Local booksellers’ top picks for 2012

Staff members from Books Inc., Kepler’s, list their year’s favorites

The Palo Alto Weekly asked local booksellers Kepler’s and Books Inc. to recommend their staffs’ top five picks for 2012. Here are some of their favorites.

“End of Your Life Book Club,” by Will Schwalbe, Knopf: If you are an avid reader and love books, you will love this one. It’s a non-fiction story about a mother going through chemo for pancreatic cancer and her journalist son. They share books and their outlooks on life as she goes through her treatments. Each chapter deals with one of the books they shared, and the variety is amazing. It is very much about what they learn from each other. I loved this book and will read some of the featured books I have not read. (Nancy Salmon, Kepler’s)

“Gone Girl,” by Gillian Flynn, Crown: A delightfully twisted thriller centered on the discordant marriage of the strikingly smart child book-series star, Amy, and the charming, Midwestern bred Nick. The story starts with Amy’s...
disappearance, and suspicion immediately falls on the husband. While the police are investigating, the reader learns when and how Amy and Nick fell in love, living fabulously as successful writers in New York City. Then the economy collapses, both lose their jobs and realize they’re on the brink of bankruptcy. Nick takes Amy back to his hometown in Missouri, using the last of Amy’s trust fund money to start up a bar. In essence, no one is happy with this situation, save perhaps Nick’s sister Go. The secrets start with a trickle and build to a full-on flood. The story is clever, the telling is exciting and the end is masterful. (Tanya Landsberger, Books Inc.)

“Radical Chapters: Pacifist Bookseller Roy Kepler and the Paperback Revolution,” by Michael Doyle, Syracuse University Press: Dense with local history, this well-researched biography celebrates Roy Kepler’s life as a conscientious objector, peace activist and bookseller. Stories from the time when Jerry Garcia, Joan Baez and Ira Sandperl were regular fixtures at Kepler’s Books & Magazines. (Christin Evans, Kepler’s)

“Ide Life: Stories,” by Alice Munro, Knopf: Alice Munro is an expert of the ordinary. Her fiction is a delicate probe, and the object of her search — executed through unornamented, subtly asymmetrical language — is a seismograph of internal life: complete, fully formed, an emotional register of the most delicate sort. To read Munro is to wake up to sympathy, intelligence, feeling. (Camden Avery, Kepler’s)

“Joseph Anton,” by Salman Rushdie, Random House: A memoir no one should have had to write, this is the first-person account of the notorious milestone 1989 fatwa and how its target lived through years in hiding and on the run. He endured the disruption to emerge as much the consummate storyteller he always was. The pen is mightier than the sword. (Melissa Mytinger, Kepler’s)

“Mr. Penumbra’s 24-Hour Bookstore,” by Robin Sloan, Farrar, Straus and Giroux: A perfect tale for our tech-driven time set in the Bay Area. Sloan’s debut novel is a terrifically agreeable story of words, books, computer science and art with a marvelous mysterious thread throughout, and young love, to boot. Sloan — and Mr. Penumbra — signal a future in which books really do exist simultaneously with all that’s “e.” (Melissa Mytinger, Kepler’s)

“Dear Life,” by Alice Munro, Knopf: Alice Munro is a legend. One of the most important, ground breaking, consistently awesome figures in rock history. Neil Young gives us an inside glimpse at what makes him tick. An essential for any fan. (Kelly McNerney, Kepler’s)

“Waging Heavy Peace,” by Neil Young, Blue Rider Press: Neil Young is a legend. One of the most important, ground breaking, consistently awesome figures in rock history. Neil Young gives us an inside glimpse at what makes him tick. An essential for any fan. (Kelly McNerney, Kepler’s)

“Radical Chapters: Pacifist Bookseller Roy Kepler and the Paperback Revolution,” by Michael Doyle, Syracuse University Press: Dense with local history, this well-researched biography celebrates Roy Kepler’s life as a conscientious objector, peace activist and bookseller. Stories from the time when Jerry Garcia, Joan Baez and Ira Sandperl were regular fixtures at Kepler’s Books & Magazines. (Christin Evans, Kepler’s)
“Redshirts,” by John Scalzi. Redshirts is far stranger than they could have possibly thought. What follows is a hilarious look at science-fiction tropes mixed with the most thoughtful debate on free will and determinism this side of Sam Harris. Great geek gift! (Steven Sautter, Books Inc.)

“The Art Forger,” by B.A. Shapiro, Algonquin Books: “The Art Forger” is based on a real unsolved art heist. An artist who earns her crust by copying famous paintings agrees to forge an oil by Degas — using the stolen original as the template and inspirations. The original seduces her with its luminous beauty, until she starts to notice some of the flaws in the brushwork. Is this really an original Degas? The reader will learn a great deal about the techniques of art forgery and the obsessive love of collectors in this convoluted yet readable novel. One will also be able to amuse family and friends at the holiday table by dropping interesting forgery facts into the conversation. And, while trying to hide that last Brussel sprout under the napkin, one may wonder who stole those priceless canvasses, and where do they hang now? (Linda Reid, Books Inc.)

“The Song of Achilles,” by Madeline Miller, Ecco: Madeline Miller won a well-deserved Orange Prize for this lushly rendered retelling of “The Iliad.” Told from the point of view of Patroclus (Achilles’ companion, and, in this version, his lover), the book takes us from the boyhoods of Achilles and Patroclus (including visits from Achilles’ sea-goddess mother, Thetis), the beginnings of their life-long relationship (an idea Miller took from Plato and Aeschylus) and through to the Trojan War and its aftermath. Miller’s prose is gorgeous and her knowledge of the era (she has a doctorate in Classics) shines through. Ten years in the writing, this debut novel is the perfect gift for the history buff, the lover of all things ancient, and for those always on the lookout for an intriguing and engrossing story. (Lori Haggblom, Books Inc.)

“The Righteous Mind,” by Jonathan Haidt, Pantheon: Building upon certain elements of his previous book, “The Happiness Hypothesis,” Haidt delves into what constitutes true civility and reason, and how we may work toward creating a uniting compassion in our lives, especially regarding the overwhelmingly divisive issues of religion and politics. This is a fraction of the deeper meanings and theories examined in the book, often lacking any kind of definitive conclusion as each is discussed. The reader is called upon to weigh each side, view things differently and determine her or his own approach to the queries presented. Everyone will not likely agree with what’s said, but one can suppose that could all be part of the point. (Tanya Landsberger, Books Inc.)
A rtists, architects and spies (plus a few furry animals and other critters) play starring roles in great books for kids this holiday season.

For those wishing to give the gift of reading and unlock children’s imaginations, here are a few books that are sure to delight.

**The Christmas Quiet Book** by Deborah Underwood, illustrated by Renata Liwska, Houghton Mifflin, ages 2-8: San Francisco author Deborah Underwood finds examples of quiet moments during what can be a noisy time of year—things even California kids (who don’t get snow) recognize: decorating the tree, reading by a fire, bundling up, drinking cocoa, listening to “Nutcracker Suite.” Illustrator Renata Liwska’s adorable fuzzy forest animals indulge in a bit of holiday mischief, too, which adds humor to this picture book kids will want to cuddle up with and parents will enjoy settling little ones down with.

**Dreaming Up: A celebration of building** by Christy Hale, Lee & Low, ages 2 and up: Imagine a book that’s a terrific gift for a toddler as well as any older child interested in art, design or architecture, and you have “Dreaming Up.” Palo Alto author and illustrator Christy Hale uses mixed media and poetry to show the connection between the simple things a child builds and buildings of famous 19th, 20th, and 21st century architects from around the world. Stacking cups, wooden blocks, Popsicle sticks, Legos, sandcastles, a (fire)house of cards, even sofa-cushion forts and blanket nooks are shown opposite real buildings inspired by their simpler creations. It’s brilliant. “Dreaming Up” is further enhanced by architect biographies, portraits and quotes, as well as descriptions of the buildings and a list of source materials.

**This Is Not My Hat** by Jon Klassen, Candlewick, ages 2-8: A little fish steals a hat from a big fish, then uses typical little-kid logic to convince himself he’ll get away with the theft—even though he knows it is wrong. But will the little guy escape, especially when someone sees him hide in the underwater jungle? Even when the someone (a crab) said he wouldn’t tell? Kids will love to come up with their own ending for this artfully told tale that invites the question: Does crime pay?

**The Cavendish Home for Boys and Girls** by Claire Legrand, illustrated by Sarah Watt, Simon & Schuster, ages 8-12: Everything’s perfect in 12-year-old super-student Victoria’s hometown. Her best (and only) friend, Lawrence, may have a gray streak in his hair and be obsessed with playing the piano, but he is Victoria’s personal project. Then he disappears. He’s not the only one, as other less-than-perfect children and even teachers go missing. Are they possibly being held against their will in the town’s creepy, bug-infested Cavendish Home for Boys and Girls? Victoria takes it upon herself to solve the mystery and rescue the “degen-
erates” (as Mrs. Cavendish calls them) though not before experiencing the horrors of the Home first-hand. She also learns to appreciate individual differences and true friendship — which is even better than perfection.

Liar and Spy by Rebecca Stead, Random House/Wendy Lamb, ages 9-14: Life is tough for Georges (the “s” is silent) — he’s being bullied at school, his dad has been fired and they had to sell their house and move into an apartment, and his mom, a nurse, is spending all her time at the hospital. Then he meets Safer, another 12-year-old who lives upstairs. Safer invites Georges to join a Spy Club and trains Georges to pay attention to details. For they need to spy on Mr. X, who may be a murderer living in their building. Gulp! The little things in this intricate, thoughtful novel add up to a big picture of reality — as bittersweet as it sometimes is — for Georges, his friends, family and most especially the reader. Fears eventually must be dealt with. And sometimes “rules are made to be broken.”

Drama by Raina Telgemeier; Scholastic/Graphix, ages 10-14: San Francisco native Raina Telgemeier clearly understands middle school drama. The graphic novel stars Callie, a theater geek with pink streaks in her hair who is filled with emotions as she goes about designing sets and navigating behind the scenes of the Eucalyptus Middle School play. Who does she like? Who does she dislike? Who’s gay? Why do the roles keep changing? And why won’t her confetti cannon work when she needs it to? As if there weren’t enough to love about “Drama,” the last names of most of the main characters are California counties. Brava!

Code Name Verity by Elizabeth Wein, Hyperion, ages 12 and up: I am not exaggerating when I state that “Code Name Verity” is better than any book for adults (even NYT best-sellers and award-winners) I have read in the past year. “Verity,” a British spy who goes by many names, is a heroine as fierce and clever as Katniss Everdeen in “The Hunger Games,” trying to survive in a world just as evil: Nazi-occupied France. “Queenie” (another of her pseudonyms) has been captured and imprisoned in an old French hotel. She makes a deal with the Gestapo to tell her story. And what a tale it is, of how she becomes best friends with Maddie, a crackerjack English mechanic-turned-pilot who would and does do anything for her. As Maddie puts it, the Scottish spy’s story is “full of bookish nonsense and foul language, brave and generous.” It tells of a friendship forged and strengthened amidst the horrors of war. “Code Name Verity” is worth re-reading for clues and “aha!” moments. I also highly recommend the audiobook, which brings to life these remarkable characters.

A world of cooking

From minimalist to Jerusalem, there’s plenty to explore

by Anne Sturmthal Bergman

This year we have chosen a smorgasbord of cookbooks. From roadside to Jerusalem, there is a lot to explore.

“The Mini Minimalist,” by Mark Bittman, Clarkson Potter, four small hardbacks: In general, I like Mark Bittman, and find his recipes creative and easy to follow. However, this package of four little books seemed more like a gimmick to me. If one wanted to travel with a cookbook, one could choose one of these and have the recipes at hand, or perhaps the small size means that the cookbook is not so intimidating. I made Brussels sprouts with chestnuts, a favorite of the season. The recipe called for bacon, which I omitted in deference to my vegetarian guests. The world is divided into people who either love or hate Brussels sprouts, but in my test diners, all thought it was a great combination of flavors — with a little brown sugar added. By the time this recipe is complete, the chestnuts are almost caramelized and their flavor lightens the strong flavor of the Brussels sprouts. Some nice recipes, in four books in a box. A good holiday gift for those who like things simple and tasty.

“Ripe, A Cook in the Orchard,” by Nigel Slater, Ten Speed Press: This beautiful book, by a British author, follows the fruits of the seasons and suggests recipes accordingly. I found it hard to substitute some of our kinds of fruit. British apples do not have the same names as our apples, and some of the recipes (such as those for currants or gooseberries) were mouthwatering, but since those berries are hard to find here, difficult to make. I did make an apple crisp, which uses a minimum of cinnamon with the apples. Crusts of white bread that are
to the Cuisinart, with sugar added, cover the apples. The crust was then covered with melted butter. This was nice and tart, and the breadcrumbs made an unusual crust since we tend to use brown sugar, flour and occasionally oatmeal. I threw some golden raisins on the top. I also made Lemon Posset, a simple recipe that makes lemony custard, which, with the addition of some fresh berries and put in a wine glass, looks very elegant. This is a showy dessert that requires almost no effort. A wonderful book, especially for those who like to buy fresh fruit from the local farmer’s markets.

“More Diners, Drive-Ins, Dives,” by Guy Fieri with Ann Volkwein, William Morrow: This book reviews a variety of low cost, relatively unknown (except to Fieri’s fans) eateries from coast to coast. Fieri has a large fan base from his show on the Cooking Network and generously shows each team member and their comments early on in the book. Clearly, this is a tight-knit group of troupers who cross the country in an ancient Chevy Impala and drop in on known and unknown places for a week at a time, not uttering a word to anyone. There are no counseling or support offered to her or her sister to work through the ramifications of their family’s terrible secret.

As an adult, Yoshie experienced frequent bouts of depression. Four years ago, she lost her job at a community college, and subsequently, her apartment. She moved back into her mother’s home, but without the ability to pay rent, Yoshie’s sister, who was managing her mother’s affairs, threatened eviction. Spiraling into a deep depression, Yoshie was reminded by her father not to speak about her mother to anyone. She learned from each other in group exercises, went on outings, and dwell or brood. As she got to know her peers and learned of their experiences, she realized that she was not alone. They shared and dined together with open minds.

Every day, there was something going on, so there was no time to dwell or brood. As she got to know her peers and learned of their experiences, she realized that she was not alone. They shared and learned from each other in group exercises, went on outings, and worked with their case managers on setting goals and planning next steps. When she started to feel down, Yoshie found that Caminar staff members were always there, day or night, to support her.

Caminar appreciates Yoshie’s willingness to share her story and also for employers like Yoshie’s who give individuals who have a mental illness a real chance to prove to themselves and to the world what they are capable of accomplishing. As Yoshie shows, recovery is real, and it is happening every day at Caminar.

Visit www.caminar.org or call (650) 372-4080
Candlelight Service
An Annual Community Gathering of Remembrance

Please Join Us
For an evening of remembrance where readings on the themes of Love, Hope, Memory & Courage come together with live music and culminate in the candle lighting ceremony to honor those we have loved and lost.

Thursday, December 6, 2012 at 7pm
Generously hosted by:
First Presbyterian Church
1140 Cowper Street, Palo Alto
(directly behind the Kara office on Kingsley Avenue)

Parking can be a challenge. We urge you to arrive early.

For more information on Kara or our Candlelight Service, call 650-321-5272 or visit www.Kara-Grief.org

MEDIA SPONSORS
Grief Support for Children, Teens, Families & Adults

Where to give

by Lisa Kellman

It can be hard to know what friends may want for the holidays, but local nonprofit organizations that serve the needy have their wish lists ready.

Several charities in the area collect food, clothing, gifts and more, which will help the homeless, aid families down on their luck and bring cheer to severely ill children. Below are a few charities looking for donations this holiday season.

Christmas Bureau of Palo Alto
Christmas Bureau volunteers provide assistance to families and individuals who have been referred by schools and social agencies. Financial donations to the Christmas Bureau are turned into gift checks for those in need. The checks can be spent by the recipients as they see fit, whether to buy food or gifts for their families. Checks may be made out to the Christmas Bureau. 450 Bryant St., Palo Alto, CA 94301. Email christmasbureau@me.com. www.christmasbureauofpaloalto.org.

Ecumenical Hunger Program The program feeds the homeless and gives away bags of groceries in East Palo Alto. This holiday season, food, clothing and household essentials are needed. Presents for people of all ages can be donated unwrapped: bed linens, household items, gift certificates to local department stores, remote-control toy trucks and cars, infant toys, dolls, soccer balls, footballs, watches, basketballs and clothing with sports motifs. 2441 Pulgas Ave., East Palo Alto. Call 650-232-7781. www.ehpcares.org

St. Anthony’s Padua Dining Room The meal program needs turkeys, fresh produce and all the trimmings for its Christmas meals. The wish list includes turkeys, chickens, hams and produce. 3500 Middlefield Road, Menlo Park. Call 650-365-9665.

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St. Francis of Assisi Church in East Palo Alto St. Francis needs canned food for its give-away through St. Vincent DePaul. Call 650-322-1231.

South Palo Alto Food Closet The food bank serves the needy through its the south Palo Alto location and needs boxes of pasta, hot cereal and condiments including mustard, relish, ketchup and salad dressing. 670 East Meadow Drive, Palo Alto. Call 650-494-9310.

Second Harvest Food Bank The largest food bank in the Bay Area distributes food to the poor throughout Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. The agency needs canned food and money. 1051 Bing St., San Carlos. Call 650-660-0800. www.shfb.org

Downtown Streets Team This nonprofit strives to end homelessness by rebuilding the lives of unhoused men and women and helping them get off the streets and become self sufficient. It needs financial donations to assist with its work program. 555 Waverley St., Palo Alto. Email chris@streetsteam.org. Call 650-305-1174. www.streetsteam.org

Ronald McDonald House at Stanford This house supports families of children with life-threatening illnesses. It has a wishing tree with ornament tags that list gifts needed by the agency this season. Companies, schools and individuals can pick up ornaments at Ronald McDonald House. The deadline to pick up ornaments is Dec. 19. When the gifts are purchased, they should be dropped off back at the house. 520 Sand Hill Road, Palo Alto. Call 650-470-6000. Ronaldhouse.net

ImVision Shelter Network The agency serves the homeless through its Opportunity Center in Palo Alto and Food Closet in downtown Palo Alto. It is in need of cash, checks, gift cards, toiletries, new or like-new infant/baby supplies, new or like-new linens, new or like-new clothing, and cleaning supplies. Food donations may be only at Food Closet, 425 Hamilton Ave., Palo Alto. Call 650-325-3663. Clothing, linens, toiletries, gifts may be donated only at the Opportunity Center, 33 Encina Ave., Palo Alto.

If your organization is located in Palo Alto or East Palo Alto and you wish for it to be included in the Weekly’s “Where to Give” list, please email editor@pawEEKLY.com with the subject heading, “Where to Give.”
Support our Kids
with a gift to the Holiday Fund.

Each year the Palo Alto Weekly Holiday Fund raises money to support programs serving families and children in the Palo Alto area. Since the Weekly and the Silicon Valley Community Foundation cover all the administrative costs, every dollar raised goes directly to support community programs through grants to non-profit organizations ranging from $1,000 to $25,000.

And with the generous support of matching grants from local foundations, including the Packard and Hewlett foundations, your tax-deductible gift will be doubled in size. A donation of $100 turns into $200 with the foundation matching gifts.

Whether as an individual, a business or in honor of someone else, help us reach our goal of $350,000 by making a generous contribution to the Holiday Fund.

With your generosity, we can give a major boost to the programs in our community helping kids and families.

Give to the Palo Alto Weekly Holiday Fund and your donation is doubled.
You give to non-profit groups that work right here in our community. It’s a great way to ensure that your charitable donations are working at home.

Donate online at siliconvalleycf.org/paw-holiday-fund

Enclosed is a donation of $__________
Name ________________________________
Business Name ______________________________
Address ________________________________
City/State/Zip ________________________________
E-Mail ________________________________
Phone ________________________________

Q Credit Card (MC, VISA, or AMEX) ____________
Signature __________________________________________

I wish to designate my contribution as follows: (select one)

□ In my name as shown above
□ OR □ In name of business above: □ In honor of: □ In memory of: □ As a gift for: (Name of person)

For information on making contributions of appreciated stock, contact Bill Johnson at (650) 326-8210.

Please Make checks payable to: Silicon Valley Community Foundation and send to:
Palo Alto Weekly Holiday Fund
c/o Silicon Valley Community Foundation
2440 W. El Camino Real, Suite 300
Mountain View, CA 94040

Non-profits: Grant application and guidelines at www.PaloAltoOnline.com/holidayfund

Last Year’s Grant Recipients

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Please withhold the amount of my contribution.
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People across the Peninsula are celebrating the holiday season by giving gifts that trump those you might find at a department store. These are gifts of time and generosity, of good will and inspiration. For many, volunteering during the holiday season has become a tradition that can unite families and inspire others.

Some help organize uplifting holiday exhibits and events, such as the annual Christmas Creche Exhibit in Palo Alto or the Bethlehem A.D. event in Redwood City, while others plan community food or toy drives. One fourth-grade student from East Palo Alto sent a handwritten letter praising her grandmother’s volunteering — “I am proud to be her granddaughter,” she wrote.

Here are first-person accounts from people in the community about how they help celebrate the holidays by volunteering to help others.

Twelve days of service

Our family celebrates Christmas, and as part of our celebration we have two different advent calendars to count down the days to Dec. 25. One of the calendars has a small box for each day where I place a square of paper with a typed message inside. I had initially written down fun activities and traditions for us to do as a family, such as walking down Christmas Tree Lane and decorating cookies.

But I felt like I also wanted to impart to my three children an awareness of the true spirit of selfless service that is a key part of our Christian faith. I decided to start the “Twelve Days of Christmas,” where at least 12 of the papers in our advent calendar would be acts of service that we would perform together, and we have done this for the past seven years.

Some activities we do anonymously, so the kids can recognize that true service has no desire for thanks or recognition. And as each year has passed, I take it as a personal challenge to find even more activities that blend service and fun, so that the kids learn that the two can go hand in hand.

Here are some of our favorite activities over the years:

- "Adopt" a family in need by buying gifts and food items and leaving the items anonymously at their doorstep
- Look at Heifer International online and choose a "share" of an animal to donate to a family in need
- Go to San Francisco on Christmas Eve with a handful of Subway gift cards to give to homeless people we see as we walk through the city
- Take toy and food donations to our favorite local performance of “The Christmas Carol,” “The Gift” at Notre Dame de Namur College
- Participate in our school’s “Working Wonders” toy drive supporting InvVision Shelter Network, and help sort the toys at their Toy Shoppe
- Go caroling with friends to neighbors who are elderly or alone
- Write thank you letters to teachers both at school and church
- Hold a free babysitting session at our home for moms of young children so they can go holiday shopping kid-free
- I feel like my kids, now ages 7, 9 and 12, have really grown to appreciate performing these acts of service for others, and it has become a cherished part of celebrating the Christmas season for us.

— Heidi Mickelsen, Palo Alto

Charities and the ‘Cousin Exchange’

I am from a family of nine siblings. As we have had our children (now there are 21 grand-children ages 6-30s) we wanted to come up with a meaningful way for cousins to exchange gifts with each other that minimized the financial burden on their parents, reduced waste (who needs all the plastic of cheap kid-to-kid gifts?), and realized the true meaning of the holidays across our family’s religions (Christian, Jewish and Muslim).

The result has become a favorite family tradition formally known as the Cousin Exchange.

In early December, all cousins are asked if they want to participate in the annual Cousin Exchange and what issue/organization they want to support this year. Names are put in a hat and an aunt picks and makes assignments (this is kept secret until Christmas Day). Each cousin makes a $25 gift to the chosen charity/cause (sometimes they have to search for the right charity) of the assigned cousin and prepares a card for Christmas Day.

When our extended family gathers that afternoon, the cousins get in a circle and one by one take their cousin’s present and bring it up to the circle. Each cousin talks about the gift and sometimes they have to search for the right charity) of the assigned cousin and prepares a card for Christmas Day.

Over the years we have learned much about
the next generation of Swezey’s — sometimes certain charities are chosen based on cuddly animals in trouble around the world, friends’ illnesses or support for aging grandparents; sometimes we learn new forays into high school or college activism; always we have learned the true meaning of the holidays.

— Megan Swezey Fogarty, Palo Alto

Singing for seniors
Our Palo Alto Girl Scout Troop, 60893, has a favorite holiday tradition, singing to seniors at the Sunrise Assisted Living Center on El Camino Real in Palo Alto.

We sing traditional carols and make conversation with them. Some of the people there have some memory difficulties, but they always remember ‘Jingle Bells!’ The best part about going is seeing all the happy faces. We started going when we were Brownies, in first grade at El Carmelo Elementary School, and now we are seventh-graders at JLS and Castilleja.

To be honest, it can sometimes feel sad because it can be hard to see someone struggling with remembering things, but that bittersweet feeling never stops us from going. For some of the seniors, they live in the moment, because that’s what they have, the moment, instead of lots of memories.

We are privileged to get to experience the moment with them. We want to do what we can to make the moment happy. We want them to enjoy themselves and the holidays, and we want them to know that they are cared for and surrounded by love.

— Palo Alto Girl Scout Troop 60893

Roadrunners’ food drive
The Roadrunners Sports Club started a holiday tradition of having a food drive for those in the East Palo Alto and East Menlo Park areas. For the past five years, the players, coaches and parents have all come together to collect, create and distribute food to those in need. This year Roadrunners collected enough food to feed over 30 individuals.

Raymond Fowler, a 13-year-old basketball player, says: “I really enjoy volunteering during the holiday season. It’s a time to share with those who are less fortunate. It is also a time to give back to my community in a positive way by helping others. It is important for me to volunteer so I can touch and make a difference in the lives of other people.”

— Tiffany Sutton, East Palo Alto

Collaborating on Crèche
Twenty-five years ago I started helping with the Christmas Crèche Exhibit (www.christmascreche.org) at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Palo Alto. In the beginning years I was a hostess for a few hours on one day — like being a docent in a museum.

Then for eight years I was in charge of all the physical facilities set-up. That was a huge job — making sure we had all the tables, lights and other infrastructure so the decorators can work their magic, the children have their space for nativity crafts and dress-ups, and nothing falls over and gets broken. After that I spent a few years doing the office and computer support.

We have a database of about 2,000 nativity sets to choose from and show 400+ each year. Each displayed set has a small card printed with information about the material, country of origin, artist, etc.

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This year I’ve “retired” and am back to being a hostess again. I’ll also be ringing with the Bell Choir for the concerts on one evening. It’s an amazing free community service that is totally done by volunteers to share with about 12,000 visitors in five days what Christmas is about — love and joy and music and friends remembering the birth of Jesus Christ.

— Sue Allen, Palo Alto

Lyton liveliness

Since 1986 our family has volunteered on Christmas morning at Lyton Gardens Health Care Center. At the time about 500 volunteers of the Mid-peninsula chapter of the Holiday Project (www.holiday-project.org) served over 4,000 Peninsula residents.

I co-led the team with Nellie Bartello, my mother, a resident of Lyton Gardens for 25 years. She was a volunteer assistant to the activities director for 12 years before she moved into assisted living, and subsequently the health care center where she died at age 96. My husband, Bob, has been a stalwart supporter as well. When our sons, Corey and Antone, were young boys they joined us, too. We’d go to church services on Christmas Eve. We’d rise early on Christmas morning to open presents, eat breakfast and head out the door.

Friends and family gather in the lobby at 10 a.m. We bring cheer to about 140 residents and staff on the three floors. We visit and sing Christmas and Hanukkah songs. From our first year with 24 visitors our numbers have swelled to 50 last year. We have sung a cappella, as well as with accordion, guitar or piano accompaniment. About half of the participants are members and family of Aurora Singers, a Palo Alto-based community chorus. Since 1991 Dawn Reyen, our musical director, and her family have made it a Christmas tradition, leading the singing and playing piano.

Since 2003 Butch and Lynne Shafsky have been Santa and Mrs. Claus, visiting and distributing cards and candy canes. We also have students and families from Peninsula School in Menlo Park, where I teach. VolunteerMatch has brought us folks from San Francisco and San Jose.

We end our visit when the residents have their lunch. Some of the volunteers scurry off to their holiday gatherings. Others linger over snacks and drinks in the lobby while they chat about the moving experiences they have just shared. Over the years we have shed more than a few tears as residents “came alive” and sang the familiar tunes. Some of them got up and danced. Many related stories of Christmases long ago and far away.

Our sons have grown, married and moved away. After our Christmas morning at Lyton, Bob and I catch a plane for Phoenix, so we can spend the rest of the holidays with our young grandkids. It wouldn’t be Christmas without our Lyton Gardens tradition.

— Graceann Johnson, Palo Alto

Becoming part of Bethlehem

When we came home from our first visit to Bethlehem A.D., my 4-year-old said, “We have just been to see the real baby Jesus,” and I knew we had come across something very special.

Bethlehem A.D. is a living nativity display that takes place in an otherwise empty lot in downtown Redwood City, recreating an entire Roman-era Hebrew village. The very next year our eldest daughter, then 12, was determined to play a role as one of the folk dancers in the village scene. It involved a few rehearsals beforehand, and then three evenings of performance beside the (real) fires near the marketplace.

Within a couple of years our two eldest boys both joined in, taking on the roles of village children who were able to participate, and one even became one of the ruffians in the chain gang taken away by the (full costume) Roman centurions! It was obvious our family had become hooked.

Eventually even I had to start joining in and for the past few years have been in costume greeting the visitors at the town gate or welcoming the visitors standing in line. I have also taken to helping out in the office and with the costume room in the run up to the event.

Even while away for college, our eldest made a point of coming back home in time to take part. Volunteering in such a well-organized and charming event has taught our children much about the historical context of life under Roman domination in the first century, as well as making the story of the first Christmas when Jesus was born come alive in their minds. This is not just a place to visit but an experience to remember. Dressing in character and playing a part makes the experience even more memorable for us, and it wouldn’t feel completely like Christmas without it.

Bethlehem A.D. takes place at 1312 Middlefield Road, Redwood City, Dec. 21, 22 and 23 from 6 to 9:30 p.m. and entrance is free.

— Carol Rogers, Palo Alto

Winter warmth

Girl Scout Troop 60647 of Palo Alto, Service Unit 601, gives back to the community during the holidays by volunteering for the

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A great grandmother
My name is Zahra Roberts. I am a student at Costano Elementary School in East Palo Alto. I’m in fourth grade.
I’m writing this to you about my Nana. My Nana volunteers at Salvation Army. Food for Life on Tuesdays. She fills food bags and passes them out. Also once a month for the Family Harvest Program.
I would like this to be known because she shows more love to people and children. I am proud to be her granddaughter.
— Zahra Roberts, East Palo Alto

Soul food
Almost 13 years ago, my mom at age 65, a lifetime native of Alabama, decided to leave all her friends, her family, her house and all her “stuff” to relocate to Palo Alto to be near my young family. For years she volunteered almost daily at La Comida, an organization that provides nutritious lunches for local seniors.
In a word, she loved La Comida. She loved the seniors that came every day to eat lunch. She loved the other volunteers that made up the daily “crews” to serve the lunch. She loved the Avenidas and La Comida staff, the cooks and especially the manager, Mary Ruth, who she has often described as “the hardest working person I know.” She was part of the structure of that community and that sense of belonging was part of her core.
On Easter 2012, my mom had a pretty severe stroke followed by multiple related health issues over the course of the next three months. She was in and out of the hospital and spent an extensive few weeks at a local rehabilitation center. Once she was home and stable, she wanted to return to La Comida to volunteer.
I was uncomfortable with her being there without any support, so I began to go with her to provide whatever “backup” she needed. I knew that she loved going there before, but now I understand it. The first day that she came in, walking rather unconfidently with her walker and having lost about 20 pounds, a table of seniors recognized her, then stopped eating and stood up and applauded her.
She was overwhelmed. This was her world, and I had just been allowed a glimpse of the genuine affection and gratitude that filled her heart in a way that nothing else could.
Going to La Comida now informs our week, we know that on Mondays and Wednesdays, she greets everyone as they come in and gives out milk. So that means on Sundays and Tuesdays we need to pick out her nicest clothes and matching shoes and earrings so that she is ready to go the next morning. It is motivating her to reorient in time and space because she is confident that they will miss her if she isn’t there.
I always admired my mom for what she did for other people at La Comida. Now in a different role, those people do so much more for her.
— Nannette Salvason, Palo Alto

Midtown Court food drive
The Midtown Court food drive has become a labor of love for me and a core group of eight volunteers.
I sent a message via the Midtown Court Neighbors & Friends email list and immediate received replies of “Yes,” “Let’s do it” and “How can I help?”
Great, I thought, my closest neighbors are willing to volunteer during the holidays.
We have set a goal of giving two grocery bags with one week of meals (breakfast, lunch and dinner) for 50 neighbors in need.
We joined Second Harvest Food Bank as partners in their food-collection program. The food bank staff is so helpful, and the website is easy to navigate. Second Harvest provided a web page for donations.
The primary goal is to make it fun by assigning roles and tasks that fit everyone’s schedules and comfort levels. “Food Drive Runners” David, Paul, Clark and Art happily drive to pick up supplies, deliver barrels and do their weekly Friday pick ups at food drop-off sites: JJkF Market, Miki’s Farm Fresh Market and Rick’s Ice Cream.
“Food Drive Scouts” Lenore, George and Wendy are having fun making their weekly trips to food drop-off sites to observe if barrels are full. “Food Drive Sorters” Ferne, Wendy and Janett relish their task of separating food items by type. Kendra and Sachiko’s Girl Scout Troop 60697 have paid for 100 pounds of oats from Milk Pail in Mountain View to help reach our food goals.

Comments from our volunteers on why they chose to volunteer for the holidays: They empathize with recipients, one having been a single mom struggling to feed her children, and they felt compelled to help put food on our closest neighbors’ tables.
— Caryll-Lynn Taylor, Palo Alto

Inspiring the children
Our family has been fortunate in many ways, but one of the most notable is the incredible childhood care that we found for our children. Sherry and Bob Marsden run a small daycare center out of their cozy home, and in addition to the love and care we receive, they have inspired and encouraged our entire family to be more thoughtful and charitable within our community.
Every year during the holidays, this couple organizes food and book drives, accepting donations of food, books, school supplies and new clothing for local children in need.
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Once all the donations have been made, the young children they care for, ages 5 and below, help wrap and deliver the donations to the Community Services Agency in Mountain View, where they get a short tour conducted by the staff. This provides the little ones with an opportunity to ask questions and to really understand the importance of their delivery. Of course, touching photos are taken each year, capturing the children proudly preparing and delivering their donations. It is always an eagerly anticipated activity and a wonderful experience for everyone.

My oldest son is now 4 and it has always been a mother/son date to select what food, which books and what kind of pajamas we donate. Last year when driving to the bookstore, my then 3-year-old said to me, “But Mommy, EVERYONE has books!” “No, sweetheart,” I said. “Some children don’t even have a place to live.” He was silent for a moment and then, looking me in the eye through the rearview mirror, he said very seriously, “They can come live with us. Our house is really big and good!” (Our house being a modest two-bedroom apartment).

Does he have a highly developed sense of gratitude? Not quite yet. He does, however, possess a keen sense of compassion and is very considerate and generous to others. I am so thankful for this tender trait, for the example set by such wonderful role models and for the opportunity to build positive and lasting memories with my family while serving others.

— Amber Harrison, Mountain View

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- Scholarships for Menlo Atherton Graduates
- Saint Anthony’s Dining Room
- Local Adopt-a-Teacher

Ken Allen sits in his home office, where he works on projects for the Midpeninsula Community Media Center.

Holiday spirit and CSA

My high school daughter and I were introduced to Community Services Agency (CSA) in Mountain View through our involvement in National Charity League. The two of us participated in various volunteer activities during the year working in the food pantry and store. We also volunteered for the Christmas toy distribution.

To be honest, my daughter did not love getting up ear-

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Dear Mr. Hanley,

I am a student at [Redacted] School in [Redacted]. My name is Zahra Robert. I am writing this to you to express my gratitude for all that [Redacted] does for our community.

My name is Zahra Roberts and I am a student at Costano Elementary School, sent in this handwritten letter commending her grandmother’s volunteer efforts.

Zahra Roberts, a student at Costano Elementary School, sent in this handwritten letter commending her grandmother’s volunteer efforts.

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Music and the Media Center

This past year I was in charge of my law firm’s (Silicon Valley Office of Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton) annual collection efforts and fundraising drive for the Second Harvest Food Bank. I am sure many others have done the same thing in their companies. I am a volunteer with the Midpeninsula Community Media Center as a community producer. For the past 22 years I have produced many programs of community interest. Holiday music programs have been a large part of my work for public access cable television. I have recorded holiday concerts at the Christmas Crèche exhibit, the annual Heritage of Christmas Concert in Menlo Park, as well as organ concerts at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church. I have also produced video tours for broadcast.

Over the years I have made so many videos that the Media Center has broadcast them around the clock all during the holiday season.

— Ken Allen, Palo Alto

‘Fast for Joy’

During this season of giving thanks and feasting on the plethora of food at holiday parties and social gatherings, our company has chosen instead to voluntarily fast and donate the money saved to feed children around the world.

Elluva, an early-stage Palo Alto startup, has launched its ‘Fast for Joy’ campaign Thursday, Nov. 15, and has already raised almost $2,000 in donations. Through the power of social media, friends and family, the campaign, which runs through Saturday, Dec. 1, will donate all the proceeds to Rice Bowls, a 501(c)3 nonprofit.

“We are passionate about innovations in small business tools, education and philanthropy. We want to change the conception that being a philanthropist means you have to be rich,” said Alex Sox, CEO. “I have used fasting in the past to seek clarity, balance, healing and guidance. I find that it has helped me in amazing ways by tapping into the creative energy and force of the Infinite.”

Every two seconds, an orphan dies from malnutrition, according to UNICEF, and a $20 donation provides about 80 meals.

We started ‘Fast for Joy,’ hoping it will become an annual event that everyone can participate in. Instead of spending marketing dollars on an advertising campaign, we would rather take those funds and create life-affirming events that engage our community and spread good will.

Expected to launch in 2013, Elluva is a technology company creating a mobile and Web-based platform for marketing promotions, which will enable business customers to create, test-market, rollout and track commerce activity.

With a couple of clicks, elluva has done a good thing, paid it forward, crowd-funded a successful fundraising effort and supported starving children around the world. Anyone is welcome to fast or just make a donation. With a $10,000 goal in mind, there are even incentive levels for those willing to support ‘Fast for Joy.’ If you would like to fast, make a donation or join the group, please visit www.InflictJoy.com.

— Grace Belangia, Palo Alto

If you are mourning a death or loss, Kara is here to help.

Adult Services

Drop in Groups:

- 2nd, 4th, 5th Tuesdays from 1:00-2:30pm
- 1st, 3rd, 5th Wednesdays from 7:00-8:30pm

No appointment or pre-interview required

Upcoming groups for specific losses:

- Men grieving the death of a family member or friend
- Parents grieving the death of an adult child
- Adults grieving the death of a sibling

A personal interview is required before joining one of these groups.

Youth and Family Services

Groups for Adults:

- Grieving the death of a partner, spouse
- Grieving the death of a child

Groups for Children and Teens:

- Grieving the death of a parent
- Grieving the death of a friend or family member

For a list of additional grief support groups and services, please visit our website: www.kara-grief.org/services

To learn more, call Kara at:
650-321-5272
457 Kingsley Avenue, Palo Alto

HAPPY HOLIDAYS

If you can’t wait for next year’s holiday parties and social gatherings, our company has chosen instead to voluntarily fast and donate the money saved to feed children around the world.

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By donating to Rice Bowls, a 501(c)3 nonprofit, you can help those in need find the strength to move forward.

— Alex Sox, CEO

Opening day has extended hours from 9:00 a.m. - 9:00 p.m.

Saturday  ..................................9:00 a.m. - 9:00 p.m.

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This space is donated as a community service by the Palo Alto Weekly.

For information go to www.nativitytrees.com

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