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CHLOE MOORE:
"I want four rats for Christmas."



OSCAR HENRICHS:
"I really like to watch Bob the Builder on Christmas."



HOLLY BURKE:
"My mom knows how to cook everything. We don't need a book."



KATIA DOMINGUEZ:
"I want a Chihuahua."



SKYLAR JASPER:
"We always have a big meal — Christmas food, warm stuff."

The holidays, according to a panel of 4-year-old experts

PHOTOS BY JAIME VALDEZ

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In an effort to get at the real meaning of the holidays, we decided to ask a group of experts: little kids. They know everything, after all, and they're honest. And, perhaps most amazing of all, they never hesitate to tell you what they think.

With the help of Tiffany Powers, a Head Start teacher at Metzger Elementary School, photographer Jaime Valdez and I sat down with five young spokespeople to ask some questions. On hand for this exercise were Katia Dominguez, Chloe Moore, Holly Burke and Skylar Jasper, all age 4. The fifth of our subjects, Oscar Henrichs, is 3.

After a brief explanation of who we were, what an interview is, etc., we began with an easy one.

What is Christmas?

"You do presents," said Skylar.

"And you play in the snow," added Oscar.

When I decided to back up and ask if they knew what a holiday was, I got five blank stares, until I mentioned a couple of other holidays.

"On the holidays I get Easter eggs!" said Chloe. "And I was Hannah Montana for Halloween."

For the next several minutes, the rest of them had to explain who, or what, they were for Halloween, but we eventually turned it back to this particular time of year.

Who knows who Santa Claus is? I asked.

"He gives us presents," said Katia.

"He has a long beard," said Holly.

"I haven't talked for a long time," interrupted Oscar, looking miffed.

"Santa Claus has deers," said Skylar, adding that "he uses them to fly the sled. They put flying collars on, and the sleigh has bells on it."

They began to seem bored about the whole

"who is Santa Claus" thing, so we shifted gears again. I asked if any of them had made a list yet of the things they'd like to get this year.

"I want four rats for Christmas," said Chloe. When asked what on earth she would do with four rats, she replied, rather matter-of-factly, "I'm gonna take care of them."

Katia said yes, she had already started a list. What's on it? I asked.

Not being all that comfortable with English, she pantomimed some things, forming big shapes with her hands and struggling to find the right words. I did understand the tail-end of the sentence: "and a car and a brush."

Oscar, who once again, hadn't gotten to talk for a long time, raised his hand high and started squirming. When I pointed at him, a whole paragraph spewed out of him:

"I want a race car, and a real car, and a race car, and it has two pedals on it to make it go and stop, and I want a motorcycle with a pedal on it to make it go and stop, too," he said, finally pausing to rest.

Skylar desperately wanted to get on the record as wanting "a unicorn pillow pet."

Holly liked the sound of that and insisted that she too wanted a unicorn pillow pet, causing Skylar to frown as if there might only be one left, and she didn't want to lose out to somebody in her own class.

"My sister has a pretend stuffed animal uni-

corn, and she doesn't want to let me touch it or hold it or anything," said Holly, "and she doesn't want to share it with me."

Oscar was getting tired of all this unicorn talk.

"I want a cat for Christmas," he said.

What kind of cat?

"A black cat."

And, if animals were being passed out, Katia wanted in on it.

"I want a Chihuahua," said Katia. She went into her pantomime again, finally making it clear she didn't want a real one, but one that you could walk on a leash nonetheless.

Wanting to hear about their family holiday traditions, I asked the kids where they would be observing the holidays.

"We have Christmas at my grandma's, and we don't have a very big tree, just a tiny one," said Skylar. Then, with a sigh, she added, "I love Christmas."

Asked what they eat during the holidays, Skylar continued, "We always have a big meal — Christmas food, warm stuff."

"Last Christmas I got a runny nose from playing outside in the yard," Skylar added.

Again, she sighed, "I love Christmas."

I asked the others around the table about their favorite holiday foods.

"Meatloaf!" shouted Chloe. "And ribs."

"I love eating strawberries," said Katia.

I was interested in how much they knew about preparation of a holiday meal. How long does it take, I asked, to cook a turkey?

"Ten minutes," said Chloe.

Oscar's hand shot up again.

"I know how to cook cake," he said. "I like cake for Christmas. You put it in the oven, and

in like three minutes, it's done, and you push a button and it puts it on the table."

Holly boasted that she sometimes helps her mom mix up eggs. When I asked what the kids knew about following recipes for special holiday dishes, she declared, "We don't need a book."

"My mom knows how to cook everything," said Holly.

For many of us, the holidays are a time for watching special movies and singing special songs. I asked if they had any favorite Christmas movies.

"I like to watch Bob the Builder," said Oscar. "I have that movie at my house."

Then, for some reason, Oscar flashed back to the subject of holiday food.

"I like to eat cake on Christmas," he said. "And pumpkin pie."

But his mind wandered again.

"I really like to watch Bob the Builder on Christmas."

After Katia remembered that her favorite Christmas song was "Frosty the Snowman," Oscar had to go back to the food one last time.

"And when I eat cake, I always eat pumpkin pie with it," he said.

Finally, I decided to drop the food and the movies.

When, exactly, is Christmas? I asked.

"It's like, Thursday," said Oscar. "You know, at school time."

By then the kids seemed downright exhausted. They were sprawling across the table like they'd been drugged and needed to take a nap. A couple of them begged to go back to class, so their teacher rounded them up and herded them away.

I waved goodbye from the little table surrounded by tiny empty chairs. Oscar, of course, spoke for the group: "Goodbye, Mikel," he said, and they disappeared through the door.

"Santa Claus has deers. He uses them to fly the sled. They put flying collars on, and the sleigh has bells on it."

Skylar Jasper