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Midwest Living

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Global giving

Rebecca Kousky graduated from Washington University two years ago with a master's degree in social work and ambitious goals: aid impoverished women around the world and inspire modern design. The young St. Louisian conceived a plan to do both.

Rebecca, now 26, launched Nest, a nonprofit online boutique that sells unique home accessories and Bohemian-chic garb made by international artisans living in poverty and up-and-coming domestic designers who donate part of the proceeds. "It's like boutique shopping, but for a cause," Rebecca says. Offerings include painted ceramic bowls, hand-stitched floral-motif pillows and bird-silhouette T-shirts—all great gifts at prices we love (\$8–\$100).

Nest gives interest-free microfinance loans (\$50–\$2,000) to help women start businesses. "It seems unethical to charge interest when you're trying to help women escape poverty," says Rebecca, who didn't take a salary for Nest's first 18 months, so she could help more women. Recipients repay loans with products and receive training to help develop their local economies. So far, Nest has funded 118 women in countries including Turkey and Morocco. See their work at buildanest.com.

Last year was a blue Christmas, according to the world's largest Christmas store, Bronner's Christmas Wonderland in Frankenmuth, Michigan. Blue was its top-selling boxed ornament hue. Their sales:

BLUE 15%
RED 12%
GREEN 10%

STRESS-FREE HOSTING

Take it from our expert party planners; cutting corners is a holiday must. Here's how they do it.

Go basic Focus on the key areas of the home: the entryway/front door, tree and mantel. Look to nature (it's affordable) for simple elegance. Display pine boughs, pinecones and acorns from the yard or oranges and cloves from the grocery store.

—Anne-Marie Dezelan, Indianapolis event planner

Use easy serveware

Don't feel guilty for using disposable utensils and plates (find pretty, biodegradable sets at plumparty.com). Wrap utensils in colorful napkins, tie with string, and place in a basket for convenient serving. —Joan Kohn, Chicago designer and host of HGTV's Kitchen Design.

Decor=gifts Centerpieces, such as mini poinsettia plants, double as take-home gifts. Use plants as a runner down a dining table.

Then, send them home with guests. —Karen Henke, Minneapolis professional organizer

Glowing green Twinkling holiday lights are a Christmas staple—that drives up energy bills. But is it worth the splurge to replace traditional incandescent holiday lights with strings of energy-saving LED lights (below)? Here's how the two stack up.

\$170 Cost to upgrade to 10 strings of M5 mini LEDs (\$250) from 10 strings of mini incandescents (\$80).

\$19 Amount you'd save in energy costs each year if you switched to LEDs, based on 10 strings powered for 400 hours.

9 Number of years you'd have to use the LEDs to break even.

100,000 Homes we could power for one year with the energy savings if 20 percent of the country replaced conventional Christmas lights with LED holiday lights.

(Source: U.S. Department of Energy)