The more than 200 entries submitted for Southwest Orlando Bulletin's 20th annual Stories of the Season short-story contest told tales of special visits from Santa, mystical holiday creatures and the joy of spending time with family and friends. Whether these tales recreate special holiday memories or take readers to an imaginary play place filled with elves, reindeer and their ilk, they are sure to bring the holiday spirit to all this year. Congratulations to first-place winner Jodi Marano of Winter Garden, runner-up Pamela Cervo of The Lakes, and child winner Tyler Hartman of Stoneybrook West, all of whom received cash prizes. Also included are submissions that were selected as honorable mentions. The staff of the Southwest Orlando Bulletin extends a hearty thank-you to everyone who entered the contest and wishes a happy holiday season to all.

Winner - A Priceless Gift

by Jodi Marano, adult
Winter Garden

At 7 years old, I didn't question my family's holiday traditions. After all, we had always done the same thing, and December 1977 in upstate New York would be no different in that regard.

I could process the sound of the engine idling before my eyes had even opened to the darkness of the wee early morning hour, before the negative temperatures that Jack Frost brought had slapped me cold across both cheeks simultaneously, before I even realized I had been taken from my bed, I was placed in the warm van; the heater blasting, blowing smells of dusty luggage and homemade Italian bread.

My father drove a green Suburban as his farm vehicle in the summer months, but once the leaves had fallen, all remnants of muck were vacuumed away, and by holiday break, the van converted into a makeshift family motor home for our annual journey south, destination: Florida.

Dad had this trip factored down to a mathematical science. Door-to-door, regardless of weather, in less than 23 hours, straight through. His little black book, wedged between windowsill and dashboard, housed every economical gas station and Dunkin' Donuts over the course of the next 1,400 miles.

Mom was more stewardess than co-captain during those days. Her sole job was to keep the "cabin" quiet. The cabin consisted of us three sisters, aged 7, 13 and 15 — challenging ages to keep entertained without the use of today's electronic devices.

A twin mattress and sleeping bag were our luxury items in the back of the van. Seat belts? They were used more as a disciplinary straitjacket than a requirement by law enforcement. We took turns napping, stretching out to read, playing cards and, of course, wrestling and fighting, as siblings occasionally do.

This behavior was frowned upon in the cabin. My father thought having three daughters would have ensured a more peaceful household than sons, to no avail. In the van, space was tight, the drive ahead long, the weather tumultuous and we were kept separated as much as possible.

My sisters were banished to opposite window seats, and I, as the baby of the family, sent to the smallest area in the back. My mother's large white suitcase doubled as my seat. I didn't mind that I had to straddle it to be able to sit upright without tipping over. I conjured thoughts of my white pony carrying me from snow to sand.

I remember the boredom. I remember Dad yelling for us to "Keep it quiet back there!" I was restless and, unlike my teenage sisters, had not mastered the skill of sleeping on-demand through several states.

My oldest sister, engrossed in a book, was not going to risk Dad "pulling the van over." She held her book with her right hand and popped her left hand up like Thing from the The Addams Family, in hopes of quietly entertaining me. I was delighted. My active imagination only saw a new doll to play with. Napkins became clothes that were tied around her wrist, and the cabin was quiet once more, for Thing had no mouth to speak.

We didn't stop to eat at roadside diners or drive-through burger joints. Our only fast-food option was how quick Mom could prepare snacks from what she had packed from our home's pantry. The cutting board was housed next to her seat, along with a large, serrated knife; the cooler at her feet. Across her lap she placed the board, evenly slicing one of the loaves of bread she had made the week prior.

We watched intently as she cut hunks of pepperoni and cheese, slices of capicola placed in between the bread with lettuce and tomato. Handing them back one at a time to us, we ate, and there was peace among us again.

I did not realize at that moment, being carried from bed to mattress that lay in the back of the van, that those were the best days of my life. Days that make memories, memories that last a lifetime. A lifetime, if you're lucky, you get to share with special people. I am that lucky.

I am still amazed that Santa was able to find us each year and deliver our gifts. I still smile when my sister positions her hand like Thing. I still think of my childhood home every time I enter an Italian bakery, and I still think it's a good idea to unplug from technology and take a long road trip with people you love, even at the risk of not liking them for a while once you arrive.

As an adult, I look forward to seeing my family and getting together. It's less frequent now. One sister resides in North Carolina, and one remains in New York. I now call Florida home. Our most recent family reunion was in February to hold Dad's hand one final time and thank him for our childhood, for being someone special, and helping to make wonderful memories that last a lifetime.

Across the miles, I can now video-chat with my siblings, send photos with my phone, and instantly let them know I am thinking of them via text. Social networks feed our chatter. It's amazing how much has changed. But with all the advancement of technology, one thing remains the same — the bond of love is the most priceless gift I have ever received.

Runner-Up - A Strategic Place
by Pamela Cervo, adult

The Lakes

Many years ago, when my boys were very young, I thought it would be fun to have our first, and only, destination Christmas vacation in Williamsburg, Va. Since we decided to drive, it gave us more flexibility to extend our stay if we wanted to. My boys were less than thrilled to be away from home on Christmas, even with the tree we bought and decorated for our condo in Williamsburg. Since I am the planner in the family, I decided we would participate in everything we could in Colonial Williamsburg, which meant we had to walk in the cold — everywhere. We went on walking tours, attended plays, visited a couple of Civil War battlefields, and even did some shopping. Did I mention it was very cold? But I was having the best Christmas ever. We even ate most of our meals out. While my husband and I have a love for American history, the boys were not exactly happy about having to participate in things historical in nature. They complained all during the trip, and I was starting to wonder if this trip was such a good idea after all. Why, we all could be in warm, sunny Florida where we belonged, right? What was I thinking, after all?

To add to this momentous Christmas destination vacation, we planned to visit our friends in North Carolina on our way back to sunny Florida. We did not have a place to stay in North Carolina, and our friends were going to call us with the names of some hotels near their home.

One day, while on the road in Williamsburg, our friend called us with the hotel information. Everything was going just as planned, and remember, I love to plan. However, in the next breath of our conversation, he proceeded to tell us that his son, on winter break from college, had just been killed in an automobile accident not far from their home. We were utterly shocked to hear this tragic piece of news. What do you say? What do you do? Why did this happen? After all, it’s Christmas, a time of love and sharing and all good things.

It seemed that we were moving in slow motion. This must be a dream or even a joke. However, after a little while, we sensed a very truthful, harsh reality, like innocent falling snowflakes turning into a snowstorm.

There was no question of our not going to North Carolina, so we proceeded to pack up and head further south. When we got to North Carolina and checked into our hotel suite, my husband and I sat down and had a conversation about the best way we could help our friends. We decided we could show our love during this most giving season of caring and sharing by

preparing a meal for the family on the night of the viewing. We, including the boys, were with the family all the way through the funeral.

While I thought the plan was for our family to go to a strategic place for a family vacation, I came to realize that although I don't always understand why, God had another plan, another strategic place for us to be that Christmas.

Lest I forget to mention it, my boys never complained or said a negative word during our stay in North Carolina. They were so patient and as good as gold.

The boys are grown now and have lives of their own. Looking back over the years, I treasure all the Christmases we have shared together as a family, even that one in Williamsburg, Va.

More Stories of the Season