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At Home With
Trace and Katie Taylor

A Hot DIY Project

Enhance the coziness
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2024 Holiday
Shopping Guide

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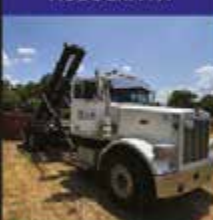
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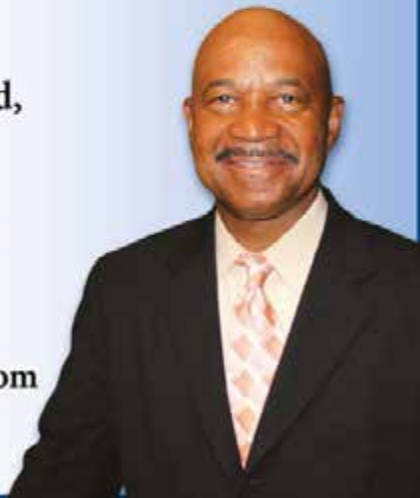
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Dr. Allala is a graduate of the Texas A&M School of Dentistry. "When I started there, it was still Baylor. My diploma has both names on it," she recalled. "I specialize in oral surgery, and we're really good at it. I'm nothing without my team. We do everything in dentistry. I like being well rounded. I enjoy being an overachiever, so I'm constantly taking continuing education, keeping up with all the

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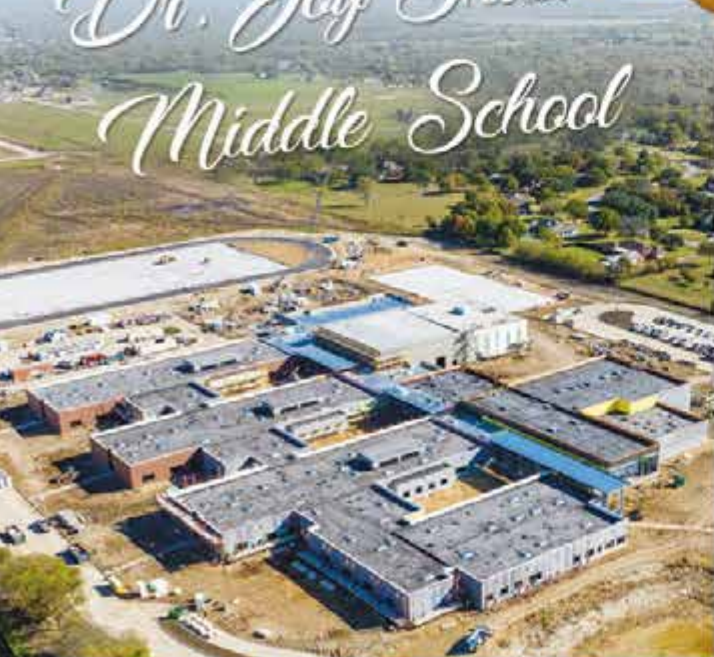
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Winter Dates

Dec. 3 – ROHS Band Concert
Dec. 9 – ROHS Choir Concert
Dec. 12 – North Texas Food Bank
Dec. 12-13 – ROHS Christmas Dance Show
Dec. 16 – ROISD School Board Meeting
Dec. 18-19 – ROMS/ROHS Finals Schedule &
Early Release (Regular Day for Elementary)
Dec. 20 - Jan. 3 – Winter Break
January – School Board Appreciation Month
Jan. 6-7 – Staff Development Days
Jan. 8 – Classes Resume (Spring Semester)
Jan. 20 – Martin Luther King Jr. Day
(District Closed)
Jan. 27 – ROISD School Board Meeting

Details at RedOakISD.org

ON THE COVER



Decorating for Christmas allows the Taylor family to honor a lost loved one.

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Shane Kirkpatrick.

*Publisher, Connie Poirier
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EDITORIAL
*Managing Editor, Becky Walker
North Ellis County Editor, Angel Morris
Office Assistant, Kristin Bato
Writer, Bill Smith
Editors/Proofreaders, Rachel Rich
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EDITOR'S NOTE



Angel

Angel Morris
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Spendy is trendy ...

While it's easy to get "spendy" in an effort to show others how much we care at Christmas, this month also brings opportunities to give of ourselves rather than our wallets. What if we reconsidered the gifts we have to offer that don't come in boxes with bows and may involve spending little to no money at all?

Discuss with your loved ones a holiday budget that involves replacing the spending of cash with the spending of time. Invite those you normally shop for to make wish lists of meaningful activities they would like to do together or projects they need help with in the coming year. "Sign up" for something on everyone's list as a commitment to do that with one another and, on Christmas Day, share homemade cards or letters of what you look forward to about doing those things together.

Part of your holiday can be spent sitting with one another to set a date and discuss what checking off a particular wish will look like, from listening to favorite music while making a special meal, or taking photos while reliving a beloved pastime. Remember, the idea is to spend time, rather than money (although it is perfectly OK to agree on a cash budget if you are so inclined). Perhaps make or buy some small token to represent the upcoming project or activity and box this up as a reminder of what you can look forward to unwrapping together next year. Your presence likely beats something trendy, and may prove the best present of all.

It's about time!

P.S. The publisher and staff of NOW Magazines would like to wish you and your family a very Merry Christmas and the happiest of holiday seasons!



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*At Home With
Trace and
Katie Taylor*



Christmas *to* Remember

— By Angel Morris

Decorating gives Katie Taylor a chance to appreciate what her own mother put into making the holidays special. “My mom loved Christmas, and that was the last holiday I spent with her. The time I spend decorating I can reflect on her memory, and I do it all for her. It takes me a full week to get it all done,” Katie noted.

Katie and her husband, Trace, have lived in Ovilla for four years, having moved from just a few miles away in Midlothian. “We’ve enjoyed living in the area for more than 11 years,” Trace noted. “The community and schools have been great.”

Before making their home in Ellis County, the couple met through mutual friends in the summer of 2008. “We quickly fell in love and were married in January of 2009,” Katie said. “It was truly a God thing, us meeting. I thank God every day for our marriage. What’s funny is that when I met my future husband, my sister fell in love with his roommate, and we are all still happily married.”

Trace has been in the oil and gas business for 18 years, currently overseeing the completion of oil wells in West Texas. Katie was a stay-at-home mom of the couple’s two sons, Bryce and Kady, who helped with Trace’s business until 2021. “I’m currently a Realtor with Keller Williams Ellis County and have loved every second of serving the community and surrounding areas with their real estate needs,” she said.

As a real estate agent, Katie knows what she wants in her own home. “When we moved, we were looking to downsize. Our oldest son was away in college, and we wanted less land to care for,” she explained. “A big factor in us choosing this home was making sure our youngest son stayed in the same schools. I loved the open layout of this home, more modern features and the neighborhood.

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“We originally only planned on being here a couple years and building again,” Katie continued, “but we have the best neighbors and community, so we are staying put!”

Katie has adopted a modern farmhouse style. “It seems to be timeless, and I can coordinate a lot of things with it. Pottery Barn is my go-to for a lot of my decor. I like neutral colors with some green and blue thrown in,” Katie described. “I’ll be honest, I change styles a lot, and we are currently about to remodel. I get a new idea, and I run with it.”

Trace appreciates Katie’s way of making their house a home, which she takes to a new level at the end

of October. “Christmas is her thing. She completely transforms every room of the house,” he noted.

The kitchen is all about gingerbread, while the dining room is dedicated to all things Santa. “I did a community Santa picture event at my house last year, and it was amazing. I can’t wait to make it a tradition,” Katie shared.

The master bedroom becomes a “red truck Christmas tree farm room.” The living room is a silver-and-white snowflake room. One bedroom is all about gnomes, another showcases the Grinch, and the last bedroom is sports themed. “Even the bathrooms have a theme. One is red cardinals, and the other snowmen,” Katie said. “Overall, the decor is a collection of all things great about Christmas.”

The Taylors’ enthusiasm does not end inside their home. “The exterior is all red-and-white candy canes, and definitely, the more the better,” Trace stated. “I am full-on Clark Griswold with the house.”

The Taylors said they love all the things the holidays bring, especially celebrating Christ’s birth. “We are big

in our faith, and family is everything to us,” Katie shared.

Katie’s last Christmas with her mom reminds her of the importance of celebrating big every year. “I lost her suddenly 13 years ago, and she was only 58. The last Christmas with her, she had made everything over-the-top fancy for us,” Katie remembered. “It was a surprise walking in on Christmas seeing her living room transformed into this amazing space. We all had beautiful place settings with our names written on ornaments, which I still have. It was a Christmas I will never forget because she put her whole heart into it.”

Today, Katie continues putting her heart into it, as well. “I have everything decorated by November 1, and I spend every second of every day it takes thinking of my precious momma,” Katie admitted. “It’s a time for me to reflect on her love and the mercy and grace she always showed. I want that joy and love to be reflected in my boys. Some think I’m crazy,” Katie continued, “but I enjoy the full two months of Christmas!” **NOW**



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A quick look at the gift items and discounts available locally.

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A HOT DIY PROJECT

— By Bill Smith



What could be more pleasant on a cool, late-fall-through-early-spring evening than being seated around your own backyard fire pit? As a do-it-yourself project, the task is not only relatively simple, but it's also inexpensive and can be completed in just a day.

You'll need some common tools for this project. Both a straight and a pointed shovel will come in handy. A level — ideally a two-foot level and a four-foot level. Have a two-by-four about three feet long to use as a screed. A rubber mallet will help align your stones, and something with which to tamp the base down is also needed.

Materials include retaining wall blocks (36 is a good number for an average fire pit), square concrete pavers might be used for the floor of the pit, but some people also use

gravel or lava rock. If you choose the pavers, get some pea gravel to fill in the gaps. One bag of sand or paver base should be adequate. Get a metal fire pit ring.

Site selection is the first consideration, even before driving to the local home improvement store to choose the materials. Find a spot that is relatively level, with a water source nearby and far enough from any structures that an unfriendly fire can be easily extinguished. It appears that 15 feet from other structures is a common distance, but it is always a good idea to check local building codes before you make your final decision.

Your fire pit may be round or square, with the round structure perhaps the most popular. Paving stones or retaining wall blocks are available with sides cut at an angle so that 10 stones joined tightly together will produce a pit about 25 inches in diameter, whereas 12 stones might yield 30 to 35 inches. The thickness of the stones will determine the final height of the pit, and a common design of a backyard pit is three stones high.

Some large home improvement stores may sell a kit

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that includes the stones and a metal fire ring, including instructions and a diagram of the completed size of the pit. One might want to just get an idea of what size pit the kit will produce and make a few changes, or just purchase the kit and create a “stock version.” Creating your custom kit might prove to be a little less expensive, but you will probably want to include a metal fire ring with this project, so that should be the first thing to consider, since that will give you an idea of the size of your pit and how many retaining wall blocks you will need.

After you determine the location and purchase the stones and fire ring, you will need to dig a hole. Place the metal fire ring on the ground in your selected location, and surround it with the first layer of stones. Push the shovel into the ground at regular intervals around the stones to mark the circle. Then remove the blocks and dig the hole about seven inches deep inside the area you marked.

To make sure you have a firm, level base, put sand or paver base in the hole. If you are on clay soil, drainage could be an issue, so you might want to dig another, deeper hole in the middle and fill it with gravel to provide a place for excess water to go. Use a level and a screed (a two-by-four works fine) to make sure the base is level and tamp the base down firmly.

Place your first row of stones around the inside of the first hole and make sure the top is level. You can always add a little sand or paver base under part of the individual stones or take a little away to get the first row as level as possible. If the first row is level, the next rows should be also.

If you haven't already put the metal fire ring in place, do it now, then add your next two rows of stones. The project could be considered complete at this point, but some builders like to add either heat-resistant adhesive or mortar to hold the stones in place.

Well done! Now it's time to bring out the marshmallows and make some s'mores! **NOW**

Sources:

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWffhXndXr4>.
2. <https://www.hgtv.com/outdoors/landscaping-and-hardscaping/how-to-build-a-fire-pit-for-less-than-100>.



Zoomed In: Alisha Pinney

By Angel Morris

Alisha Pinney (left) recently became the new chief executive officer for a nonprofit organization that brings specialized health care to Ellis County. FirstLook Sexual Health and Pregnancy Center is a medical clinic focusing on wholistic care for men and women, providing counseling, educational programs and support groups. “This ministry has a powerful mission that has impacted countless lives,” Alisha shared.

Pictured with FirstLook Wellness Coach Christina Sanchez at the organization’s community diaper giveaway, Alisha anticipates the future. “My goal is to enhance our services, strengthen our community partnerships and ensure that we continue to offer the compassionate support that is at the heart of everything we do,” Alisha said.

Alisha succeeded Donna Young, who led FirstLook for more than 17 years. “I look forward to working alongside our dedicated team, volunteers and supporters,” Alisha noted, “to expand our impact and continue the incredible work that Donna has championed.”



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Hayven Waltmon greets guests to First United Methodist Church's pumpkin patch while selling treats to raise funds for her school trip to Washington, D.C.



Third-grader Harmony Hawkins shows her award-winning entry from the Shields Elementary Red Ribbon Week coloring contest.

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CookingNOW *In the Kitchen With* MASHERRIE TAYLOR

— By Angel Morris

Louisiana native, MaSherrie Taylor, said baking and cooking are part of her heritage. “I come from a line of culinary chefs that didn’t hold the credentials but were the best cooks I’ve ever had the opportunity to experience,” she noted. “In my African-American family, food was an important display of affection.”

Being her great-grandmother’s “quality assurance coordinator” in the kitchen at age 3, then preparing dinner for her brother when their mother worked multiple jobs, MaSherrie’s passion in the kitchen ignited. Today, she and her husband own Taylor Made Cakes & Cuisine, allowing them to share “a taste of the Bayou in the heart of Texas.” MaSherrie promises her faith shines through in her cooking. “My first ingredient is always love.” **NOW**

Garlic Parmesan Mashed Potatoes

Serves 8-10.

- 5 lbs. red potatoes
- 1 14.5-oz. can chicken broth (reduced sodium works)
- Sea salt, to taste
- 1/2 cup butter
- 1 cup heavy whipping cream, room temperature
- 1/3 cup Parmesan, shredded from the block
- 1/2 tsp. garlic powder

- 3 cloves garlic, minced, pressed or grated
- 2 Tbsp. fresh parsley, or 1 Tbsp. dried parsley
- 1/2 tsp. white pepper
- 2 blades fresh chive

1. Boil the potatoes in the chicken broth until fork tender.
2. Mash the potatoes to your desired consistency. (I like a balance between creamy and chunky.) *Tip: Drain the potatoes well to remove any extra starch. Too much starch can lead to gummy mashed potatoes!*

3. Add the remaining ingredients directly to the pot.
4. Mix and mash until just combined. Don’t overmix.
5. Serve with fresh chives and melted butter. No gravy needed!

Authentic Red Beans and Rice

- 3 cups chicken stock
- 1 8-oz. pkg. smoked tasso or ham hocks (Turkey option: Use smoked turkey necks or turkey tails)
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 jalapeño pepper, diced (optional)
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 cups water
- Kosher salt, to taste (divided use)
- 1 cup basmati rice
- 1 Tbsp. butter
- 1 12.8-oz. pkg. smoked andouille sausage, thinly sliced
- 1 medium sweet onion, diced
- 1 green bell pepper, diced
- 2 celery ribs, diced
- 1 1/2 tsp. Cajun seasoning, salt-free
- Black pepper, freshly ground, to taste
- 2 Tbsp. fresh parsley leaves, chopped
- 1 lb. dried Camellia Red Kidney Beans

1. In a large Dutch oven or pot, add the chicken stock, tasso or ham hocks, bay leaf, jalapeño peppers and garlic. Bring to a boil. Cover; reduce heat to low. Simmer for 1 hour.
2. In a large saucepan, add the water and salt; cook the rice according to package instructions. Set aside.
3. Heat the butter in a separate skillet over medium heat. Working in batches, add the sausage and cook, stirring frequently, until lightly browned, about 3-4 minutes; remove the sausage from the pan and set aside.
4. Add the onions, bell peppers and celery to the sausage grease. Cook, stirring occasionally, until tender, about 3-4 minutes. Stir in the Cajun seasoning, pepper and parsley until fragrant, about 1 minute.
5. Stir the red beans into the Dutch oven. Transfer the veggies to the pot of beans. Cover and simmer 2-3 hours, until the beans are creamy.
6. Turn the heat off; let the beans rest 30 minutes to 1 hour to thicken. Mash some of the beans for added texture; pull the ham hock meat from the bone and add to the beans.
7. Ladle the red beans into a bowl; top with the rice. Enjoy!

Pecan Cream Pie

- 1 cup heavy whipping cream
- 1/4 cup powdered sugar
- 2 8-oz. bars full-fat cream cheese, softened
- 1 1/2 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1/2 cup brown sugar
- 1/4 cup real maple syrup
- 1 cup pecans, finely chopped
- 1 9-inch pie shell, baked and cooled
- 1/2 cup pecans, roughly chopped

1. In a bowl with a hand mixer or Kitchen Aid with a whisk, whip the heavy cream and sugar until stiff peaks form, about 5 minutes.
2. In a separate bowl, blend the cream cheese, vanilla, sugar and syrup until combined and creamed together.
3. Fold the whipped cream mixture into the cream cheese mixture, stirring together. Add the finely chopped pecans, stirring until combined.
4. Pour the mixture into the crust; smooth out the top. Garnish with roughly chopped pecans. Refrigerate at least 4-6 hours before serving.

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