

A new Christmas blend

By Teresa A. Parsons



Some people say that the American or the Christian or the Catholic family — or even the family in general — isn't what it used to be.

That is true, as members of the Bertot family know from experience.

But they would also add that the change is all right. In fact, they might even say that it's an improvement.

The people who'll gather at their Palmyra home this holiday season are not all related to each other in the way the family used to be defined.

There will be Ted Bertot — or Dad to some — a program specialist at the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry, and Michele Bertot (known to friends as Shelly and to some others as Mom), a mechanical technician at Eastman Kodak Co.

Ted and Shelly are married. Each has three children — ranging in age from 14 to 20 — from previous marriages. Erika, Jaeseena and Kirsten are teenagers who each live with their other parent. Stefan, Ted Jr., and Denise are all living on their own, having recently joined different branches of the armed services.

Although the logistics are not yet clear, all of Ted's and Shelly's sons and daughters will arrive at the Bertot home sometime this week, except for Stefan, who left last week for Germany.

What they'll find there is the best Christmas present ever — Joshua, a new seven-year-old brother. Last week he "came home forever" with Ted and Shelly after their application to adopt him was approved.

Also present will be friends and relations too numerous to mention. The Bertots regard anyone who's alone or lonely or unwanted at Christmas as at least temporary family members. Some might say they go to extremes. A friend one year left the remains of his cremated Uncle Chester in a box on the Bertots' bookshelf. The box has been there ever since.

What they will do once they are all together depends on what feels right. Each year, the Bertots have adapted their holiday traditions to fit their changing family circumstances.

After Ted was divorced nearly eight years ago, he began the tradition of opening his home during the holidays to others who were single or without family. Since they married two years ago, Ted and Shelly have continued that tradition of hospitality. But they have also experimented with some new ideas.

Before they put up a tree or bake cookies or decorate their home, for instance, the Bertots make sure that others have the ingredients for Christmas cheer. Their basement is filled with boxes of food and wrapped gifts that they'll organize and help distribute on behalf of St. Anne's Parish in Palmyra.

When their sons or daughters arrive, they'll be expected to pitch in — a situation they sometimes enjoy and other times merely tolerate.

The same is true of attending Mass together. Regardless of the accepted custom in their respective homes, sons or daughters who stay at the Bertot home on any weekend are expected to go to church.

"They don't not stay because of it," Shelly said. "Generally, the kids seem to think it's a good place to come."

For both Shelly and Ted, visitation arrangements with their former spouses are relatively simple and relaxed. Typically, Shelly's children spend Christmas Eve with her former husband. Otherwise, the children "pretty much come when they want to come," said Ted.

Perhaps because they aren't all together as often as some families, the Bertots' holidays are geared above all toward enjoying each other. They don't watch much television, but prefer to play board games and listen to music and converse.

This may sound as simple and pleasant as Christmas on Walton's mountain, but it really isn't. A blended family, like anything that's been broken and mended, shows some cracks here and there.

Offspring with more than one set of parents inevitably end up comparing them. They are understandably jealous of sharing a parent with a new partner and that partner's children. Step-parents quickly learn to tread carefully on the ground between their partner and their partner's children.

The Bertots cope with such stresses and strains by trying to make each son and



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal
Like any other seven-year-old, Joshua Bertot is waiting anxiously for a visit from Santa Claus. But for his adoptive parents, Ted and Michele Bertot of Palmyra, the anxious wait ended two weeks ago when Joshua came home with them for good.

daughter feel equally treasured. They depend on time, rather than on their checkbook.

"We don't put that much material emphasis on it. From the beginning, we explained that to us, there are more important things than money," Ted said. "We do a lot of things together. We've tried to say that 'You as a person are important,' rather than plying them with things."

"One of the kids summed it up rather nicely when he said, 'You don't get much there, but at least they treat everybody the same,'" Ted added.

Sometimes their approach has worked, and sometimes it hasn't. Despite plenty of anxiety, their first Christmas together in 1984 went smoothly — more so than either Shelly or Ted expected.

They invited all six children and several friends to drop in at their first small apartment outside Palmyra. Shelly made a bowl of punch and a ham, and everyone sat down together and shared a meal. The girls ended up staying for four days.

The following Easter was a different story. Two of the kids got into a fight over a game and ended up shouting and throwing things. "Why do you make us come here and have holidays with these

other kids?" one of them asked Ted afterward.

But gradually, the Bertots believe, their children are beginning to feel less like fellow guests and more like brothers and sisters. Last year, for example, Shelly's daughters called to find out when Ted's daughters would be visiting so they could all be there together.

As far as Joshua is concerned, everyone in his ready-made family is strong or beautiful and absolutely perfect. Already, he crows over pictures in the family album with the pride of a natural-born little brother.

The presence of Joshua and the absence of Stefan will undoubtedly bring more changes to the Bertot Christmas tradition this year. But lately, change has been kind to their family, so why should they worry?

"Every year you try something different. If it's good, you keep it. If not, you throw it out," Shelly said. "I think you have to try different things, especially in a blended family, because everybody's used to different things."

"We are prepared for some rough moments," Ted added, "but the whole family is really excited about being together."

First you put the fruit in and then add the Jello. Add flour and milk and put it in the electric mixer for five minutes. The temperature should be 1,000 degrees. It will be for eight people. But make it big. Then put it in the refrigerator.

Brett Wolfe
St. John, Humboldt
Grade 2

You put strawberries on the top, then you put cream on top of the strawberries. Then you put it in the oven and then you put it on a plate and eat.

Robert Whiting
St. John, Humboldt
Kindergarten

Put in 99 eggs and four cups of sugar. Then put 10 nuts and two scoops of flour. Then add six bananas and 100 cherries. Add chocolate chips and put it in the refrigerator. Then bake at 500 degrees for one hour. Take out when it starts to spatter.

Robert Richardson
St. John, Humboldt
Grade 2

The bowl should be six inches. Add five inches of water. Add green ice cream, eggs, bananas, sugar, pineapple, oranges, peaches and apples. Mix with beaters. Put it in the freezer for six hours then bake in the oven for one hour.

Matthew Lehmann
St. John, Humboldt
Grade 2

Put 200 eggs and 90 nuts. It will weigh 900 pounds. You need a big spoon and lots of sugar. Bake for nine hours in the oven.

Meghan Kelly
St. John, Humboldt
Grade 2



Put in 100 eggs, five cups of oil, milk, cherries, sugar, bananas and nuts. Use a 10-ft-long spoon to mix with and bake for a half hour. When it starts to get mushy, take it out. It's done.

Ryan Grevell
St. John, Humboldt
Grade 2

It is easy to make So is a Bongbycake And a Sillybysighcake But for your sake, Only make a fruitcake!

Matthew Lester
St. John, Humboldt
Grade 3

How to choose a gift for mom or dad

I want to get Mom a wreath. It will be made of real evergreen and smell like pine. I will buy dad a new coat. It will be black and it will keep Dad warm in the winter.

Chad Gruka
St. Michael, Newark
Grade 2

I think and think ever day, but I do not no wate to get. I think I'll get Mom a braslet. I mite get my Dad some pantes. I think I'll get them thes!

Lisa Medoro
St. Michael, Newark
Grade 2

I want to give Mom and Da a present for Christmas. I will give Mom a cup for her coffee. It says Mom on it in pretty colors. Dad will get a key chain so he won't loose his keys.

Mike Dundas
St. Michael, Newark
Grade 2

I am going to get her a glass angel for the tree, so that the tree will look prettier. I got my Father a nut and bolt set so that he can build me something.

Stacy Lehmann
St. John, Humboldt
Kindergarten

Go to the Store and pick out a Gift for Mom and Dad. Go to the Cashier then Give Her the money. then Go Home.

Anna Winterkorn
St. John, Humboldt
Grade 1

I will buy Mom a mug. Mom likes to drink alot of coffee. Mom likes flowers so I will try to find a mug with flowers on it for Christmas.

Julie Aman
St. Michael, Newark
Grade 2

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