

Family Fusion: Combining Christian and Jewish holidays

Nancy Sharp, Special to the Rocky

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Photo by Photo Courtesy Of Nancy Sharp

Wedding bells rang for Nancy Sharp and Steve Saunders on July 5. Their blended family is made up of Saunders' sons, Ryan, 17, far left, and Dylan, 16, far right, and Sharp's twins, Rebecca and Casey, 7.

Circa 1997: New York City and a mishmash Christmas at the Zickermans. The memory still makes me smile - mini-Hebrew National hot dogs, a lighted Hanukkah bush and, of course, the upbeat melody of Charlie Brown's Christmas music.

My first husband and I designated Dec. 25 as our holiday to host because our Jewish mothers had claimed all the others.

Much has changed since those years. My husband died, I moved to Colorado with my twins and remarried in July, and now I get to legitimately celebrate Christmas. And Hanukkah.

My new husband is Steve Saunders - Denver native and 7 News anchor/reporter (which also means that Dusty Saunders, a mainstay at this paper for more than 50 years, is my father-in-law). I leapt at the *Rocky's* offer to write about blending our family this holiday season, our first



Photo by Ellen Jaskol / The Rocky

Twins Rebecca and Casey Zickerman fashion ornaments in the shapes of airplanes, hearts, flowers, reindeer, menorahs and Jewish stars.

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together. Might this mean no more scrambling for last-minute Hanukkah tchotchkes and stocking stuffers that the kids discard as quickly as they open them?

Yes, and so much more.

By saying "I do" in July, Steve and I took such a huge leap forward for our families that this season must embody something far more defining. By which I mean: How can we make our mark as a new family?

For us, the answer lies partly in honoring the past. Having both been widowed, our former loves and the lives we created together still live on in our hearts and those of our children: Ryan, 17, Dylan, 16, and Casey and Rebecca, 7. Next month it'll be 6 years since Pam, Steve's wife, died of pancreatic cancer; my husband, Brett, lost his brain-cancer battle 13 months later.

Today, the turbulent feelings of mourning are behind us and our losses are simply part of our story. We see this reality reflected daily in the faces of our children, also in the memories that pull us back in time.

Like when Ryan and Dylan, then 7 and 8, gleefully tore through floor-to-ceiling-high wrapping paper that hid the Christmas tree and the presents beneath. Or when my grandmother, at the ripe age of 93, teased Brett about not buying green bananas while our babies crawled at her feet. She told the joke often, and while she, too, is long gone, I still hear their playful banter clear as a song.

So life moves along. Here I am a Denverite, married again and feeling happier and more settled than I have in years. How did I get so lucky? Serendipity may have brought Steve and me together (we met through *5280* magazine two years ago when Steve appeared in its "top singles" issue), but faith in a better future sealed the deal.

It occurs to me that celebrating this future is precisely how the Saunders-Sharp-Zickerman clan can make its mark. I feel sorry for the mailman, what with all these names sharing a tiny box, but if he reads our story, maybe he'll be more understanding. For our family, simply appreciating what it means to be together is the great gift of the season.

We're planning a "fusion" meal for the six of us that the kids will help prepare. The boys chose banana cream pie for dessert, a favorite of their mom's. And Casey and Rebecca want to serve mini-hot dogs in memory of their dad. I'll make fresh challah bread, my grandmother's brisket and Steve's mom's Irish mashed potatoes. We'll throw in some latkes and even a little eggnog. To us, the meal represents the best of the past and the start of a new tradition. We plan to feast in the dining room and ban cell phones and texting. Above all else, the night is about enjoying one another.

And what would a first Christmas for two Jewish kids be without a tree? I love the way Casey and Rebecca have taken responsibility for creating ornaments: airplanes, hearts, flowers, reindeer, menorahs, Jewish stars, photos and whatever

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else strikes them as celebratory. In this way, we'll add our own symbols to those Steve and the boys have collected over the years. The more the merrier.

But not more presents. This year in particular, we, like so many families, have talked to our kids about setting limits. It's not just about economics, it's about gratitude.

As Casey, so wise beyond his 7 years, says, "People should just be happy with what they have." And we are.

Reaching across faiths

Stepping Stones supports about 400 interfaith couples and families throughout Denver and Boulder every year. Here are some tips on how to create respectful holiday customs that are right for your blended family:

* **Create an opportunity** for everyone in the family to share favorite memories and traditions.

* **Find common ground in food**, family, music, community service or gift-giving.

* **Create a new tradition that integrates** everyone's vision. You might introduce a time-honored recipe, plan a day of service or collectively agree on a new family ritual.

* **Have meaningful dialogue.** Create a special family meal or activity and ask thought-provoking questions like "Do you believe in

miracles?" and "What is it about Hanukkah and Christmas that you like most?" The idea is to elicit feelings about faith, family, culture and values.

* **Build memories that will be reservoirs for life.** Consider starting a family scrapbook with holiday photos and keepsakes that can be added to in subsequent years.

* **Learn more about blending faiths** at Stepping Stones, 5840 E. Evans Ave. Call 303-388-1198 or visit steppingstonesfamily.com for more information.

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