

Family trees

A holiday symbol changes but endures.

Story by Marci Diehl

I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT CHRISTMAS trees. It's that time of year, of course. But even if I weren't, my oldest son, Matt, would remind me.

"Are you getting a live tree this year?" he'll ask.

Yes.

"Mom." His voice will be patient, kind of. Then he'll ask the question he asks every year: "Why don't you get a lighted tree?" (Insert here all the virtues of his artificial tree: comes in two pieces, no mess, "you pop it open like an umbrella and bingo! It's done.")

I can't blame him. Now that he's a busy husband and dad, convenience is a priority. When he and his brothers were little, our first Christmas tree was artificial. Its "needles" looked a lot like the baby bottle brushes that sat drying in my kitchen.

Yet I never could let go of the memories of the real Christmas trees of my childhood, hung with big multi-color bulbs and silvered glass balls, shimmering with tinsel. My dad would shake the snow off the chosen tree and bring it in to decorate on the day of Christmas Eve. That night, I would lie beneath the branches, gazing up at the lights, almost giddy from the perfume of its greenery.

Certain Christmas trees seem to stand out over the years, like milestones along the road. They mark major events and stages, and we carry those memories always. Here are some of mine:

1977—A young family with three children, we own our first big home. Our artificial tree is wound with 10 strings of lights. Some of the decorations I made myself: There are candy canes, homemade gingerbread men, ornaments from places I've traveled and decorations crafted with varying degrees of artistry by my small boys. I create Christmas magic, and this is a pinnacle of happy times.

1978—A friend brings a live tree for me, and I set it up in the dining room of our house, beginning a tradition of having two



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trees. We've just brought new baby Colin home from Strong Memorial Hospital, where he had a liver biopsy. For five days in December, I'm terrified he might die of a possible congenital liver defect. The live tree helps calm and comfort me. Miraculously, the surprised specialists find nothing but a healthy, normal baby. Baby Colin plays the part of Baby Jesus at Mass. No Christmas will ever be as meaningful.

1985—Having hauled the fake tree with us when we moved to Florida, we demote it to the rarely used living room. We buy a live tree for our family room. It's weird to be surrounded by palm trees and humidity for Christmas.

1989—Our first Christmas in Canandaigua. We've bought a gigantic Victorian home, so we go to the tree farm to buy a fittingly large tree. A 6-foot-6-inch farmer holds one up for inspection. When we untie it at home, branches explode outward to cover a third of our living room (it looked so much smaller at the farm). We are the Griswolds from *Christmas Vacation*.

1999—Ten years later, the boys and I are on our own. In a rented house on Granger Street, I debate even having a tree. The only remaining spot of floor space in the tiny, post-divorce house is taken over

by a filing cabinet. I've moved my office back into my house and I'm recovering from a nasty orthopedic surgery. I'm on crutches, and money is tighter than ever. But my son, John, now in his 20s, buys a real tree. It's only four feet tall, and we jam it into a corner of the living room. Though grown, my sons still shake packages that arrive. We laugh hard and open presents. We're together; and with my last three strands of working lights and only the most special and sentimental ornaments, that little tree looks grander than four feet tall. It's a milestone tree.

2008—So, this year, I'll stick to a fresh tree. My home is bigger now, and so is my family. Sons marry, babies are born, family arrives from out of town, and we all pile in together, full of real joy and gratitude for what we have.

Our Christmas trees record the history and consistency of our life together—buoys on an emotional sea. In their silent presence, they tell us that we've survived and adapted. We flow with the changes life brings, large and small. And we believe that in each coming year, our hearts and lives will grow.

As things change, so will the size of our Christmas trees. But as a symbol of love, they will always be gigantic. ■