured music performed by students at Palo Alto High School.

Higbee and Jackston officially became parade co-chairs. They planned a more intricate, and official, celebration with professionally made costumes and a clown performance group.

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GROWING WITH THE TIMES

While the parade continued to grow in size and popularity throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, Schneider said that production took the biggest leap in the early 1990s.

Moving into the 1990s, the technological advances of that time period allowed the Festival of Lights Parade to become more refined and elaborate. Specifically, Schneider pointed to the development of LED lights which made the parade shine brighter than ever before.

Additionally, Schneider said, the parade now had access to larger floats that are able to drive independently, as opposed to being pulled by a golf cart or pushed by volunteers.

"In the early '90s, that stuff became sophisticated," Schneider said. "Which is cool."

This general notion of growth alongside general advancement has continued into the modern day. The path of greater sophistication aligns well with the development

Wishing you and your family the best of the holidays!



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of Silicon Valley as a global center for technological innovation and advancement, Schneider said.

Both Schneider and Haley noted the importance of maintaining the parade's hometown feel, but given Los Altos' position in Silicon Valley, that local feeling involves ever-improving tech.

The community in Los Altos is filled with people who have a strong familiarity with this developing technology. Haley said. An advanced and innovative parade is a reflection of the local community.

"We have a lot of local engineers who are working behind the scenes on the floats … they come in and they say this is a way we can improve it, we can make it more environmentally friendly with the new batteries that we have, and they're always programming," Haley said. "So we're getting more and more sophisticated."



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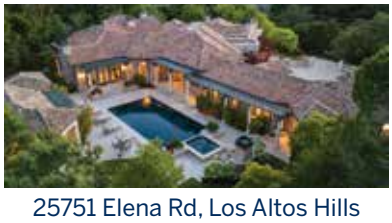
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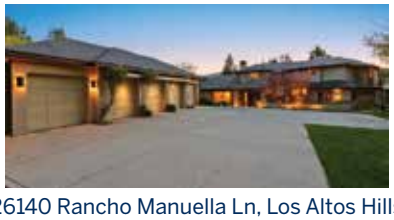
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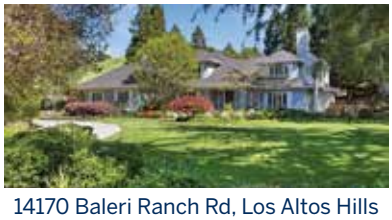
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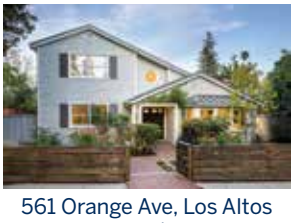
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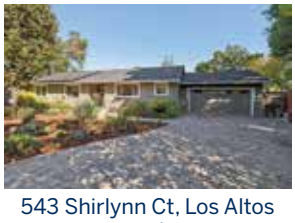
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50 YEARS OF HOLIDAY JOY

Since its creation, the Los Altos Festival of Lights Parade has grown exponentially, but it still contains bits and pieces that honor the parade's 50 years so far, Schneider said.

"What's fun is that … Marion (Jackston) liked bears, and Hope (Higbee) liked rocking horses, so we have those two floats still in the parade," Schneider said "Obviously, they've been renovated and renewed, but they're still there."

Haley added that the parade's central goal of spreading holiday joy and nostalgic comfort has remained intact.

"We do modernize things, but we always strive to keep that feeling of the childhood holiday fantasy," Haley said. "There are no statements except joy, and I think people really respond to that."

In celebration of their 50 year anniversary, 2026's parade will include a cable car full of people who were instrumental to the parade's creation and development. This is also the first time that a cable car will be featured in the parade.

"It's been a while for some of them to be associated with the parade, and I think they are so excited to be a part of it," Haley said. "To be remembered for their huge contributions, but also because that spirit is still there … we want to honor them."

Schneider said that the parade is still incredibly local, and it always will be. Organizers prioritize local bands and business, with the goal of keeping things by and for Los Altos.

"It's a really unique Los Altos thing," Schneider said. "It's just a very happy time."

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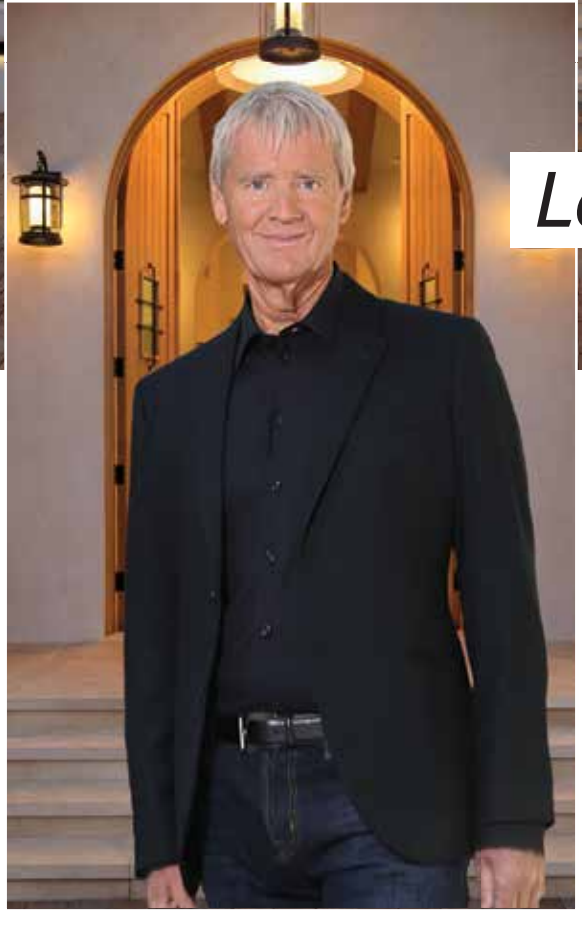
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4 TIPS to Build a Happy & Healthy Holiday Spread

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The holiday season is filled with special gatherings, beloved traditions and all kinds of delicious food. Whether you're hosting an intimate get-together or a house full of family and friends, a few thoughtful touches can help you create a festive spread that not only feels special, but is also nourishing for your guests.

Registered dietitian and nutritionist Dawn Jackson Blatner has shared four simple tips for serving easy, crowd-pleasing appetizers that are celebratory, nutritious and holiday table-ready.

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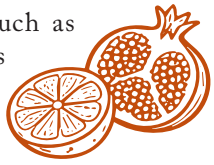
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1 EAT THE COLORS OF THE SEASON



Incorporate colorful seasonal ingredients like pomegranates, citrus, sweet potatoes, cranberries and fresh herbs to naturally create a gorgeous, festive holiday palette and add nutrition.

Even simple touches, such as adding pomegranate seeds to salads or garnishing appetizers with rosemary or sage, can bring festive pops of color without requiring an entirely new recipe.



2 BRING BALANCE TO THE HOLIDAY TABLE

Celebrations and get-togethers are meant for enjoying comfort food – some of which may be less healthy for you. That doesn't mean you should leave these festive dishes off the menu; instead, create balance around them. Add protein-rich foods, fruits, vegetables and whole grains, along with the seasonal favorites your family looks forward to every year.



Offering nourishing options alongside festive favorites gives guests the freedom to build a plate with the food they love, while keeping their bodies properly fueled and satisfied.

3 GIVE INGREDIENTS A SECOND ACT

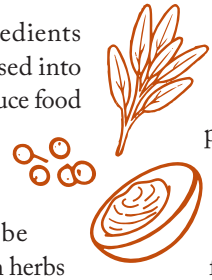
Choosing versatile ingredients that can be easily repurposed into meals and snacks helps reduce food waste and simplifies post-holiday meals.

For example, leftover roasted vegetables can be folded into an omelet, fresh herbs can brighten sandwiches and salads, and proteins can be an easy addition to grain bowls or wraps. Thinking beyond holiday meals can help you get more out of what you already have on hand.



4 PUT A FRESH SPIN ON A HOLIDAY FAVORITE

By adding in unexpected ingredients, such as bold herbs, you can elevate the cherished recipes guests know and love.



One way to put that advice into practice is serving deviled eggs with fresh sage, topped with cranberry. Hard-cooked peeled eggs, such as those made by Eggland, provide plenty of protein and vitamin B12, and they have less saturated fat than ordinary eggs.



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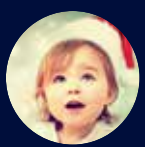
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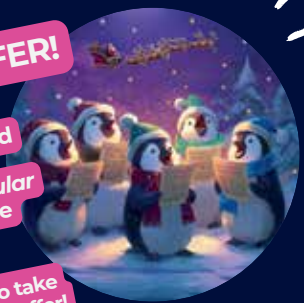


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HOLIDAY SPECTACULAR
December, 2026

Making Kids' Holidays MERRIER

Los Altos United Methodist Church partners with MVPD's Cops That Care program

BY MARY LARSEN
Town Crier Staff Writer



The Mountain View Police Department's Cops That Care program, which collects and donates toys and other gifts for Mountain View children in need, is now in its 24th year. This year, Los Altos United Methodist Church is partnering with the program, collecting gifts via a "Christmas Love Tree" at the church, and helping to decorate. These are some scenes from the 2025 event, held at Rengstorff Community Center.





THE AGENCY

happy holidays

RG

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Hi there, my name is Ryan Gowdy. I am a second-generation Los Altos realtor who lives, breathes, and loves everything Los Altos. My children attended our local schools and I am a proud sponsor of LAEF. I still live in the wonderful community where I was raised. I take great pride in providing exceptional service to my clients who trust me for guidance in all things real estate. If there is ever anything that I can do to support you with your real estate needs, please don't hesitate to reach out.

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"It's been a lot of fun. Our members are very happy to support something that ***feels so personal."***

- SUSIE BUCHHOLZ
LAUMC's Christmas Love Program Leader

Los Altos United Methodist Church (LAUMC) has a long tradition of giving to those in need – from its continued involvement in Compassion Week after founding it in 2012 to its many service projects around the Bay Area and beyond. At Christmastime, this service takes the form of collecting donations via a giving tree, now known as the "Christmas Love Tree."

This year, LAUMC is partnering with the Mountain View Police Department's long-running Cops That Care program, which provides toys and gifts for roughly 1,000 Mountain View children referred by local schools.

2026 will mark Cops That Care's 24th annual toy and gift drive event. MVPD's Facebook page says the drive "reflects the true spirit of the season, community partnership, compassion, and service."

LAUMC's Christmas Love program leader Susie Buchholz said one of Cops That Care's biggest donors had to reduce donations by 50% this year, so LAUMC's gifts will really help.

The Christmas Love tree process is simple: A tree is "decorated" with paper tags, each denoting a gift that a particular recipient would like.

"It's been a lot of fun," Buchholz said of the giving tree. "Our members are very happy to support something that feels so personal – 'Here's a 7-year'old boy who loves the Sharks.'" Some donors choose multiple tags.

The tree will be up from the Sunday after Thanksgiving through Dec. 6, with purchased gifts due back at church on Dec. 13.

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But the love doesn't end there. Buchholz said that in addition to providing gifts, LAUMC volunteers have adorned Cops That Care collection bins that will be distributed throughout the area, and they will be helping the police decorate the hall in Rengstorff Community Center – where all the excitement happens on Dec. 19 – including bringing in and decorating some artificial Christmas trees.

"I suspect we'll be spreading Christmas love throughout the year," Buchholz said, with plans for mentoring and various other activities in the works.



"It's about Christmas love – about spreading love, particularly at Christmas," Buchholz said.

For more information on Cops That Care, contact program coordinator Guiuliana Leopold, School Resource Officer, at (650) 448-9780 or guiuliana.leopold@mountainview.gov.

Donation bins can be found in many locations, including Walmart, the YMCA, Hyatt Centric Hotel, The Ameswell Hotel, Erik's Deli and Petsmart. In addition to gifts, monetary donations are accepted. Checks should be made payable to the Mountain View Police Department with "Cops That Care" in the memo line and sent to 1000 Villa St., Mountain View, CA 94041. Donations for gift cards can be made via roonga.com/collection-drive/details/copsthatcare2026.

Los Altos United Methodist Church is located at 655 Magdalena Ave. For more information, visit laumc.org.





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CRAFTING Christmas

Tips for creating handmade Christmas gifts

Special to the Town Crier

Pinterest searches in the U.S. for handmade Christmas gift ideas have increased 400% year over year, with new analysis highlighting growing interest in making holiday presents and finding products to sell from home.

The research by crafting brand Resparked's analysis found that searches for the term also rose 200% month over month. Searches for "homemade christmas gift ideas" increased 200% annually, while "engraved gifts" rose 100%.

Alongside interest in personal presents, searches with a selling focus are also growing. "Things to make and sell from home" increased 400% year over year, while "things to sell at craft fairs" rose 90%.

For Santiago Roa, founder of Resparked, the findings create an opportunity to help beginners choose projects they can realistically finish, whether they are making gifts for friends and family or considering their first craft sale.

"A good handmade gift starts with knowing the person you're making it for," he said. "A favorite phrase, a meaningful date or a design connected to something they love can give an everyday object a personal connection."

Roa added that people "don't need to master an entirely new craft before Christmas. Choose one manageable project, practice the technique and give yourself enough time to finish it properly."

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Making gifts people will want to keep

Personalization offers a starting point for people who want to make a gift but feel uncertain about designing something from scratch, according to Santiago. A name, a short message or a simple illustration can be incorporated into a suitable keepsake, ornament or decorative object. He recommended choosing the item around the recipient's interests before deciding how to customize it.

"Think about where the gift will live and how the person will use it," he said. "Someone who loves their garden might appreciate a personalized plant marker. Someone who keeps every family memento might prefer an ornament with a date that means something to them."

Santiago also suggested that people not make the project too complicated.

"Keep the design simple enough to execute well," he said. "You can make something personal without covering every available surface."

He also advised beginners to make one complete sample before committing to gifts for several people. That includes testing the design, checking the finish and working out how the item will be packaged.



A homemade gift still needs a budget

Making a gift is not automatically the least expensive option, particularly when a project requires new equipment or materials that will only be used once.

Before starting, Santiago said it's a good idea to add up the full cost of the project, including tools, practice materials, the item being personalized and packaging.

"Look at what you already own and what you'll use again," he said. "A tool you use for several projects is a different purchase from something you buy for one gift and then put away. Finish one piece before buying supplies for 10. That first attempt will tell you much more about the time, materials and skill involved than a picture of the finished project."

From homemade presents to a first craft sale

While the increase in searches for products to make and sell suggests interest in exploring small craft businesses, it does not establish how many people have started selling or whether their projects are profitable.

For anyone considering holiday orders, Santiago recommended testing a small range of products and recording the time needed to complete each one.

"Personalized work includes more than the time you spend making the item," he said. "You also need to confirm names and spellings, agree on the design, package the order and answer questions."

Before setting a price, Santiago suggested sellers count the materials, packaging, selling fees and time spent. "Then ask whether you could make several to the same standard and deliver them when promised," he added.

He also recommended setting a clear order deadline and limiting customization options while learning how long production takes.

"Start with a product you can make consistently," Santiago said. "A small number of well-finished orders will teach you what customers want and what you can realistically deliver."

For those focused on making gifts for loved ones rather than for profit, Santiago said that "the same principle applies: Choose a manageable project and leave yourself time to enjoy making it."





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Rooted in community. Here for what's next.

FLURRY OF FESTIVITIES

IN STORE FOR THE HOLIDAY SEASON

COMPILED BY NEEL GUPTA
Town Crier Editorial Intern

A parade, ballets, tree lightings and holiday markets are among the many local events on tap to celebrate the season. Keep reading to find out what's happening, when and where.

NOV. 29



Festival of Lights Parade

6-8 p.m. in downtown Los Altos

Kick off this holiday season with the 50th annual Festival of Lights Parade, and enjoy illuminated floats, local marching bands, festive lighting and a visit with Santa Claus.

Admission is free. For more information, see losaltosparade.org.

DEC. 3 *THROUGH* DEC. 6



Smuin's "The Christmas Ballet"

7:30 p.m. Dec. 3 and 4

2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Dec. 5

2 p.m. Dec. 6

At the Mountain View Center for Performing Arts, MainStage, 500 Castro St.

The Bay Area Ballet Company performs its annual "Christmas Ballet," with choreographic additions this year from new company artist Maggie Carey. The production runs two hours and is appropriate for children.

Tickets start at $25. For more information and tickets, see smuinballet.org/events/christmas-ballet-2026.

DEC.
4



Holiday Tree Lighting

6-8 p.m. at Veterans Community Plaza, corner of Main and State streets in downtown Los Altos

The annual Holiday Tree Lighting rings in the season with local student performances, festive lighting and trolley car rides around the downtown. Santa Claus will also make an appearance and be available for pictures.

Admission is free. For more information, see downtownlosaltos.org/event/holiday-tree-celebration.

DEC.
5

THROUGH

DEC.
6



The Rooted Market: Holiday Edition

10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at IFES Hall, 432 Stierlin Road, Cupertino

The event features 40 local vendors and offers plants, plant supplies, ceramics and other holiday gifts. There will also be a silent auction for items, and all attendees receive a 30% discount code for online orders from Sansi, along with automatic entry in a giveaway from the plant-lighting merchant.

Admission is free. For more information, see bit.ly/4yjZbp2.

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DEC.
6



Barn Lighting

2-5 p.m. at Westwind Community Barn, 27210 Altamont Road, Los Altos Hills

The community gathering welcomes all ages and offers drinks, cookies, seasonal games, pony rides, a petting zoo and photos with Santa, among other family-fun activities. The event will end in a celebratory countdown of the barn lighting.

Admission is free. For more information, see bit.ly/47O426W.

DEC.
12



German Holiday Market

11 a.m. to 9 p.m. at Mountain View City Hall Plaza, 500 Castro St.

The German International School of Silicon Valley presents an outdoor German Christmas-themed market selling artisan crafts with a petting zoo, German live music and holiday decorations.

Admission is free. For more information, see germanholidaymarket.org.

DEC.
19

AND

DEC.
20



Bayer Ballet's "Snow Queen"

1 and 6 p.m. each day at the Mountain View Center for Performing Arts, MainStage

Local dance academy Bayer Ballet stages its annual two-hour performance, inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's classic fairy tale and directed by Inna Bayer. The production is appropriate for all ages.

Tickets start at $42. For tickets and more information, see bayerballet.com.

DEC.
10

AND

DEC.
17



Holiday Market

4-8 p.m. at State Street Market in downtown Los Altos

The annual Holiday Market is a European-style night market where local vendors sell holiday gifts and stocking stuffers. Shoppers can also enjoy live music and a visit from Santa.

Admission is free. For more information, see downtownlosaltos.org/event/holiday-market

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DEC.
12



Winter Wonderland Family Fun Day

10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Los Altos Community Center, 97 Hillview Ave.

The Los Altos Community Center hosts themed Family Fun Days on select Saturdays, and the Winter Wonderland event will include holiday-themed activities such as arts and crafts, movies and a scavenger hunt.

Admission is free. For more information, see losaltosca.gov/329/Family-Fun-Days.



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A HOLIDAY TWIST

HOW A LATE-NIGHT CRAVING BECAME A TRADITION

BY KATHERINE MANASSERO
Town Crier Editorial Intern

Yeast bubbling in a mug with warm water and sugar, the orange glow of the oven illuminating eight golden twists of dough – few things are more comforting to me.

Four years ago, pretzel-making wasn't so simple. My best friend, Elise Koo, and I began our tradition of doughy, salty delights late one night during a sleepover. Since then, it's become a part of the holiday season, marking Christmas, New Year's, Valentine's Day and St. Patrick's Day celebrations.

It all started with us scrolling through Pinterest and flipping through my mom's laminated cookbooks, we searched for a recipe. The criteria? It had to satisfy our craving for something salty and pair perfectly with the gloriously ridiculous rom-com or whodunit we planned to binge that night.

After browsing a few recipes, we landed on one called "The Easiest Soft Pretzels" – found online at moderncrumb.com – and got to work. At first, the recipe's title felt more like false advertising than a guarantee. Within minutes, we hit a wall: My family's pantry lacked the all-important yeast packets. After begging my older sister for a ride to Safeway – followed by three hours of mixing, waiting, kneading, waiting and shaping – our creations went into the oven for a suspenseful 12 minutes.

Watching the twists rise and puff into the soft pretzels I remembered hanging in the baseball stadiums of my childhood, I felt my excitement grow. After a brief minute to broil some color into those beauties, we covered them with melted butter and yet another generous dose of salt.

With our corny series playing in the background, we bit into our pretzels. Steam rose out of the fluffy dough,









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and our night was made by the comfort in every piece.

After that night, pretzels became a staple of our regular sleepovers. More than a few times during our "pretzelganzas," we ended up with chewy batches, burned edges, and disappointing salt neglect. But each time, laughter and an abundance of "backup snacks" (that we were always going to eat anyway) drowned out the disappointment of a failed batch.

Though we soon mastered the classic pretzel twist technique, we quickly branched out – first shaping portraits of each other in dough clumps, then forming a tree and ornaments for Christmas, "2025" for New Year's, and later making a clover for St. Patrick's Day. Pretzels became our way of marking occasions, even when the occasion was just another long-overdue sleepover.

Eventually, "The Easiest Soft Pretzels" lived up to its name – more or less. We'd graduated from recipe-following novices to reasonably competent pretzel-makers, making the whole process feel "easy-ish."

And somewhere between the burned edges, questionable dough sculptures, and countless coats of melted butter, pretzel-making became more than a way to satisfy our late-night cravings. What mattered was having something to do together, whether we were trying to figure out if we had sifted three or four cups of flour or debating the questionable life choices of our show's protagonist. The recipe gave us a reason to start, but the memories gave us a reason to keep going.

These days, the smell of yeast and butter is becoming an increasingly rare one in our kitchen. Between college applications, school and the ever-growing busyness of our lives, finding a night to bake together takes more planning than it used to. But when we do manage to squeeze one in, there will still be flour on the counter, butter on our fingers, and, inevitably, an ingredient we forget to buy. After all our pretzel nights, some things never change.

If you make these pretzels, prepare for them to work their way into your own holiday traditions and late-night cravings. Try out the classic pretzel twist, then have a little fun with hearts, animals, faces.



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THE AGENCY



On Christmas Eve, Granny's Gumbo Offers a Bowl Full of Memories

BY MIA SCOTT
Town Crier Editorial Intern

If you had put a steaming bowl of my great-grandmother Granny's gumbo in front of me as a child, I probably would have wrinkled my nose and left it for the dogs.

Back then, I didn't appreciate it as much as I do now. It's not easy to make; it's not soup over rice, as little me thought; it's hours of time and love in each batch, and years and years of perfecting the traditional recipe.

Today, that exact bowl of gumbo is more than a Christmas Eve dinner; it's a memory. It makes me recall every table I've ever eaten at, how I differ from the last time I ate it and how the people at the table have changed, all sharing one dish, one recipe that's older than my whole family combined.

Now I find it delicious, too. It originated from my dad's side of the family, handed down from my Nana's parents, Willette and Harry Dionne. Long before I ever sat at the family dinner table, the Dionnes, or, as I knew them, Granny's family, packed up their lives and moved from Louisiana to Beaumont, Texas, bringing their authentic Cajun traditions, like this recipe, with them.



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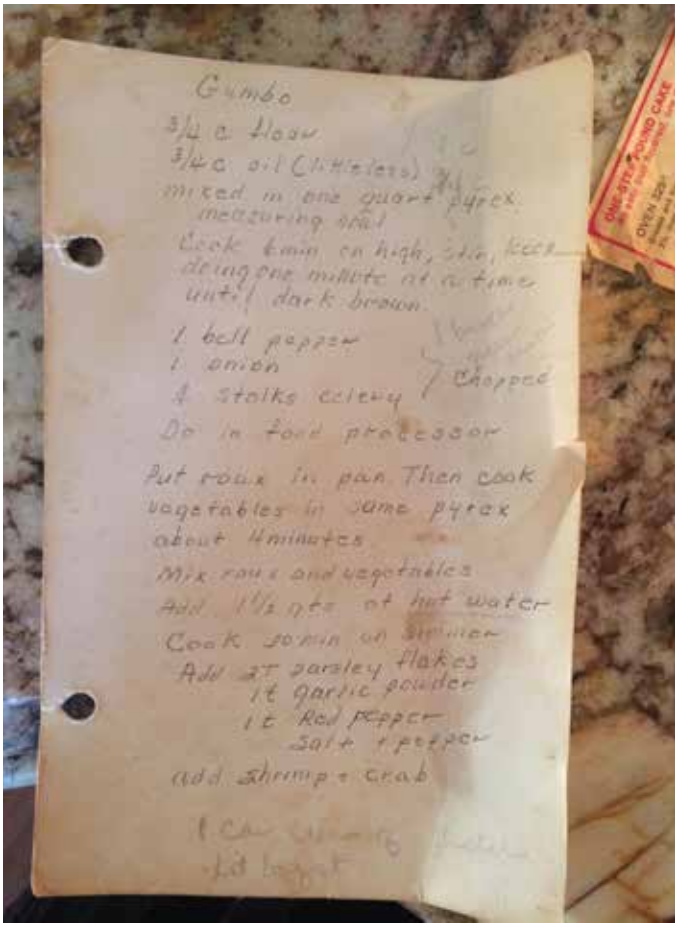
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Tucked in an old cookbook, you'll find the recipe on a weathered, handwritten recipe card, stained with history and scribbled with adjustments over the years. It all begins with a careful mix of flour and oil, cooked down minute by minute to form a roux. Every year without fail, I am reminded that it's easy to burn, so many times that I don't think I'd be able to forget that fact if I tried.

From there, it gets a lot easier: Chop the vegetables, combine them with the roux and hot water, and let it simmer. The final step is to add a generous amount of crab and shrimp. Finishing touches, like parsley flakes, garlic powder, red pepper and a dash of salt and pepper, bring it all together.

Making gumbo always sounded easy to me, until that year Nana accidentally burnt the roux during a cooking session, which led my mom to step in. She rescued the dish and took over the reins from then on out.

Every Christmas Eve, when that pot starts to simmer and the kitchen fills with the smell, it instantly bridges that year with every one before it. Gumbo honors Willette and Harry Dionne's journey, celebrates Nana's years of keeping the tradition alive and highlights the funny and beautiful ways our family passes down the torch through one delicious, nostalgic bowl at a time.



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The holiday season arrives differently for everyone. For some, it means busy calendars filled with gatherings, travel and celebrations. For others, it brings opportunities to slow down, focus on wellness or simply spend more time with the people who matter most.

No matter what your journey looks like, one goal usually remains the same: finding gifts that feel thoughtful, without stretching the budget. That's why many shoppers are focusing on practical gifts that deliver style, comfort and value long after the wrapping paper is gone.




De Mattei
CONSTRUCTION



One category that is often appropriate this time of year is boots. As temperatures cool and schedules fill with everything from family photos to festive outings, boots offer versatility that works throughout the season. From fashion-forward tall silhouettes to everyday ankle styles, today's options combine comfort and style in ways that make them easy to wear long after the holidays are over.

For the runners, walkers and fitness enthusiasts on your list, athletic footwear remains one of the season's most practical gifts. Whether someone is training for a race, building healthier habits for the new year or simply staying active during a busy season, performance footwear is often a practical option.

Of course, not every gift needs to come wrapped in a large box. Some of the most appreciated holiday surprises come in smaller packages. Accessories such as socks, hats, bags, shoe care products and shoe charms can make ideal stocking stuffers while adding personality and practicality to everyday routines. They can also be an easy way to add a little extra cheer to holiday shopping lists without adding a lot to the total at checkout.

As shoppers navigate gifting season, value continues to play an important role in purchasing decisions. Rather than choosing between quality, style and affordability, consumers are increasingly looking for retailers that offer all three. Focusing on gifts that can be worn and enjoyed well beyond the holiday season may help you feel more confident that these presents will provide lasting value.

After all, the season is about more than finding the perfect gift. It's about celebrating the moments, milestones and traditions that bring people together. The right pair of shoes, boots or accessories may be just one part of the season, but it can help someone step confidently into everything that lies ahead.



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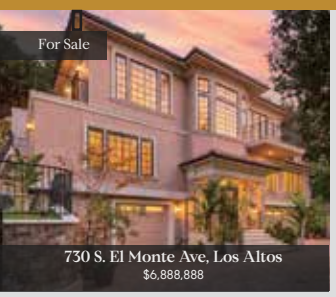
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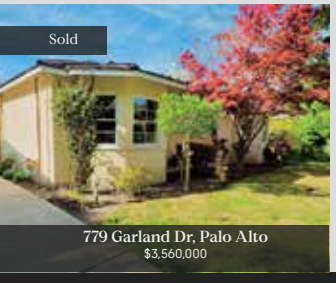
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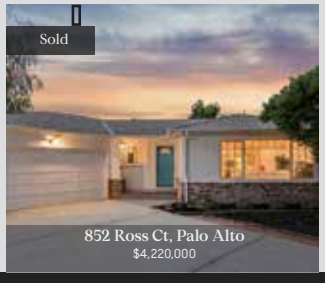
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PREPARING FOR MY FINAL MARCH *in the* FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS PARADE

BY MICHELLE JACOB
Town Crier Editorial Intern

This will be my third and final year decked out in bright string lights and a crisp blue and white uniform performing as part of the Los Altos High School marching band in the annual Festival of Lights parade.

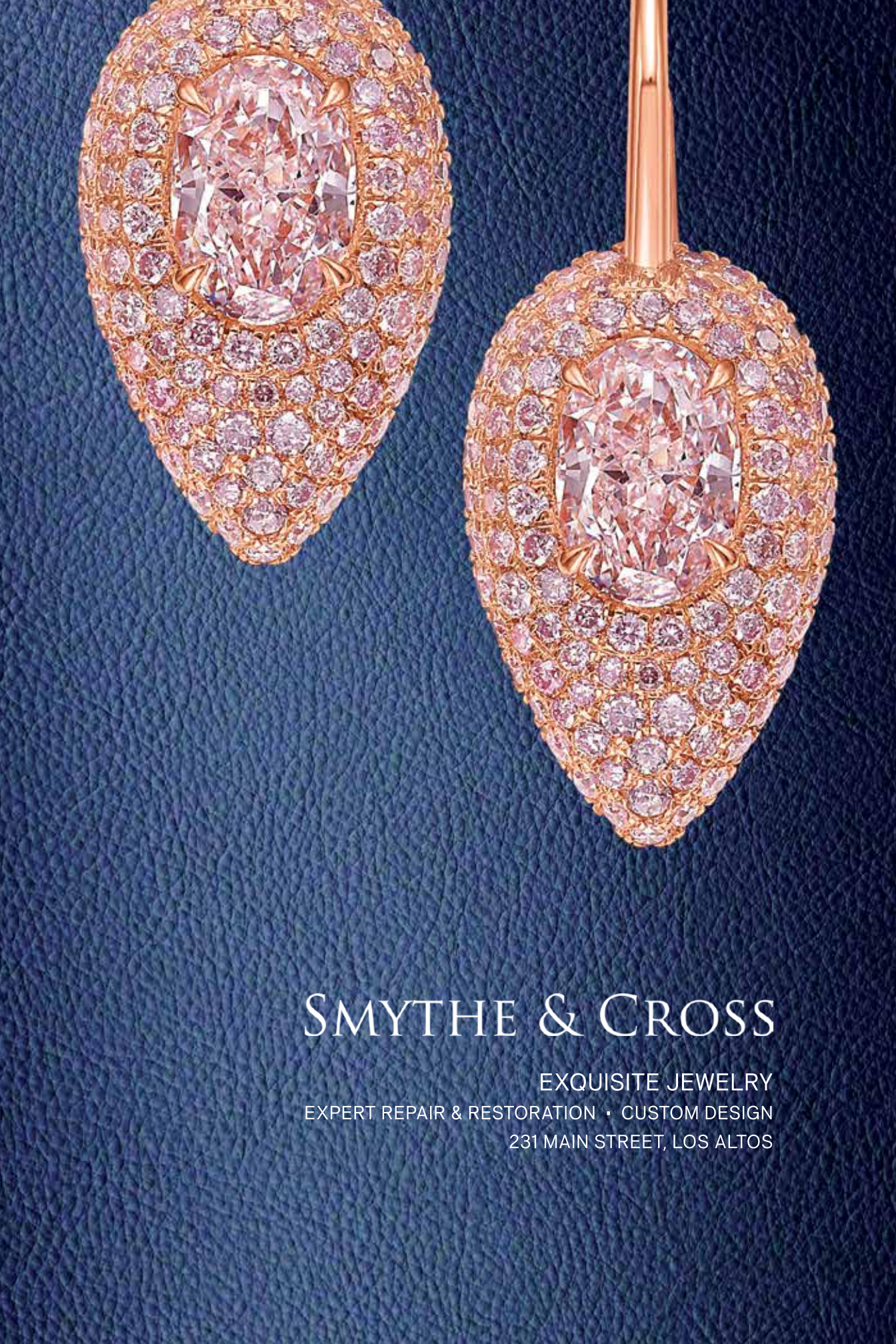
Before I ever participated in the parade, I was a spectator. I moved to Mountain View when I was 13 and that's when my family and I attended the event for the first time. Watching the array of illuminated floats, local groups walking with banners and, of course, bands, was a marvel; I'd never seen anything like it. The next year, I joined the concert band, and the year after, the marching band.

The Festival of Lights is a beloved tradition in Los Altos. Although I never experienced it as a young child, I love watching the awestruck faces of little kids, as they

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Michelle Jacob, right, rehearses with members of the Los Altos High School marching band.

point and smile at the parade.

In my completely unbiased opinion, music is one of, if not the most, important parts of making the festival what it is. It brings that holiday spirit in a way nothing else can, with every note ringing through downtown on those cold November nights.

We play the same piece every year – "Christmas Medley," composed by Jay Dawson. It layers dozens of holiday tunes, including "Jingle Bells" and "Gloria in excelsis Deo," to create a complex tune with varying style throughout, from the swaying jazzy start to the long, soaring end.

I'll be honest, the parade is hardly my favorite part of being in the band. As a baritone horn player – a 6-pound, giant trumpet-looking thing – holding up my instrument for more than a couple minutes is agonizing, and the parade is longer than that. Every year, as I walk back to the school with the rest of the ensemble with Jello arms and extremely tight shoulders, I wonder why I ever chose this instrument, or even why I ever joined the marching band.

The parade, though, officially marks the end of the marching band season. It marks the last time this ensemble – with these exact people, many of whom I've known for the past three years – will ever perform together. There will be no more practices to complain about, no more 12-hour competition days, no more Friday night football games playing in the stands when everyone's ready to go home.

But as a senior, this is the last time I get to experience any of that. Which would be great, except for the fact that with each tiring practice come countless inside jokes and hours of stifled laughter; every competition brings eating dinner with some of your closest friends. Even my aching arms leave me muscle definition that I know I'll never work out to get.

If you ask anyone who's ever watched the Festival of Lights, they'll tell you that it's special. And it really is. It's a time where you see the community come together, to both put on the amazing spectacle that the festival is, or to simply crowd together and witness the magic of the parade.

Community is a special thing, and I'm lucky to have found it, in more ways than one.

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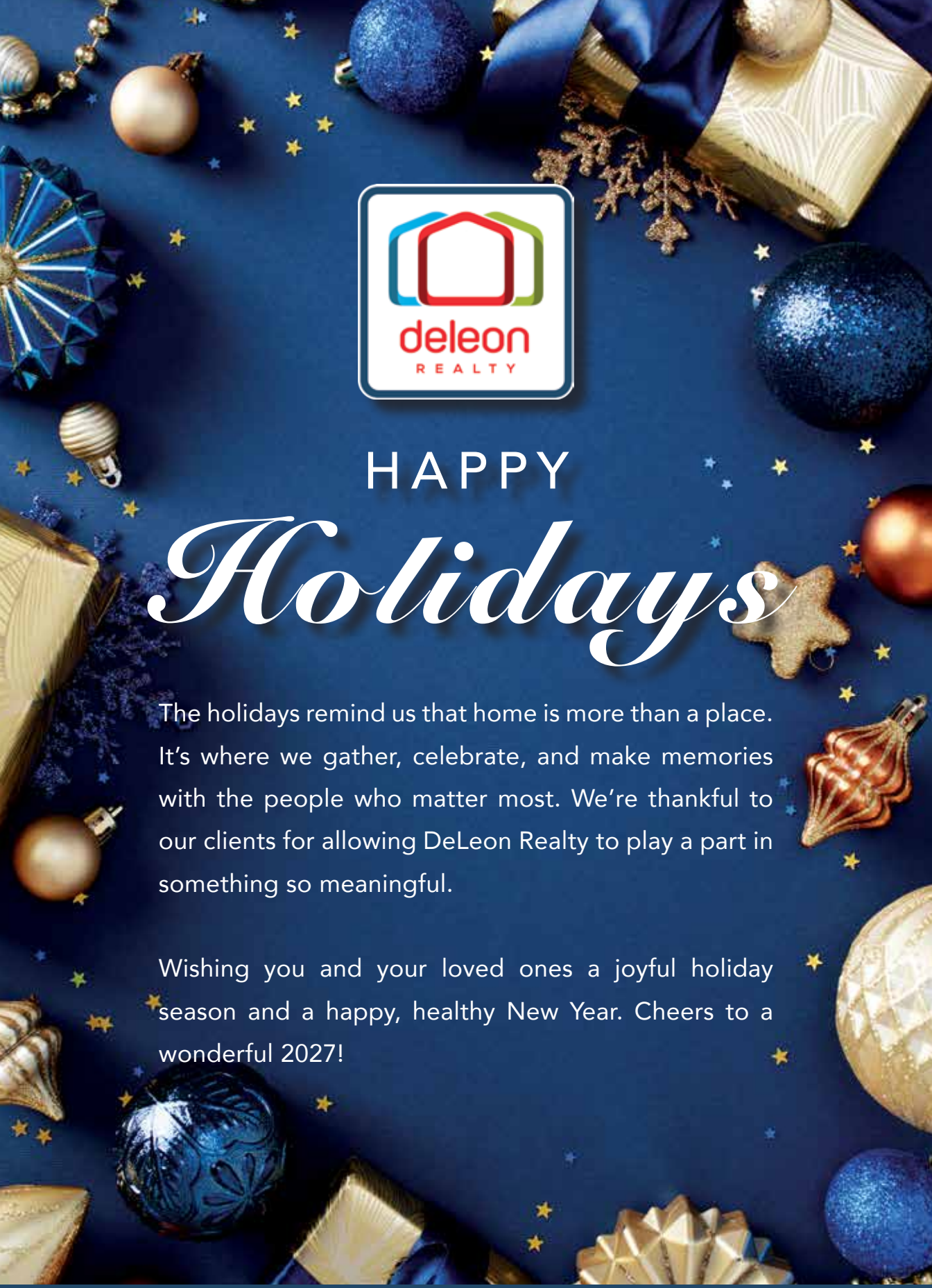
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