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Gay Couples Confront Holiday Stress

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WHEN Christmas Day breaks over the hills of Staten Island, it will find Nan Buzard and Susan Allee nestled snugly in their 100-year-old shingle-sided Colonial house in St. George, watching "Holiday Inn."

Then they will gather up the other lesbian women who are their downstairs tenants and head off with a cardamom coffee cake and sugar cookies -- plus an 11-week-old puppy -- to dine with their neighbors.

It is not a completely conventional Christmas, but it is the kind of day Ms. Buzard has come to treasure, even though she felt the tug of tradition on a recent visit to friends in New England.

"New England is the epitome of Christmas," she said. "I was saying to my girlfriend that this makes me want to get married, have children and live in a farmhouse. There's a strong image of something that has escaped so many people. But if we could just slow down and look around, we would see how much family we do have."

Lesbians and gay men struggle constantly to define what "family" means. That struggle is at its fiercest during the holidays, when the schism between reality and the world depicted by Norman Rockwell deepens for everyone, especially for those who are trying to create families their own relatives would scarcely recognize.

"Turn on TV and look at the commercials," said Eric Sherman, a New York psychotherapist who works with gay men and lesbians. "Kids are running into Grandma's arms. The message is, 'Have a happy holiday -- our way.'"

As it happens, Ms. Buzard, 38, who grew up in New York City suburbs, would be welcome in her mother's home with her partner.

But not everyone can make that claim.

"When I bring my partner to my family, she's received as *persona non grata*," said a Manhattan woman in her 30's who works in communications and refused to be identified so as not to make a bad family situation worse. "That's extremely painful for me, especially since we've lived together for five years."

Her older relatives, who emigrated from South America, have ignored her companion or, she said, given her "funny looks." The woman leaves her partner out of family events.

"We all pretend to be very happy with one another," she said, "but something is not complete with the picture. The whole thing about Christmas is to share it with the people you want to share it with."

An East Village couple have been together for seven years -- except on Christmas Eve and Christmas morning. What keeps them apart is that one, a 38-year-old Wall Street lawyer, has yet to acknowledge his homosexuality to his mother, although other family members know.

"There is something of a group effort to protect mom," he said. "There are religious concerns, having grown up in a Catholic family. We come from the elephant-in-the-living-room school of thought. We don't discuss that."

As a result, the two men part ways on Dec. 24 to join their relatives in Pennsylvania and Queens. They reunite in Manhattan the next evening and exchange gifts.

Single people face their own difficulties. "My grandmother always asks, 'Do you have a special girlfriend?' " said Jason Rardin, a New Yorker who returns to Wisconsin. "I always say that I'm too busy or that my priorities are in other areas. When I was in school, that was an easy excuse, but it's fading now that I'm 25."

The holidays may not be the best moment for unvarnished truth, however.

"As warm as it is, it's also a tense time of year," said Michelangelo Signorile, author of "Outing Yourself: How to Come Out as Lesbian or Gay to Your Family, Friends and Co-Workers" (Random House, 1995). "Coming out as gay or lesbian in the middle of all that is not going to create an environment where people can discuss things calmly. It may throw more wood on the fire of the anxieties people already have."

Steven Petrow, author of "The Essential Book of Gay Manners and Etiquette" (Harper Perennial, 1995), has distilled holiday experience into several rules, among them:

"If you're not wanted by your family or are uncomfortable with them, create your own extended family and traditions."

And: "If you're tangled up in the holiday blues, volunteer at a local hospital, soup kitchen or AIDS service organization."

The annual Toys for Tots party in early December would seem to combine these ideas. It has become a holiday tradition for gay men in New York, and its beneficiaries include the pediatric AIDS unit of Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx, Mother Hale House, the West Harlem Youth Council and God's Love We Deliver.

The price of admission is a new toy or article of children's clothing. When Robby Browne, a real estate executive, gave the first party 10 years ago, about 40 men showed up. This year, 2,000 people came to the party, held in the church of the Fourth Universalist Society, at Central Park West and 76th Street.

In the days before the party, a larger-than-usual contingent of single men could be spotted in the aisles of F. A. O. Schwarz and Gap Kids. "We don't have much of an opportunity to participate in the rituals of a traditional family," Mr. Browne said. The small mountain of donated goods nearly engulfed the 15-foot-high tree around which they were piled.

Holiday icons can be small in scale, too, like the three-foot-high artificial Christmas tree, strung with tiny white lights, that once perched in a window at St. Vincent's Hospital, where Frank **Fedornock** spent Christmas 1991.

That tree was a beacon. Mr. **Fedornock** never took it down or turned it off. As long as it was illuminated, his friends knew he was alive, simply by looking up from Seventh Avenue and spotting the tree in the window. It glowed until March 1992, when Mr. **Fedornock** died of AIDS.

One of his close friends, Bill Evans, still has the tree in the mid-Manhattan apartment he shares with his partner, Chuck Fischer. It is a reminder to Mr. Evans that his sense of family extends beyond his own kin and embraces Mr. **Fedornock** and Mr. Fischer and the dozen or so assorted gay friends the couple will welcome to their home on Christmas Eve.

"I have a good and supportive family out in Cleveland," Mr. Evans said. "But this is my family, too."

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