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Absent children alter festive spirit

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Galva family with son in Iraq cuts back on decorating

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Copley News Service

GALVA - "It's the most wonderful time of the year."

Our View

Letters

Not quite. Many families in the area are counting on "the most wonderful time" being around March or whenever their military loved ones finally come home.

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Two Galva families once worked together to decorate their neighboring homes every year for Christmas. The Jim Dohertys and the Ronnie Thompsons had many merry moments. Memories linger of the Dohertys' son Chris up on a truck stringing lights on the Thompsons' roof.

Lifestyles

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This year is different. The Thompsons have moved across town, a 2003 summer storm robbed the Dohertys of the better part of a large pine tree in their yard and a recent snowstorm took yet another branch. And Chris is away in Iraq.

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Instead of Christmas lights, the Dohertys have decorated their property with year-round, come-home sentiments, including white lights. A candle is in the window and a wreath on the door ever since Chris left with the Army over a year ago.

They added red, white and blue bunting for the Fourth of July and recently red, white and blue lights for the wreath; before that they had white lights that looked yellow for the 1st Cavalry, Chris' Army division.

They have two flags up, one for the 1st Cavalry. Mrs. Doherty buys yellow ribbon by the spool and a friend of a friend makes up her bows.

With their daughter in Florida, things are definitely different for the Dohertys' this year.

"You really notice when the kids leave. When nobody's coming back, you really notice," said Pam Doherty, Jim's

wife.

A large artificial Christmas tree bought many years ago will have wait for another Christmas. This year, the Dohertys are putting up a much smaller tree, and a second candle with a Santa in a window.

Meanwhile, at Camp War Eagle, a base at the edge of Sadr City in Bagdad, 1st Lt. Chris Doherty has a Christmas tree near his bed to remind him of his family's love.

The lights on Chris' tree were pre-strung when his family sent it. They promptly blew out the first time he plugged in the tree. A family friend sent a second string. The tree is lit daily, connecting Chris to his family and memories many miles away.

Pam said American soldiers don't aggravate Iraqi insurgents by flaunting signs of Christmas in front of them, but the tree at his bedside is acceptable.

Pam, who is finishing up a degree in parks and recreation/tourism administration at Western Illinois University, said being around young people at college and volunteering with physical education classes in Galva have helped keep her spirits up while her son is in Iraq.

"It was kind of a helpful thing, just being around kids and listening to what they're doing," she said.

She's also met a friend in college whose husband is in Iraq. "I know that it's tough on everyone," she said.

"It's hard, but one of the big things is trying to keep everybody up," she said. "We have our moments, but we try to keep a good face for everybody else. I know our daughter-in-law is going through a rough time."

Amanda and Chris Doherty were married in a civil ceremony last Dec. 23. He has sent both Christmas and anniversary presents back to the States. They are planning a church wedding for May.

Amanda lives with her parents in DuQuoin, but is planning to move to the Fort Hood, Texas, area in January in preparation for Chris' return. Their families hope he'll deactivate and return to the States in May. So far they've heard he will come home in March for a three-day leave, return to duty for 10 days then have 30 days off.

Pam said she and her husband still enjoy the Christmas activities, however. She said if she didn't have so many night classes, she might be able to get to more events.

"I used to have a lot of time for thinking. Too much. It's gotten a little better. We're getting close to the end. We'll be together next Thanksgiving and next Christmas, and that's what we keep planning for. That's what we're looking forward to," she said.

"Probably for a lot of families' kids from the National Guard here, I think it'll be a rough time for them," she added.

"I'm hoping they have family around and a lot of people that will help them through."

Lisa Hammer is a reporter at the Galva News.