

Christmas FEATURE

Season challenges interfaith families

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

Terry and Sherri McArdle have a Christmas tree this year.

Ted and Christine Aroesty have a nativity scene.

And Raj and Rosetta Borkar have both. Such items are typical in homes at this time of the year.

But these three Rochester families are hardly typical.

Sherri McArdle is Jewish; so is Ted Aroesty. Raj Borkar is Hindu. But their three respective spouses are Catholic.

As a result, Christmas time is a challenge. The three families must seek ways of to blend traditions and make compromises — and to communicate what others take for granted.

The Borkars have perhaps the easiest time of it — in part because Raj grew up in an ecumenical environment in Bombay.

"In Bombay, my circle of friends was very cosmopolitan," observed Raj, who recently completed his medical residency at St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester. His circle of friends included Hindus, Catholics, Jews and Moslems.

"I don't view anyone as Catholic, Hindu or anything else," he added. "I just go by the person rather than the religion."

In addition, Raj's family was open to him marrying a Catholic, Rosetta said.

"Fortunately for us, his mother was broad-minded," noted Rosetta, who attends St. John the Evangelist Church in Greece. The family, she added, "accepted me with open arms."

Rosetta's family would have preferred a Catholic husband for their daughter, Raj said, but still made him feel welcome.

Meanwhile, Christmas is not an entirely alien celebration for Hindus, the two noted. Hindus have a fall celebration called Diwali — a "festival of lights" — that in some ways parallels Christmas. The festival is celebrated by placing candles outside a home, and exchanging gifts and treats.

And Jews have their own "festival of

lights" — Hanukkah, which commemorates the rededication of the Temple by Judas Maccabaeus in 165 B.C.

But people who try to make that feast into a kind of "Jewish Christmas" at this time of year are mistaken, Terry McArdle said.

"I think something that a lot of Catholics are not aware of is that Hanukkah is not the big deal holiday that Christmas is for Catholics," noted Terry, who attends Corpus Christi Church. "Hanukkah is kind of a celebration of an historical event."

Terry has learned a great deal about Judaism since 1977. That's when he began dating his wife, who is now on the board of Rochester's Temple B'rith Kodesh. The two married in 1981, and have two children — whom they are raising as Jewish.

One way they have blended traditions is that, when Hanukkah falls close to Christmas, they put up their Christmas tree the first day of the Jewish feast. But it was many years before they even had a tree, due to Sherri's feelings.

"It's not my tradition," Sherri said. "It symbolizes many things that are not my belief."

But sensing how important it was to Terry to have a tree — especially after the children began to arrive — Sherri agreed to allow a tree, albeit, with lingering uneasy feelings. But those feelings have gradually been eased in living out an interfaith marriage.

"My biggest lesson about that is that celebrating someone else's faith does not diminish my own," Sherri said. "In fact, it even enhances it."

Terry, too, discovered that his contact with Judaism helped him to overcome his estrangement from the Catholic faith.

"Every time I went to B'rith Kodesh, it reminded me of what I was missing," Terry recalled. "Being part of a faith I didn't belong to and going someplace else brought me back to the church."

The McArdles worked out some holiday issues as they arose after they were married. The Aroestys did so even before

they married last May. One of the earliest issues revolved around a nativity scene.

"It took a good year before I could convince him that I wanted (a nativity scene) in the house," recalled Christine, who attends Catholic services at the University of Rochester Interfaith Center.

Ted acknowledged his reluctance to have such a powerful Christian symbol in his home.

"I think that everybody kind of feels you have to put up walls and say this is the way it has to be," he said. "But once you get into the marriage, you start to think, 'Maybe this isn't so important and maybe this is something I can give on, especially once there's children.'"

At the same time, Christine agreed not to place crosses on the wall out of respect for Ted's feelings.

One issue they resolved before they married was that their children would be raised Catholics. But both want their children to have contact with Jewish traditions.

"We decided to expose them to ele-



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Terry and Sherri McArdle, and their children Rachel and Matthew, blend Catholic and Jewish traditions during the holidays.

ments of Jewish faith not in an attempt to confuse them, but to enlighten them," Ted explained.

Indeed, Christine added, a number of people warned them to be careful about blending their faiths too much and thus confusing the children. In too many cases when traditions were blended without the children having a clear sense of religious identity, she observed, "religion never becomes a part of their lives, and I think that's unfortunate."



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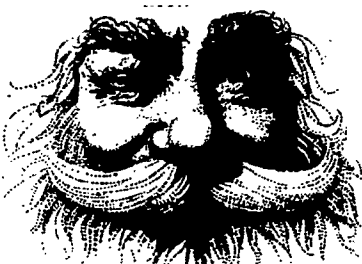
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