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Movers and shakers reflect on holiday gifts that once moved them

By LISA CRAWFORD WATSON

PERHAPS THE most challenging aspect of the gift-buying season is finding gifts for your family and friends that will actually mean something to them. One thing that may help is to stop and think about the presents you've received over the years that have retained their value — not necessarily as objects, but as treasured gestures or emotions.

Seasons come and go, but somehow the memories of certain gifts linger. Perhaps you still have a precious item you wrote to Santa about years ago. Or you fondly remember getting just what you wanted — or something you could never have imagined. Or maybe your most pleasant Christmas memories are less about what was unwrapped and more about who gave it.

Monterey County Supervisor **Mary Adams** remembers one particular gift she received when she was a child that perhaps presaged her career. Her mother was a frugal person who decorated for the holidays but didn't squander time or money on giftwrap, which meant that on Christmas Eve, she placed the gifts for her family right out in the open — not under the tree, but near it.

"I was in third or fourth grade, and I desperately wanted a watch," Adams said. "I remember seeing it sitting there in the blue chair, a shell-shaped box, which held the round watch I wanted, with a saddle-colored leather band. I used it until it wore out. I still enjoy wearing watches. After my husband passed away, I took a couple of links out of his and started wearing it."

'Same spirit as the original'

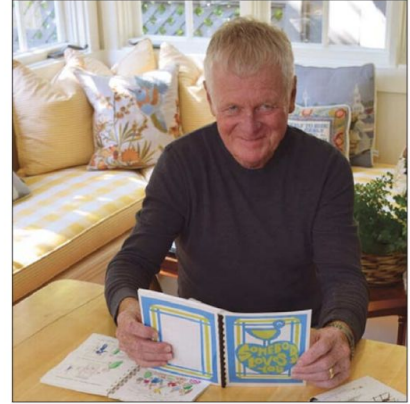
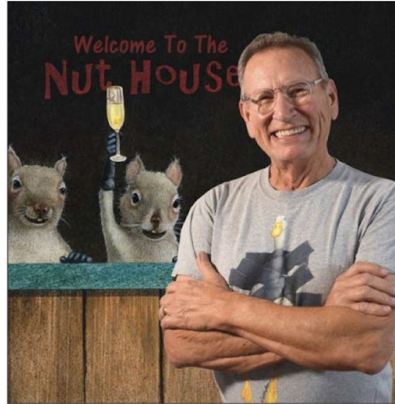
Artist and author **Will Bullas** still remembers the paintbrush holder his wife Claudia gave him 30 years ago. The

vessel was a specially designed commemorative vase from Windsor & Newton — Bullas' personal favorite company for watercolor pigments. When she gave it to him, Claudia told him that being in possession of such a special brush holder meant he was committed to being a professional artist.

"For many years, I cherished that brush holder, and every time I pulled a brush from it, I thought of her sup-

port, and my personal commitment to my art," Bullas said. "Unfortunately, about a year ago, one of our cats bumped the vase, sending it into smithereens. I have since replaced the broken vase with a dandy new brush holder — and I've managed to instill in it the same spirit of the original vase."

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PHOTO/COURTESY WILL BULLAS (LEFT), PHILIP M. GEIGER

For Will Bullas (left), it was a special paintbrush holder that inspired him greatly before meeting its untimely demise at the paws of a cat. Mayor Dave Potter still has a series of illustrated books his mother made for him each year until she turned 100.

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HOLIDAY GUIDE

TREASURED

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When **Leon Panetta** was 8 years old, his parents bought an upright piano and started him and his brother, Joe, on piano lessons. Two years later, Joe had gotten into sports, while Leon had landed a solo piano concert at the Sunset School auditorium. When the family moved from Monterey to their home in Carmel Valley, Panetta's parents hired a "more serious piano teacher," who had a Steinway grand piano on which Panetta played his recitals.

While Panetta worked up the repertoire for his recital, including Mozart, Schubert, Scriabin, Schumann, Beethoven and Grieg, his teacher told his parents he really needed a better piano. One year at Christmas, his parents bought him a Baldwin parlor grand, which they placed in the living room near the holiday decor.

"I'll never forget how my mother brought me in," he said, "and put her hands over my eyes. The piano looked huge. It had no bows, but I knew it was my gift. After dinner, I would go in and practice, and my mother would sit by the floor heater and

listen to me play. I was so excited to hear my music on a grand piano.

"After I grew up, I got involved in politics and went back East. Eventually I returned to my childhood house in Carmel Valley, and the piano was still there. We still have it in the living room, and I still play it. I'll go into the living room on Sundays and play; it brings back a lot of special memories."

Waiting all season

Growing up in Europe, **May Waldroup**, who built the Barnyard Shopping Village and established the Thunderbird Bookstore, began celebrating Christmas on the first Sunday of Advent, four weeks before Christmas. An Advent wreath, made with pine branches and decorated with four candles, rested in the middle of the dining-room table, where the children gathered to make Christmas presents for aunts and uncles, parents and siblings. The table was littered with colored paper and pencils, needles, threads, knitting needles and crochet hooks, and many balls of colored wool thread, plus a basket filled with Christmas cookies, just baked.

"All season I waited for Christmas Eve when the big living-room doors would be

flung open after dark," she said. "A bell was rung, and there stood my grandmother in front of the tree, with all the lit candles as the only light in the room."

After everyone sang carols, her grandmother took the youngest child to one of the tables, and removed the cloth to reveal her presents. Waldroup, the second youngest, was next.

"One year, there, in the middle of all the presents, was a "magic flute" recorder, just the right size for the hands of a 6-year-old. I picked it up and tried to cover the finger holes and then blow," she said. "The sound that came out was everything but magic, so I tried again and again. Many months later, I actually won a prize as best flute player of my class."

Artist **Jean Brenner** and her husband Alan had been married a year when they decided to spend Christmas in Hawaii. Because a year earlier there had been such a competition between their mothers to give the newlyweds a special "first Christmas," the couple decided to head for Hawaii.

"On Christmas Eve, Alan gave me a gift that consisted of a piece of wire, bent into a ring and wrapped in duct tape," she recalled. "He told me, 'this is a symbol of what you're going to receive.'" And the

next morning, his real gift was a sapphire ring he had bought at a jewelry store in Carmel."

Shortly after, Alan slipped and wrecked his knee, landing him in the emergency room and, later, on crutches. The kids all felt so bad for him, they surprised him with a sightseeing tour by helicopter, on Christmas Day.

"Alan and I were married 29 years before I lost him," Brenner said. "I no longer have him, but I have the ring and all the wonderful memories it represents."

Every Christmas, throughout his life, Mayor **Dave Potter** received an illustrated book by his mother, Ruth, an artist, depicting some part of her life as she remembered it. The books recorded when she met Potter's father during the World War II, when the newlyweds first took a trip to Europe after the war, the house she had later designed and built, and a lifetime of excursions.

"My mother made these books right up until she was 100 years old, and I have every single one of them," he said. "I look at them all the time, and whenever I have anyone over, I bring them out."

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