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The National Herald

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Welcome to TNH's Christmas Issue



By Eleni Sakellis

elcome to The National Herald's annual Christmas issue! We hope you enjoy the issue and the season with all the tidings of comfort and joy! As we rush to find the perfect gifts for our loved ones, I hope you take the time to tell your family and friends how much they mean to you, and to show gratitude for the blessings that come into our lives. The true meaning of Christmas is love, after all, not only for those closest to us but for our neighbor, our fellow human beings, no matter how much they may seem different from us on the surface, we have much more in common than most of us would like to admit.

It is easier not to believe in the spirit of love and hope that encourages us all to treat each other as

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one family, to do unto others as you would have them do to you. It is easier to buy a gift for someone rather than spending time with them, doing something meaningful, and making memories you will cherish for a lifetime. How many people do we cherish in this life and how often do we tell them how much we appreciate and love them face to face?

Technology connects us across the globe, but if we don't share these moments in person, we miss the human connection even though we live on this planet with billions of people. How many people still feel alone, especially during the holidays? If each one us reached out, in the true spirit of Christmas, to visit one person who is on their own, what a blessing it would be.

The tradition of singing Christmas and New Year's carols, the kalanta, brings a special kind of joy during the holidays. For recent immigrants, it can be especially meaningful, bringing a bit of home to the celebration of Christ's birth and the start of the New Year. Those of us who were born in the United States

and sang the carols with Greek school mostly in Christmas plays and pageants and Sunday School events have a slightly different experience of the kalanta, but our parents and grandparents always appreciated our efforts to remind them of Christmases long, long ago. If we were lucky, yiayia or pappou might share a story of Christmas past.

This year, besides wonderful gift ideas for loved ones, we hope you also remember the less fortunate and give back to those in need. While the gifts we give each other are certainly a nice symbolic gesture in honor of the gifts the Three Magi gave to the baby Jesus, we should also help the homeless who need coats to get through the cold this winter.

We should probably also remember that the poor, downtrodden souls of the earth need help all through the year and not just in December. Soup kitchens serve the hungry throughout the year as well and



not just on holidays when the local TV news cameras might swing by for a short feature. The massive amount of food wasted every day is another issue we should all be aware of while we prepare tons of food for our guests during the holidays. Do we really need to pile our plates with food we cannot possibly hope to finish while homeless families line up at soup kitchens around the world?

There is a lot we can do to make this world a better place and the spirit of giving, though it starts at home shouldn't be limited to those in our immediate family circle. It may seem safe and comforting to imagine that we are technically following the words of Jesus, that we are doing good deeds, but there are many more people who need help. There are causes that we should be fighting for, people living under oppression, discrimination, and violence. In the end, we should ask ourselves what would Jesus do?

We wish you a very Merry Christmas and a Kappy and Kealthy New Year!



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Christmas at the Dormition of the Virgin Mary in Southampton, NY

By Theodore Kalmoukos

NEW YORK - The parish of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary in Southampton, New York will celebrate the incarnation of Christ by focusing on three very essential things as Fr. Constantine Lazarakis said in an interview with The National Herald: "The focus is on three areas during advent: worship, philanthropy, and fellowship. As advent begins in mid-November, the look of our Church begins to point toward the birth of our Savior. Wreaths and garlands are hung about the buildings; the icon of the Nativity takes its place on the proskinitaria. A Christmas Tree too appears in the narthex. Our Church has a number of events and programs for the Christmas Season."

He also said that "at Christmas time, much of our teaching is aimed at helping our faithful focus on the true meaning of the season. So, in Greek School and Sunday School, our students prepare for our Christmas pageant, learning carols about the birth of Christ. Our sermons and annual Christmas letter are designed as a counterbalance to the message of materialism that has become the hallmark of the secular holiday season. We begin a number of philanthropic initiatives. The first is our Thanksgiving food drive. In cooperation with a local food pantry, we collect pantry items and grocery store gift cards to insure that those in need will be able to stock their pantries and purchase groceries during the cold months.'

Fr. Constantine added that, "we also begin our Giving Tree clothing and gift drive.



The children of the parish of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary of Southampton Long Island present their Christmas program.

The tree in our narthex is decorated with paper ornaments, each with an item printed on it. Members of our Church choose an ornament and purchase the item listed, returning it by a certain date. The gifts are distributed through The Retreat, a local agency offering services to families affected by domestic violence."

He also noted that, "for Thanksgiving Day, we prepare a Thanksgiving feast open to anyone and everyone on the East End of Long Island. The feast is offered free of charge. The idea is that no one should be alone during the Holiday Season.'

Speaking about the Christmas Tree, Fr.

Constantine said, "our PTO and Philoptochos offer a joint family event in our Tree Lighting. On the first Saturday of December, a local youth choir offers a Christmas Concert, followed by the lighting of the tree just outside the Sanctuary. Once the tree is lit, we come inside to a wonderful meal and gingerbread houses for the youth of our parish to decorate and take

The parish consists of 250 families. Fr. Constantine said that "our Christmas Eve Divine Liturgy is well attended (in the evening), with men, women, and children of all ages. Members of our choir sing the Liturgy, while young men and boys assist

the clergy in the Altar."

Asked what kind of questions do the congregants and especially the young men and women bring up about the incarnation of Christ, Fr. Constantine said: "Deep theological questions are not commonly posed, although they do come up in our Bible study and catechism classes. At this time of the year, I think the faithful are more apt to pray and engage philanthropy than to ponder the mystery of the incarnation in intellectual and theological terms.'

For Fr. Constantine Lazarakis, "Christmas means that humanity is always loved by God and that He will never abandon us. God is with us."

Christmas at Holy Trinity Parish in New Rochelle, NY

By Theodore Kalmoukos

NEW ROCHELLE, NY - The children and the youth give a special coloring to the celebration of Christmas at the Holy Trinity parish of New Rochelle, New York, which consists of 550 families and is considered one of the most prestigious and growing parishes in

In an interview with The National Herald, the parish's presiding priest Fr. Nicholas Anctil said that "it has been the tradition of the parish for the last 40 years to celebrate the Christmas Liturgy on Christmas Eve followed by the singing of the carols by the whole parish. We also celebrate the Divine Liturgy on the Saturday before Christmas and host a beautiful Christmas pageant on the Sunday before Christmas after the Liturgy."

Fr. Nicholas also said that, "from Thanksgiving to Christmas we collect canned items and dry goods for the New Rochelle Food Pantry. Starting this week, we also provide gifts for children in New Rochelle through a program we call the St Nicholas Giving Tree. Each family will take a tag off of a paper tree and purchase as many gifts as they wish. We usually collect about 200 children's gifts. We use these gifts to sponsor the Christmas party for the children who are connected to the New Rochelle 'Drop In' after

Asked if the young men and women of the parish participate in the services, Fr. Nicholas said that "the Junior Choir chants the Saturday before Christmas Liturgy as well as the Christmas pageant. The Sunday School children all participate in the Pageant.

When asked what the congregants have been asking him regarding the mystery of the Holy Incarnation and generally about the Orthodox Faith, Fr. Nicholas said "this generation lives on the internet. There are many sites that reduce the celebration of Christmas to Santa Claus and Christmas gifts. It's my job to teach them that God's greatest Gift to mankind was His Only Begotten Son. I have a nice dialogue/sermonette with the children of the Sunday School program right after the reading of the Gospel. They do have a difficult time understanding the Birth narratives. I have to use an icon on the back wall to explain the sequence of the Birth

To the question "what does Christmas mean to you," Fr. Nicholas answered that "at my age, Christmas reminds me of this amazing event that [signified that] God wanted us all to be saved, so he sent us a New Adam to be the example of a perfect Man and a perfect God. It means that I need to keep doing good without being tainted by the ills and sarcasm of our society.

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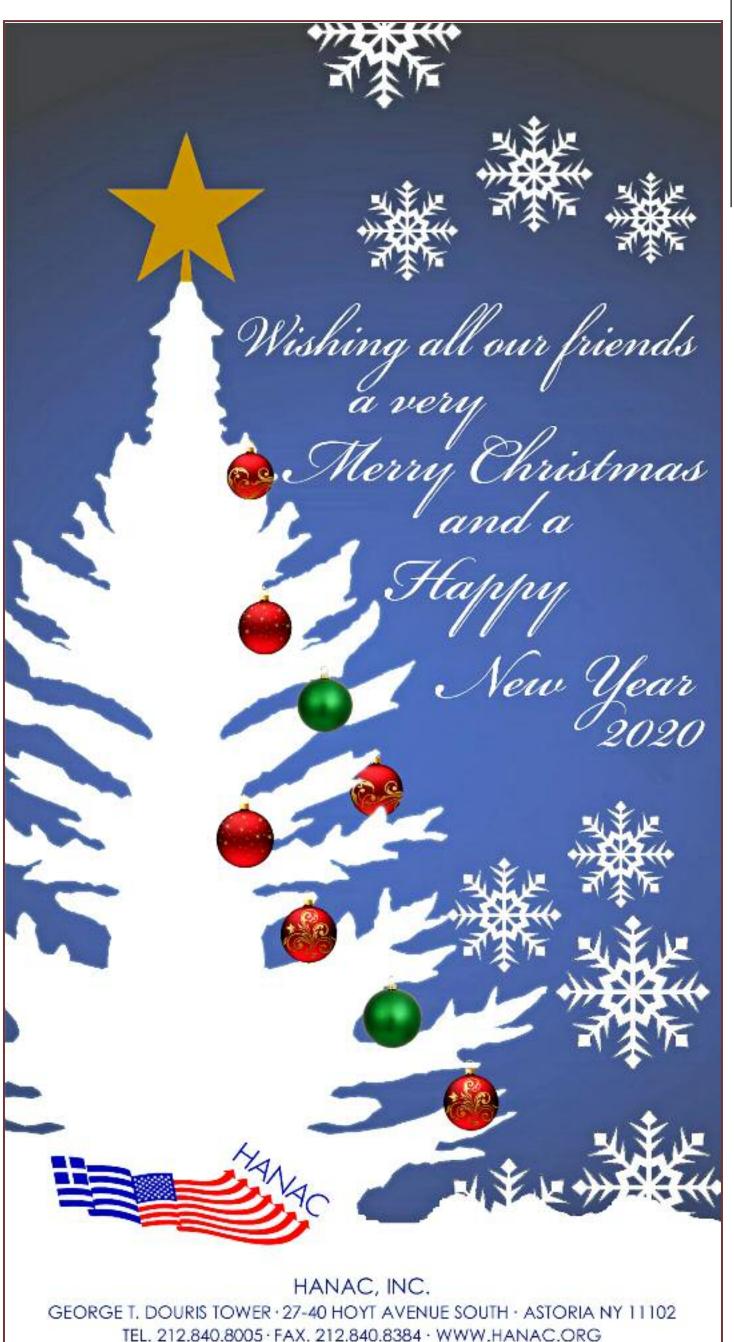
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Pancyprian Choir Christmas Concert Kalanta Shares the Spirit of the Season

By Eleni Sakellis

ASTORIA – The Pancyprian Choir of NY presented its annual Christmas Concert - Kalanta under the direction of Phyto Stratis and shared the spirit of the Christmas season at the Church of St. Catherine and St. George in Astoria on December 13.

The event opened with a poem recited by Vicky Tsavalias and Cypriot kalanta sung by Demetris Michael.

Gifted musicians Glafkos Kontemeniotis on piano and Ellie Tsachtani on flute accompanied the Choir and the soloists, including Michael, Ariadne Panagopoulou, Aggeliki Psonis, and Louis Panayiotou, in the charming and soulful concert which touched the hearts of all those present.

The Choir opened with the traditional Greek Christmas carols, the kalanta, and then performed Ave Maria, followed by the Christmas hymns, as well as other Christmas favorites including Joy to the World, O Come All Ye Faithful, and Oh Holy Night. The Carol of the Bells with Greek lyrics included

references to the churches in the occupied areas of Cyprus and in Asia Minor and Pontos. Stratis' arrangements of the well-known songs added a vibrant aspect to the concert.

The children of St. Demetrios Elementary School also participated in the concert, adding their youthful voices and energy to the performance of Santa Claus Is Coming to Town, among other Christmas and New Year's carols. Santa Claus made his annual appearance at the concert and handed out gifts to all the children.

Among those present were

Archbishop Elpidophoros, Dean of St. Demetrios Cathedral in Astoria Fr. Nektarios Papazafiropoulos, Consul General of Cyprus in New York Alexis Phedonos-Vadet and his wife Melina, Pancyprian President Philip Christopher, Federation of Cypriot American Organizations President Kyriacos Papastylianou, St. Demetrios Cathedral Parish Council President Emmanuel Dritsas, and St. Demetrios Elementary School Principal Betsy Sideris, as well as many members of the com-



TNH/ZAFEIRIS HAITIDIS

His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America and Santa Claus at the Pancyprian Choir Annual Christmas Concert - Kalanta.

munity

Stratis thanked all those present for their continuing support, including Christopher and Pancyprian Cultural Division President Ismini Michaels, and welcomed Archbishop Elpidophoros, at the conclusion of the concert, saying that "we are very happy to be here today because we were looking forward to singing for you." Archbishop Elpidophoros said that, "Christmas is a children's holiday because God becomes a child, he is born. And without children, Christmas is not Christmas. And without the joy of children, Christmas is not beautiful. Santa Claus is next to me. As long as there are children, there will be Santa Claus."

Pancyprian President Philip Christopher thanked Stratis, the Choir, and the children of St. Demetrios who participated in the concert and saying, "they gave us so much joy. The Pancyprian Association of America was founded 45 years ago after the tragedy of the invasion of Cyprus. All of our divisions, our choir, our soccer teams, the women's division, are all fighting for one thing: freedom. Always remember that we are fighting for the freedom of Cyprus."

After the concert, many audience members congratulated the members of the Choir and requested more songs, perhaps for next year. A reception with festive Christmas cookies and other traditional snacks followed the concert in the church hall.

At Athens' Iconic Noel Bar, the Magic of Christmas is Forever

By Constantine S. Sirigos

ATHENS – "For we need a little Christmas right this very minute" says Auntie Mame, and in Athens you can get it all year long – yes, Athens, Greece. The warm and quirky Noel bar-restaurant-coffeeshop is just a few blocks from the most heavilly trafficked parts of the Greek capital, and while tourists are directed there, Greek-Americans have to stumble upon it, but when they find it, the serendipity of ho-ho-ho in summer or spring is wonderful.

The myriad nooks and crannies accented by fine reproductions of famous paintings and suffused with jazz, rock, American standards, and other international music spun by excellent DJs are ideal for dates and gatherings of friends – there is also a private party room upstairs.

It is an historic space with a touch of elegance. Once upon a time the building housing Noel was famous for its many tiny shops – leather goods, jewelry,

etc. After the burning of Smyrna, it housed refugees from that great but ill-fated city.

Five years ago, deep in the latest Greek crisis, the owners – Christos Efkratidis, Fani Spyridaki, and Aris Doukas – thought a bit of Christmas spirit was just the thing to sprinkle into the heart of the sprawling city – and the people of Athens embraced it, like a child hugging Santa at Macy's, and it quickly outgrew its original space.

The elegant yet fun feel and flavor are born of Spyridaki's aesthetic sense and the atmosphere is enhanced by fine food and Noel's signature cocktails.

During The National Herald's visit Maria Mourani, who began to work there two years ago and is now the Event Manager, was a gracious host, happy to share the story of the unique venue.

"It's Christmas all year long," she said, beckoning to the permanent lights and ornaments, "but this time of year we shine – every year we add decorations



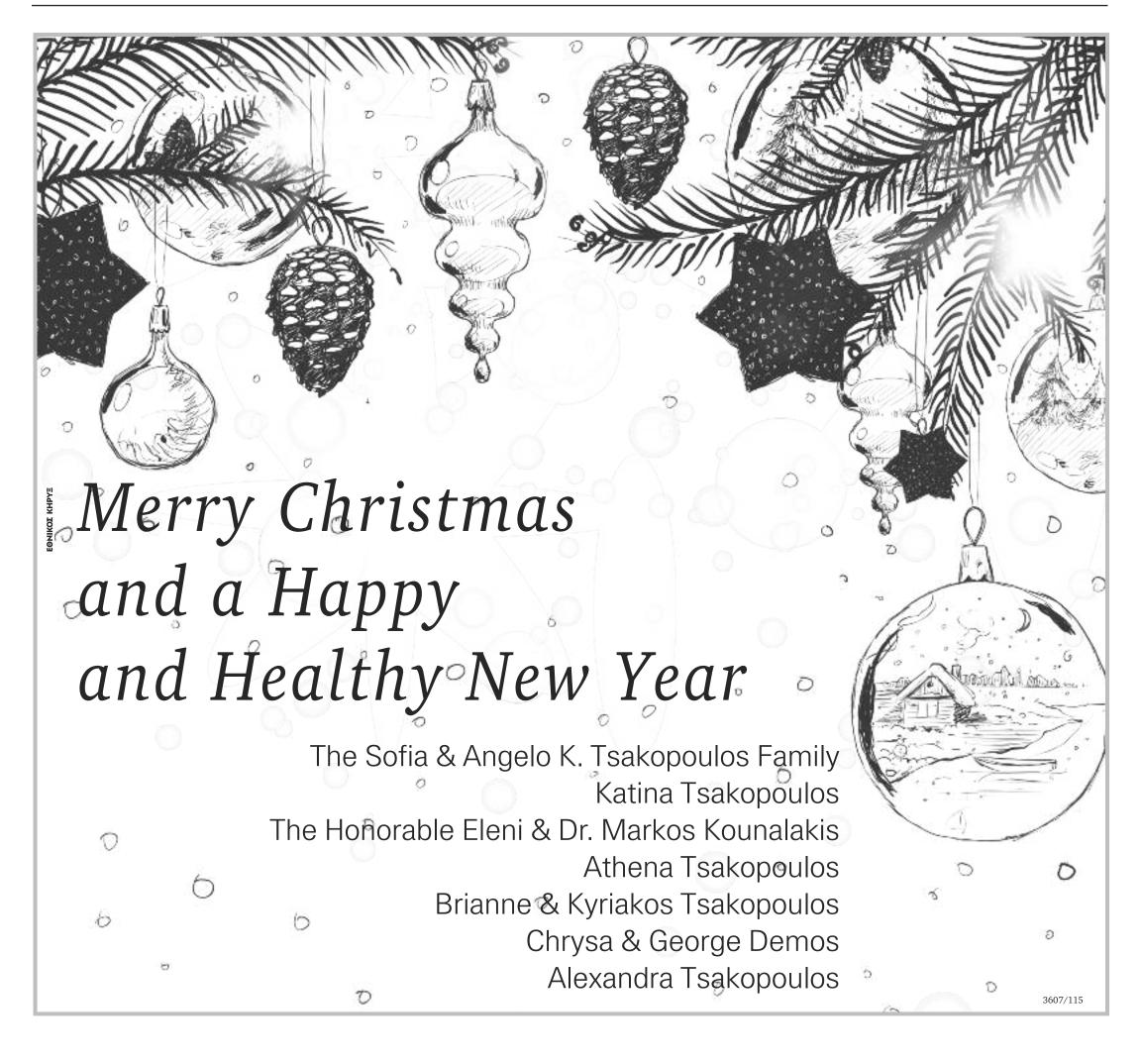
according to a special theme. This year it's the Enchanted Forest," she said as she pointed out trees and branches gathered on beloved Mt. Pelion in Central Greece.

Architecturally every subspace is a little different, planned to present some surprises to the guests – like the feeling children have as they are about to open their Christmas presents.

What Noel offers most of all is the feeling is "being your home for Christmas, all year long" said Mourani, who added that patrons who feel staff's welcoming energy enjoy coming several times a year for their doses of Christmas.

"And we want every time they come to be an experience, from the food to the drinks to the music, not just a visit to another restaurant."

The experience this reporter is looking forward to next is Noel's 'Chocolate Tower' – "so much chocolate you can't handle it" she said with her warmest and most delicious Christmas smile.





Merry Christmas & Happy New Year

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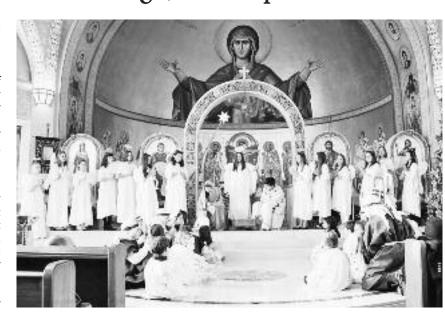
The Saint Barbara Parish in Orange, CT Prepares for Christmas

By Theodore Kalmoukos

ORANGE, CT – Saint Barbara's in Orange, Connecticut is a growing parish in numbers, in faith, and in good works. In an interview with The National Herald its presiding priest Fr. Peter Orfanakos said that "the Saint Barbara community consists of 750 families that live in 67 towns in the State of Connecticut."

Apropos of the holidays, he said that "in anticipation of the celebration of Christmas, children of the Saint Barbara Greek Orthodox Parish participate in a variety of programs and events. The members of the Sunday School Program offer a Christmas Pageant that involves nearly 200 children, who participate with various speaking and nonspeaking parts and in the Children's Choir. The 70 students of the parish's Greek Language School also hold an annual and very well attended Christmas celebration. This year it will be held on December 19 and consists of poems, songs and special reflections. Meanwhile, the children of GOYA continue their year-round ministry at the Community Dining Room in Branford, CT where they prepare and serve meals to approximately 100 individuals and families in need. During the month of December the teenagers also visit many parishioner homes and local Senior Housing facilities singing Christmas Carols and spreading holiday cheer while the Sunday School sponsors a toy drive for the patients at Yale Children's Hospital."

Asked about the Holy Services Fr. Peter said that "analogous to many Greek Orthodox parishes throughout the world, the celebration of the Feast of the Incarnation of Christ begins with the service of the Royal Hours of the Nativity on the morning of December 24. This special service offers readings, prophesies, and hymns which point to and interpret the Birth of Christ. Later that afternoon the community gathers for the celebration of the Vesperal Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great. This service 'opens the liturgical day' and begins the celebration of the Nativity. Parishioners from near and far gather



for the evening service before traveling to family celebrations. For the Saint Barbara Community, this service is the one that is attended by the majority of the faithful. The beautiful choir leads the congregation in the chanting of the hymns of the Liturgy and the singing of a selection of Christmas Carols in both Greek and English at the conclusion of the service." The children at the Saint Barbara parish enact the birth of Jesus who divided human history into two, before and after Christ.

Fr. Peter said that, "on Christmas morning the parish celebrates the Orthros and Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, providing another opportunity to offer prayers of thanksgiving to God for His timeless Love and Mercy. Children of the parish participate in the above services by prayerfully reading many of the Psalms and Prophesies as well as serving in the Altar as Acolytes"

Asked, "what does Christmas mean to you, Fr. Peter said that "Christmas is God's continuing response of love to humanity's cries of repentance, that began with the voices of Adam and Eve. God is born on Earth to show us the way home, the way back to heaven. Saint John Chrysostom states it much more eloquently that I do: '...that coming among us he may teach us, and teaching, lead us by the hand to the things that man cannot see."

Holy Trinity Parish in Fitchburg, Massachusetts Prepares for Feast of Christmas

By Theodore Kalmoukos

FITCHBURGH, MA – The historic Holy Trinity parish in Fitchburg, Massachusetts is preparing to celebrate the greatest mystery of all time, the Incarnation of the Son of God, with love and works of faith.

In an interview with The National Herald the presiding priest of the Holy Trinity parish, Fr. Paul Bebis, said that "Christmas is a time of lights, gift giving, and Christmas trees. But more importantly, it is a time to remember the miraculous birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our Holy Trinity Church consists of 150 families and we celebrate this time of the year with services and activities. We also attend the Vespers services of our neighboring parishes in Clinton and Worcester, MA."

Fr. Paul also said that "we have a Hope Luncheon in our church every fourth Saturday of every month and we serve the less fortunate and homeless people of Fitchburg. We usually have 20 to 30 people come and everything is served by our parishioners. It is a model ministry of our Metropolis. In the month of December, we serve

an extra special dinner. We also help the less fortunate with a food pantry which contains of many cans of food for those less fortunate. This year, we are participating – as we have participated in other such programs throughout the years – in Kylee's Kare Kits for Kidz Holiday Mission in which we give gifts to needy children. We also participate in distributing gifts to patrons of our local Orthodox Nursing Home in Worcester every Christmas season."

Speaking about the youth he said that "youth ministry in our church can be difficult throughout the holiday season because there is so much to do outside the confines of the Church. However, on one Saturday before the Christmas holiday, we give a Communion breakfast in our church sponsored by our Sunday School teachers, parents, and students. The day begins with a Divine Liturgy followed by a beautiful homemade breakfast for all the parishioners of our church. I will speak to the children about the Birth of our Lord.'

The parish does a lot of philanthropic works. Fr. Paul said that "in the month of December,



HOLY TRINITY OF FITCHBUF

our Philoptochos Ladies Society has a big Christmas Fair in which we sell a hot lunch which consists of Greek cuisine and pastries to the residents of Fitchburg and the surrounding

towns. This is a big event in our

Church every Christmas season.

All the proceeds go to our Philoptochos Ladies Chapter." Regarding the Sacred Ser-

rices, he said "The Church has services on both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with the permission of our Metropolitan. We have a Vesperal Divine Liturgy

on Christmas Eve at 4:00 PM. On Christmas Day, our church celebrates the Birth of Christ with a Divine Liturgy in the morning."

When asked what kind of questions the parishioners ask, Fr. Paul who is the son of a very

prominent priest, Fr. Constantine Bebis, who is now retired, and also the nephew of Professor Emeritus of Patristics of Holy Cross School of Theology George Bebis, he said that "many parishioners have asked me about the identity of the Wise Men, and the death of thousands of children by Herod. Since the wise men were not of Jewish descent, they came to see Christ who was born Jewish. These men were symbolic of our church today in which membership is not determined by ethnicity, but faith. In addition, many people did not realize that the thousands of innocent young boys murdered by King Herod when looking for the baby Jesus are now considered saints of our Holy Orthodox

Speaking about the meaning of Christmas Fr. Paul said that "Christmas means the Birth of Christ, love, sharing, and giving. Since the theme on Christmas is birth, many of us need to be 'reborn' into the Orthodox faith by bringing the life of the Church home to our families."

Fr. Paul and his family will celebrate Christmas this year in New Bedford, MA with his father and uncle.

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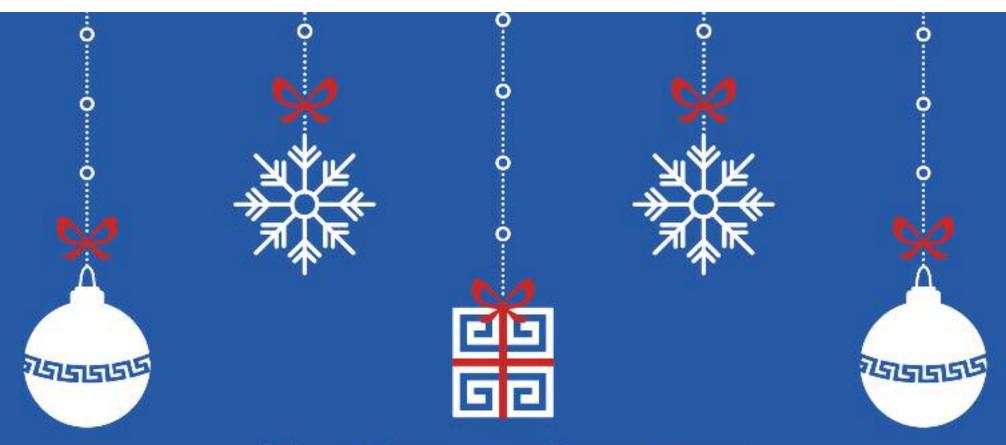
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Avocado Leaf Tea: A Healthy, Unique Gift for the Holidays

By Eleni Sakellis

LOS ANGELES, CA - In our search for unique holiday gifts, healthy food and beverages that work well with the Mediterranean diet are often at the top of our list. We also occasionally come across charming stories of how a business was founded as well.

Avocado Leaf Tea Company founders Scott Wibbenmeyer and his wife Sharon, natives of St. Louis, MO, decided to move closer to their oldest son who had moved to Los Angeles, California.

According to their website, they "found the perfect piece of land with the perfect view, but it only had one catch. It came with an avocado grove.'

The couple decided to become avocado farmers and while researching avocado groves, Sharon "discovered an article on the benefits of avocado leaf tea and I was thoroughly intrigued," as she noted on the website.

"It seems it has been used for medicinal purposes for thousands of years and folklore suggested it had helped everything from the common cold to kidney stones. I have been known to geek out on research and the more I searched, the more information I found in recent studies. Most have been published over the last few years, touting the health benefits of the avocado leaf."

Scott Wibbenmeyer spoke with The National Herald about Avocado Leaf Tea, which fits in nicely with the more plant-based Mediterranean diet, noting that "it helps with reduced risk factors for cardiovascular disease... just like the Mediterranean diet.' TNH: What are the other top health benefits of Avocado Leaf

Scott Wibbenmeyer: Avocado Leaf Tea contains the same ben-

eficial properties as the Avocado Leaf. It is a natural anti-inflammatory, reduces the risk of heart disease, reduces the risk of stroke,



Avocado Leaf Tea is available in natural flavor and a variety of tasty blends.

SCOTT WIBBENMEYER

helps kidney function, aids in lowering cholesterol, helps lower blood pressure, improves gut health, aids in memory retention, aids in reducing stress and anxiety. It's also loaded with polyphenols and is a super antioxidant. Avocado Leaf Tea is also gluten free and non-GMO.

TNH: What are some of your favorite flavors?

SW: I am biased perhaps, but I love them all. Our 100% Natural Avocado Leaf Tea is our homage to how Avocado Leaf Tea has been drunk for centuries. It's smooth and rustic with no aftertaste. Peach and Lemon are simply delicious and amazing. Chamomile is great before bed. And I am drinking Black Tea in the morning instead of coffee. It gives me the kick I need but easier on my stom-

TNH: What has been the most rewarding aspect of becoming Avocado Leaf Tea Makers?

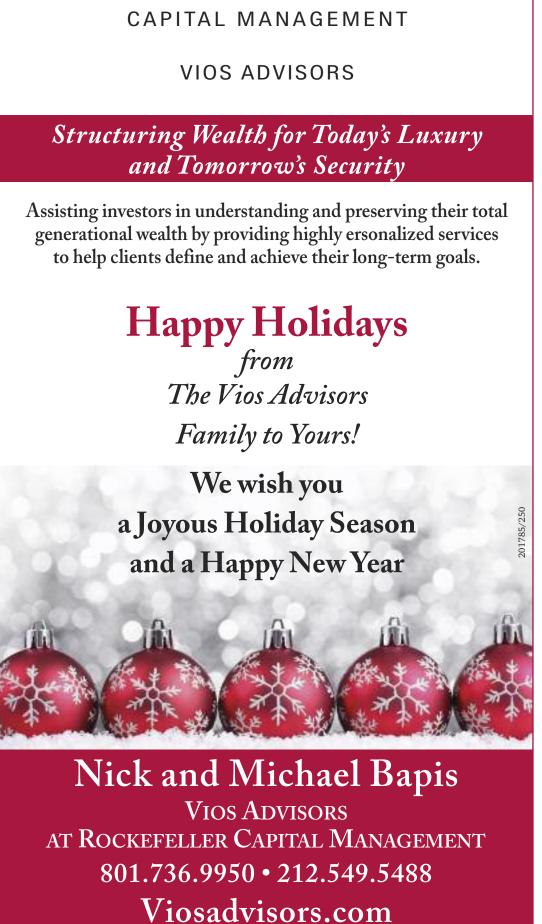
SW: Watching people's face when they sip it. They really love it... and they are surprised how smooth it is. It is truly rewarding to see that all the hard work that we have done to create this new category of tea is being so well received... We love our Avocado Leaf Tea Family!

More information is available online: www.avocadoleaftea.com. For holiday gift-giving, Avocado Lea Tea gift sets featuring your choice of a single canister of tea with tea mug or the Holiday Party Pack with tea mug are available on the company's website.



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Shop Early: U.S. Christmas Tree Supplies Tight, Prices up

By John Raby

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — Customers searching for the perfect Christmas tree typically glance at Sandy Parsons' limited offerings, then keep walking.

Parsons never got her order for 350 trees from a North Carolina farm. Supplies were short, she was told. Instead, she was shipped some smaller ones for her lot at the Capitol Market in Charleston. Those paled in comparison to the much taller beauties at a competitor's lot next

"This has been the worst season," Parsons said. "We lost a lot of money by that. It sets you back two or three years."

Christmas tree supplies are tight again this year across the United States, depending upon location and seller. The industry

is still bouncing back from the Great Recession and trying to win people back from a shift toward artificial trees when times were especially tough.

Industry officials say not to worry: Everyone who wants a last-minute tree should be able to find one. It just might take a little more searching, especially if customers want a specific type, and you might have to pay a little more.

The best advice, said Amy Start, executive director of the Michigan Christmas Tree Association, is simple: "Shop early."

Parsons has been in business for 42 years as a seasonal seller of flowers, produce, pumpkins — and this year, just 32 Christmas trees.

"I can tell you how many I didn't buy: 350," said Parsons, whose disappointment has been tempered by robust wreath

In the next lot, Robert Cole was having a jolly ole time preparing an abundance of trees for loading onto customers' ve-

The difference? Cole's lot, French Creek Farms of Buckhannon, grows its own trees.

"We've been busier than we've ever been before," Cole

Gesturing toward the lots of Parsons and another competitor, he explained his brisk business in the simplest economic terms: "Because there's been no trees here and no trees over there."

An oversupply of trees about a decade ago caused a domino effect nationwide. Subsequently, fewer trees were cut down, which meant not as many seedlings were planted to replace them. Hot, dry weather also took its toll, forcing many growers to close.

Larry Smith, who has been selling Fraser firs from the same lot in Lenoir, North Carolina, for 40 years, and second-generation Christmas tree farmer Mike Rood of Hermann, Missouri, said some farmers' adult children aren't as eager to take over the family business, leading to

a labor shortage. "A lot of the farmers have gotten older and their kids realize there's an easier way to life," Smith said.

Despite such challenges, Smith isn't looking for other ways to make a living.

"I hope they find me fell over dead in the tree patch," he said. "That's the way I really want to

Smith's trees have graced homes across the North Carolina foothills and up to the White House. He said he's having his best year ever and doesn't foresee running out. When his supply dwindles, his team heads up the mountain to harvest more.

In Missouri, Rood buys precut trees not native to the state to supplement the short supply. This year, his farm couldn't buy as many taller trees as it

"The bigger trees in particular at this stage in the game are going to be harder to find," Rood said.

"So they need to be aware that if they're really looking for a big tree, they need to go out and find it pretty quickly.

Missouri Christmas Tree Association President Steve Meier said that by late December, "there's still going to be Christmas trees left that haven't been chosen.'

The supply issue goes all the way up the chain.

Oregon has the highest annual production of Christmas trees, followed by North Carolina and Michigan. In Oregon, where some tree farms comprise thousands of acres, Kirchem Farm owner Cher Tollefson in Oregon City closed her 100-acre business this holiday season for the first time in nearly three decades, citing a lack of trees.

"Our trees need a year to grow," Tollefson said.

The number of Christmas tree farms nationwide fell 3% between 2012 and 2017, the latest year available, according to the U.S. Department of Agricul-

According to the National

Christmas Tree Association, a real tree last year cost \$78 on average, up \$3 from 2017.

At the Charleston market, customer Bob Atkins of Madison noticed not only that prices are higher but "there's not as many

He was near the point of settling for an artificial tree when he and his wife, Jane, found the right tree after about 20 minutes on Cole's lot.

"I do not want an artificial tree," Jane Atkins said with a smile. "We will fight over that!"

Artificial Christmas trees now represent 70% of all trees in U.S. homes.

The Denver-based National Christmas Tree Association is trying to change that, mainly by appealing to a sense of tradition among millennials.

Young families are our bread and butter," said Doug Hundley, the group's spokesman. "It's important to that group of adults to have that real tree experi-

Associated Press Writers Sarah Blake Morgan in Lenoir, North Carolina, Summer Ballentine in Jefferson City, Missouri, and Mike Householder in Detroit contributed to this report.















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201116/238

Santa, Soldiers Bring Joy to Beleaguered Alaska Village

By Mark Thiessen

NAPAKIAK, Alaska (AP) — A school employee wearing a traditional pink Alaska Native smock called a kuspuk breezed through the hubbub in the cafeteria adorned with murals of purely Alaska scenes, zigzagging through children clutching presents and past uniformed soldiers wearing Santa caps.

"Napakiak is happy today," she proclaimed to principal Sally Benedict.

That's a rare emotion of late for the 300 or so residents of this western Alaska community. "We're falling into the Kuskokwim River," Benedict explains, because of erosion that is forcing everyone to move their town farther inland.

But for one day this month, the Alaska National Guard gave folks a reason to smile, thanks to its "Operation Santa Claus" program, which featured the jolly old elf himself distributing gifts to the children.

"This lightens the load," said Benedict, a former Detroit educator who arrived last summer. "This is sunshine for us. It's a brightening of our day."

Now in its 63rd year, Opera-

tion Santa Claus has become a rarity among National Guard units. Defense officials have shut down the program everywhere but Alaska, where the mission survives because the state is so large and some communities are so remote.

The program started in 1956 when the residents of St. Mary's, Alaska, had no money to buy children Christmas presents after flooding severely impacted hunting and fishing. Since then, Guard members try to visit at least two rural communities a year, delivering Christmas gifts and other needed supplies.

They've been to remote burgs with names like Koyukuk,

This Dec. 3, 2019, photo shows Alaska National Guard Staff Sgt. Joseph Sallaffie handing a gift bag to Corban Jimmy while Marlene Black looks on during Santa's visit to Napakiak, Alaska. The Alaska National Guard brought its Operation Santa Claus to the western Alaska community, which is being severely eroded by the nearby Kuskokwim River.

Savoonga, Illiamna, Kwethluk and Tuntuliak. The visit to Napakiak involved two aircraft: a 400-mile (644-kilometer) trip in a small airplane from Anchorage, then a five-minute helicopter ride to the village.

"We love this, we truly love coming here," said Maj. Gen. Torrence Saxe, the adjutant gen-

"We love this, we truly love coming here," said Maj. Gen. Torrence Saxe, the adjutant general of the Alaska National Guard who found himself topping ice cream sundaes with cherries for the revelers in Napakiak. "This is a proud tradition."

The Guard isn't the only Santa's helper in the nation's largest state.

The Salvation Army is celebrating its 50th year of helping the Guard, collecting gifts, book bags and other items to be distributed. Major corporate sponsors like Costco and Walmart contribute to the program, and Rich Owens for years has provided the ice cream from his Tastee Freez restaurant in Anchorage.

"It's a labor of love," said John Brackenbury, the Alaska divisional commander of The Salvation Army.

Climate change is a contributing factor in the erosion caused by the Kuskokwim, a 700 mile-long (1,125-kilometers)

river that becomes an ice highway for travelers in the winter, has been an ongoing problem in Napakiak, but the pace has accelerated in the past few years. It's a dilemma seen in numerous Alaska communities affected by a warming climate that is thawing permafrost permanently frozen soil - and compromising river banks, according to Brian Brettschneider, an associate climate researcher at the University of Alaska Fairbanks' International Arctic Research Center.

"You see this at a number of rivers in western Alaska where the bank stability is so much less than it used to be because the warming temperatures are allowing the banks to just crumble away with even typical river flows," he said.

This year alone, Napakiak's erosion has been responsible for more than 100 feet (30 meters) of lost shoreline.

In September, the village school's 10 fuel tanks were relocated by barge across the river to the nearby town of Bethel after being threatened by aggressive riverbank erosion.

Erosion also threatens the school, which sits less than 200 feet (60 meters) feet from the river. The Lower Kuskokwim School District needs to move the school, but local officials say finding money for a new school has been challenging.

River erosion also threatened Napakiak's firehouse and city garage, so those structures were moved in July.

The village also has applied for permits to relocate the boat harbor, which was destroyed by storms in May. The five-year plan, Benedict said, is to move everyone to the other side of an air strip.

But at least for one day the

But at least for one day, the residents of Napakiak didn't have to worry about the erosion creeping ever closer to their homes, and instead could focus on the smiles or even smudges of chocolate from the ice cream sundaes on their children's faces.

Marcus Billy thought he received a basketball, but he became a little confused when he saw it was lime green and not orange. It was only when all the wrapping paper was off that he was sure. When asked if he was happy with that, he said, "Yeah!" before running off to play.

Associated Press writer Rachel D'Oro in Anchorage contributed to this report.





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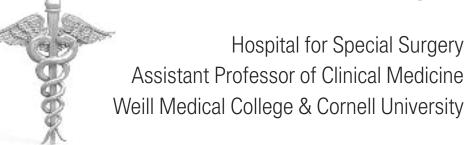
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Palestinians in Bethlehem Look Beyond Religious Tourism

By Joseph Krauss and Mohammad Daraghmeh

BETHLEHEM, West Bank (AP) — For decades, the people of Bethlehem have watched tour buses drive up to the Church of the Nativity, disgorge their passengers for a few hours at the traditional birthplace of Jesus, and then return to Israel.

But in recent years a new form of tourism has taken root, focused on the West Bank town's Palestinian residents, their culture and history and their struggles under Israeli occupation.

As pilgrims descend on Bethlehem this Christmas, they have the option of staying in restored centuries-old guesthouses, taking food tours of local markets, and perusing the dystopian art in and around a hotel designed by the British graffiti artist Banksy.

The centerpiece of tourism, and the focus of Christmas celebrations in the coming weeks, is the 6th-century Church of the Nativity, built on the site where Jesus is believed to have been born in a manger. Extensive renovations in recent years have saved the roof from collapse and revealed colorful wall mosaics depicting angels and saints.

Earlier this month, the Vatican returned a small part of what Christians believe to be the original manger, which was sent to Rome as a gift to the pope in the 7th century. The thumbsized relic, displayed in an ornate silver case, can be seen in a chapel adjoining the church.

In Manger Square, just outside the church, a massive Christmas tree has been set up and festivities are planned in the coming weeks as various de-nominations hold staggered Christmas celebrations. On Jan. 7, Bethlehem will host an international Santa convention.

Tourism has suffered in the past during outbreaks of violence between Israel and the Palestinians. But the Palestinian Tourism Ministry expects 3.5 million visitors to Bethlehem in 2019, up from 3 million the previous year, and many think there is still room for growth.

The general situation in Palestine and the Holy Land is that there is very good security, better than most countries in the world, and so the people are visiting," said Elias al-Arja, chairman of the local hotel associa-

He noted that while the Holy Land includes the most important sites in Christianity, including the places where tradition says Christ was born, where he grew up, was crucified and resurrected, it attracts far fewer visitors than the Vatican. "We have the opportunity to draw more people," he said.

Religious tourism is a boon for the local economy, but many Palestinians feel the city's modern residents are largely ig-



Israel captured the West Bank, along with east Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, in the 1967 Middle East war. The Palestinians view the territories as part of their national homeland and hope to one day establish an independent state.

Visitors travelling to Bethlehem pass through a sprawling Israeli checkpoint and then drive along the separation wall, which Israel began building dur-

ing the second Palestinian intifada, or uprising, in the early 2000s. Israel says the barrier is needed to prevent attacks, but the Palestinians view it as a land grab because its route places almost 10% of the West Bank on the Israeli side. Bethlehem itself is almost completely surrounded by the barrier and a string of Jewish settlements.

The town's predicament is on vivid display in and around the Walled-Off Hotel, which was de-

signed by Banksy and opened in 2017. The hotel looks out on the separation wall, which itself is covered with artwork, graffiti and museum panels explaining life under occupation. Inside, a number of Banksy pieces are depicted in a haunting lobby, which this time of year is dimly lit with Christmas lights.

The hotel offers weekly performances by local musicians and daily tours of a nearby Palestinian refugee camp. Tours of Banksy's public artwork elsewhere in the town can be organized on request.

A different form of alternative tourism, conceived by Palestinians themselves, can be found in the city center, just a few hundred meters (yards) from the church. There the municipality. with Italian aid, has restored an 18th-century guesthouse and rented it out to Fadi Kattan, a

French Palestinian chef.
The Hosh Al-Syrian Guesthouse includes 12 tastefully furnished rooms ranging from \$80-150 a night. At its Fawda Restaurant — Arabic for chaos - Kattan uses local ingredients to cook up traditional Palestinian cuisine with a modern twist.

"My vision was to say religious tourism will promote itself by itself, it doesn't need the private sector to promote it," he said. "Let's promote everything else. Let's promote our food, let's promote our culture, let's promote our history."

Kattan is especially keen to promote Palestinian cuisine, which he says has been appropriated by Israeli chefs and food writers. As with nearly everything else having to do with the Middle East conflict, there are two sides: Israeli cuisine owes much to Jewish immigrants from ancient communities across the Middle East and North Africa.

Continued on page 20



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Melania Befriends Former Leukemia Patient

By Darlene Superville

WASHINGTON (AP) — The first time Caoilinn McLane met Melania Trump she had no idea it wouldn't be the last time.

Fighting leukemia from her bed at Children's National Hospital, Caoilinn McLane, then 15, met the first lady in 2017. Mrs. Trump had quietly visited the hospital to help with preparations for a "healing" garden that was being built for patients and their families.

They met again when the first lady returned weeks later to dedicate the rooftop garden.

And the pair saw each other Friday when McLane was given the honor of introducing Mrs. Trump when she returned to the hospital to continue the tradition of first ladies reading to patients at holiday time.

"I'm glad that we're here, and I get to see her again," McLane, now 18, told The Associated Press in a brief interview before the event as she sat with her mother, Libby McLane. The family lives in Aldie, Virginia.

At one point, when McLane suffered a relapse, she answered the telephone to find the first lady was on the line.

"It was so special," she said.
"I felt very cared for and it ...
meant a lot that somebody was
thinking about me."

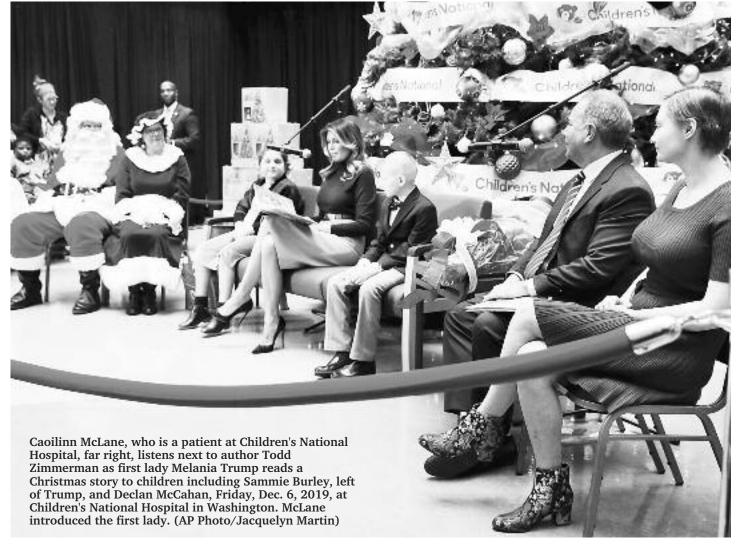
Libby McLane said the White House had reached out to her a couple of days in advance to set up the call. At the time, mother and daughter were spending a lot of time going back and forth between hospitals in the District of Columbia so the girl could get radiation treatments she needed to get ready for a bone marrow transplant.

"So when the call was coming, I knew who it was and I let her answer it," Libby McLane

"I sort of freaked out," added Caoilinn McLane. The high school senior said her leukemia is in remission following a bone marrow transplant about a year

The first lady's office confirmed Caoilinn McLane's account of her interactions with Mrs. Trump.

The first lady has spent a lot of time visiting children in hospitals around the country, especially those born dependent on opioids. Her concern for



Caoilinn McLane fits with her "Be Best" youth initiative and its focus on child well-being.

Libby McLane said the first lady has also sent messages through Children's National Hospital.

"She really is genuine and cares for the kids, and that's so special," Libby McLane said.

"I appreciate her interest in just following along and seeing how Caoilinn's doing and sending us well wishes," she said. "A lot of times, through the hospital, we'd get a little message that they had spoken to Mrs. Trump and she was asking how Caoilinn's doing."

Caoilinn's doing."

At the hospital on Friday, the first lady toured a short-stay unit and a surgical unit. She also visited with patients in a playroom and helped make

snowflakes with them.

She came down to the atrium after the tour, sitting with two patients in front of a towering Christmas tree to read "Oliver the Ornament Meets Belle," a sequel to the story she read at the hospital in 2018. Oliver is a damaged Christmas ornament with a spirit that helps him overcome challenges.

"Nice to be here again," Mrs.

Trump said before she started reading the story.

When finished, she wished everyone "Merry Christmas and happy and healthy New Year." She also praised the doctors and nurses on staff as "amazing."

The tradition of first ladies visiting hospitalized children at Christmastime dates back to Bess Truman.

Palestinians Look Beyond Religious Tourism

Continued from page 19

The guesthouse partners with a local group known as Farayek to offer food tours in which visitors wander through the local market, meeting farmers, butchers and bakers before having lunch at the guesthouse. Another program includes cooking classes taught by a Palestinian grandmother.

"What I was hoping to achieve is to have people stay three nights in Bethlehem, to have people go to the fruit and vegetable market, to have people meet the people of Bethlehem, not just the very short tour into the city," he said.

When the guesthouse opened in 2014, the average stay was one night, but now it has risen to three and a half, with steady occupancy throughout the low season, Kattan said.

A handful of other restored guesthouses have also opened in recent years, including Dar al-Majus, Arabic for House of the Maji, named for the three kings said to have visited the manger after Christ was born.

The guesthouse is part of a wider initiative by the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land and a local association to support the Christian community. Bethlehem's Christian community, like others across the Middle East, has dramatically dwindled in recent decades as Christians have fled war and conflict or sought better economic opportunities abroad.

A local family living next to the guesthouse cooks breakfast and traditional meals for guests, and the guesthouse employs members of another two families. The guesthouse mostly supplies itself from the local market, and there are plans to expand to another restored house in the old quarter next

Bethlehem's mayor, Anton Salman, expects the recent growth in tourism to continue.

"Each season is more active and more organized and more attractive for the local community in Palestine and for the tourists," he said.

Dancer with One Hand Makes Radio City Rockettes History

NEW YORK (AP) — A dancer born with one hand is making hoofer history as the first person with a visible disability ever hired by New York's famed Radio City Rockettes.

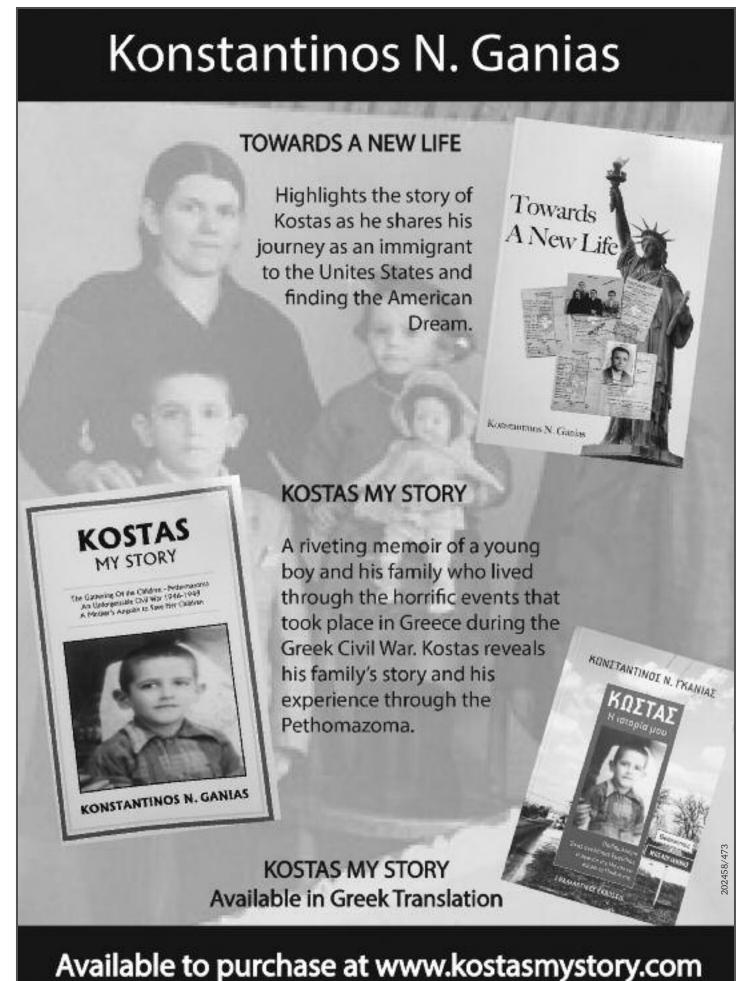
"I don't want to be known as the dancer who has one hand, and not because that's a bad thing," Sydney Mesher, who joined the Rockettes this season, told Newsday. "But because I've worked very hard to be where I am."

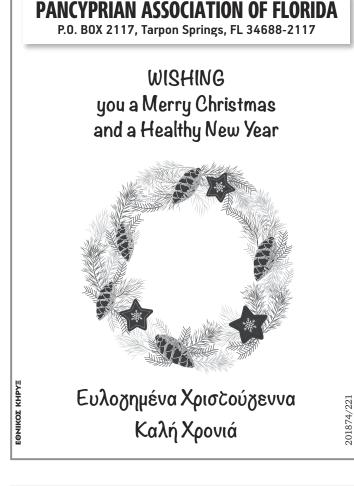
Mesher, 22, is missing a left hand because of symbrachydactyly, a rare congenital condition.

The Pace University graduate from Portland, Oregon, was hired by the Rockettes after her fourth audition. She said she has been "mesmerized" by the troupe, which dates to 1925, ever since first seeing them on TV in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

Rockettes creative director Karen Keeler caled Mesher "an incredibly versatile dancer with a strong work ethic." Keeler said Mesher "is smart and determined, with an eye for detail."

The annual Radio City Christmas Spectacular runs through Jan.







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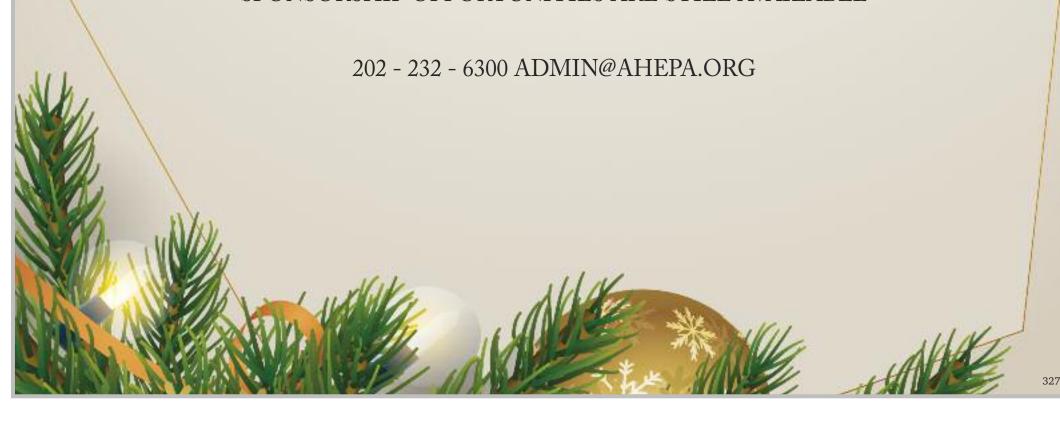
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2-Year-Old Arthur Becomes Star in UK Christmas Ad Tradition

By Danica Kirka

LONDON (AP) — Little Arthur crawls out of bed in his red Marvel Comics pajamas, brushes his teeth and strolls outside after breakfast to his day job: helping out at the family hardware store in Rhayader, Wales. It's Christmas and Arthur, nearly 3, has his work cut out for him wrapping presents, hanging ornaments and helping customers.

But the cute video with 1.3 million views on YouTube - and counting - comes with a larger larger message. Don't forget the little guy.

"The small little family owned businesses still exist out there," said Arthur's dad, Thomas Lewis Jones, 30. "If you can afford to shop locally, do so. If you can't. I hope you just enjoy the video."

Big Christmas ads have become a tradition in Britain — an opportunity usually for much larger companies to pull out all the stops to woo holiday shoppers and stamp their brands firmly on the consumer brain. These are usually mini movies, similar to Super Bowl showstoppers in the United States, that feature warm and fuzzy characters like lovestruck penguins and mythical creatures who reveal the true meaning of Christmas.

These ads don't normally originate in a town 200 miles from London and have a budget of 100 pounds (\$130).

Yet this simple, day in the life of Arthur promotional video has drawn attention to much larger problems of bricks and mortar U.K. retailers this Christmas, struggling as they do with issues ranging from the steady losses to internet retailers to a controversial local tax system whose

reform is constantly discussed. Despite initiatives, such as



ABOVE: In this undated handout image taken from the Christmas advert by Hafod Hardware store, hailed Friday Dec. 6, 2019 for the accolade of "Christmas ad of the year". The advert features nearly three-year old Arthur as he works in the shop, wraps presents and helps

customers.

Small Business Saturday, stores really are facing challenges. They are often dwarfed by the bigger stores that can offer better prices and more selection. Many have a tough time getting through each year.

"What this video has done is throw into the spotlight the very



real challenges that smaller firms throughout the U.K. are actually facing," said Mike Cherry, the national chairman of the Federation of Small Businesses. "They are facing spiraling business rates, high rents and online competition, expensive town center parking and the loss of bank branches and ATMs. All of these issues make for a perfect storm that is putting many small businesses at risk."

Jones, who runs Hafod Hardware, simply made Arthur his go-to star to promote the store. Arthur's supporting cast is his grandfather, John, his greatgrandfather Alan and his greatgrandmother Pauline. The filmmaker, Josh Holdaway, is a family friend and has a cameo appearance.

Since being posted Monday, Jones' phone has not stopped ringing. At the time he was speaking to The Associated Press on Friday, he noted with some degree of astonishment that the video was popular in Japan. It's also big in Australia. And Morocco - and so on.

But for Jones, it was a movie for his neighbors, too.

"People have been coming in this morning saying congratulations... they've been bringing in bottles of champagne for us to say well done," he told Britain's Press Association. ""The locals are incredible, they're our bread and butter. We're very lucky to have the community we have here in Rhayader."

The ad ends with Arthur transforming into his father in the act of putting the Christmas tree on his shoulder. It urges everyone to to "#Be a Kid this Christmas."

"You get an experience when you go into a shop like ours," Jones said. "You get personal service."

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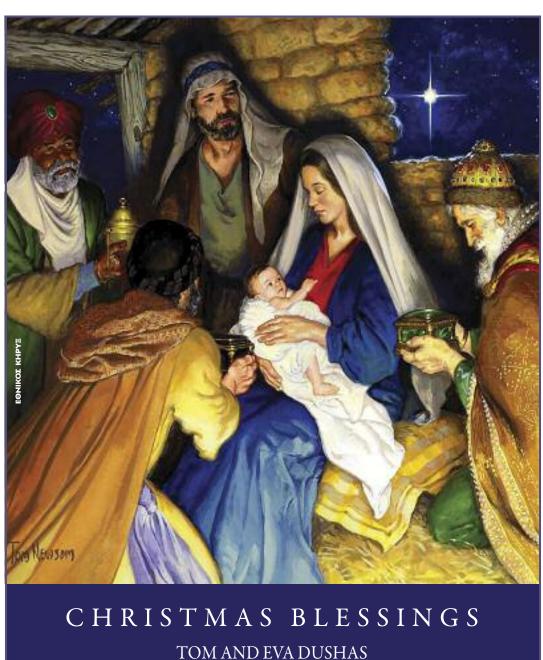
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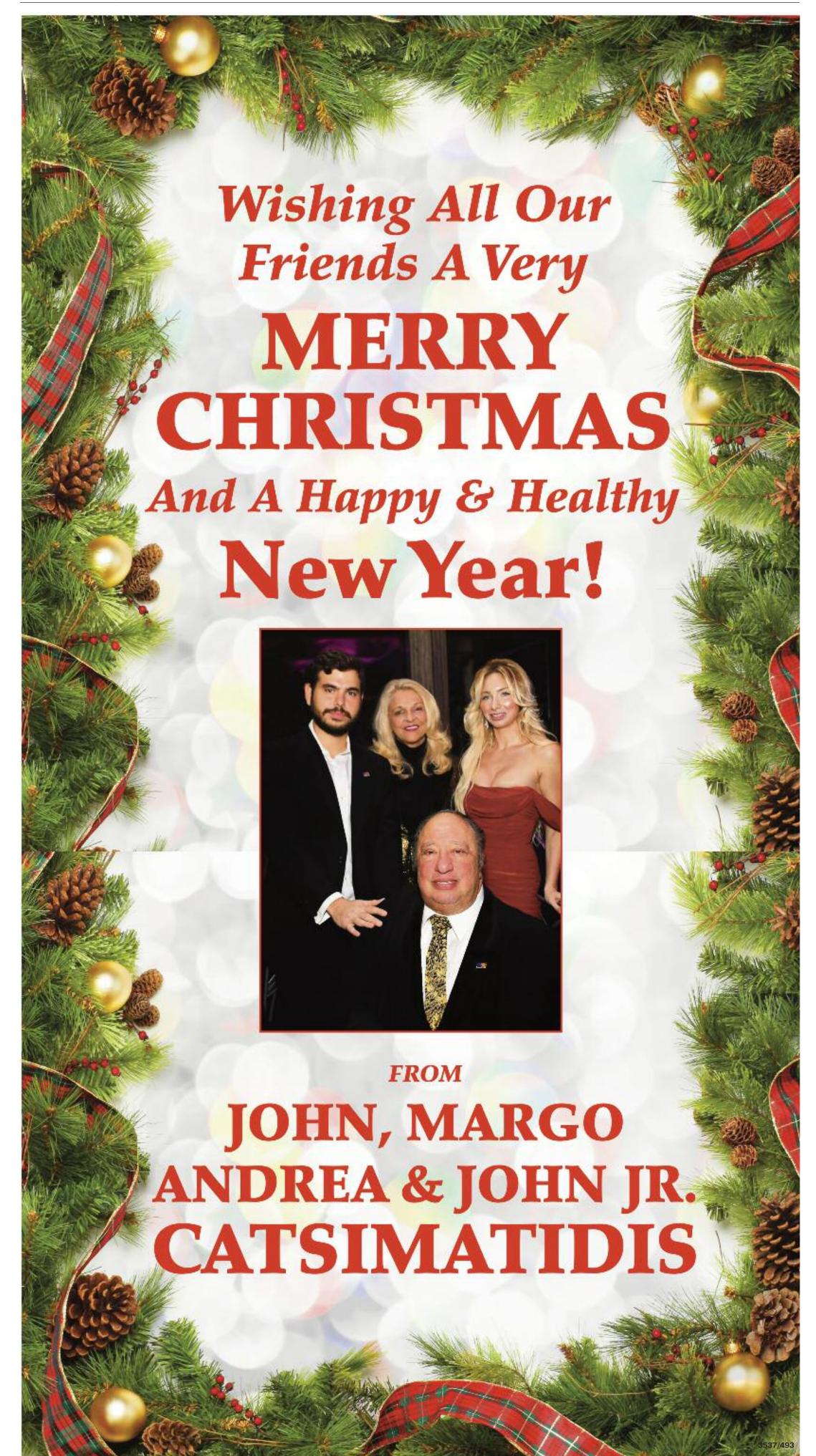


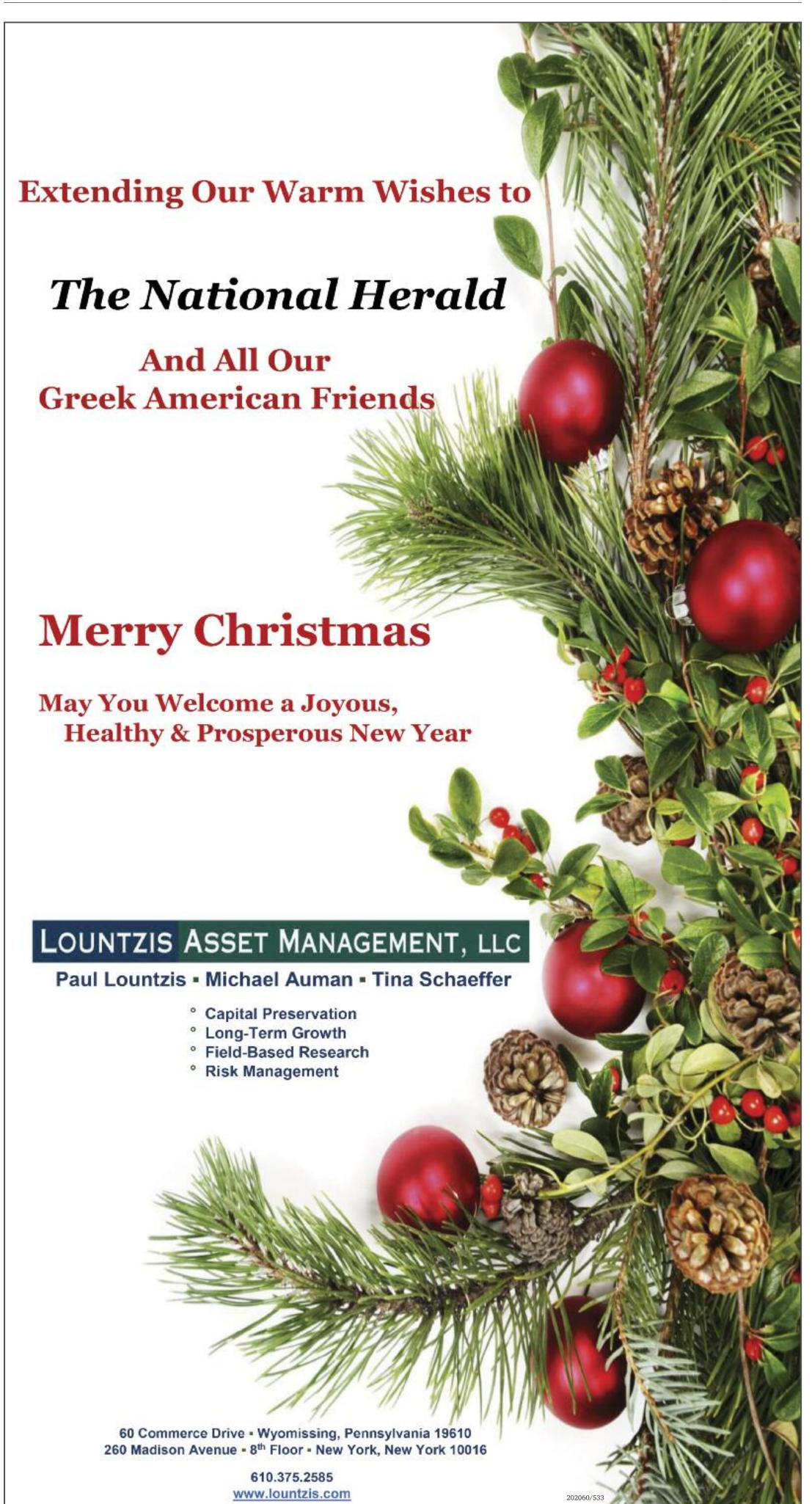


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Many heartfelt wishes to our dear friend, Antonis Diamataris. Thank you for the many years of service to our community both here and abroad. Never stop fighting the good fight! All the best today and always.

Manuel N. Stamatakis

2017/90/455







Ray of Festive Cheer: Santa Feeds the Fish in Berlin

aquarium, which is home to about 5,000 underwater creatures.

BERLIN (AP) — Santa has taken a dive in Berlin. A diver dressed as Father Christmas - and a companion dressed as an angel - descended into the tank at the Sea Life aquarium in Berlin on Thursday to offer the fish some seasonal cheer. The festive feeding of the sharks, rays and others has become an annual event at the



Give the Gift of Ancestry DNA Kits This Holiday Season and Help Bring Justice for Families of Cold Case Victims

DEERFIELD BEACH, Fla. (Newswire.com) - DNA Labs International is reminding people this holiday season that gifts to discover ancestry can help bring justice for families of cold case victims. In the fall, DNA Labs International launched a new campaign encouraging people who are buying DNA testing kits from family heritage and ancestry sites to #DNAOptin to GEDmatch.

By uploading DNA results from these family heritage sites to GEDmatch and opting in, it enables law enforcement to connect persons of interest, which can help solve violent crime.

It renews hope for the victims of previously unsolvable cases. GEDmatch, an open data personal genomics database, provides step-by-step easy instructions and allows anyone to upload results from companies such as Family Tree, My Heritage, 23andMe or Ancestry.

This new technology helped the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office identify and arrest 39-yearold Luke Fleming for the 1999 murder of Deborah Dalzell. The victim had been beaten, sexually battered and strangled. Using genealogy and GEDmatch, Fleming was identified as a suspect. DNA Labs International matched DNA evidence from the

crime scene. Thousands of cases still remain a mystery that the GEDmatch database could help solve. For example, in Jacksonville, Florida, the case of 17year-old Leslie McCray remains

unsolved 34 years later. Her body was found in 1985 on Christmas Eve on the side of the road not far from I-295 on Jacksonville's Westside.

She had suffered stab wounds to her neck. GEDmatch could bring resolution to this

The family of Ricky Gene Herriage in Athens, Texas, is still without answers 32 years later. Herriage's body was found in a remote part of Henderson County near Athens on CR 1500 in Walnut Creek. He had been

shot multiple times. The lack of evidence at the scene led police to believe he was killed someplace else, possibly in the early morning hours

of March 8, 1987. Genealogy could also help solve the case of 9-year-old Amber Hagerman, who was taken while riding her bicycle in a grocery store parking lot in Arlington, Texas, on Jan. 13, 1996.

Hagerman's body was found five days later floating in a creek with her throat slit.

No one has ever been caught for the abduction and murder, but it was this case that

forget

launched the Amber Alert sys-

"Justice for Amber's family as well as thousands of others is possible through GEDmatch," said Allison Nunes, chief operating officer with DNA Labs International.

"Our goal with the #DNAOptIn campaign is to bring awareness to the public about why opting in is so important for solving cold cases as well as current. Those buying ancestry DNA kits as gifts this holiday season should tell their loved ones about why opting into GEDmatch is so important, and they both can make a real difference."

The cases mentioned are just a small sample of those that can be helped using new DNA technology and genealogy to help solve them. ProjectColdCase.org has a list of victim profiles with case information and a searchable database of cold cases that DNA matching could help bring about new leads.

All people need to do to opt in is download their DNA from the family heritage website they used, upload their DNA profile into GedMatch, and select the public view with law enforcement access.

For more information about the DNA Labs International and the #DNAOptin campaign, visit DNALabsInternational.com.

About DNA Labs Interna-

Founded in 2004, DNA Labs International specializes in forensic DNA analysis and genealogy for law enforcement agencies, attorneys, and government forensic labs. The company is an ANAB ISO 17025 accredited laboratory. For more information, visit DNALabsInternational.com.

Magnone jennifer@slammm.com 305-857-5497 • Press Release Service by Newswire.com Original Source: Give the Gift of **Ancestry DNA Kits This Holiday** Season and Help Bring Justice for Families of Cold Case Vic-

Contact:

Jennifer





Shorter Shopping Season Means a More Intense Scramble

By Anne D'Innocenzio

NEW YORK (AP) — The mad scramble between Thanksgiving and Christmas just got six days shorter.

Black Friday once again kicks off the start of the holiday shopping season. But with six fewer days than last year, it will be the shortest season since 2013 because Thanksgiving fell on the fourth Thursday in November — the latest possible date it could be. That means customers will have less time to shop and retailers will have less time to woo them.

Adobe Analytics predicts a loss of \$1 billion in online revenue from a shortened season. Still, it expects online sales will reach \$143.7 billion, up 14.1% from last year's holiday season

The National Retail Federation, the nation's largest retail trade group, baked the shorter season into its forecast, but it

says the real drivers will be the job market. It forecasts that holiday sales will rise between 3.8% and 4.2%, an increase from the disappointing 2.1% growth seen in the November and December 2018 period that came well

short of the group's prediction. Last year's holiday sales were hurt by turmoil over the White House trade policy with China and a delay in data collection by nearly a month because of a government shutdown. This year's holiday forecast is above the average holiday sales growth of 3.7% over the previous five years.

NRF expects online and other non-store sales, which are included in the total, to increase between 11% and 14%, for the holiday period.

Black Friday is expected to once again be the largest shopping day of the season, followed by the last Saturday before Christmas, according to MasterCard SpendingPulse, which tracks spending across all types of payments including cash and check. Thanksgiving Day isn't even on the top 10 holiday shopping days, according to MasterCard.

The 2019 holiday season will be a good measure of the U.S. economy's health. Many retail CEOs describe their customers has financially healthy, citing moderate wage growth and an unemployment rate hovering near a 50-year low.

The overall picture is positive," said Craig Johnson, president of Customer Growth Partners, a retail consultancy. "People are spending out of positive cash flow as opposed to borrowing.

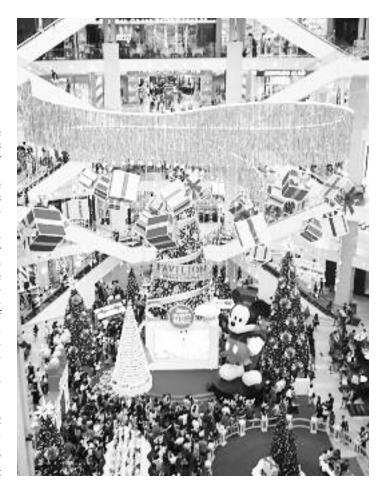
Economic growth has moderated since earlier this year, with growth at just 1.9% in the July-September quarter, down from 3.1% in the first three months of the year. Analysts

blame at least part of that on the U.S.-China trade war, which has forced many companies to delay plans to invest and expand.

That's left consumers as the main drivers. So far, Americans have kept up their spending, allaying fears of a recession.

With more holiday deals hap pening earlier to compensate for the late start, many have already started to shop. More than half of consumers have already started their holiday shopping and nearly a quarter of purchases have already been made, according to the annual survey released by the NRF and Prosper Insights & Analytics. The survey of 7,917 adult consumers was conducted Oct. 31 through Nov. 6.

This is further evidence that the holiday season has grown far beyond the period between Thanksgiving and Christmas, said Matthew Shay, president and CEO of NRF, in a statement.





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Best wishes for a Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays and a Wonderful New Year!





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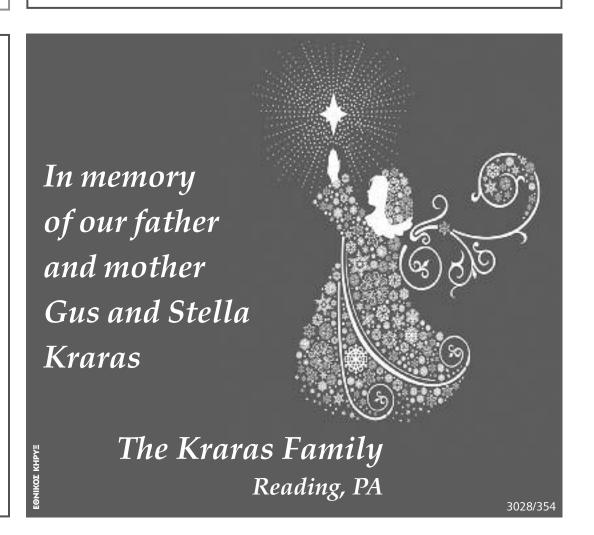
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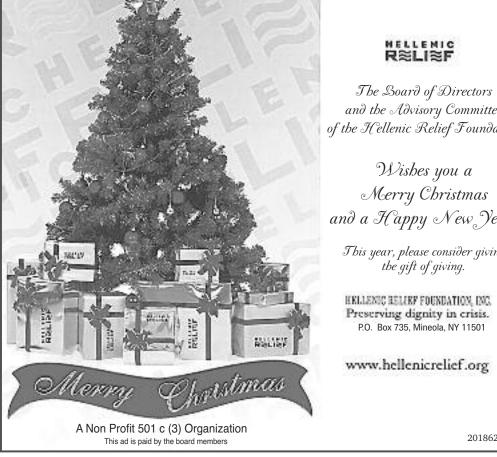
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To All Of Our Greek Friends In America And Greece

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The Medical Center of Boston International, Inc.

Καλά Χριστούχεννα και Ευτιχισμένος ο Νέος Χρόνος

Holiday Stress: Amazon, Others Under Gun for 1-Day Delivery

By Joseph Pisani

NEW YORK (AP) — This year, holiday stress may take on a whole new meaning for online retailers.

Amazon, Walmart and others have promised to deliver more of their orders within 24 hours of customers clicking on "Buy."

The coming weeks will be the first test of whether they can make that happen during the busy holiday shopping season, when onslaughts of orders and bad weather can lay waste to even the best delivery plans.

It's an expensive feat that requires not just additional planes and vehicles, but more workers and reams of data to help retailers prepare and predict what shoppers may buy.

And the stakes to deliver on time are high. A late package can damage a retailer's reputation, since shoppers tend to blame them, even if the late arrival is the fault of the delivery company.

"The store made the promise," said Suketu Gandhi, partner in the digital transformation practice at consulting firm A.T. Kearney.

Amazon learned that six years ago, when UPS and FedEx were crippled by bad weather and last-minute online shopping, causing millions of packages to be late for Christmas. Since then, the online shopping giant has been building its own delivery network to give it more control over when and how its packages are delivered. It has

leased jets, built package-sorting hubs at airports and launched a program that lets contractors start businesses delivering packages in vans.

Others are feeling the pressure to keep up with Amazon. When the company introduced two-day shipping about 14 years ago, shoppers expected the same from other stores. That appears to be happening again.

"Customers love two-day delivery," said Mark Cohen, a retail studies professor at New York's Columbia Business School. "But they like one day better."

Smaller retailers, however, will probably be hurt trying to pay for quicker shipping, said Cohen, who used to be an executive at Sears Canada.

The push for even speedier





Best Wishes for a Happy and Healthy Holiday Season And Prosperous 2020

From the Pancretan Association of America **Board of Directors** President Eleftherios Dramitinos



delivery comes after Amazon announced in April that it would cut its delivery for Prime members to one day from two. Wal-mart and Best Buy followed with their own announcements. Many smaller retailers are also trying to deliver quicker, according to UPS, which said it will have 11 more jets flying this year to keep up.

But many eyes will be on Amazon this holiday season and whether it will keep its delivery promises. That's because 42% of all online sales this holiday season is expected to go to the Seattle company, according consulting firm Bain & Co.

It says it's up to the chal-

"We deliver for our customers every day and are confident in our ability to serve customers this holiday season," Amazon said in a statement.

Amazon already had a chance to test out one-day shipping during its Prime Day event in July, which has become one of the company's busiest shopping events.

It has another advantage: lots of cash. Amazon expects to spend about \$1.5 billion during the holiday season, partly to move items closer to customers and pay for more worker shifts. It says the cost is worth it, since it's already seeing customers spend more because of the



switch to one-day delivery.

The spending starts even before a package hits the road. Retailers are using machine learning technology to predict what shoppers may buy and then placing those items in stores and warehouses closer to them, said Anne Goodchild, the director of the Supply Chain Transportation and Logistics Center at the University of Washington.

Amazon has more than 100 warehouses around the country to store, pack and ship goods. Walmart is using warehouses and stores near customers to pack next-day orders. Best Buy has opened warehouses near the heavily populated cities of Chicago, Los Angeles and New York. Target says more than 90% of online orders are packed

While Target doesn't promise next-day delivery, it says that half of its two-day deliveries are showing up at customers' doorsteps the next day. It's also offering same-day delivery from stores for an extra fee and, like other retailers, it offers an op-

tion for customers to buy online and pick up from a store.

Shippers say they are ready for the influx of packages. UPS, which says next-day air shipments jumped 24% in the most recent quarter, has built more package sortation hubs that will help it process an additional 400,000 pieces per hour. FedEx will again be offering online retailers a way to ship next day or in two days when orders come in late afternoon or night. And the U.S. Postal Service says it will be delivering packages in more cities on Sunday, a change it typ-

ically does during the holidays. But cities may not be prepared for the rushed deliveries. Goodchild said places like New York and Seattle are not built to deal with the vans and cars stopping to deliver, causing traffic and congestion.

"That's where we see pressure," she said.

AP Business Writers Anne D'Innocenzio in New York and David Koenig in Dallas contributed to this report.



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Empty Stores along NYC's 5th Avenue Dressed for Holidays

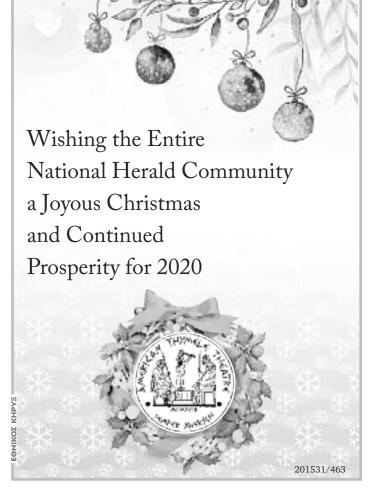
NEW YORK (AP) — Some vacant stores along New York City's luxury shopping corridor will be dressed for Christmas as if retailers like Tommy Hilfiger and Ralph Lauren had never left. The Wall Street Journal reports that a merchants' association

has installed nostalgic holiday window displays in four vacant stores along Fifth Avenue in midtown Manhattan. Jerome Barth of the Fifth Avenue Association says the group

wants shoppers strolling between Central Park and Rockefeller Center to see an uninterrupted stretch of holiday cheer. Tourists crowd the avenue every holiday season to see the elaborate decorations at stores like Saks Fifth Avenue and

But New York City has seen an increase in vacant storefronts in recent years. The city comptroller's office says the retail vacancy rate climbed to 5.8% in 2017 from 4% in 2007.

Information from: The Wall Street Journal, www.wsj.com



How to Pick the 'Right' Amount to Spend on Holiday Gifts – According to an Economist

Jay L. Zagorsky Boston University

(The Conversation is an independent and nonprofit source of news, analysis and commentary from academic experts.)

(THE CONVERSATION) Gift giving is a big deal this time of

To find the "perfect" gift, Americans will spend about 15 hours shopping. Women will do about twice as much as men. And they'll shell out about US\$1 trillion on gifts.

While retailers relish the holiday shopping season as a time when consumers open their purses or wallets, for many consumers - especially those who do not like shopping - these days are filled with dread. They mark moments when shoppers clog malls, websites become overloaded and delivery trucks block streets. The entire process generates untold amounts of stress and anxiety.

One source of stress is just how much to spend on gifts. Spending too much can put you in financial distress. Spending too little may make you look cheap.

How do you decide what's the "right" amount to spend on



As an economist, I study holidays and gift giving because a large fraction of retail shopping is driven by seasonal events like Black Friday, Cyber Monday and Super Saturday – also and more appropriately known as Panic Saturday – which is the last Saturday before Christmas. DEAD WEIGHT LOSS'

The long lines of people returning items after the holidays seem evidence enough for that.

This has led some economists to argue there's a "dead weight loss" to Christmas presents that "destroys" as much as a third of their actual value. A 2018 study estimated Americans spend \$13 billion a year on unwanted gifts.

Other economists, however, have resisted this Scrooge-like view of gift giving and point to evidence that a present can actually have more value to the recipient than the price the giver paid. In other words, a gift, even when technically unwanted, could have more value simply because someone else bought it

SETTING A BUDGET

Since gifting is a social act, it makes sense to consider how much other people typically spend.

veys run each year that ask peo-

what they plan on spending for holiday gifts. The National Retail Federation's annual survey of holiday spending estimates the typical American will spend \$659 on gifts for family, friends and co-workers in 2019. On the high end, Gallup puts the average at \$942, with more than a third of respondents expecting to spend over \$1,000 on gifts.

But these figures aren't that helpful for an individual since \$659 means something different to someone making \$40,000 a year versus \$200,000.

That's where the Consumer Expenditure Survey comes in. It's a large survey run by the Bureau of Labor Statistics that tracks the spending habits of 12,000 to 15,000 families each year. The government uses the survey to determine the cost of living and inflation rates for the typical family.

The survey follows gift giving very precisely. It has categories for common holiday presents like electronics, books and clothes, as well as gifts that typically aren't associated with the season such as housing and transportation.

After removing these non-holiday gifts, the typical U.S. family spends about 1% of its annual take-home pay on gifts. So whatever you earn, you could multiply it by 1% to get a figure that is in the ballpark of what the average American spends - but won't break the

MAKING THE HOLIDAYS **MEMORABLE**

While calculating a gift budget is one way to take the stress out of how much to spend on gifts, my family has another: Only give gifts to children.

Adults get wrapped boxes filled with paper. After the real gifts are opened and the young children are safely moved out of the way, we crumple up the paper and throw it at each other in our annual paper fight.

That keeps the cost down while making the kids feel special. It also ensures the kids don't feel left out when their friends talk about the gifts they received. Other families follow their own methods for controlling expenses, such as secret Santa gifts or by focusing attention more on togetherness than on the stuff received.

Whether you have a paper fight or follow another family tradition, my main message is that it doesn't take very much money to make the winter holidays memorable.

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On the Money: Making Gift Wrap Sustainable

By Dee-Ann Durbin

Growing unease about waste has some Americans rethinking wrapping paper.

Gift wrap is still a huge business. U.S. sales of wrapping paper climbed 4% to \$8.14 billion last year, according to a recent report by Sundale Research. But sales of reusable gift bags rose faster, the company said. Sundale said it's also closely watching green trends furoshiki, the Japanese art of

wrapping with fabric — because

they could impact gift wrap

Northern Arizona University, started wrapping Christmas gifts

in brown paper grocery bags a

few years ago when she saw the bags piling up at home.

environmentalism, but a good

way to use these bags that aren't

going to get used otherwise,"

reusable bags to the grocery, the

pile is getting smaller. Wood says she might switch to fabric

wrapping that she can reuse

able nature of my wrapping,"

released last month, half of U.S.

respondents said they will give

holiday gifts without wrapping

this year to avoid using paper,

according to Accenture, a con-

sulting firm. Nearly two-thirds said they would happily receive

Gift wrap companies are tak-

ing notice. IG Design Group, a United Kingdom-based maker of

stationery and wrapping paper,

said earlier this year that it re-

moved glitter from its paper because it's not recyclable.

This year, about one-third of Pa-

per Source's holiday wrapping

Paper Source, a Chicago-

gifts without wrapping.

"I want to change the dispos-

Some consumers are ditching wrapping altogether. In a survey

Now that her parents carry

she said.

each year.

she said.

"It wasn't consciously around

Marie Wood, a student at

sales in the coming years.

papers will be stone-based.

'Our customer is more aware of sustainability and their carbon footprint," said Patrick Priore, the chief marketing officer for Paper Source. "We would be foolish not to go in that area." Here are some wrapping and

recycling ideas:

Choose recyclable gift wrap. Papers that contain foil, plastic coating, cellophane and glitter are not recyclable, according to the American Forest and Paper Association. The association says

a general rule of thumb is to crumple the paper; if it stays in a tight ball, it's paperbased and can be recycled. Kula, Hawaiibased Wrappily uses old printing presses print designs on recyclable newsprint. A three-sheet set of its paper is \$10. Hallmark sells a set of four rolls -35.2 feet in to-\$14.99. Paper Source says its stone paper can be recycled; it costs \$9.95 for a 10foot roll. Go with

bags.

Westlake, Ohio-based American Greetings says gift bags now make up 30% of its wrapping business. They cost more upfront than many wrapping papers, but they're easy to reuse; just cut off ribbon handles which aren't recyclable — if you're putting paper gift bags in the recycling bin. Many sizes and varieties of gift bags are available at Etsy.com. Philadelphia-based VZ Wraps sells a set of three cotton wine bags for \$13.59. Amazon has a set of five cotton bags for \$23.95.

Wrap with fabric. An ancient craft in Japan is gaining converts elsewhere. Ten Thousand Villages, a fair-trade retail chain, sells gift wrap made from saris that are recycled by artisans in Bangladesh. The company says sales have been growing steadily since the wraps were introduced in 2013; so far this year, sales are up 20% over 2018. The 26-square-inch wrap, which comes with instructions, sells for \$12.99. Or go even simpler; wrap a gift in a pillowcase

or a T-shirt. - Recycle it all. New Jerseybased recycling company Terra-Cycle promises to recycle everything — including ribbons, bows, tissue paper and wrapping paper with glitter — in its Gift Zero Waste Box. The company sends customers an empty box with a paid return label; once it's full of gift wrap, customers send it back. TerraCycle says it has processes for even hard-to-recycle products like ribbon, which it uses for insulation or melts into plastic pellets. The company says a medium box is the most popular size for family gatherings; it costs \$147.

Gift giving is stressful because nobody wants to buy what they think is a perfect gift only to discover it is a dud.

So if you're dead set on buying some gifts, how much should you budget for it?

There are a number of surple during the fall to estimate

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based chain, introduced a recyclable wrapping paper made out of crushed marble and limestone that uses less water to produce than regular paper. A limited release of the paper sold out before the holidays last year.



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