

PARTIES:

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ly simple. After cleaning the house and figuring out where the kids could go for a few hours, Cordell put the coffee on.

Whether in private homes or local watering holes, many area holiday gatherings include a theme. According to Evite.com — a digital invitation and social event planning service — some of the most popular holiday themes for gatherings include cookie or ornament exchanges, ugly sweater, holiday baking or white elephant parties and toy drives.

On Dec. 16, Hermiston Brewing Co./Nookies Restaurant held an ugly sweater Christmas party. In addition to 10 percent off all day for those donning an ugly sweater, the event crescendoed in the evening with music by Dallin Puzey and Tucker Tovey. They also held drawings for gift baskets, held a raffle and played Roll a Snowman — a dice game drawing a snowman — for a chance to win dessert.

The place was packed, said Kimberlie Graffunder, a bartender/waitress. Even though some patrons didn't wear ugly sweaters, everyone enjoyed the festivities — especially the employees.



STAFF PHOTO BY TAMMY MALGESINI

Angela Todd wore a reindeer sweater and antlers during the Ugly Sweater Christmas Party Dec. 16 at Hermiston Brewing Co./Nookie's Restaurant.



STAFF PHOTO BY TAMMY MALGESINI

Lorna Westlund dishes up a plate of food during a Dec. 12 women's potluck and Christmas sock exchange at the home of Deana Cordell in Hermiston.



STAFF PHOTO BY TAMMY MALGESINI

Employees Caitrin Gormley, Jasmine Stollar, Shelby Coggins, Reagan Deshane and Kimberlie Graffunder pause for a photo during the Ugly Sweater Christmas Party Dec. 16 at Hermiston Brewing Co./Nookie's Restaurant.

"It makes coming to work exciting," Graffunder said. "It puts you in the festive mood. I think it brings a little Christmas spirit into the community."

Assistant Manager Janna Fricke was thrilled with all the staff getting into the holiday spirit and dressing up. She dug out her ugly sweater with a snowman motif, which she purchased last year for the restaurant's event.

"Also, the party gets the customers involved with the servers," Fricke said. "It's a way to connect and have fun."

Fricke was also excited about being able to book Puzey and Tovey for the party, who often bring a

large following with them. It just adds to the fun, she said.

The coffee klatch ladies have held a Christmas potluck gathering for more than a decade. The first few years, the women rotated where it was held. Then, beginning in 2010, Judy Hayes held an open house party in her new home in conjunction with the event. Being single, Hayes didn't have to work around her family's schedule and offered her home for the gathering each year until she moved out of the area. The past three years, the party has been held in different women's homes.

"Judy had the gift of

hospitality," said Lorna Westlund. "I don't have that. I get too stressed out."

Cordell said having the food as a potluck cuts down on the planning and expense of hosting the event. In addition, people get to bring their favorite dish to share with others.

"I made a Waldorf salad, which was part of our Christmas tradition from growing up," Westlund said. "My great-aunt Zella used to make that all the time and it seemed like the perfect thing to take to the get together."

Evolving over time, the gift exchange used to feature presents with a prede-

termined dollar amount, said Shawn Logue. Most of the time, the gift exchange included the white elephant game — AKA Bad Santa, Dirty Santa and Yankee Swap. Although it typically takes a lot longer to open the presents, Logue said it adds to the fun.

"I like the stealing," she said. "It's fun and unpredictable."

With the last couple of years being an ornament exchange, Cordell thought it would be fun to do something different after seeing the idea about a sock exchange on the Internet. Since Cordell enjoys filling Christmas stockings for her family, she thought

the ladies would have fun filling socks with small items like candy, lotion, nail polish, lip gloss, holiday-themed gag toys.

"I thought people could be creative and have fun with it," Cordell said.

Even with the food and gift exchange, Cordell said the best thing about the party was just being together. Sitting around chatting, she said, was her favorite part of the evening.

Greene agreed.

"These are very special women in my life," she said. "I don't get to see them all the time during the year, so these gatherings are important to reconnect."



STAFF PHOTO BY GARY L. WEST

Janie Santoyo of Hermiston and Greg Griffiths, chaplain with Hermiston Police Department, finish filling food boxes on Wednesday, Dec. 16, 2015, at Thompson Hall on the Umatilla County Fairgrounds. Behind them is a portion of one of the assembly lines used by Christmas Express volunteers to put the meal boxes together.

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to put together about 500 food boxes. The boxes are being disbursed from the Agape House this week, through today, to families that would most benefit.

Police Chief Jason Edmiston said, all together, about 100 pounds of food will be distributed per family, including bags of onions and potatoes donated by local growers, turkey, dry goods and canned food. In addition to the food donat-

ed by growers like the Columbia Basin Onion's Alan Cleaver and the Walchli families for both produce and equipment, canned food collected with the help of local students in food drives and financial contributions from individual donors and groups like the Hermiston Rotary Club, which are used to buy additional food.

"I never knew how generous this community was until I took this over," Edmiston said. "I can call any farmer and tell them what I need" and the next thing he

knows, the need is met.

Christmas Express also spends between \$8,000 and \$13,000 each year for food.

Edmiston said he seeks bids on the other food goods, and this year the additional food was purchased through Walmart.

Members of Living Faith Church have also volunteered to help this year with presents for the children up to fifth grade in families that receive food boxes.

Schools and area churches also help to identify those in need of the donated food and gifts.

This is the second year that all city departments have joined the program. And city workers put the boxes together in two assembly lines, filling enough boxes, stacked six rows high, to fill 12 pallets.

Christmas Express began in 1969 when Dick Hodge, a local insurance agent, asked then-police chief Bob Shannon to help distribute leftover toys to children who may not have received gifts that year. The police department now coordinates the annual charity drive.

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