

December 2021

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Coping With Loss Over the Holidays

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YOUNG WRITERS CONTEST WINNERS

INSIDE! CALENDAR • HOLIDAY CAMP & FUN GUIDE

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FILM REVIEW

By Jack Kyser

Belfast

Read online at:

www.austinfamily.com/films



Cover model Rexton is three years old and loves snuggling, riding his tractor and playing on swings with his big sisters. He also likes trucks and Paw Patrol. Photo by Jordan Ashley Photography.



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Catch Austin Family magazine live on "Good Day Austin" every Thursday morning.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

ANNETTE LUCKSINGER

Lucksinger is a mom of two and author of the guidebook and app "Exploring Austin With Kids."

For years, my family would join others to put together packages for the homeless. We would fill bags with socks, water, toiletries, granola bars, first aid items and goodies. Folded pieces of construction paper got stickered and stamped to become homemade cards. The kids wrote notes: "Happy holidays. I love you! Have a happy new year!"

We kept the bags in our car to give to those in need. I once rolled down my window and handed one to a young man. As the traffic light turned green, I saw him in my rearview mirror, the packet in one hand. In his other was

the card my son had made. He held it up, smiling as he waved it in the air, grateful to receive not food or shampoo or water as much as a kind note from one human to another, wishing him well.

We celebrate that spirit in this holiday issue. We offer ingenious ways to surprise friends and family by gifting experiences instead of things. We pose simple ways to work volunteering into your festivities to make them merrier. Our education article considers important factors before bringing home a new family member to learn from and love – a puppy! Plus, a very special bonus this month is the publication of the winning stories from our 2021 Young Writers Contest.

As always, we share lots of advice to keep your family happy, healthy and safe.

From Austin Family to yours, happy holidays!

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QR Scan to see "the funnest thing in the history of funnest things!"

Play it safe

product recalls

Government Recalls Wiggle Sets, Bike Helmets and Playsets



Hanna Andersson has recalled about 4,400 baby long sleeve **wiggle sets**. The snaps on the long sleeve top can detach and pose a choking hazard to young children. The style number 66938 on the recalled sets is written on the main label at the neck. These sets were sold exclusively online in size zero months to three years old at hannaandersson.com.

They were available from July 2021 through October 2021 for about \$46. Consumers should immediately stop using the recalled clothing set and contact Hanna Andersson for a full refund. All known purchasers are being contacted directly.



ABUS has issued a recall for about 800 MountZ youth medium **helmets** because they fail to comply with the U.S. CPSC federal safety standards for bicycle helmets. Printed on a label on

the inside of the helmet is the model name (MountZ) with the manufactured date of March 2020 or October 2020. The recalled helmets were sold at independent bike shops nationwide in velvet black and polar white colors from April 2020 through October 2021 for about \$80. While no injuries have been reported, consumers are advised to stop use of the recalled helmets and return them free of charge. Details for obtaining a full refund can be found at mobil.abus.com/usa/on-road/bike-helmets/voluntary-recall.



About 5,100 Turbo Racer, Cloud Racer, Captain's Fort and Fort Highlander outdoor **playsets** have been recalled by Backyard Play Systems. The wooden parts used to reinforce and create a decorative gable design

on the wooden roof of these playsets pose an entrapment hazard for children. The sets were sold exclusively online both at Costco (from March 2019 through May 2021) and at Lowe's (from December 2020 through May 2021) for about \$1,000. No incidents have been reported. Consumers should immediately stop using the recalled playsets and contact Backyard Play Systems for a free repair kit. If a consumer is unable or does not wish to do the repair themselves, Backyard Play Systems will send a representative to perform the repair at no charge. The firm is contacting all known purchasers directly.

The US Consumer Products Safety Commission works to protect the public from unreasonable risks of serious injury or death from more than 15,000 types of consumer products.

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AROUND

Austin

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Wreaths Across America

The nonprofit organization Wreaths Across America was founded to continue and expand the annual wreath-laying ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery. The organization's mission is to remember the fallen, honor those who serve and teach our children the value of freedom. These goals are carried out in part each year by coordinating wreath-laying ceremonies at hundreds of veterans' cemeteries and other locations across the nation.



On Saturday, Dec. 18, at 11 a.m., Wreaths Across America will be at Capital Parks in Pflugerville and at Bagdad Cemetery in Leander. Our veterans will be honored and remembered through the laying of remembrance wreaths on the graves of fallen heroes and the act of saying the name of each and every veteran aloud. The community is invited to attend the ceremony. You may also sponsor a wreath or volunteer. For more information, see wreathscrossamerica.org.

by the numbers



50+
Holiday events are happening around Austin this year

source: See the AFM calendar and Holiday Event Guide!



1967
Year of the first Zilker Holiday Tree lighting

source: austintexas.gov



30 million
Trees are cut to make gift wrap. Alternatives? Try old maps, fabric, newspapers and comics.

source: mindthewrap.org

CELEBRATE the Holidays

View the full schedule at austinpbs.org/holidays

Austin



We're Looking for a Few Good Kids ... To Brag On!

If you know a young person deserving of recognition or a youth group working to positively impact our community, let us hear about it. They just might end up in next month's "Around Austin" section of Austin Family magazine! Send details and a photo to editor2003@austinfamily.com.



Children enjoy the interactive forts on display at the Wildflower Center. Photo credit Alicia Wells.

Fortlandia and Illuminations

This holiday season, visitors can experience two of the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center's most popular events – Fortlandia and Luminations – at the same time.

The annual Luminations will feature thousands of luminarias, seasonal food and drink and the light-splashed forts of Fortlandia. Enjoy the natural wonder of winter in the beautiful Texas Arboretum. Reservations are strongly recommended as the event will have limited capacity nightly. Luminations runs from Dec. 2 through Jan. 30.

Fortlandia, a creative collection of custom forts and spaces designed and built in the arboretum will transport you to imaginary worlds and spark an appreciation for art and nature. The outdoor exhibit will be open through Jan. 30.

Pick up a free "Passfort" field journal upon check-in. With a mini map and many creative prompts, it sparks new ways to observe nature and the art of Fortlandia. "Passforts" are available to explorers of any age and are dual language – English and Spanish.

Things To Do This December

1-7

Adopt a Family for Christmas

Williamson County Brown Santa Program

4

Sing-Along and Downtown Tree Lighting

Texas State Capitol

Dec. 1-Jan. 30

Luminations & Fortlandia

The Wildflower Center

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Top Ranking Elementary Schools

Both Canyon Creek and Cactus Ranch elementary schools in Round Rock ISD earned top honors in the state by ranking in the top 10 list of Texas elementary schools by U.S. News & World Report's first-ever ranking of elementary campuses. Canyon Creek ranked seven and Cactus Ranch followed shortly in spot nine among 4,446 elementary campuses eligible for consideration in Texas.

The ranking for elementary campuses is based on math and reading proficiency, or how well students perform on state assessments, and math and reading performance, or how well they perform compared to expectations. The data is based on reports from the U.S. Department of Education and only includes public schools. The state assessment data used in the rankings is from the 2018-2019 school year and therefore pre-dates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on test-taking.

Superintendent Dr. Hafedh Azaiez noted, "These campuses and so many more within our District are prime examples of the quality of teaching and learning we have taking place in our classrooms and the tradition of excellence our campuses continue to uphold regardless of challenges and obstacles."



ROUND ROCK
INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT



Local High Schools Rank High in the Nation

According to the U.S. News & World Report, of 17,857 high schools in all 50 states, three area schools ranked in the top 100 best public high schools in Texas and in the top 500 in the nation.

Two schools in Austin ISD made the top 100 list. Liberal Arts and Science Academy (LASA) ranked #4 in the state of Texas and #41 in the nation. Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders ranked #12 in the state and #98 nationally. In Round Rock ISD, Westwood High School is listed as #69 in Texas and one of the top 500 in the nation.

Schools were ranked on six factors based on their performance on state assessments and how well they prepare students for college.



The USPS Pen Pal Project Guidelines and Policies

Pen Pal Project

The U.S. Postal Service is teaming up with We Are Teachers to introduce the USPS Pen Pal Project, a free educational program for third to fifth grade students.

The project will provide 25,000 classrooms across the country the opportunity to partner with matched classes to write 1 million letters. The goal is to build friendships and diversify students' perspectives. By participating in the program, students will also improve their writing, communication and collaboration skills.

U.S. public, charter and private schools are invited to join the USPS Pen Pal Project. More information, including official rules and instructions to sign up, is available at weareteachers.com.

School Groundbreaking

St. Austin Catholic Parish broke ground on a redevelopment project of the entire church campus. The project will include new buildings for St. Austin's award-winning school with state-of-the-art classrooms and a greater emphasis on STEM education through the new science lab. The school will also have a new gymnasium and outdoor spaces.

The school has been a part of St. Austin's since 1917 and has occupied the same building for over 70 years. Once completed, the redesigned school will serve up to 400 pre-K3 through eighth grade students. Classes are expected to resume on-site in the fall of 2023.

The main portion of the new building will be located immediately adjacent to the church along Guadalupe Street across from the University of Texas campus. The current school building will be razed to make way for a new downtown residential tower that will serve both university students and residents of the area.

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ANNOUNCING WINNERS

2021 YOUNG WRITERS CONTEST

This year's topic: You win a prize to travel anywhere in the universe.



5th Grade Winner
ELENA DELUNA
Hill Elementary School

"Are you ready?" An astronaut asked Emily. She nodded and slipped into her space suit. On her way out the door her head bumped the ceiling. Gravity was a lot weaker here.

Emily carefully took a step outside. She had won a ticket to travel anywhere in the universe. A normal girl! On planet Hi-2845678763456!

Emily gazed around the foggy world.

She saw a faint shape. Emily squinted trying to see it better.

"One moment," The astronaut said, stepping back inside the rocket.

There was a loud bang, and Emily whipped around. The rocket was gone. She was on a planet by herself. With limited air.

Don't panic don't panic don't panic... OKAY PANICKING!

She stared ahead at the figure. Only it wasn't a figure anymore. She could see it clearly. It was a short fuzzy creature with purple octopus like tentacles.

Emily screamed and scrambled away.

"Oh hush," The creature said. It's voice was high. "My name is Violet."

Emily blinked. "Uhm, I'm Emily... are you an alien??"

"Uh, no. Are you a gurnef??" Violet questioned.

"No! I'm a human! Duh."

"Human..." Violet murmured, like it was the first time saying the word. Maybe it was!

"Well I have NO idea what Alien is, or human. But I'm a Hopie." Violet said.

"Okay.. but how will I get home? My ship just disappeared!" Emily cried.

"Follow me." Emily followed Violet past some gates and into somewhere that looked like a town. Except it was very neon.

Violet spoke to some of the 'Hopies' walking around. One nodded and ran off.

Violet turned around. "Okay, your ship home will be here soon."

Could this planet be the place where the cure is..? Emily wondered as she shuffled after Violet, deeper into the village.



5th Grade Runner-up
INES PILA GAHR HOSKING
Ridgetop Elementary School

They gave me a prize to go anywhere in the universe-

With all my choices, is this a blessing or a curse?

They gave me the Willy Wonka ticket of space travel

Any doubt or question in my head I could unravel

I could go to the future, see flying cars

I could travel to Jupiter, Saturn or Mars!

Visit the Sahara or the Amazon

Or go back in time to make sure my Zoom cam is on

See the white peak of Everest

Or Rome where history never rests

But, the universe is so vast

My choice... with such great expectations cast?

I guess with this prize I must choose something that will "Wow!"

But you know what?

Nothing is better than where I am right here and now.

My future ahead of me

My past behind me

A smile ear to ear

And me, right here.

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4th Grade Winner
RIHI CHAWALA
Doss Elementary School

Blackness. That was all I could see. Except for an orange dot glimmering in the distance. That was where I was going.

I had gone to NASA's contest to try to win a trip on the new rocket. I had entered my name and job description. That night, I watched the drawing on my television. My name was drawn!

A rusty shape, growing closer, in the ink of space. Closer, closer, closer.

5! I was dancing with fear. 4! My body was also ready to explore. 3! I froze. 2! I was stuck. 1! There was no turning back now. Touchdown!

The sound of a can opening. The latch opened. Silence surrounded me. I was like a lone hunter, searching for life. My whole career depends on each step, each leap, each minute, each hour. And if I fail, my whole life would come down upon me.

I slowly searched the freezing sands for signs of life. The wind scattered the sand, opening a tunnel in the dune in front of me. I quickly moved under the cave.

"Rrrrrrr!" came a growl from deeper in the cave.

"Living creatures!" I walked in to get a closer look.

"Ggllleuuooopp," the creature said. (Translation: Earthling, you disturbed me. Now, I might send you to Messy Planet. You are warned.)

I took out my camera and shot a picture. I sent it to NASA. My job was done!

I stepped out of the cave to go back to the rocket. Suddenly, the UMO (unidentified Mars organism) shot out its tentacles and gripped me tight. It squeaked, "That's it! I'm dumping you at Messy Planet. And the UMO took me on a nonstop trip to Messy Planet. I was doomed!



4th Grade Runner-up
NATALIA VELA CORTES
International School of Texas

A Prize to Travel Anywhere in the Universe

I chose Africa and brought my dog, Bob. After we landed, our pilot Pete said, "We have a problem!" "What?" I responded. "The airplane is broken," says Pete. "WHAT? Are we stuck in the savannah?" I exclaimed. "Yes!" replied Pete. "Bob can help us find food and defend us!" I told

Pete. Pete said the radio was broken but we would be rescued soon. Pete stayed to fix the radio while Bob and I explored. Next, we heard a noise. Bob started to bark and we ran toward the noise. We saw a cheetah's front leg stuck in the rocks. Bob found a stick and we helped free the cheetah's leg. I used my long socks to protect his hurt leg. He followed us and we all walked back. Pete saw the cheetah and screamed. "Natalia, there's a cheetah behind you!" "I know! It's my friend. Bob and I rescued him. His leg was stuck between rocks." "I'm worried the cheetah will attack us," said Pete. I replied, "Don't worry. He's not going to attack us because we saved his life."

In the morning while Pete was asleep, I went for a walk with Bob and the cheetah. Suddenly, we saw poachers hiding in the tall grass. We all hid. The poachers wanted to shoot the cheetah. I threw a rock and they thought that the cheetah ran the other way. We ran back to Pete and told him our story. Pete said a helicopter was on its way. We called the police and the poachers went to jail. We took the cheetah on the helicopter so he would be safe. We named him Chase. On the helicopter, my friend Aarna was there with a giant panda that she found in the bamboo forest.

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Judges:



Carmen Oliver

Carmen is author of a picture book series and has a new book release in Fall 2022. She founded the Booking Biz, a boutique-style agency that brings award-winning children's authors and illustrators to schools, libraries and special events.



Bethany Hegedus

Bethany has an award-winning picture book and she is also the Founder and Creative Director of The Writing Barn in Austin and host of The Porchlight podcast, which includes writing craft and creativity interviews, as well as the popular Courage to Create series.



LIFELINES

BRENDA SCHOOLFIELD

Schoolfield is a freelance medical writer based in Austin.

Help Your Family Breathe Easier During the Holidays

Before you put up the tree, light a scented candle, spray holiday air freshener or invite people over, take a minute to learn about seasonal challenges to healthy indoor air quality. During this time of year, we spend more time indoors, breathing the air inside our homes. Simple steps can protect your family from harmful pollutants and virus particles in the air that could make them sick.

POOR INDOOR AIR QUALITY CAN MAKE YOUR FAMILY SICK

The quality of air in our homes has a direct effect on health and well-being. Poor indoor air quality can cause irritated throat, coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath. People with certain conditions, such as asthma, COPD and heart disease, are at increased risk. Exposure to pollutants can worsen their condition. Over time, anyone exposed to poor indoor air quality day after day has a greater risk of developing serious health problems.

COMMON INDOOR POLLUTANTS

Some common indoor pollutants are particulate matter and airborne chemicals. Particulate matter consists of microscopic solid or liquid particles suspended in the air. These particles can come from a variety of sources and vary in size. The EPA says that the size of particles is directly linked to their potential for causing health problems. Of particular concern are particles that are small enough to pass through the nose or mouth and get into the lungs. Smoke from a wood burning fireplace has the potential to produce these types of particles. Dust from an artificial tree or pollen from a live tree are other sources of particulate matter.

Candles can release harmful chemicals into the air as well. One study found that certain candles produced particulate matter and emissions similar to those contained in exhaust from a diesel engine. Airborne chemicals have been linked to health problems in children.

ELIMINATE HOLIDAY POLLUTANTS

Here are some easy ways to reduce the level of holiday pollutants in your home:

- Choose candles made from natural ingredients, such as soy, instead of paraffin, a petroleum-based product. They may release lower amounts of harmful emissions. Burn candles in a ventilated room.
- Make your own holiday room scent instead of using a spray or air freshener. Put orange peel, cinnamon sticks and a few cloves in water. Simmer in a saucepan on the stove or in a crockpot. Search “ways to make your home smell like Christmas” for recipe ideas.
- Dust and wipe down holiday decorations to get rid of dust, pollen and mold.
- Rinse off a live tree outside and let it dry before bringing it into the house.

Wash the Christmas tree stand before using it.

- Use plastic storage containers instead of those made from cardboard, which can harbor dust and dust mites.

MAKE INDOOR AIR CLEANER

Low air exchange rates make indoor air pollution worse. Increased indoor air flow (ventilation) helps flush out indoor pollutants as well as virus particles that spread disease. Here are some ventilation strategies recommended by the CDC:

- **Open doors and windows wide.** It's most effective to have several doors and windows fully open to maximize air exchange. But if that's not possible, even opening a window a few inches can help. Use common sense with this strategy. For example, don't open the windows if allergens could trigger an asthma attack or a child could fall out of a window.
- **Use your HVAC system to help trap virus particles.** When people are visiting, set the fan to "on" instead of "auto." This will keep the air moving. Use pleated filters designed to trap smaller particle size. Make sure the filter fits properly. Change it every three months or as directed by the manufacturer. Annual maintenance is recommended. Incomplete combustion can release carbon monoxide and other harmful byproducts into the air.
- **Use fans. Turn on ceiling fans to move the air around.** Place a box fan (or other type of fan) so that it blows indoor air out an open window. Don't point the fan towards people. It could blow contaminated air directly at them.
- **Limit the number of people inside your home and how long they stay.**

The level of virus particles in your home can increase according to the number of people and length of their visit. Try to entertain outdoors. If that's not possible, gather in larger rooms. Consider asking everyone in your home to wear a mask and keep a distance of six feet apart. Masking and social distancing has been proven to slow the spread of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

- **Turn on exhaust fans when you have visitors.** Exhaust fans in the bathroom and above the stove may help move air outside. Even if the fan isn't vented to the outside, it can move air so that virus particles aren't concentrated in one place. Keep the fans on for an hour after the visitors leave.

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Holiday Events and Camp Guide

Events and Destinations

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Two- and three-day family weekends available. Experience what it is like to own your own horses and ranch for the weekend with your family! Our special family sessions run from September through December and are all-inclusive (lodging, all meals and snacks, tack, horses, lessons, etc.). Everyone gets to bunk together as a group in our beautiful bunk room. texasHORSECAMPS.com

BANDERA

Nov 1–Dec 15

DREAMLAND'S LIGHTS & DELIGHTS

The first ever holiday light display, a new ice skating rink pop-up, an artisan walk for shopping. This 64-acre property will be dazzling with nearly half a million tree lights and 20 large holiday displays. dreamlanddstx.com

DRIPPING SPRINGS

Nov 20–Jan 4

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

A Christmas Carol is a musical sleigh ride through rhythm and time, infusing the traditional Victorian story with a musical score that spans all genres and eras. This family-friendly spectacular creates an infectious spirit that has everyone dancing in the aisles. zachtheatre.org

DOWNTOWN AUSTIN

Nov 24–Jan 2

CAMERON PARK ZOO

Visit Waco's Cameron Park Zoo's Wild Lights. A quarter of a million lights will brighten your walk through the zoo and Santa will be visiting until Dec. 22. Tickets on sale now. cameronparkzoo.com/specialevents/wild-lights

WACO

Nov 22–Jan 9

PLAYLAND SKATE CENTER SANTA'S SKATE SHOP

Admission includes roller skate rental. Take your own digital photo with Santa. We charge for all kids, whether they skate or not. Non-skating adults and children under 3 are no charge. playlandskatecenter.net

NORTH AUSTIN

Dec 11, 1–6 p.m., Dec 12, 12–5 p.m.

PLAYLAND SKATE CENTER WINTER BREAK SKATE

Extended skating sessions available. Great activity for all ages. Check out our website for more details. playlandskatecenter.net

NORTH AUSTIN

Dec 20–Jan 3

PLAYLAND SKATE CENTER NEW YEAR'S EVE BALLOON DROP

Come skate from 12–6 p.m. with a family-friendly balloon drop. Admission includes roller skate rental. playlandskatecenter.net

NORTH AUSTIN

Dec 31, 4 p.m.

Check out the Austin Family calendar – in the magazine and online – for more holiday events.

Summer Camp Only

CAMP HEART O' HILLS (girls only)

CAMP STEWART (boys only)

Located on the Guadalupe River near Kerrville, our friendly staff teaches over 40 fun, character-building activities to kids from around the world. Family-owned and operated, our camps have separate locations for boys and girls with the same dates and rates. Enjoy family-style dining and great food. We grow kids better! hohcamp.com

OVERNIGHT CAMP

Holiday Camps

CAMP DOUBLECREEK

DAY CAMP

Dec 20, 21, 27, 28

Camp Doublecreek is Austin's best day camp, featuring a variety of activities like swimming, archery, horseback riding, rock wall and more. We make sure every camper goes home knowing that someone believes in them. There will be one-day camps: Dec 20 (general activity/game day), Dec 21 (soccer camp), Dec 27 (dance camp) and Dec 28 (horseback riding camp). We also have spring break camp March 14-18. campdoublecreek.com

CAMP JUMP!

DAY CAMP

Dec 20-22, Dec 28-30, Jan 3-4

Winter break could be filled with gymnastics, arts and crafts, yoga, sports skills and so much more! Camp Jump! is an action packed, imaginative, four-time-award-winning experience. Come see why. jump-austin.com

IDEA LAB

DAY CAMP

Nov 22-24, Dec 20-23, Dec 27-31, Jan 3-4

While school is out of session, join us for our awesome STEM camps (voted Best STEM Camps in Austin by the readers of Austin Family magazine). You can sign up for just one or two days or all of them! Each day will have unique activities for each age group (ages 5-7 and ages 8-12). idealabkids.com/location/austin

NEWK'S OUTBACK COLORADO SKI TRIP

OVERNIGHT CAMP

Dec 17-24, \$1350 all inclusive

Join us for a week of fun, great food and new friends. Skiing, snowboarding, sledding and more. All ages welcome. newkennis.com

NEWK'S OUTBACK TENNIS CAMP, CHRISTMAS

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Established in 1968 by tennis legend John Newcombe, the Tennis Ranch has evolved into one of the premier tennis destinations in the world. All skill levels welcome. newkennis.com or email adventures@newkennis.com

RIO VISTA FARM WINTER BREAK CAMP

DAY CAMP

Dec 20-23, First Session
Dec 27-30, Second Session

With instruction in English riding lessons and horse care, campers leave with a respect for the hard work, dedication and fun involved in working with horses. Rio Vista is located 10 miles from downtown Austin. Camps run from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Ages 7-16. 512-247-2303 riovistafarm.net

ROCK-ABOUT CLIMBING

Rock-About is the longest-running rock climbing outfit based out of the Central Texas area offering courses for beginners, experienced climbers, groups and Boy and Girl Scout troops. Our guides provide a safe environment in which you can experience hiking, sightseeing, camping, and best of all, climbing. Each guide has years of experience both as a climber and a guide to ensure that you have a fun, memorable experience. rock-about.com

STEPPING STONE SCHOOL WINTER BREAK

DAY CAMP

Dec 20-Jan 4

Winter Break is just around the corner...do you know what your child will be doing? This winter break, we will delve into the immersive world of Lego® where "Everything is Awesome." Students will use Lego® bricks to learn about the variety of science, technology, engineering, art and mathematics (S.T.E.A.M.) concepts and use daily "Challenge Builds" to expand their imaginations and problem-solving skills. In addition, campers will take part in our exceptional Joy and Mindfulness curriculum, as well as embark on virtual field journeys over the course of the camp. Locations throughout Austin metro area. Kindergarten-5th Grade. 512-459-0258 steppingstoneschool.com

YMCA WINTER WONDERLAND!

DAY CAMP

Dec 20-23, Dec 27-30, Jan 3-4

Windows will glisten with glittering snowflakes and sparkling ice crystal ornaments, as hot-chocolate-sipping students celebrate the magic of the winter season. Wintery science, fake snow and icy art curriculum will be accompanied by theme-related stories and books, including "When This World Was New" by Danilo Figueredo, "Sneezy the Snowman" by Maureen Wright and the Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale "The Snow Queen." Multiple locations in Travis and Hays counties. More Winter Break information and online registration is available at eacymca.org.

Holiday Helpers: Volunteering as a Family



BY ANNETTE LUCKSINGER

Wish lists. Homemade cookies. Gift buying. Tree decorating. Party planning. The holidays are a busy time, filled with traditions. Why not make family volunteering one of them? As you celebrate the spirit of the season, you will also be passing down valuable lessons to your children.

Here are some ways that you can easily and meaningfully mix volunteering into your family's annual traditions:



Cookies & Gratitude

Kids truly embrace the spirit of the holidays. It's not just the sugar that feeds their frenzy. They get excited about preparations, gift giving and the anticipation of others' joy. When baking cookies for teachers and neighbors, make an extra batch for your children to share with the mail carrier, package delivery drivers, custodians, crossing guards or the garbage and recycling collectors. You will be teaching gratitude for the people that serve others throughout the year.



Crafts & Caring

While you sit at the table to address that large stack of holiday cards, pull out the stickers, stamps, markers and

construction paper for your young artist to craft homemade cards. Your child can hand these out as gifts, include them with homemade goodies or slip them in packages for the homeless filled with food and necessities. When your children give their cards to others, they will witness the impact that kindness and caring for others can have.



Gifts & Generosity

While you are out holiday shopping, ask your kids to choose one or two extra presents to donate to a toy drive. They can also select a gift card, a coat or canned goods to add to a donation drive to brighten another family's holiday. Older children can volunteer to wrap gifts or sort food at the local food bank. These small actions go a long way in teaching empathy and generosity.



Carols & Community

Sing Christmas songs! Bundle up, fill the thermos with hot chocolate or apple cider and gather your neighbors. Then pay a visit to someone who might be

lonely and would appreciate a bit of holiday cheer. Kids will see how simple it is to spread joy.

Sleigh Rides & Sustenance

If you have time to spare and eager elves, load up in your sleigh to deliver much needed gifts of food. Several local organizations need helpers to make deliveries to the elderly, disabled or students who will miss out on school meals over the winter break. Young children bearing these gifts can make the occasion even merrier. At the same time, you will be teaching about the importance of food security and how communities can support each other.

Helpers & Happiness

One way to add to the fun and feel the power of community is to join a group dedicated to making the world better for those in need. Several nonprofits offer ways for families to get involved, such as Any Baby Can, Austin Allies, Round Rock Serving Center and Generation Serve. Check their online calendars for kid-friendly opportunities.

It may seem overwhelming to add yet another activity to your lengthy list of things to do at this time of year, yet you can easily work volunteering into what you are already doing to celebrate the season. You and your children will likely find that your holidays are happier for it too.

Annette Lucksinger is editor of Austin Family magazine. She is also a mom of two and author of the local guidebook "Exploring Austin With Kids: Over 100 Fun Things To Do."

Gifting Experiences



BY KARISSA TUNIS

Last year, I decided to do something a little different for the holidays. I asked everyone on my side of the family to give my children experiences instead of toys. At the time, we had our house listed for sale, and I could not handle the thought of more “stuff” to be organized for each showing. So, the request was really made for my sanity. However, in the end, I think my kids enjoyed it even more than I did.

Their favorite was a gift from my sister's family. They gave each of my children a small, wrapped gift. Inside were books about fish, each one matching my children's reading levels and interests. Also included was a card filled with passes to the National Aquarium. My kids were thrilled!

Even better, over one of their school breaks, we planned for our two families to visit the aquarium together. Not only was it an awesome gift, but together we created many family memories that we still talk about.

Toys are great, and my kids get sentimental with everything they receive. But sometimes it's nice to bring the focus back to quality time. Material possessions definitely have their purpose, but a fun memory can last a lifetime.

If you like something physical to hang onto, it's easy to tie in a small souvenir. Whether it's a trinket from the gift shop, a book about the topic or even a

simple photograph that you can frame, there are lots of options for turning an “experience gift” into a lasting memory.

“Try these ideas as a starting point to get creative.”

Below are some suggestions for gifting experiences on any budget. Some experiences can get pricey, but don't stress if you have little money to spend. Remember, this is more about the time than the money spent.

- Family passes to attractions – museums, zoos, aquariums, train rides
- Gift cards to fun interactive places – laser tag, indoor play parks, arcades
- A state park pass with maps, binoculars and a magnifying glass
- Season passes to a bowling alley, ice skating rink, museum, pool or nature center
- Music or acting lessons
- A week of summer camp or a fun STEM session

- A share of a local Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm
- A picnic basket with a few goodies, along with a map of a new park
- Seasonal passes to a strawberry patch, pumpkin patch, Christmas tree farm
- A certificate for a sporting lesson, whether gymnastics, dance, soccer, archery, climbing or martial arts
- A family pass for horseback riding lessons or a trail adventure
- A certificate to special classes – pottery, art, knitting, cooking
- Concert or theater tickets
- A scavenger hunt around a local playground that ends with playtime

Each of these presents gives your loved ones reasons to spend time doing something they love while also creating lasting memories. Try these ideas as a starting point to get creative. Then personalize an experience gift based on the interests, hobbies and passions of that special person receiving the gift.

Karissa Tunis is co-author of “Parenting While Working from Home: A Monthly Guide To Help Parents Balance Their Careers, Connect with Their Kids, and Establish Their Inner Strength.” She is also co-owner of adothemparenting.com.

Puppy for a Present? Consider These Factors First



THE Learning curve

ALISON BOGLE

Alison Bogle is a writer living in Austin with her husband and three children. A former fourth grade teacher, she now enjoys writing about children and education.

There is something divine about a good dog. Simple, trustworthy and loyal to the core, it reflects back to us that which makes us our best selves. In its eyes, we do no wrong and we are always worthy of an effusive greeting, whether we've been gone five minutes or five days.

As a child, I counted my dog as one of my best friends. Her humble devotion meant that she was the perfect spot to lay my head after a hard or trying day. When I had to go downstairs in the night to get a drink of water, her steady presence meant there was no fear. And, with the patience of Job, when no one was free to play, she became my playmate – getting dressed up in

my t-shirt or having her fur styled with barrettes. She was the best.

When I grew up and had three small humans of my own, I knew that I wanted them to have the same sort of heart-shaping experiences as I did. I wanted them to learn to care for and respect an animal, to feel the responsibility and privilege of receiving a dog's love, and to have a place to lay their heads after a long day.

To my great joy, with research and a little luck, Murphy has been just that for my kids. He is counted as one of their best friends. He recently withstood the indignity of being dressed up for Halloween. He has had many a small and

troubled head laid against the curve of his back.

WHAT A PET CAN TEACH A CHILD

During the holidays, many parents consider gifting their children with a dog. It is a gift that offers companionship, along with so much more:

- 1. Responsibility and caretaking.** Dogs need walking, bathing, feeding and regular bathroom breaks. Involving your child in your dog's care will help her to develop a sense of responsibility.
- 2. Perseverance and patience.** It will take awhile for any dog to settle into your home and to learn your family's rules, especially if you bring home a puppy. Involving your child in the dog's training will help him to practice perseverance and patience as the animal learns what is expected.
- 3. Gentleness and respect.** Dogs should always be treated with kindness and respect. Making that a non-negotiable rule will help your child learn how to be thoughtful and gentle with animals, which can carry over to friends and to others.

“Carefully consider whether or not a dog's temperament is a good fit for your family.”

4. Empathy. Dogs can't easily communicate their needs, so we have to learn to attune to their signals and moods. Learning to do so will help your child gain perspective and empathy for another's needs and feelings.

5. Life lessons. It is a hard fact that dogs do not live as long as humans and that losing a pet is heartbreaking. Yet, there is much to be learned through the grieving process. It can teach kids how to cope with other losses that they will inevitably encounter in life.

DECIDING ON THE RIGHT DOG

When choosing a dog, it is important to consider the following things so that you find the best fit for both your family and your new pup:

- **Don't rush.** It can be tempting to hurry and pick a dog in time for the holidays, but the dog will be with you for its lifetime. Instead, you can gift dog supplies like a bed, leash or toys for your kids to unwrap and then let them share in the excitement of researching and picking the right dog for your family.
- **Activity level.** This counts for both the dog and for your family. For example, our family is always on the go, so we needed a lower energy dog, one that wouldn't need regular walks or frequent stick throwing to keep him happy.
- **Size.** Smaller dogs can be satisfied with smaller homes or yards, but larger dogs will need more space.
- **Temperament.** Do you need a dog that is easy going with children or are you looking for a more driven dog that will participate in agility training? Carefully consider whether or not a dog's temperament is a good fit for your family.
- **Timing.** Are you prepared to bring a dog home? Do you have space and time in your schedule to care for and to train the dog? Do you have upcoming travel that may interfere with consistency? Our family elected to wait until after Christmas to bring our dog home so that we could put away ornaments and other

Christmas decorations that could have been unsafe should our puppy get hold of them. Consider timing when you decide to get a dog.

- **Training and socialization.** It is imperative that you train and participate in socialization activities with your pup. These actions will ensure that your dog is manageable, enjoyable, and most importantly, safe around children and other animals.

American writer Caroline Knapp said it well: "Before you get a dog, you can't quite imagine what living with one might be like; afterward, you can't imagine living any other way." With thoughtful consideration and careful selection, your child, too, can know the joy and deep companionship of sharing life with a dog.



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December 2021 calendar

Go to austinfamily.com for expanded listings.

Any family-friendly events can be posted at austinfamily.com and will be made live once approved. Certain restrictions apply.

Wed 1

Santa's Wonderland. During your visit, families can mail their letters to Santa and receive free giveaways while supplies last. Families can also enjoy the amazing aquariums and wildlife displays and schedule a free photo with Santa. 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Bass Pro Shop, 200 Bass Pro Drive, Round Rock. basspro.com/shop/en/santas-wonderland.

Wild Lights Cameron Park Zoo. The Zoo suddenly brightened with thousands of tiny lights. There were carolers singing and tasty treats, too. Wednesdays-Sundays from Nov 26-Jan 9 for a holiday light spectacular. Kids of all ages can visit with Santa from 6 p.m. to closing through December 23rd. 1701 N. 4th St., Waco. \$15 adults, \$12 for 3-12 years, under 2 FREE. Cameronparkzoo.com/specialevents/wild-lights/

Austin Trail of Lights. The city's most beloved and longest running holiday tradition. On this 57th year, guests will enjoy the lights from the comfort of their vehicles. 5:30-10:30 p.m. \$30-\$65 per vehicle. Zilker Park, 2100 Barton Springs Road. austintrailoflights.org.

Thu 2

Light Up the Lake. Featuring spectacular giant balloons hovering over Bright Lake, an amazing light show, live music, holiday displays, food and refreshments, crafts, family activities, a yule log and more. 4-6 p.m. Old Settlers Park, 3300 E. Palm Valley Blvd., Round Rock. roundrocktexas.gov.

Starry Night at Girlstart. Girlstart's STEM studio and mini planetarium is a unique space for families to explore astronomy. 5-7 p.m. Girlstart, 1400 W. Anderson Lane. FREE. girlstart.org.

Laguna Gloria at Night. All ages are welcome for a guided lantern tour. Free advance ticket reservations are encouraged. 7:30 p.m. The Contemporary Austin, 3809 W. 35th St. FREE. thecontemporaryaustin.org.

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1.

Fri 3

Tree Lighting & Santa's Wonderland. Tree lighting, music, snow hill and play area, food vendors, inflatables and rides. 6:30-9 p.m. Heritage Oak Park, 875 Quest Parkway, Cedar Park. visitcedarparktexas.com.

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1; Light Up The Lake, see Thu 2.

Sat 4


Photos With Santa. Enjoy Christmas carols and a custom hot cocoa bar, write your letter to Santa and mail it to the North Pole, and take photos at our Selfie Station. 8-10 a.m. Elgin Recreational Center, 361 N. Highway 95, Elgin. elgintx.com.

Baby Bloomers. Baby Bloomers is a special program during which the museum is open exclusively for visitors ages 0-3 years and their families. 8-10 a.m. Thinkery, 1830 Simond Ave. \$7. thinkeryaustin.org.

Old Town Christmas Festival. Every first Saturday of December, Old Town comes alive with Christmas joy. 9 a.m. Leander Public Library, 1011 S. Bagdad Road. FREE. leandertx.gov.

Outdoor All Ages Storytime. Join us for songs, stories and rhymes in the park. In case of rain, storytime will be held under the pavilion. All ages are welcome. 10-10:30 a.m. Northwest Recreation Center, 2913 Northland Drive. FREE. library.austintexas.gov.

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Dreamland Kids Day. Cotton candy, balloon animals, face painting, petting zoo and more. 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Dreamland, 2770 W. Highway 290, Dripping Springs. dreamlanddstx.com.

Christmas Bazaar. Handmade crafts, holiday décor, art, clothing and more. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. St. Thomas More Catholic Church, 1020 Farm-to-Market Road 620. FREE. stmaustin.org/christmas-bazaar.

Christmas on Mercer Street. The town will be a winter wonderland of lights, holiday shopping and Christmas cheer. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Downtown Dripping Springs. FREE. cityofdripping Springs.com/christmasonmercer.

Christmas Stroll Festival. A parade at 10 a.m., followed by live entertainment and holiday shopping, photos and visits with Santa from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 4 to 7 p.m. New this year is dinner with the Grinch and Santa in Santa's Village from 3 to 4 p.m. Downtown Georgetown. FREE. mainstreet.georgetown.org.

Holiday in the Park and Craft Fair. Children can meet Santa, ride the train, jump on inflatables and participate in holiday activities. Food for purchase; bring cash. Noon to 3 p.m. Cat Hollow Park, 8600 O'Connor Drive, Round Rock. FREE. bcmud.org/specialevents.

Weekends With Santa. This is a great opportunity to take a photo with Santa, and you can bring your own camera to get the photo you want. He will be in front of the 22-foot Christmas tree with Mrs. Claus. 1-3 p.m. The Arboretum, 10000 Research Blvd. FREE. thearboretum.com.

Elgin VFD Lighted Christmas Parade. Parade starts at dusk and travels from Elgin Memorial Park to historic downtown Elgin. 6-7 p.m. Downtown Elgin. FREE. elgintx.com.

Lights On. The Lights On event marks the beginning of the holiday season in Lakeway with the first lighting of the Trail of Lights behind City Hall. 6-8 p.m. 1102 Lohman's Crossing Road, Lakeway. FREE. lakeway-tx.gov.

Hot Cocoa Stroll and Home for the Holidays. Enjoy the Hot Cocoa Stroll, pictures with Santa, shopping and more in historic downtown Elgin. All day. FREE. elgintx.com.

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1; Light Up The Lake, see Thu 2.

Sun 5
Free First Sunday at the Bullock Texas State History Museum. Families can explore three floors of exhibits that showcase artifacts from around the state. See a special, multi-sensory holiday screening of "The Muppet Christmas Carol" (rated G) at 1 p.m. Bullock Texas State History Museum, 1800 Congress Ave. FREE. thestoryoftexas.com.

Lakeway Sing Along Family Christmas Show. Back-to-back performances will be held at 2 p.m. and 4:30 p.m. Lakeway Activity Center, 105 Cross Creek Road. FREE. lakeway-tx.gov.

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1; Christmas Bazaar, see Sat 4.

Mon 6
Monday Mix-Up. Presented in person and virtually. Join the Buda Public Library for weekly programs. Library programs provide enrichment and enjoyment for ages 12-18. 4:30-5:30 p.m. Buda Library, 405 E. Loop St., Buda. FREE. budalibrary.org.

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1.

Tue 7
Kindergarten Tour. If you are considering a private Christian education for kindergarten, come explore our campus and see what Redeemer has to offer. 9-10 a.m. Redeemer Lutheran School, 1500 W. Anderson Ln. FREE. redeemerschool.net.

Lego Lab. Build Lego WeDo 2.0 robots in an indoor workshop for ages 5+. Registration required. 3:15-4:15 p.m. Wells Branch Community Library, 15001 Wells Port Drive. FREE. wblibrary.org.

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1.

Wed 8
CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1.

Thu 9
Little Texans: Freeze. Share stories, sing songs and expand your imagination at this hands-on program that incorporates movement, play and tactile learning into engaging experiences for ages 2-5. 10:30-11:15 a.m. Bullock Texas State History Museum, 1800 Congress Ave. FREE to \$13 and under. thestoryoftexas.com.

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1.

Fri 10
Holiday Ornament Craft Night. Create your own ornaments for the upcoming holiday season. All supplies will be provided, and with several ornament designs to choose from. 6-8 p.m. Pflugerville Recreation Center, 400 Immanuel Road. parks.pflugervilletx.gov.

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CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1.

Sat 11

Pancakes & PJ's. Show off those Christmas jammies at this fun event filled with holiday spirit, a hot breakfast for all family members, Christmas crafts and a visit from Santa. 8 a.m. Leander Public Library, 1011 S. Bagdad Road. \$5. leandertx.gov.

Unplug & Explore: Let's Go Geocaching. Come join our next adventure in this year's fall lineup of Unplug and Explore. We will explore our local Pflugerville parks in search for hidden geocaches using a GPS-enabled device. Registration is open to ages 6-12, but space is limited. 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Pflugerville Recreation Center, 400 Immanuel Road. parks.pflugervilletx.gov.

Second Saturdays Are for Families: Moid Making. Ever wonder how the giant works of art at Laguna Gloria were made? 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. The Contemporary Austin Laguna Gloria, 3809 W. 35th St. FREE. thecontemporaryaustin.org.

Drop-in & Discover. Join us in the gardens on select Saturdays to play, learn and discover. 10 a.m. to noon. Wildflower Center, 4801 La Crosse Ave. FREE with admission. wildflower.org.

Holidays in Hutto Festival. Brushy Creek Amphitheater features entertainment, local artisans, local shop vendors, food trucks, kids' activities and more. We ho-ho-hope to see you there. 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Brushy Creek Amphitheater, Hutto. FREE. huttotx.gov.

Sembrando Herencia 2021 - Valiente Soy! This bilingual musical is based in Puerto Rican history and current events. A combination of live music, dance, community theater plus sticks and

machete fighting to bring awareness of the island's rich history and uncertain future. 6:30 p.m. George Washington Carver Museum and Cultural Center, 1165 Angelina St. Tickets \$5-20. FREE for children 2 and under. bit.ly/3Do4mZf.

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1; Baby Bloomers, see Sat 4; Weekends With Santa, see Sat 4.

Sun 12

"The Watchmaker's Song" (Kid's Matinee). The Neill-Cochran House Museum is excited to present a jazzy, immersive retelling of "The Nutcracker," presented by Ventana Ballet. Experience this classic story in a whole new way. 1-3 p.m. Neill-Cochran House Museum, 2310 San Gabriel St. nchmuseum.org.

"A Charlie Brown Christmas." Austin Chamber Music Center presents this Christmas classic. 3 p.m. Paramount Theatre, 713 Congress Ave. tickets.austintheatre.org.

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1.

Mon 13

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1; Monday Mix-Up, see Mon 6.

Tue 14

Texas History Tuesdays: Mavericks, Dogies and Drovers - Cattle Drives. Hear from a special guest speaker, an 1870s cattle driver who has traveled through time to reminisce about his cattle drive experience. 10-11 a.m. Bullock Texas State History Museum, 1800 Congress Ave. FREE. thehistoryoftexas.com.

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Tween Mystery Book Boxes: Winter Edition.

Twens ages 8-12 can register to receive a box of two books, some library swag and other fun surprises. 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Pflugerville Public Library, 1008 W. Pfluger St. library.pflugervilletx.gov.

"It's a Wonderful Life" (rated PG). The Paramount Theatre Holiday Film Series presented by CapMetro. Either a negative COVID-19 test within 48 hours of show or proof of COVID-19 vaccination is required for all patrons ages 12 and older. 7 p.m. Paramount Theatre, 713 Congress Ave. \$11. tickets.austintheatre.org.

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1; Kindergarten Tour, see Tue 7; Lego Lab on the Porch, see Tue 7.

Wed 15

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1.

Thu 16

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1.

Fri 17

Armadillo Christmas Bazaar. Featuring national and local award-winning artists, live music and a full bar in a festive, lively atmosphere. 10a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Palmer Events Center, 900 Barton Springs Road. \$10. armadillobazaar.com.

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1.

Sat 18

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1; Baby Bloomers, see Sat 4; Armadillo Christmas Bazaar, see Sat 17.

Sun 19

"The Nightmare Before Christmas" (rated PG). The Paramount Theatre Holiday Film Series presented by CapMetro. Either a negative COVID-19 test within 48 hours of show or proof of COVID-19 vaccination is required for all patrons ages 12 and older. 1 p.m. Paramount Theatre, 713 Congress Ave. \$11. tickets.austintheatre.org.

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1; Armadillo Christmas Bazaar, see Sat 17.

Mon 20

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1.

Tue 21

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1.

Wed 22

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1.

Thu 23

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1; Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1.

Fri 24

CONTINUED: Santa's Wonderland, see Wed 1.

Sat 25

Christmas

Sun 26 - Fri 31

CONTINUED: Austin Trail of Lights, see Wed 1.

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Festive and Bright: Best Holiday Lights in Central Texas

BY JESS ARCHER

Ready or not, the holidays are upon us. That can mean a lot of hustle and bustle, but it is also a beautiful time of year in Central Texas to enjoy with your family. In Austin, December is usually mild enough to still be outside. With that in mind, you may be wondering where you can experience a great holiday light show without all the crowds, expensive costs or parking problems. Below are three impressive holiday light displays in the surrounding Austin area that are affordable, accessible and sure to wow your whole family.



Photo courtesy of Visit Marble Falls.

Walkway of Lights

Marble Falls

One of the best Christmas light shows in Central Texas, the Walkway of Lights is worth the scenic one-hour drive. Back for its 31st year, this show is a dazzler. If you like twinkling Christmas lights, how about a million twinkling of them reflected on beautiful Lake Marble Falls? The walk stretches along the lake and features 2 million lights and over 350 lighted sculptures. Located in Lakeside Park, this free light display runs every night from 6-10 p.m.

What's more, the Walkway of Lights pairs perfectly with two other great holiday experiences in Marble Falls. Santa makes an appearance at the Walkway of Lights nearly every night in December. In addition, visitors have the rare opportunity to ice skate in Central Texas at the adjacent ice rink. The pop-up rink is open during the holiday season. The fee for skating is minimal and the experience is sure to generate some memories and laughs. For more information about the Walkway of Lights and festivities, check out visitmarblefalls.org.



Photo credit George Cofran, editor of hillcountryportal.com.

Lights Spectacular

Johnson City

Johnson City is an easy, one-hour jaunt from the city, which makes the Lights Spectacular display well worth experiencing. For the month of December, the quaint Johnson City Square lights up. Dedicated locals take great pride in creating a beautiful show for visitors to experience. Over two million dazzling white lights cover the courthouse and nearby Memorial Park. The impressive display can even be seen from the International Space Station. Viewers can park near the courthouse and stroll casually around the square and park for a truly magical light experience. Parking is free and so is the light show, making this a great outing to pair with dining out in Johnson City. For more information on experiencing the "Twinkliest town in Texas," go to lightsspectacular.com.



Rock'N Lights Holiday Tour

Round Rock

If you want to see a great holiday lights show while maintaining social distancing protocols, pack the hot chocolate and hit the road for the Rock' N Lights tour. Starting on Old Settlers Boulevard in downtown Round Rock, this light show is viewable from the comfort of your own vehicle. This year's second annual show will feature an entirely new lights display.

If you go on the weekend, you can end your tour with some added fun at Christmas Towne, featuring a shopping bazaar, petting zoo and holiday entertainment. The Rock'N Lights Tour runs through December. Visit discoverroundrock.com for more details.

Jess Archer is a freelance writer in Austin. Find Jess at writerjessarcher.com.



FAMILY MATTERS

BETTY RICHARDSON

Richardson, PhD, RN, CS, LPC, LMFT, is an Austin-based psychotherapist.

Finding Joy: Coping With Loss Over the Holidays

Q My sister, a single parent, passed away this summer. My husband and I are raising her two children, my 11-year-old nephew and 14-year-old niece. We are all still grieving my sister's death. It's hard for me to think of ways to make any of the holidays, especially Christmas, enjoyable. I want them to be a special time though, especially for the kids. Could you offer some suggestions to help?

A It's no doubt a time when you and the children may find yourselves feeling sad and perhaps crying a lot at times. Yet, you have made the decision for all of you to be happy if you can. Deciding to be happy is the first step to experiencing it. You can grieve and still find joy in the season.

I hope these suggestions will help you to deal with grief and make the season more enjoyable for you and your family. Some of these practices may also work for people who have lost a partner or spouse as well as those who may experience depression over the holidays.

1. Have a memory night in which each family member writes a favorite memory of the person you are missing. Collect these memories in a book. Then each person can share that memory. Memory sharing is one of the best ways to deal with someone's death.
2. Talk about the type of holiday the person who died would want the survivors to have. Most likely the answer is a happy one. It can help to celebrate if you know that this is what your loved one would want.
3. Discuss what past holidays were like and decide which old traditions to continue as well as which new traditions to try.
4. Focus on the purpose of the holiday, such as the celebration of the birth of the Christ child or new beginnings in the new year. Explore what behavior you want to change as well as what skills you want to learn. Use this time to reflect and move forward.
5. Get involved in helping to provide something for families who can't afford holiday meals or presents. Involve your whole family, including the children, in these activities.

Arthur C. Brooks, in a piece titled "Feel Happy, Even When You Are Not," points out that research shows helping others improves feelings of well-being.

6. Act like a happy person even if you don't feel happy. There has been research in which half of a group was assigned to act as extroverts and half to act as introverts. The ones assigned to act extroverted had increased feelings of well-being. A number of famous psychoanalysts have used this "Acting As If" strategy in therapy. Ask yourself, "What would a happy person do to make the holidays joyful for the children, my husband and me?" Then take action to do those things for your family.
7. Ask friends what they are doing to celebrate the holidays. Gather some ideas. Then ask your family which ones they would like to try and add other ideas of your own.

Grieving is a crucial part of the healing process. However, it's important to be happy too, some of the time at least. Thank you for sharing this question with our readers. I wish you and your family happy holidays.



JUST FOR GRINS

CATE BERRY

Berry is an Austin-based children's book author and mother of two. She also teaches writing workshops for young people at cateberry.com.



Sweaty Christmas

Years ago, I wrote a book for kids called "Sweaty Christmas." It's hard to believe, but that white heat of genius did not change the face of modern publishing. (Oh, if I had a nickel!) It does remain, to date, my favorite attempt at children's literature.

Anyhoo. The season approaches, so it's all coming back. The Currier and Ives setting. The white-capped roofs and apple-cheeked children romping and singing carols amidst snowball fights. The cozy fires warming frostbitten noses and toeses and all that show biz.

But residents of Central Texas don't play those reindeer games.

I spend a great deal of December talking my kids down from the whole "no snow" thing. Yes, I'm sure someone, somewhere, is having hot cocoa that's making a difference to their body temperature. Cousins on the east coast get to live the dream while

we live the nightmare of shorts and flip flops on December 25th. Not to mention the ding dang air conditioner running full speed during our glorious holiday feast. The upside? There is no upside. No holiday miracle delivers us from our yearly case of post-Santa heat rash.

But tis the season for unity, dagnabbit. And nothing brings Texans together like complaining about the weather. So cheer up, buttercup. Help your neighbors string their house lights while wishing them glad tidings and good cheer. Ice down the seasonal Shiner Bock and continue to question the meaning of a sweater.

After all, it's the most wonderful time of the year for sunscreen.

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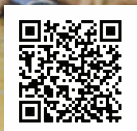
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