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Lynn's Top Five

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piece of cardboard so they don't tangle; and put together a small holiday tool set with wire, snips, extra lights, etc. This stays in the holiday box so it's right there when you need it!"

Linda Lahonta: My wonderful friend, Linda, and I have also known each other since our children were quite young. On top of running a very successful tax practice she has also launched two amazing young men. If anyone in my life ever embodied everything Christmas, well, it is definitely Linda. She and her husband, Keith, came up with this awesome idea that embodies the sheer survival of exhausted parents, along with much needed humor! "Our kids were not allowed to get out of bed until the bell rang, meaning Santa had just left. (One year we even scooped up deer poop from the lawn and put it on the carpet to prove the reindeer had also been there.) This meant we could control the present opening time to a more reasonable 7 to 7:30 a.m. rather than 6 a.m. or earlier!"

It's that time of year when we count our blessings. This year I was reminded of one of the best gifts a girl could have - really, really good friends. So for my last column of the year I asked some of my Lamorinda "besties" to share some of their cool holiday time and money saving ideas, great wit and wisdom with you.

Kjerstin Taylor-Rezendes: As my very first Lamorinda friend, Kjerstin has a special place in my heart. Not only is she mom to three of her own great young adults and a younger stepson, but she and husband Tom Rezendes own the very popular NorCal Golf Academy in Walnut Creek. She shares, "Our holidays have changed dramatically over the years. One practice I developed early on was wrapping gifts immediately as they were purchased and kept a written list for each person so I didn't forget what I had purchased back in July! This put an end to those all-nighter Christmas Eve's with frantic wrapping and exhaustion in the morning. Of course, I have to admit that every year there is at least one present with the wrong name on it, but I think that is a 'tradition' accidentally inherited from my mom!"

Melissa Griggs: This amazing mom of four young men - including a set of twins - designs, remodels and builds homes that you would salivate over. She and one of her incredible homes has been featured in Better Homes and Gardens magazine. With a son successfully launched in New York City, one finishing up at Saint Mary's, two at University of Arizona, a home in Lafayette and a home in St. Helena, this is a gal with about three minutes of free time, in who knows what city and what day! Here's her share: "When putting away your holiday decorations, number the boxes in the order you want to unpack; lights get wrapped on a

Debi Murphy: As a pastor's wife (husband Kevin is the pastor of the Lutheran Church of Walnut Creek) Christmas is kind of the "family business." And of course as our director of operations, life at Ballou Plum is incredibly busy at this time of year. Debi says that what has kept her sane all these years is "to find joy in every situation and to let go of expectations and commit to staying cheerfully flexible!" Her share for this column is really to keep it simple. Rather than try to replicate a many course, huge sit-down feast she says, "I love simple comfort foods for the holidays! A big pot of chili or beef stew with cornbread are family favorites." Staying with the theme of keeping it simple, she adds: "My goal is to decorate for the holidays in one hour or less. What I remember about each holiday are the meaningful conversations and time spent with others and not how amazing (or not) my house looked!"

My own share: I'll close with this contribution which has stood the Ballou family in good stead over the years. My husband, John, and I started out our lives together with very little cash and there were many lean financial years as we built our future together. Our best selves came through in the annual hand crafted "coupon book" that we secretly created for each other. Later, as the kids grew, they too got caught up in the spirit of the "coupon book" when allowances fell a bit short of shopping reality. These fun coupons included everything from taking a chore on for a family member (such as washing the dishes) to more indulgent offerings like breakfast in bed. Recently I ran across an old coupon I hadn't cashed in yet for "Dinner and a Movie" from my husband. Can't wait to redeem it over the holidays!

Wishing you a holiday full of fun, simple blessings, with those that matter most. Happy Holidays!

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