

Holiday travel takes on a special meaning for special people



A New Directions trip to Disneyland has been a holiday highlight since 1987.

While many of us moan about the complications of our impending holiday travels to see loved ones, dread the long lines at the airport or lament our long drives, there is one group that is doing no complaining.

In fact—in the truest spirit of travel—they relish getting out and away for Christmas with unmatched zeal.

The group is Holiday Happiness and it is made up of individuals with developmental challenges who have nowhere else to go for the holidays.

“These are the forgotten ones,” says Dee Duncan, executive director and

founder of New Directions, the non-profit organization behind Holiday Happiness.

escape artist

DeAnne Musolf
Crouch

She tells me about Gordon (not his real name), a 54-year-old man, who waits every Christmas at the window of the residential treatment center he

calls home. As his friends are picked up one by one by family, he waits with his coat on his lap, his eyes riveted to the street and his face filled with anticipation of the holiday he’ll spend with loved ones. His sister and brother both live in town. They should be here any minute, he believes.

“But no one has ever come to visit him,” Ms. Duncan says and suddenly we’re both too choked up to speak.

Like some individuals with developmental challenges, Gordon has no contact with family. I read a letter from the staff at his center that details how Gordon is a trooper—he collects old Christmas cards and small toys from the recycling center where he works to make himself stocking stuffers. And he always keeps his time free so he’ll be ready when his family comes.

Staff eventually coax him to come home with them for Christmas dinner, but before leaving Gordon always leaves a note on the door, just in case his family comes by. And it’s always a very big disappointment.

It’s people like Gordon who moved Ms. Duncan to start Holiday Happiness back in 1985, in response to what she had personally witnessed working as a counselor for eight years in a residential treatment center.

“There’s always a handful of people left behind when the others go home for holiday visits” Ms. Duncan recalls. “I worked every Christmas trying to help the folks left back have a happy Christmas—only it was virtually impossible because no matter what I did, I couldn’t make up for the fact that they had nowhere to go.

“I would think that the nicest thing I could do is take them to the Biltmore for brunch but,” her voice catches inadvertently as it often does when talking about Holiday Happiness (as I find mine does in simple reply), “I couldn’t make up for the fact that they had no family and nowhere to go.”

Out of every residential treatment center housing 200 people, around five of those people are left behind, she estimates. In 1985, to give these folks something to look forward to and count on for the holidays, Ms. Duncan took 15 people for three days—Dec. 24, 25, and 26—from Santa Barbara to Zaca Lake, about two hours north. “It was the most homey and Christmassy place I could think of.”

The group quickly outgrew the Zaca Lake cabins—“and the only other place in Southern California open Christmas Day is Disneyland,” Ms. Duncan discovered. They started going there; Holiday Happiness expanded to four days. And she started hearing about people who needed help all over California. Soon she was taking 100 people with developmental challenges from all over the state. “But the logistics of flying over the holidays were just too much,” she says. Today, Holiday Happiness is five separate programs traveling to five separate destinations, serving 125 people who would otherwise be alone.

“The need for this program is great—greater than many people think,” says Ms. Duncan. “Because many of these people can’t communicate that well, people don’t realize they have the need. They really are the forgotten ones, and they are devastated—as anyone would be. They may have brain impairments, but they have the same emotions as anyone else.”

The group from San Diego goes to Sea World; the group from Northern California goes to San Francisco. Ms. Duncan still leads the Santa Barbara

group every year, which continues to go to Disneyland.

Today, the 40 travelers will load up a Santa Barbara Airbus (which donates a bus, with a driver who donates his or her time). This itself is no small feat, since some of the travelers use electric or manual wheelchairs, walkers, leg braces or canes; some have visual impairments; some are on oxygen. But everyone, to a person, is thrilled and filled with excitement.

In fact, ironically, Holiday Happiness participants are now the envy of those who have family picking them up, says Ms. Duncan, “of the ones who have to go home and be with Aunt Alice *again this year* while the others get to do these really fun things.”

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They arrive at the Anaheim Marriott around noon. Doormen open the doors with aplomb for their guests; some are recognized from past years and are greeted by name. “Hello Mr. Merlin,” a doorman says, and shakes his hand.

Marriott has worked closely with New Directions and Holiday Happiness since 1987. “The staff is like family. They know the repeat travelers by name. What I really love about the Marriott hotel staff is that they treat our participants with the same respect they treat any of their clientele—they treat them like royalty. And it makes a huge difference to our participants’ self-esteem. And that’s been unique to the Marriott.”

Ms. Duncan recalls how one year the hotel’s general manager came down on Christmas morning to greet the group and asked John (not his real name), a 12-year old from Santa Barbara, “How has your stay here been?” John replied, “It’s been really good—except I didn’t

have cookies and milk before I went to bed.” That night, room service arrived with chocolate chip cookies and milk.

While Ms. Duncan checks them in, the travelers have lunch in a restaurant at the hotel—a big part of the program since the participants don’t have the opportunity very often. And they get to choose whatever they want off the menu. “A few will order something like a steak or lobster and a few will order a hot dog wherever we go,” Ms. Duncan chuckles. “What’s important is that they have a choice, and they get treated in a respectful manner.”

That night the group goes out for their special Christmas dinner, because the next two nights they’ll be at California Adventure and Disneyland. “We go to a nice steakhouse or French restaurant that they can get dressed up for,” Ms. Duncan says. (Though dress clothing is on their packing lists, some don’t have any and that’s OK.)

On Christmas Eve morning they’ll head to Disney’s new California Park (this year for the first time). On Christmas Day they’ll hit Disneyland itself.

It’s a dream come true for the participants, and, according to Ms. Duncan, the epitome of holiday happiness. “All the shops are specially decorated, there is lots of caroling going on, it’s very Christmassy, very traditional—like an old-fashioned Christmas.”

But unlike the Christmases other participants are used to, this time no one feels left out. “Disneyland goes all out for us. They will hold up rides to let us get people on. Sometimes they have to lie down on the ride, but we manage. We want them to get on the ride, because we don’t want them to miss out—because they miss out on so

much, so we want them to experience it totally.”

Rides top their list, with Fantasyland being a favorite area. And they enjoy shopping. But the parades are the best of all.

Other park guests get as much pleasure as the Holiday Happiness travelers, Ms. Duncan says. “At first strangers we encounter are a little standoffish, but I love to ask them for help and get them immediately involved because then they get the gift of who these people are, and that’s really the mission of New Directions—for the general public to discover what a gift these folks really are. And these tours make that really possible.”

And every year once—and sometimes more often—someone will anonymously pick up the tab or purchase gifts for the group. “I’ll go to pay and they’ll say, ‘Oh, someone has already picked up the tab,’” says Ms. Duncan. “They can tell it’s a very special, very loving situation.”

In the evening, the group returns to the hotel only after the parks have closed. “They *love* the idea of staying out late—that they did it to the hilt,” says Ms. Duncan. By the time the participants are in their rooms, it’s often 2 a.m., and *then* there’s a staff meeting. The volunteers, which number 15 (some participants need one-to-one care), give up their own Christmases—many year after year. “They give of themselves completely and totally for four days,” says Ms. Duncan. “It redefines tired—physically and mentally exhausted.”

But then Christmas morning arrives, with the gift-opening extravaganza in one of the Marriott suites’ living rooms. There’s a tree, eggnog, cookies, and

Christmas music—all very homelike. Santa passes out personalized stockings made by the Coastal Quilters and gifts purchased by people in Santa Barbara who each adopt a participant’s wish list.

“The wish lists are really simple—and how touching they are” says Ms. Duncan, her voice catching again. “They aren’t used to having a lot.”

One participant, for example, asked for an extension cord, another a garden trowel. A woman wanted a coloring book or notepad. A little girl wanted a T-shirt, or tennis shoes, or a coat. “Because they have so little, they are so appreciative—you cannot help but cry,” says Ms. Duncan, now crying herself.

Indeed, says Ms. Duncan, it’s absolutely stunning on Christmas morning “because they believe Santa Claus is real—even those that are very independent and live on their own in special apartments.” Says Ms. Duncan, “The volunteer Santas never go home without crying.”

This year should be no exception.

P.S.: Gordon decided this Christmas to join Holiday Happiness as well, to start to make his own Christmas traditions—something truly wonderful he can count on and look forward to.

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