

December 18, 2002, Doylestown, PA

Holiday greetings from Doylestown, Bucks County, and Philadelphia, PA! We're still here after moving from Texas almost seven years ago. We flew back to Texas in June to see Jean's mother in Harlingen and to visit the old neighborhood, the church, and a few friends in the Dallas area. After returning in the evening to the Philadelphia airport, we drove home through a blinding rain and lightning storm and arrived at the house to find the electricity had been knocked out by lightning strikes. The closed-up house was stifling, so Mike sat outside drinking beer and watching the fireflies and distant lightning while Jean, Paul, and Gretchen tried going to bed.

Jean and Mike are still working, the kids are in their final years of high school, dog Rupert has been joined by dog Otis, the 401k has turned into a 201k, and we've survived what passes for drought conditions here. Despite the drought and basic neglect, Mike's mini-garden produced a good crop of tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, and Swiss chard. The Christmas flower shown in this letter appeared in Jean's cutting patch garden this summer—we have no idea what it was or where it came from. Last winter was very mild with only six inches of snow. This fall we had seven inches of snow just after Thanksgiving. Thankfully, the well hasn't run dry and area water supplies seem to be recovering.

This year Paul is a high school senior and Gretchen a junior at Central Bucks East High School (famous for graduate Justin Gaurini of American Idol). Paul and Gretchen took driving lessons this summer and now are practicing with actual family cars. Soon they will be able to take the driving license test—scary! Next thing you know, they'll want their own cars too.

Paul is our resident pasta cook and videogame addict. Despite our doubts, he successfully completed his graduation project titled, "The Skeptic Consumer"; it had something do with testing cleaning products, but we never really saw what he actually did. He was inducted into the official thespian society after being in musicals "Annie" and "Aladdin" this year. He is taking advanced placement courses in Spanish, physics, and calculus. Physics is giving him (and us) fits. Paul has been deluged with college brochures and letters this year. He wants to study Latin, so Mike and Paul visited colleges in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Baltimore that offer good Latin language programs. Last week Paul sent applications to three colleges.

Gretchen is a "Lord of the Rings" fanatic. She has read the trilogy twice, saw the first movie four or five times (and has the DVD), and has all the video trailers for the new movie on her PC. She is our resident computer geek. Her big adventure this year was camping out at the weeklong Creation (Christian) rock concert event in central PA. Her favorite Christian rock band is Newsboys from Australia. Gretchen out blew and outgrew her flute, so in August we drove down to Washington, D.C. to spend a weekend at a flute convention. She bought a new flute with more notes—now she has no excuses about not being able to play pieces assigned by her teacher. She plays in the high school band but is careful to avoid anything to do with marching. She's teaching herself how to play her guitar. She wrote a book for her graduation project (to be completed in April) and will try to get it published. She has been looking at college brochures and investigating web sites trying to find the right "artsy fartsy" program in creative writing. She passed her advanced placement test in American history and will soon be taking the test for European history—should save us some college expense, we hope.

Jean still catalogs new books for the Bucks County Library system—like turning a kid loose in a candy store! She is diligent about working out with a private trainer several times a week. Just before Thanksgiving she flew to Texas to spend some time with her mother. She came back in time to celebrate Christmas with a fractured ankle, the result of tripping over Paul's shoe last Saturday. The cast may be off by February.



Mike still works for Unisys in a communications software development group. He survived two major layoffs this year. He needs two more courses to complete a master's degree in information science from Drexel University. He continues to sing tenor with the Bucks County Choral Society. The choir sang nine concerts in 2002 including "Elijah" by Mendelssohn, "Messiah" by Handel, and a program of opera choruses in German, Italian, French, and English. In February Paul and Mike attended a two-day church youth group retreat and ski event in the Poconos. During the summer Mike hauled teenagers on day trips to Dorney Park (Allentown) and Six Flags (New Jersey) amusement parks. In October he flew to Salt Lake City to visit brother Dave and to attend the Society of Exploration Geophysicists convention.

In other news, Bucks County was abuzz this summer about the movie, "Signs", filmed here starring Mel Gibson. The local newspaper diligently reported Mel and Justin sightings almost every day. Also, we added another watchdog to the household this year. Otis, nine months old, joined his half-brother, Rupert, to give us solid, English cocker spaniel protection from intruders and public servants. Not! Jean keeps asking, "What are we doing with two dogs?" We replaced the dog-decorated carpet in the den with a wood laminate floor. We replaced the furnace in the attic after Mike stuck his foot through the sheetrock ceiling while changing a filter—taught that furnace a lesson! The sheetrock was temporarily pasted back together with duct tape after chasing away the dogs who wanted to eat the insulation that fell through the hole.

We enjoy visitors even if they really came to see Niagara Falls. In May sister Cindy and her husband, Dave, swung by for a visit before heading to Niagara Falls. Then the Jain family from India swung by for a visit on their way to Niagara Falls. In July a hummingbird visited the open porch and spent the night buzzing around the rafters trying to find a way to freedom before Mike coaxed him out the next morning with a broom. He seemed to be headed toward Niagara Falls. In October Jean Mitchell from Austin, TX came to see the autumn colors but the trees, still recovering from summer drought conditions, didn't cooperate and waited to put on their usual show of color in November instead. However, she went back to Austin instead of Niagara Falls.

Despite the twists and turns of 2002, we feel blessed and fortunate. We hope that you are happy, healthy, and enjoying all the big and little things that life has to offer. May God guard and bless you during this holiday season and throughout 2003.

