

NEW IN HOMES

Wrapping up gift selections

I remember vividly waiting as a kid for the Sears Christmas catalogue to arrive. By the time the letter to Santa Claus was written, the “wish book” was so well thumbed that if you didn’t get to it soon enough it was hard to read it.

Naturally my mother was kind enough to deliver the letter to Santa (and take a few hints for herself). I still marvel how all that shopping for five children was accomplished, the Christmas baking was completed and the house decorated from Christmas tree to nativity scene. (My father still recounts how the two of them assembled bicycles by flashlight when the power went out one Christmas Eve.)

With spare time at a premium, it’s probably the moment to suggest appropriate gifts for those you know well, those you don’t and gifts you should never buy alone at any time.

If it is something intended for a house, keep in mind what the other elements of the room are and, if possible, walk into the shop with a small sample of them. “Eyeballing” a colour that you believe matches the sofa is a recipe for disaster. So take a throw pillow from the sofa, an arm cover, or any reasonably small removable element so that you can match the colour.

While I applaud the stores for their energy-conscious lighting choices, those fluorescent and halide lights can often change the colour from the way that you would see it in daylight. A swatch of paint colour can easily be found at a paint store; if worse comes to worst, take a photograph.

Consider, too, where the recipient will place the gift item. If you are brave enough to purchase something large, you better also walk in with a floor plan. Remember to measure doorways and staircases to ensure the piece can actually make it into the room.

I have to say that furniture is a brave choice and may go terribly wrong unless you are sure of the recipient’s taste. Places like BoConcept, EQ3 and Casalife (to name just a few) have staff that will help you lay things out or will even do a



GLEN PELOSO

house visit if necessary. Include delivery with that kind of gift. And if you are going to give someone an appliance, include the cost of installation.

You are far safer to go with items that are either practical or can be stored away or are consumable. If you don’t know someone particularly well, then candles make a great choice. They can be used just about anywhere and they aren’t a huge design commitment for the recipient.

You may find them at places like Home Sense or Crate and Barrel starting under \$10. You can also search out fine handmade beeswax or scented candles at places like Crabtree and Evelyn. Or check out local artists at the One-of-a-Kind Show or at their studios.

I’m also a fan of digital frames — they don’t take up much space and can be filled with hundreds of memories. They can find their way into almost any decor. If you are budget-constrained, an ordinary picture frame might be a better choice. Black or silver frames blend easily with most decors. If you are pretty certain of tastes, then you can make some “out there” choices.

If you are really uncertain about what to get someone, then get a gift card. Some think of gift cards as impersonal, but I see it as considerate in that you don’t have to pretend that figurine is something she always wanted.

Useful items in the home tend to be found in the kitchen. Generally you can’t go wrong with a small appliance (provided they don’t already own one). I’m always happy to give a single-cup coffee maker like the Tassimo or Keurig models. The small size allows you to put them out of the way, and many are



CHRIS GALLOW PHOTO

Picture frames in neutral colours are a good gift when you’re not certain of a person’s decorating tastes.

nice looking enough to feature on the countertop.

If you know you are dealing with a true coffee lover, then get an espresso maker like the Saeco brand, for instance.

I recently got a soda stream unit for my own house, largely because I love sparkling water and was tired of lugging home bottles. I appreciate the eco-friendly aspect of reusable bottles and the exchange program they have for the empty canisters.

If there’s a chef in the family, then a mix master is great.

There are also pots and pans like the T-FAL Sensorielle style I have. I have burned more than one thing but never ruined the pots. They can be part of the look of the kitchen. The days of beat-up cookware are long gone. The kitchen is now an entertaining space for everyone who walks in the house.

If you find these choices a little pricey, you really can’t go wrong with wine glasses. The Riedel catalogue has a vast selection specific to the wines most loved by the gift recipient.

If you know the person well, then go ahead and buy sheet sets and duvet covers. However, these are pretty strong elements of a bedroom and you want to be sure they will set a tone the recipient will be happy with.

Good functional items might be pillows and duvets. They can be more expensive but I discovered the HC Sanders products a few years ago in a hotel in Europe and brought them back with me because I loved them. They now have a store in Toronto, which saves you the cost of a flight to Europe!

The same is true of bathroom towels. These are the room’s accents so you need to be sure that you know the room and the person well enough. And you don’t have to buy too many. Four will really work — generally we use the same four towels all the time: two in use and two in the wash.

These furnishing choices need to come with a receipt and you have to have a thick skin regarding returns.

Topping the “never buy for someone else unless they are with you” list is art. This is a personal experi-

ence that resonates with the emotional life of the recipient; he or she should really be with you. There are many pieces that I appreciate greatly but I know I could not live with and look at every day.

Furniture is a brave choice, for sure, but art can go wrong for many reasons. If you have your heart set on art, then take the recipient by the gallery to see it without revealing your intentions.

I am always most happy with people who don’t get me “design” items as gifts. I know the intention is good, but like the late Andy Rooney, who wanted to choose his own books to read, I like to be able to get what I “need” instead of ending up with a house full of “dustables.”

Glen Peloso is a designer who hosts HGTV’s *Restaurant Makeover* and *Take This House and Sell It*, is the design editor of *Home Décor & Renovations* magazine and a regular contributor to *Canadian Home Trends* and *Revive* magazines. Glen appears every two weeks in *New in Homes & Condos*. You can contact him through his website www.glenpelosointeriors.com, follow him on Twitter at [peloso1](https://twitter.com/peloso1) or on Facebook.

‘I saw tears of joy and gratitude’

BUILDING FUTURES from H1

The OHBA partnered with LiveDifferent’s Hero Holidays on the project.

Six houses were blitz built in four days and a dedication ceremony was held on the fifth.

“I’ve been to many different countries and I’ve been in barrios before, but nothing comes close to this experience,” says Doug Tarry, president of the OHBA.

“To see the spirit these people have is pretty incredible. It’s been an unbelievable experience. It is about their spirit.”

James Bazely, one of the co-chairs of this adventure, was beaming as the homes were dedicated and the keys given to the new homeowners.

It was Bazely’s daughter, Melissa, who challenged him to get involved in building homes here, where she now lives and works.

Bazely responded by challenging the OHBA to move its annual conference to Puerto Plata and build proper homes for the residents.

“This was everything I hoped for and more,” Bazely says during an interview in the lobby of the Rio Bachata resort in Puerto Plata.

“I anticipated that some of the delegates would back off when they saw the conditions of the neighbourhood, but instead they worked double shifts and turned up every day. They worked very hard.

“Until you’re seeing it and smelling it, you don’t know exactly what you’re up against.”

Aguas Negras was built on a former garbage dump and when it rains, black water surfaces and floods the streets and homes, bringing garbage and sewage with it.

“Often you see the statement ‘exceed your expectations.’ I have always thought that was a ridiculous description,” Dan Gabriele, co-chair of the build, says. “But I would have to say this is the first time I



GALE BEEBY PHOTOS

Brian Loder of Brookfield Homes takes some local children for a joy ride.

would use that descriptive phrase.

“What I really wasn’t expecting was the fashion in which all the participants pulled together as a team and were selfless in their daily efforts.

“The fact that this big group of gringos cared about the community inspired the residents believe in their community and they did their utmost to express their appreciation through their kindness.”

When we arrived in Aguas Negras for the first time, I spied a sign welcoming us to Barrio Nuevo Renacer, which translates as New Life.

The community of Aguas Negras petitioned the government for the name change to reflect its changing nature, from a squalid choked encampment to a real community with a school and clinic and growing families, says Christal Earle of LiveDifferent.

When the volunteers — divided into six teams — arrived at the building sites, local contractors had already demolished the decrepit homes that had stood there and had started laying concrete blocks.

ONE OF THE PEOPLE I had the

pleasure of meeting in Nuevo Renacer was Sandra N. Timeo.

She has created a foundation called the Garden of Light and has spearheaded the building of the school, a church, a clinic and women’s co-operative that sells handmade goods, as well as running boys and girls clubs.

Timeo grew up in Nuevo Renacer and is a single mother of four children, aged 19, 17, 15 and 12, and is loved and respected by all who know her.

The school, which goes up to Grade 4 or 12 years old (whichever comes first) is about to get a second floor, meaning that the children won’t have to bused out of the community to continue their education.

Although admission to the school is free, children must buy their own uniforms and books, which can be a barrier to many families getting their young ones a prized education.

Timeo says there are about 1,000 families living here — about 4,000 people — and there are 258 children attending the school with 10 teachers, and 36 girls and 22 boys in the



Sandra N. Timeo has made a real difference in Nuevo Renacer.

clubs she runs.

Teachers at her school are paid about the equivalent of \$60 a month for a half day of classes; \$120 a month if they work both morning and afternoon shifts.

ALVIN CURLING ACTED as an unofficial ambassador to the group. The former MPP and envoy to the D.R. from 2005 to 2006 pitched in with the building, too.

“My role as the ambassador of this project was unique. I was not assigned specifically to any one of the six sites and this allowed me to see a spirit of humanity demonstrated that words would definitely fall short of capturing.

“I saw tears of joy, tears of kindness and tears of gratitude and relief. Individuals were transformed from giving to receiving, from acceptance to sharing,” he said in an email.

“Canadians coming from the comfort of their homes to assist others with less means of material infrastructure found a community that welcomed them with a spirit that has sustained them through natural and human disasters for decades. Smiles that melt the hearts of all, children that wanted piggyback rides to say that ‘we are family,’ children of both nations sharing their games and spaces as all kids do when they get together.

“I saw the language of human kindness in full flight through smiles, laughter, high fives, low fives, or sharing a Presidente, a Dominican beer. These actions transcend all spoken words. In precise terms, it was saying *nuestra familia*. “It was indeed an honour and a life

changing experience.”

THERE’S AN OLD ADAGE that if you give a man a fish, he eats for a day, but if you teach a man to fish, he’ll eat every day.

Working on that principle, Liz McKie and Melissa Bazely of Dove Missions began the pig program in Nuevo Renacer.

In this pilot program, a female pig, a pen and food was bought for a family — who was taught how to take care of it. When the piglets reach about two months, the farmer gives one female pig back to Dove Missions and can sell the other piglets (for about \$30 for a female, about \$25 for a male).

Then Dove Missions sets up another family with the new pig, and when she matures, she’ll be bred and the cycle continues.

During the week of the build, the first mamma pig, who they’ve named Chum Chum, gave birth to 13 piglets.

THE KEY CEREMONY was attended by over 200 participants, including LiveDifferent volunteers, plus about 400 community members, making for very crowded the streets. Each family received the key to their new home from each of the six team captains.

Canadian Ambassador Todd Kuiack, who joined the build for two days, spoke in both English and Spanish.

“I cannot tell you how happy I am to be here,” he said. “It is a privilege to represent these 200 Canadians, as well as the 800,000 Canadians that come here every year.

“I didn’t do enough (on this build) but I will do more.”

Kuiack is right: This was a privilege beyond description.

There are more pictures and stories on my blog at www.thestarblogs.com/galebeebey. You can reach Gale Beebey at gb@thestar.ca or follow her on Twitter at [galebeebey](https://twitter.com/galebeebey).