

Making Time

Kathy Ireland's holidays are far from photo-shoot perfect – homemade décor and cheesy Christmas music make her household merry

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Kathy Ireland spent years as a red-carpet regular during her career as a fashion model and film actress. But during the holiday season, this

highly successful businesswoman turns her own spotlight on her family, and she urges other moms – and dads – to do the same. Ireland, who got her start as a model at 17, now helms a fashion and home-furnishings licensing company that earned \$1.4 billion in revenues in 2008. Her name is on everything from athletic socks to ceramic floor tile, and the company recently announced a partnership with High Point, N.C.-based Vaughan Furniture to create a 230-piece collection. Her new book, “Real Solutions for Busy Moms: Your Guide to Success and Sanity” (Howard Books, 2009), was released in April.

As a lifelong Santa Barbara, Calif., resident, Ireland says she's never seen a white Christmas. That's because, despite all her work-related travel over the years, she's always made a point to be home for the holiday. Although the snow may have been missing, she says her childhood holidays were filled with their own special rites.

“The tradition was getting the artificial tree out of the box,” Ireland jokes. But then came the decorating and cookie-baking that everyone enjoys this time of year. “And my mom



Image courtesy of Kathy Ireland

always made a wonderful Christmas dinner.”

Today, Ireland is one of those Christmas fans whose decorations go up even before Thanksgiving, though her husband – an emergency room doctor and commercial fisherman – may grumble a bit at the holiday music she needs to get in the mood. Festive florals, ornaments, tinsel, lights and a porcelain nativity scene are all part of the yearly plans. “It's fun to Christmas-ify our house; I love it,” she says. “I love the lights and I love the food. I like Christmas music on all the time – I drive the family nuts.”

However, while one might expect the residence of a home-furnishings designer to be picture perfect for the holidays – especially when the rooms often form the backdrop for promotional photo shoots – it instead features a homemade appeal, thanks to the role her kids play in the decorating process. Over the years, she's let them call many of the decorating

shots, which she sees as a way to empower the kids' own creative impulses. “They get to pick out the tree and decorate it,” she says, noting that the trees now come fresh from a tree farm instead of a box. “Our trees are a little hodgepodge, and usually a little heavy on the bottom,” since those are the easiest branches for little arms to reach.

“I just want everyone to feel welcome,” she says of this low-key approach, “and not have it so precious that you can't live in it.” While the decorations are a key ingredient in Ireland's Christmas celebrations, the family downplays other material aspects of the holiday. Charitable donations to favorite causes replace gifts to many adult family members and friends. And the savvy business manager also sees a valuable teaching moment for her children when planning her gifts to them. Ireland tries to model the financial prudence she learned from her British father, who,

she says, called credit card debt the “never-never plan, because you'll never, never pay it off.”

“You've got to have a clear budget, and you can let the kids know what Santa's budget is,” she says. “Santa has to live in this economy, too.”

Spirituality also is a big part of the family's celebration. With a beach just a short walk away, Ireland and her husband often gather their kids there to watch the sun rise Christmas morning. They read aloud the story of Jesus' birth as a way to help ground the day's festivities with an appreciation for their original meaning.

It takes time to make time to prepare for such traditions, Ireland says, and that requires deliberate effort. In fact, she maintains her calendar 18 months in advance. Her work as the CEO and chief designer take second billing to such family milestones.

“The work has to work around the kids' schedules, and Christmas is a big part of that,” she says. “I've never missed a Christmas – I have always felt you have to put boundaries up.”

Practical strategies, like planning ahead, form the basis for Ireland's new book, a continuation of her effort to find solutions for families, especially busy mothers. She carries that motto through to the design of all the varied products now carrying her name. She and her designers have outlined eight distinct themes tying floor tile to curtains to upholstery, so an active mom can spend less time making choices.

“We've saved her time and taken the stress out of selection,” Ireland says of her new Vaughan Furniture line. This marketing approach was inspired by personal experience, not business-school finesse. And its current success is based on an appreciation of the challenges she's faced while juggling dual careers as executive and mom.

“In reality, I began working on it 15 years ago, when I became a mom,” she says. “I quickly understood that moms were under-served in many ways. I know that moms everywhere feel that push and that pull. I believe we can have it all, just not all at once.”

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