

## FOR THE MAN WHO HATED CHRISTMAS

by Nancy W. Gavin

It's just a small white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree. No name, no inscription, it has peeked through the branches of our tree for the past ten years or so.

It all began because my husband, Mike, hated Christmas. Oh, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it - the overspending, the frantic running around at the last minute to get a tie for Uncle Henry and dusting powder for Grandma, gifts given in desperation because you couldn't think of anything else. Knowing he felt this way, I decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, ties etc. and reach for something special just for him. The inspiration came in an unusual way.

Our son, Kevin, who was twelve that year, was wrestling at the Junior League level at the school he attended, and shortly before Christmas there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church. Mostly black, these youngsters - dressed in uniforms consisting of ill-fitting boxer shorts, hole-punctured T-shirts and sneakers so ragged that the shoestrings seemed to be the only thing that held them together - presented a sharp contrast to our boys in spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling wrestling shoes.

As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear, a kind of light helmet designed to protect a wrestler's ears. It was a luxury that the rag-tag team obviously could not afford.

Well, we ended up walloping them - took every weight class - and as each of the boys got up from the mat, he swaggered in his tatters with false bravado, a kind of street pride that could not acknowledge defeat.

Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly, "I wish just one of them could have won," he said sadly. "They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the hearts right out of them." He loved kids - all kids - and he knew them, having coached Little League football, baseball and lacrosse. That's when the idea of his present came.

That afternoon I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling gear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church.

On Christmas Eve I placed the envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year and in succeeding years. For each Christmas I followed that tradition, one year sending a group of retarded youngsters to a hockey game, another a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground a week before Christmas.

The envelope became the highlight of our Christmas morning, and our children, ignoring their toys, would stand by with wide-eyed anticipation as their Dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents. As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical presents, but the envelope never lost its allure.

The story didn't end there. You see, we lost Mike last year to cancer, and when Christmas rolled around I was still so wrapped in grief that I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope, and in the morning it was joined by three more. Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their Dad. The tradition had grown and someday will expand even further when our grandchildren, standing around the tree with wide-eyed anticipation, will watch as their fathers take down the envelope.

Mike's spirit, like the Christmas spirit, will always be with us.