

Quest

PODCAST



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Episode 10: Holiday Do-it-Yourself Gifts, Crafts & Recipes December 3, 2021

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Mindy Henderson: Welcome to The Quest Podcast, proudly presented by the Muscular Dystrophy Association, as part of The quest family of content. I'm your host Mindy Henderson. Our mission with this podcast is to bring thoughtful conversation to the neuromuscular disease community and beyond about issues, affecting those with neuromuscular disease and other disabilities, and those who love them.

And this month, we'd like to acknowledge International Day of Persons with Disabilities, which we join you in celebrating this December. We at MDA are here for you to educate and inform, to demystify, to inspire and to entertain. We are here shining a light on all that makes you you. Whether you're one of us, love someone who is or are on another journey altogether thanks for joining. And now let's take a moment to recognize our sponsors.

Wishing you a very happy holiday season from our sponsor Cytokinetics. Cytokinetics is dedicated to supporting the MDA community and to advancing potential medicines for families impacted by neuromuscular diseases. And thank you to our sponsor, Amylyx pharmaceuticals, a Cambridge based company, focused on the development of therapeutics for the treatment of ALS and other neurodegenerative disorders. The people and families facing the challenges of serious neurological conditions is at the heart of everything we do to find out more, please visit Amylyx.com.

Let's continue our holiday theme today. I thought it would be fun to have a conversation about some fun holiday projects that we could do ourselves, independently. We could do with our kids, with our friends, with our parents. And so with us today, I have two women who are way more talented than I am in the world of crafting and baking and all of the things here to share their fun ideas. So, first up I have Casey Stark. Casey is a member of the neuromuscular disease community like myself, and is joining us from Wisconsin where I was

actually born. So I feel like we maybe won lost twins or something. But like myself, Casey has SMA, but unlike me, she has a gift for crafting and art and has always had a passion for art and being creative. And she actually lended her talents at MDA summer camp. So we're going to hear about that in just a second.

But second, I have Therese Gabriel. Therese is a family care and support specialist who has been with MDA for over 13 years. She was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri. Therese previously taught kindergarten and first grade among lots of other things, and also spent some time as a stay at home mom. And it was during that time when her passion for cooking and baking came to the forefront. She's written 12, get that 12 cookbooks, hosted a local cooking show and opened a tea room where she served recipes from her cookbooks. I am so excited to have you both with me today. Thank you for being here.

Casey Stark: Thank you.

Therese Gabriel: Thank you for having us.

Mindy Henderson: Absolutely. So I can't even begin to talk about the two of you and all of your talents and accomplishments. Casey, do you want to tell us a little bit more of, about you and your artwork?

Casey Stark: Yeah, for sure. So, like Mindy said, I'm based in Wisconsin. I was born and raised in Wisconsin, currently living in the Milwaukee suburbs area, but all throughout my life, growing up, art has always been a huge passion of mine. So whether just has a little old kid carrying around markers and crayons and coloring in a coloring book or throughout college and my adult life. I've always had just a very high level of interest in sketching, drawing, whatever it may be.

My art passion kind of started as a kid. I'm still very horse, crazy horse obsessed. So as a kid, I wanted to draw the horses, create these pictures of horses I've met. Horses, I've seen, and that's kind of what sparked my interest. So growing up, up until probably early adulthood, I exclusive of drew horses. So my portfolio really wasn't diverse. All you would really see is horses and other things related to horses.

But as I've gotten into my adulthood, I've really gotten interested in expanding my drawing and crafting skills to go beyond just the equine world. So lately in the past few years, I've gotten into different crafts, such as like resin, epoxy, painting, doing some glass etching here and there. And it's just really fun to keep learning new different techniques, to expand my knowledge within the art world, but then also just learn something new and have a fun new hobby as well.

Mindy Henderson: Definitely. And you also have an Etsy shop.

Casey Stark: I do. So in part of expanding my drawing variety, I started first by experimenting with drawing different animals. So I have a dog and I started just sketching and drawing her in different poses. And then I needed some new artwork in my

kitchen. So I started over the COVID quarantine time, sketching out different type of farm animals.

Mindy Henderson: Oh, cute.

Casey Stark: Because I have kind of like a country theme house going on in my house. So I practiced doing like pigs, cows, chickens. So as I got more comfortable with drawing and sketching, different animals, I had the idea of why not turn this into something where I could meet make maybe a little extra money on the side. So I opened up my own pet portrait page on Etsy. So I do commissions for people, for any and all pets. So whether that be dogs, horses, cats. Those are the three main I've done so far, but I'm definitely open to any and all pets.

Mindy Henderson: I love it. I've got two dogs and a cat. So I may have to send you their pictures and get you to do some artwork for me.

Casey Stark: Yeah, for sure.

Mindy Henderson: And what's the name of your Etsy shop?

Casey Stark: So my Etsy shop is called The Barking Brush. And when you search it on Etsy, you have to use the at symbol and then The Barking Brush is all one word.

Mindy Henderson: Gotcha. Okay, fantastic. And you also have a full-time job, correct?

Casey Stark: I do, yes. So I graduated from college with an undergrad in biology, and then I went on for grad school for cytotechnology. So kind of within the sciencey real atmosphere. So I currently am using that knowledge and those skills. I work at the Medical College of Wisconsin doing research compliance. So we have a lot of different scientific research that is being done at the college. And I help oversee the different aspects when it comes to regulatory compliance. So any type of funding that the college receives for research, the experiments have to be conducted in a safe manner. So I make sure that the appropriate approvals are in place and the research is being conducted in compliance with the different regulatory committees.

Mindy Henderson: That's really great. And you and I spoke the other day and I think you told me that you've even worked on some research projects for neuromuscular disease. Is that right?

Casey Stark: Yeah. Yep. We do have some investigators at the college where I work, who studies focus on different muscular dystrophy related diseases. So I've seen some duchenne studies as well as I want to say, limb girdle as well, but there's a little bit of everything there at the college that people are studying.

Mindy Henderson: That's so cool. So you've got the art mind and you've got the science mind. I think that's fascinating.

Casey Stark: Thank you.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah. So Therese, I would love to hear a little bit more about you and share with the listeners, all of the super interesting things that you've done over time and I listed some of them in the intro. But I think that you're so interesting and so talented.

Therese Gabriel: I always joke and say when I grow up, I'm going to be something and I just keep redoing those somethings every so often. But they all have a very common underlying theme, I guess you would say, a lot of what I enjoy doing is working with people and then also everything that comes out of working with people. So right now, as you mentioned, I'm one of the care specialists. So pre-COVID, I was the camp director for St. Louis area. And I was the care specialist who went into the care centers to meet with all the different patients that we had. So it gave me a great opportunity, always, to connect with people. It helped that I had been a teacher. Once again, connecting with a lot of people and kids that helped when I was directing the summer camp program.

And then my love of all things artistic and creative are always helpful at camp. Because camp is filled with all different opportunities for creating and doing and things like that. So it's been fun. It's been challenging throughout COVID. All of our roles have shifted somewhat. We've done instead of in person camp, we've done virtual camps, but still had a lot of arts and crafts sprinkled in our virtual camp. And the same goes in my other hobbies, I guess you would say.

I enjoy cooking and baking. And I had taught classes out of my home, but once again, during COVID, that kind of stopped. And we've managed to do a few things via Zoom. I do have grown children and grandchildren. In fact, my two year old granddaughter's up in the suburbs of Wisconsin. So next time I go there, I might have to look up Casey and we could connect.

Casey Stark: Oh, so fun.

Therese Gabriel: We try and do Zoom. Last year, we did a Zoom in all of my kids around the country had gingerbread houses and we all decorated while we sat on the Zoom call just those kinds of things. Try and get creative. So you can keep some of the traditions going even during these challenging times.

Mindy Henderson: Absolutely. So I'm a bit of a foodie myself and I enjoy cooking. Do you have a specialty? Are you more of a baker or more of a cook or do you do both?

Therese Gabriel: I do do both just because I've... So I have younger brothers and so I was the first one married and I was the first one with kids. So all the holidays started happening at my house years and years ago. So I love baking and doing all of the fun stuff. Probably particularly pies are my specialty. And a lot of people get really freaked out about pies. That's what caused me to start teaching classes at home. So many friends were like, "Well why I can't make pie crusts?" I'm like, yes, you can. Come on over.

Mindy Henderson: No, I find pie crust a little intimidating. I feel like it's very specific.

Therese Gabriel: A lot of people do, but once you start doing it, it really does become easier. So I've done that, but I like to cook as well. Probably primarily I enjoy entertaining. So any reason to have friends over is fun for me.

Mindy Henderson: Are you going to do a Friendsgiving this year?

Therese Gabriel: We don't usually do that because I usually do a big Thanksgiving for family.

Mindy Henderson: Oh, okay.

Therese Gabriel: We did just about a week or so ago do like a chili cook off outdoors. We're still trying to be relatively safe, even though all of us have been vaccinated. But for me, it's just as much fun to do all the planning and setting the stage if you will. So we got the bales of hay, and I got blankets and we had a bonfire and all the chili was set up. But then I had had to make apple cider donuts and I had to make sangria. And I say I had to, those just give me great-

Mindy Henderson: I was going to say something about that.

Therese Gabriel: Yeah. Great excuses for me to try out lots of new recipes.

Mindy Henderson: Wow. So those donuts sound kind of amazing. I might eat that recipe.

Therese Gabriel: I'd be happy to share.

Mindy Henderson: Or better yet. Just have you send me some.

Therese Gabriel: Yes, yes. Those are fun. I've done cooking classes at camp. So like you said, you're a foodie. A lot of our kids really enjoy cooking and they've become quite the foodies. So we did make your own pizza. I coordinate it with a garden center. So they brought us all oregano and different herbs. So the kids got to see like from start to finish. Snip and fridge herbs, put it on your pizza, bake the pizza. Then we also had cabin competitions of cake decorating. We had a sponsor donate tubs of icing and big, giant sheet cakes. And every cabin had like two hours to decorate the cakes. And that was a lot of fun.

Mindy Henderson: Wow. I can tell I'm going to be really hungry by the time that we're finished talking. So on that note, Casey, I know that you were also involved in leading a camp project. Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

Casey Stark: Yeah. So the Muscular Dystrophy Association Camp for Southern Wisconsin reached out to me a couple years back. And this was kind of at a point where I was kind of removed from the camp life after being a camper and graduated, I hadn't really been involved with camp in my young adult life. And then I was approached a few years ago by the MDA office. If I would like to help with their arts and crafts and kind of help with creating a project for our graduating campers. So being a graduated camper myself, I know how special MDA camp is to a lot of people, whether it be volunteers, program staff, campers. And especially when you're a camp and you've reached that point in time where you

can no longer go to camp. It's definitely bittersweet. And it's a place where you want to be able to go every year.

But we all come to that point in time where we have to transition into something else. So I was really excited to be able to come up with an idea, kind of like a memento are those graduating campers to take home with them. So that way they always kind of had a piece of camp with them wherever they may be. So the first year that I was asked to lead this project, we did a project where we took like an eight by eight canvas and with painters tape, I outlined the state of Wisconsin.

And then I also added a piece of painters tape kind of in the location of where camp is within the state. And so with those areas masked off during the week of camp, all the volunteers and campers and program staff, except for the graduating campers were asked to dip their finger, just one finger in paint, and then they would place that fingerprint within the state. So then by the time that you removed all the painters tape, the state of Wisconsin was made up of all of those fingerprints. And then there was a empty space of where the camp location was. So kind of a way for the graduating campers to take a piece of everyone that's touched their wives and the campers whose lives they've touched as well to be able to take home with them and remember each of those individuals as well.

Mindy Henderson: I love that idea. Did you come up with that?

Casey Stark: So when I was trying to find ideas, I was looking kind of like on Pinterest and Etsy, just for like going away type ideas. And I came across it as kind of like a graduating high school gift that someone had done. And I mean, this is kind of somewhere, we're graduating camp going on to that next phase of life. So I thought it would be really fitting to kind of apply it to this scenario.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah. I'd love that. And I can think of a lot of different situations where that kind of project would be really special. I really love that idea.

Casey Stark: Thank you.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah.

Therese Gabriel: Yeah. That's awesome. I'll have to put that on our list when we get to go back.

Mindy Henderson: I think so. So Casey, while I'm talking to you, I would love to ask you just for a second, because we may have some people listening who sort of share some limitations and things that we experience as SMA, unfortunately progresses a little bit. And for me my finger dexterity and my muscle weakness has made it... Nevermind the fact that I've already told you, I am not a creative person. But it's made it a bit challenging for me to do much in the way of art. And so I'm curious to know if you've experienced limitations in the way that your body will cooperate to do the kinds of art that you like to do. And if so, any tips or ideas that you've come up with to sort of compensate or adapt your approaches.

Casey Stark: For sure, yeah. I have definitely experienced kind of a gradual loss... A very, very gradual at that though loss and being able to do certain things when it comes to like crafting and whatnot. So my biggest thing is I try to work small. So whether I'm painting something or doing like the glass etching or resin everything I'm doing is rather small. So that way I can manipulate it better. Bigger pieces, bigger objects, it gets hard when they get bigger, because then they become heavier and then manipulating them a certain way so it's comfortable to either draw on them or paint on them or whatever it may be. It just is too overwhelming. So that's one of my main overarching things that I do is I always keep what I'm working on rather small. And then given that a lot of my artwork that I'm doing currently is painting like painting mostly on canvases.

I do some work with painting on other objects as well, but I've really found some products that really help with minimizing the amount of physical exertion I have to do in order to paint. So one of those being is I have this pallet that's called a stay wet pallet. And before I had this pallet, anytime I would paint, I would take like a paper plate and put like a dollop of each of my paints on this paper plate. And I would use that paper plate for a couple hours either until I was done painting or the paint dried up, I'd have to get new paint on there.

And opening and closing those paint tubes can get very tiring just because sometimes they like to close a little bit harder than others. So the constant manipulation of opening and closing got really taxing. So I came across this stay wet pallet, which is essentially, it's like a tray that has a sponge underneath it. And it has special paper that you put on top of the sponge. So I can keep that paint wet and active for... I've used it for up to two weeks without having to replace paint.

Mindy Henderson: Oh my gosh.

Casey Stark: Yeah. So not only does it keep me from having to constantly open and close paint tubes, it's also become very economical too, because I'm throwing away unused paint. So that's been a lifesaver, especially recently with painting so much more. Another thing that's really helped too is as I'm painting, I'm constantly switching between different brushes and the picking up and regripping of brushes can get tiring after a while.

So I've actually found a... And you can just find this on Amazon relatively cheap, but it's a paint well. So it's like a bucket made for like paint brushes, but in the plastic well around the rim, there's pre-drilled holes for your paint brushes to fit into. So it's in the nice way to like put the paint brushes in there. They're not going to roll off, but they're also already upright. So it's easy to pick up, start painting, put it back down, change out a different brush. That's also been really a nice way to help kind of conserve energy and that has allowed me to paint longer than what I normally would've been able to.

Mindy Henderson: Oh, cool. I love that there are all of these inventive things out there that I never heard of those two things.

Casey Stark: Yeah. I've just stumbled upon them in the last couple months. So I glad I did because they've changed my life.

Mindy Henderson: Very, very cool. Yeah, I bet.

Therese Gabriel: I was just going to throw in, we adapted a few things at camp because some of our campers like painting upward, the anti-gravity was the difficult portion. And we had a teacher and artist come him down to camp and he immediately took a lot of our brushes and taped them or connected them to extenders.

And what he ended up doing was putting the canvasses lower, like around the campers knees, or even lower than that. And then their arm and wrist could still remain on the arm of their chair where they had more stability. And then the paintbrush, because it was extended, they were able to paint. So it's very different that looking up onto an easel, it was rather painting down. But with gravity, with them, they were able to paint similar to you, Casey, for a much longer period of time without getting so tired of having to be reaching up. And I thought that was great. A very simple idea.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah. That's a fantastic idea.

Casey Stark: Yeah. I'll have to implement some of those because right now, like painting backgrounds on some of my canvas, I have like a mini easel, but like you said, the upward gravity it's very hard. And so normally, when I'm doing backgrounds, I'll set the canvas on my lap. But then that just creates a whole nother mess because you have all of the, we paint all around. So yeah. I have to try that out too.

Therese Gabriel: Right. Yeah. It worked really well for them.

Mindy Henderson: Nice. So great. Well, I'm ready to jump into some more projects. I think that you've both come ready to discuss a couple of fun projects that our listeners could maybe try at home this year. Therese, do you want to start us off?

Therese Gabriel: Sure. So I think a lot of times people, if you think about the holidays, my number one rule that I would tell you is like start early. And try and do things ahead of the time if you can. And I'm sure lots of you have seen, but there's a lot of really great recipes that can be kind of pre-done if you will, and all the dry ingredients put together. And then when it's time to make it, you truly just have to add like stick of melted butter or a couple eggs and some oil. And so I really recommend that. I think doing that with your kids is actually a really fun opportunity. You get the big ball canning jars from the store and you layer the things in. Whether you layer in to make cookies or you layer in my personal favorite, which I shared with Mindy are some campfire bars.

And they're basically like a s'more that you cook in the oven, but everything can be layered in that jar. You can tie a cute little bow on the top. Number one, it makes a great gift. Number two, even if you just want to get it ready for yourself, right before people come over, things are already measured out and ready to go. So there's all sorts of those. Once again, like Casey has said looking on the

internet and Pinterest and Etsy and things give you great ideas. But doing a lot of those jar activities, the kids enjoy doing them. They have a lot of fun and they feel very proud that they can give this to grandma or give this to their aunt or their godmother or whoever. And it's easy and it's fun and it taste good. So those are all good things.

Mindy Henderson: Absolutely. And I will also throw in with my own daughter, I think one of the best ways to get your kids out of kind of a pickiness rut is to get them in the kitchen and have them start cooking. Because like you said Therese, they've got them the kind of the pride factor in the fact that they created something and then by extension, they want to eat it. So, I think in general, cooking with your kids is a really great thing to do.

Therese Gabriel: And during the holidays you also want to instill that mindset of doing things for other people. That's always just such a good thing to do.

Mindy Henderson: Cook food.

Therese Gabriel: So you're right. If they make it, they're much more likely to eat it. And that they help make it. They are very proud to like give it to someone that it's something they actually created and made for them. So there's just a lot of good that can come from that in both people involved.

Mindy Henderson: Absolutely. And so this s'more recipe, I know that you sent me the recipe and in fact, all of the projects, I think that we're going to talk about today, you guys either have sent me, are going to send me some instructions that we can then post on the so notes page. So if you're listening and you want to go find detailed instructions about any of what we're talking about, you can go find them on the webpage. And did you tell me there that this s'more recipe, it's literally just stuffing a bunch of stuff to a mason are and making that cute and then adding some better when you're ready to bake it.

Therese Gabriel: That is exactly right.

Mindy Henderson: Doesn't get much easier than that.

Therese Gabriel: It doesn't get much easier. And it's very simple. Even very young children can do it. It's breaking up graham crackers and layering those, pouring in some of the mini marshmallows, pouring in chocolate chips. So really, there's not a lot that you could mess up, so to speak.

Mindy Henderson: Up my alley.

Therese Gabriel: Yeah. And then all you need to do is melt butter and bake it for like 15 minutes. And I'm a picky eater. So unless it tastes really good, I don't really like to make it or eat it. And peas do taste really good. So I highly recommend.

Mindy Henderson: It sounds dangerous. I will tell you that.

Casey Stark: Yeah, it sounds really good.

Therese Gabriel: Well, it gives you a little taste of camp because what's camp without s'mores.

Mindy Henderson: I know so fun. So Casey, do you have a project or a recipe or something you want to talk us through?

Casey Stark: Yeah. So my thing, when I... Because I always like to create like Christmas gifts for my family or my extended family. So I do a lot of just like really easy gifts. I can make a lot of and give to people. My biggest thing is I like to make practical gifts. So unfortunately everyone only has so much wall space. So giving someone a picture or something like that they can put on their wall can only be done so many times.

So one of the gifts I like to do, I like to have like a practical use behind them. And two really easy ones that I've done previously are ceramic coffee mugs and coasters. So for the coffee mugs, it's just, you can go to any type of store that carries glassware. And just by like either white or clear, any type of style of ceramic coffee mugs, and then you can use oil based paint markers, which are easily found in a craft store.

And you can get as intricate as like a entire like scenery, or it could be as simple as writing someone's name on it and decorating around it. So it's a really nice, easy craft for like anyone, whether you're young or old, because it can be so versatile. But then once you make your design on the cup, you can bake it in the oven to kind of set it. And then that allows you to hand wash the ceramic mug. So that way people can use it without the design fading away.

Mindy Henderson: Oh, that's really cool. You don't need a special oven or any... Like a ceramics oven or anything. You could just bake it in a regular oven.

Casey Stark: Yeah. So 350 for 20 minutes is usually what I do. And that heat just sets in that oil based paint. I wouldn't put it in the dishwasher load just because of the heat of the dishwasher. Hand washing is probably safer, but it allows them that person to use or their morning coffee or whatever it may be. But so then you can remind them of that gift that you give them.

Mindy Henderson: Oh, I like that.

Casey Stark: Yeah. And then nice thing to go along with it is coasters. So craft stores and I think I've even seen them at Walmart too, or Target in their arts and craft section. You can find like wooden, plain coasters and I've even used like cork, like plain cork coasters as well. And you can use like a acrylic paint, paint, markers, anything that would be able to be like painted or printed on the coaster.

Again, you can get as detailed as like a scenery, I've done pet portraits on like the coasters themselves. Or you can be as simple as just like a fun little design, but that way it's something that's personalized for that person, but still useful. And then with those coasters, what I like to do is just put a little bit like a mod podge on those just to kind of seal it. So that way, if they do set anything on there that maybe like wet or damp that you're drawing won't get a erased from there.

Mindy Henderson: Okay. That makes sense. So those you don't bake, you would put like a protective coating on them.

Casey Stark: Correct.

Mindy Henderson: Okay. Such good ideas. And you could even... I'm a bit of a chocoholic too, so I might stuff the mug with Hershey's kisses or M&Ms or something.

Casey Stark: For sure. Yeah.

Mindy Henderson: If you're giving it okay. As a gift. Yeah. That's so fun. Well, so I figured I would share a couple of... I have probably the two easiest recipes. I don't know Therese, your recipe sounds really easy, but these two recipes are so simple. One of them has two ingredients, three, if you want to get fancy. But one of the things that my mom did with me when we were kids growing up and Thanksgiving was always a big deal. And we were doing tons of cooking for that.

And then of course the holidays in December, and I know that cranberries can be a little bit of a polarizing topic. Some people love them, some hate them. But the things that I could do in the kitchen were a little bit limited. I couldn't get up over the stoves to cook things in or lift things in and out of the oven or do lots of knife work or anything. So my mom found a recipe for cranberries that is actually three, yes, three ingredients. And stick with me here because I'm going to start with canned cranberries and I'm not talking about the jellied stuff. There's a big difference between the jelly cranberry stuff, which is kind of gross. But you can find whole cranberries in a can. I think it's like 16 or 18 ounce cans, maybe.

So you get one can of that. And one can of crushed pineapple. You squeeze the juice out of the pineapple and you throw both of those cans in a bowl together. And then if you want to get crazy, like I said, you can chop up some pecans and pecans are small. And I was able to work with, I think my mom would just give me a steak knife and set me free to chop up some pecans depending on if you can do that safely. And then throw those in the bowls. And I'm not kidding new, it makes a delicious cranberry sauce. So you just whip up the three things in a bowl. The other recipe that I have to share is one of the world's, I think, best fudge recipes.

And again, it's two ingredients. It's so easy. It's almost embarrassing, but you take a bag, I think it's a 12 ounce bag of semi-sweet chocolate chips, pour them in a bowl with a can of Eagle brand sweetened, condensed milk. And you may microwave it for 45 seconds at a time. And in between microwave that you want to give it a good stir, but as soon as your lumps are gone, you throw it into a pan. And I'll go and buy those disposable aluminum pans, because they make great gifts and you could just dump it in there.

If you're a nut person, you could decorate it with nuts on top. Sometimes I've found the smashed peppermint candies in the grocery store and you can sprinkle those on top. So you can kind of get creative with how you decorate the top. But it's a really good fudge recipe. I was surprised when I found out how

simple it was. So those were my two relatively simple, kind of kid friendly recipes that you could do either for your family or with your family or if you're giving gifts away. So do either of you have any other projects that you want to share with us?

Therese Gabriel: I would just say since we mentioned pies earlier. There is no shame in buying the pre-done roll out the pies. But what my kids love and I am one of them when it comes to this, the extra pie crust. We use little cookie cutters and cut out acorns and leaves and pumpkins and things like that. Sprinkle them with cinnamon sugar, bake them in the oven and those go faster than anything. But then I also just recently, a couple years ago, saw this great idea with leftover pie crusts.

They chopped up some dried cranberries, those craisins that you can get in a bag, they chopped those up and they chopped up pecans very finely and kind of put a sprinkle of both of those things between two layers of pie crust. And then kind of rolled it and then cut it out. And those were a great little like snacking cracker to put with like your hors d'oeuvres. So you got a little taste of like the cranberry and pecan, but it was in that flaky pie crust itself. And everybody thought they were amazing. Like, oh my God, these are so great. And I was like, oh my goodness, these are so easy. But they really did make a really nice cracker type snack and with the cranberries and the nuts in there, they tasted great.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah. That's a fantastic idea. I love that. I love that. Casey, what about you?

Casey Stark: Yeah. I was going to say kind of going off of that. I think sometimes like cooking and crafts can be like misconstrued as really intimidating, especially if you're not already like an artsy type person. And I think the biggest thing to remember when we're doing like was crafts or cooking, whatever is that it's not necessarily the complexity of it, but that it's coming from you. And it's something that you're making with your time. I think gifts like cooking, like cooking stuff and crafting things, I think means more to the person you're giving it to than just something you buy at the store and give to them.

So you don't think you need to necessarily be like a super skilled artist or baker or chef to do anything. I think coming from the heart and doing like what you can makes it special to that person that you're giving it to. So I think especially for crafts adjusting it to your level and personalizing it based on your level of skill, I think is something everyone can do.

Mindy Henderson: Absolutely. And it's not about what you spend or like you said, how skilled you are. I love that sentiment. Some of my most beloved gifts that I've gotten over the years are Christmas ornaments that people have painted for me or books that I've received from people. So I'm glad that you said that. I think you're exactly right.

Therese Gabriel: Absolutely.

Mindy Henderson: So what about traditions? This is also a time of year I think when a lot of people, a lot of families have traditions that have lots of sentimental value and have a lot of meaning. For us every time we traveled somewhere, since my daughter was

small, we would buy a Christmas tree ornament. Everywhere that we went. And so our tree is full of ornaments that we've gotten from China and the Bahamas and New York and all of the different places that we've gone to on vacation. And we kind of get to revisit those memories every year when we take them out and unpack them. Casey, what about you? Do you have any special traditions in your family?

Casey Stark: Yeah. So when I was younger, we would do all of our Christmases as a giant extended family. We'd spend the Christmas time at my grandparents with my aunts, cousins, uncles, and my grandma would always give each grandchild ornament every year. Until your age, 18, every year you got an ornament that had the year denoted on it, but it would be something different. So one year I got like a little dog that had, I think it was like 1994, like so long ago. But every year it's just a little something different and growing up then once you hit 18, you have this collection of ornaments that you can then use in your own... In my own house now when I decorate, I now have all these ornaments that I can fill my tree. And they have a memory behind each of them it takes you back to that specific year.

Mindy Henderson: I love that. I love that. Therese what does your family do?

Therese Gabriel: So there's several different things because all of my children are grown now. So they've created some of their own traditions, but one of the things growing up that was a tradition. First of all, we at our home decorated a lot. So each room had a different Christmas tree and then the ornaments kind of coincided with that. So for instance, in my kitchen, there's a Christmas tree and all the ornaments on it are little types of cooking ornaments.

Mindy Henderson: Oh, cute.

Therese Gabriel: It helps that my cousin is in charge of the ornaments for Hallmark.

Mindy Henderson: Oh, that's convenient.

Therese Gabriel: So every year, but probably one of the things that I enjoy doing the most, and if my kids are in town they do it with me. My birthday is a few days before Christmas. And when I was born, my dad came to the hospital, obviously to see my mom and brought her a plant. And it was in a Santa. A ceramic scene and there was a plant coming out of it. And so that started kind of the first Santa part of my collection.

Mindy Henderson: Oh, wow.

Therese Gabriel: So now I probably have 200 or 300 Santas.

Mindy Henderson: Oh my gosh.

Therese Gabriel: Because over the years that has been similar to your ornaments. When my aunt was in Hawaii, she came back and brought me a Santa from Hawaii. When my aunt was in Ireland. So all the different people in my life have gathered these

Santas, knowing that I would collect them. And so when I unpack that box, now, it's a little bit melancholy because quite honestly, the majority of the people who have given those Santas to me have since passed away. But each one in each box is labeled and it's... Some people are like, isn't that sad?

And I said, no not really I spend the afternoon unwrapping each one and filling this one piece this... This shelving unit we have and decorate it all. But it's kind of like, I get to think about aunt Betty and aunt Barbara and my dad, and all the other people in my life who have kind of touched me on my birthday and given me a Santa. So that is always a very special time. And we all talk about it and we all have our favorite ones.

Mindy Henderson:

That's beautiful. And the common thread that I'm seeing in all of our examples are the people in our lives and the memories that we make. And so for anyone who's listening if you don't have your own traditions yet, feel free to steal ours and create those special memories with your family that you get to unpack and revisit every year. I think it's so special and so much fun. So we are almost out of time, but I do want to ask you both one more question, if you don't mind.

I recorded another holiday episode with a mental health therapist because while the holiday are festive and there's lots of fun activities and time together that we spend with people, the holidays can also be really stressful for a lot of people. And so Casey, let's start with you. I wanted to ask you if you've experienced stress intermingled with all of the fun times in the holidays, and if you have any good tips for people kind of to mitigate stress or manage stress over the holidays.

Casey Stark:

Yeah, for sure. So I think I'm experiencing probably the most stress this holiday season compared to other recent ones, just dealing with opening my new Etsy business. A lot of people have ordered portraits that they want to give to their loved ones for Christmas time. And so now I have the added stress of not only getting my own personal and things like that done for my family and friends, but now I have the added stress of making sure I'm getting these gifts completed in time for people who have ordered portraits of their pets. And luckily I haven't overbooked myself. So I still have a good amount of time before getting them to people. But I think a lot of us when we start to get into this holiday mindset, we just have that mindset of, we need to get it all done right now, right away as fast as I can.

And especially like with my painting, with I have these pending orders, I feel like I just have to go, go, go get them done as fast as I can. And with no breaks in between. And what I've kind of had to do just to kind of give myself like a mental break and not get too like overworked with working a full-time job and then painting on the side. I need to really just kind of take a step back and make sure I'm taking time for myself.

So kind of blocking out the holiday time crunch that we probably all feel. I have a roommate that I live with and he's basically my best friend and oh, we do a lot of things together. So I always have to kind of just make sure like on a weekend, I'm not just painting, I'm taking time out to either go to the store with him or go

see a movie or go out to dinner. Because otherwise, if I just paint 24/7, I get stressed out.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah. I think that's great advice. The holidays can come with a lot of expectations. And you're right there's so much to do. And so many of us put so much pressure on ourselves for everything to be perfect, but you know what I think just taking a minute to take care of yourself and enjoy the moment is really great advice. So Therese do you have any, any advice for people who are listening?

Therese Gabriel: I do. This is advice I've had to learn along the way, but you mentioned expectations. I would really encourage people to actually lower their expectations. I feel like we expect so much from different people or from different events. This is just going to be amazing or wonderful and kind of bring that down a notch is always helpful. And then along with that being open and accepting of new ideas or new options.

As I mentioned, my kids are grown, they live around the country and I don't get to have everybody here on December 25th. So if we have to celebrate Christmas on December 27th, that's okay. And kind of coming into this new idea or new concept. And if I only get to see two of them on this day and a week later, I get to see the other one, just really focusing on what you have right then, and not so much focusing on the shoulds or woulds like you're supposed to do it on this day. And this is the official.

Kind of just putting that off to the side, I think has really helped. It just allows me to enjoy our Christmas, whenever that might be, or thinking of it in a more positive way. It allows me to enjoy several Christmases. Because we'll have a small one maybe with part of the family and then another small one later. So that has really been a great way to not get stressed, that it's not going to be perfect or it's not going to be just so. And then, like I mentioned before, just preparing ahead of time. I just can't stress that enough. So I just always know when you entertain people enjoy the whole host or the hostess when they're relaxed and enjoying things as well.

Mindy Henderson: That's a good point.

Therese Gabriel: So if you're running around crazy, that doesn't make for a nice time. It's not a nice time for you, but not really for your guests or your family either. So just trying to get things done ahead of time and just leaving the last little bit and taking help from other people. People always say, can I bring something? And I think a lot of us our initial responses. Like, "No, that's okay, I can do it. I can do it." Well, maybe our initial response needs to be sure if you'd like to bring dessert, that would be great. And really, it makes them feel more involved and it gives you a little bit of a break, but yeah, those two things are, are really important and helpful, I think.

Mindy Henderson: I love that. I love that because it there's so much that we could do. You mentioned to the coulds and the shoulds and the woulds. There's so much that we could do to make everything beautiful and perfect and on and on and on.

But at the end of the day, it's about the people who you're with, I think. And the memories that you're creating and the time that you're spending together. So I think you both are very wise and give great advice.

Well, we are about out of time. I could talk to you both forever. This has been so much fun. I am going to, like I said, post your projects, your recipes that you shared on the website, on the episode page. So if anybody wants to go grab those feel free. And I just want to wish everybody who might be listening a very happy holiday season and appreciate you sharing some of it with us.

Therese Gabriel: Thank you so much, Mindy. It was a pleasure.

Casey Stark: Yeah. Thank you.

Mindy Henderson: Thank you for listening. For more information about the guests you heard from today, go check them out at mda.org/podcast, and to learn more about the Muscular Dystrophy Association, the services we provide, how you can get involved and to subscribe to Quest Magazine or to Quest Newsletter, please go to mda.org/quest. If you enjoyed this episode, we'd be grateful if you'd leave a review, go ahead and hit that subscribe button so we can keep bringing you great content and maybe share it with a friend or two. Thanks everyone. Until next time go be the light we all need in this world.