

Create your own Advent calendar

By Lindsey Hollenbaugh, Berkshire Eagle Staff Berkshire Eagle

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Nothing says Merry Christmas like one pre-breakfast piece of chocolate hiding behind a cardboard cutout square on a chocolate Advent calendar.

For many believers -- and some not -- Dec. 1 marks the first day to tick off the days until Christmas one advent box at a time. Even though technically Advent begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, most commercial Advent calendars start the countdown today.

Dating back to early 19th-century Germany, the Advent calendar as we know it originated when religious families counted down the days to Christmas by drawing lines in chalk on their doors each day to mark Advent's passing. Historians believe sometime in the first decade of the 1900s, the first Advent calendar was printed. The first chocolate-filled calendar was created in 1958, according to Gourmet magazine.

While most big-box and specialty stores sell their own brand of the popular chocolate-filled calendar, a sudden interest -- thanks to well-lit Pinterest holiday boards and filtered craftiness on Instagram -- in creating a homemade version is building holiday steam one adorable idea at a time.

For Kelly Bevan McIlquham and her family, each day of Advent is marked with a wrapped Christmas book that is opened and read, with the holiday literary streak ending, of course, with "The Night Before Christmas," on Dec. 24.

"Christmas is so busy, just being a family is so busy, so in the midst of the crazy holiday season, it's really nice to sit back and have some quiet family time at the end of each night and enjoy each other -- it's what the holidays are about," said Bevan McIlquham, founder of Berkshire Family Focus, an online magazine created in June 2012 to help Berkshire County families find fun and creative activities and local events.

The mom of three -- a set of 14-year-old twins and a 12-year-old boy -- began the book-wrapping tradition shortly after her children were born and continues it to this day. The kids may be older, and busy basketball-season nights might mean opening a few books in one night to catch up on the countdown, but she says they still look forward to the tradition.

Bevan McIlquham also suggests families create an activity Advent calendar as a fun, creative way to mark the season. When her children were younger, she would take a pre-made felt wall-hanging Advent calendar with pockets and place a piece of paper in each day with a fun activity.

"You don't have to come up with big, huge things to do," she said. "Just take time for each other -- put local holiday walks in there, take a night and drive around the neighborhood to watch the lights."

Other activities could include watching a favorite Christmas movie with popcorn, decorating the tree, making reindeer food for Santa's transportation, or a shopping trip to buy gifts for local charities.

"These are things we do anyway during the holidays. It just helps build up the excitement," she said.

Homemade, creative Christmas countdowns can be for more than just children. Taking the time to

observe the daily practice of something during this special time of the year can be a personal way to prepare for the holidays.

Melanie Mowinski, associate professor of visual arts at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts and founder of LetterPRESS as a Public Art Project in North Adams, creates a collage-a-day during Advent on her blog www.melaniemowinski.com.

"[Advent calendars] are just fun -- the idea of anticipation beginning, looking forward to something -- and I like discipline and daily practice that came from that," said Mowinski, a self-proclaimed lover of all things. She's a "Christian non-practicing Catholic," whose mother used to make felt Advent calendars for her sister, brother and her when they were children.

The daily December observance began last year, when Mowinski posted a blog a day, highlighting a 5-by-5-inch collage on paper using paper, cut-out shapes and some handwriting with a brief explanation of what moved her that December morning.

You don't have to create something complex. Even buying something like a Lego Advent calendar you have to build helps connect you to the season, makes you participate, Mowinski said. She buys nothing to create the daily work and likes that about the process.

"Everywhere we look it's all about consuming," she said of the holiday. "I don't buy anything. I use what I have. It's another reason why I like [creating the calendar]. I am thinking about the anticipation of Christ coming into the world. Whether you are Christian or not, there is sense of light -- that goodness is possible and peace is possible. For me, that's what it's about and how to cultivate that in myself and in others."