

LIFE'S WORK/Lisa Belkin

A Wassail to the Weary This Christmas

THIS column is a toast of the season to all those who don't have a free moment to raise a glass themselves.

We hear a lot about the fun this time of year, and looked at through a certain lens it can appear that workers everywhere are taking it easy and taking time off. They are at office holiday parties. They are shopping online during work hours. They are arriving late and leaving early and exchanging Secret Santa gifts in between. From Thanksgiving through New Year's, it sometimes seems that work has hit the pause button, to resume in January.

Except for those of us who are working more than ever.

So here's a toast to those who spend December scrambling — to finish reports and expense accounts and end-of-year equipment purchases. It's for the half of the office who fills in while the other half takes those ski vacations. It's for parents desperate for child care over the weeklong school break (including yours truly, who has packed twice as much writing into the week before Christmas, so she can be free to be Mom the week after).

Most of all, it's for workers whose busiest time of year is this one, and who make the season all that it is for those with the time to enjoy it.

Kandi Karban is one of those people. She is executive director of the Festival of Trees in Detroit, an annual extravaganza that has raised as much as \$700,000 for the Children's Hospital of Michigan (this year's tallies aren't finished yet; that's part of what Ms. Karban is doing right now). The festival, which ran from Thanksgiving through Dec. 4, fills 65,000 square feet with designer-decorated trees and wreaths and gingerbread houses, all to be ogled and then purchased.

Once it's over, the real work begins: tearing down the displays; hand-signing 50,000 thank-you letters that double as charitable donation receipts. Ms. Karban will do her own Christmas shopping on Dec. 24.

And her own tree? "I won't have time to put one up this year," she said.

Robyn Smalletz does have a tree. In fact, she has five of them throughout her home, each with its own theme (the one in the family room is full of leopard-print bows and safari animal ornaments).

This column about the intersection of jobs and personal lives appears every other week. E-mail: Belkin@nytimes.com.



Randall Enos

But she won't be home much this month to enjoy them. Ms. Smalletz runs Gloria Duchin Inc., the Providence, R.I., ornament manufacturer founded by her mother, and she travels almost constantly during December, introducing retailers to next year's ornament line.

She does this now, because she's more likely to find buyers in a Christmas state of mind. "I set up my own trees in October," she says. "Then I have time to enjoy them before the craziness starts."

While Ms. Smalletz was decorating in October, Nilda Garcia had started wrapping gifts for her 15 nieces and 5 nephews. She starts early, because come November she wraps full time for other people. She is on the wrapping team at Kate's Paperie on the East Side of Manhattan, where shoppers bring in stacks of gifts, and, for \$60 an hour, have them made into paper-covered works of art.

With a tape dispenser attached to her wrist, Ms. Garcia does things like disguise a tricycle as a miniature Christmas tree, complete with ornaments. She'll wrap past closing time on Christmas Eve, then be back at work on Dec. 26. "Hanukkah is late this year," she says. "Lots to wrap until January."

Tara Oolie is planning to take a breather

next year, because she won't have time to take one earlier. She runs a spa, Just Calm Down, in Chelsea. Her customers go there to relax, and she goes there to work — seven days a week from Thanksgiving until New Year's.

"My personal holiday season is in January, after the holidays," she says. "That's when I can get up late, go out to lunch, enjoy what December has brought."

Further uptown, Stephen Trojahn, too, says, "I work when other people play and play when other people work." He is the executive chef of "21" Club, the restaurant, and he says he hasn't spent Christmas with his own family "in about 10 years."

Most years he has gone to what he calls Orphan Christmas, the meal the restaurant staff throws together at someone's house after the kitchen has closed. ("Cheese and crackers, whatever is convenient; after a 16-hour day you're not going to go home and make something," he says.)

This year his restaurant is open Dec. 24 but closed the 25th, so he has that day off. "I'm not really sure what to do," he says, but he adds that he thinks he may take a tip from what Jewish New Yorkers have been doing for eons.

"If I end up eating Chinese food," he says, "that sounds good."