

Holiday Greetings to y'all from Doylestown, PA!!

We have been blessed with good health and an interesting year. The year started with 40 inches of snow instead of the usual 10-15—it is ending with at least another 10. Paul and Gretchen became devotees of the Dance Dance Revolution (DDR) video game, Jean continued working as a cataloguer at the Bucks County Library, and Mike continued singing tenor with the Bucks County Choral Society.

The world experienced shock and awe this year. However, since our last Christmas letter we have experienced our own version of shock, awe, and “aw shucks”! Our first shock was just before Christmas last year when Jean tripped over Paul’s shoe and fractured her right ankle. She wore a knee-to-arch cast and was unable to drive for seven weeks. For her, the good news was that she was also unable to clean, cook, run a taxi service, etc. After the cast came off in February, she discovered that she had also torn up her left knee, so she had surgery on April Fool’s Day. She has recovered from her injuries but has not regained her sense of invulnerability.

We were in awe when Paul graduated from high school, got his driver’s license, and moved into a dorm at LaSalle University in Philadelphia in August. He plans to become a language teacher (probably Latin). This semester he is also studying Japanese. He already received the award for “outstanding AP Spanish student” in high school. Just think what impact he could have on international relations! During his last months of high school he was in theater productions of “Oklahoma” and “Much Ado About Nothing” and received the award for “most improved actor” at the annual drama club dinner. He has a passion for Japanese anime’. In August Mike drove Paul and his costume to the annual “Otakon” Japanese anime’ convention in Baltimore where there were about 20,000 young people from all over the world wearing bizarre and amazing costumes based on anime’ characters. One evening while Mike and Paul were walking back to the hotel after dinner at an Inner Harbor restaurant, two very friendly young women in hot pants, heavy makeup, and big dangling earrings started chatting up Paul while waiting to cross a street. He was a little embarrassed when Mike explained the difference between “very friendly girl” and “streetwalker”.

“Aw shucks” events occurred throughout the year. Mike lost his job at Unisys in May while working on a contract between Unisys and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA). The project got bogged down in the red tape of the new Department of Homeland Security. Fortunately, Unisys had already reimbursed tuition and fees for the master of science (MSIS) degree in

information systems Mike received from Drexel University in June. Also in May and June, Jean's mother, Margaret (81), suffered a fractured vertebra and a broken hip from falls in her apartment in Harlingen, Texas. Jean stayed in Harlingen during June-July while Margaret was recovering from surgery in the hospital and nursing home. When Jean's sister, Layne, returned from a safari to Botswana to take over the vigil, Jean flew back to Philadelphia.

More "aw shucks" occurred in November when 50-60 mph. winds split the trunk and destroyed a 30-ft. Bradford pear tree and also tore a 25-ft. blue spruce out of the ground toppling it on the garage. The good news is the garage wasn't damaged, no one was hurt, and our Christmas tree (the top eight feet of the spruce) is "free" this year!

In February Gretchen completed her required senior project while still a junior by writing a book, submitting it to two publishers, and earning a "distinguished" grade. She got her driver's license in February and now drives Mike's car ('94 Toyota Camry, 159,000 miles) to school each day. She's enjoying her senior year, especially AP English. For the first time she has an English teacher who challenges her. She visited six small liberal arts colleges with strong creative writing programs in Pennsylvania and Ohio. She's been accepted at Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio and has been invited to compete for their top scholarship (Yea!). She is obsessed with "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy and has her ticket to be one of the first to see "The Return of the King" when it debuts on December 17. This year she decided to join the high school choir and drop band so that she can go with her friends on the choir trip to Orlando next spring. She still plays her flute at home occasionally.

In June we stuffed the four of us, two of Gretchen's buddies, and camping equipment into a rented mini-van and headed to Creation 2003, a "Christian Woodstock" festival, along with 80,000 other people. The event site was shifted to Hershey Park at the last minute because the usual farm site in central Pennsylvania was too muddy for camping. When we got to Hershey, we were directed to Fort Indiantown Gap, a U.S. Army military base 20 miles from Hershey. Most of the base was off-limits. We never actually saw any soldiers but we could hear them doing their early morning calisthenics. We pitched three tents and endured three 95+-degree days. Campsite amenities were limited to semi-trailer tank trucks of water, rows of porta-potties, and cheap ice 200 yards up the hill from our campsite. Buses of all descriptions, including school buses pressed into emergency service, hauled campers to the main venues in Hershey. We were entertained with helicopter gun ships

passing overhead and artillery and mortar explosions on the other side of a ridge. Jean had never been camping before but the experience confirmed what she already suspected—Holiday Inn is camping enough!

Immediately after camping, Jean flew to Harlingen to check on her mother. She stayed in Texas while Mike, Paul, and Gretchen flew to Minneapolis and drove to visit relatives in Minnesota (Minneapolis, St. Cloud, Rochester) and South Dakota (Milbank and farms). Paul and Gretchen were reintroduced to grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins they don't get to see very often. A side trip to the Spam Museum in Austin, Minnesota was a highlight of the journey for them. Mike was able to attend his 40th high school reunion in Milbank where his old football coach autographed copies of his book, Greeno, A Winning Tradition of Teaching and Coaching.

In August we were part of what could become a future PBS documentary on Asperger's Syndrome (A.S.). A camera crew spent two days filming us and (several walk-ons) during interviews and activities (DDR, badminton, video games, etc.) at home and then at the office of Paul's psychologist. The filmmaker wants to show a more complete view of A.S. and its impact on the family. The filming was exciting at first and then became just plain exhausting!

In September Mike flew to Harlingen where he met Layne and drove Margaret's car ('95 Ford Crowne Victoria, only 27,000 miles) loaded with some of her belongings 2000 miles to Doylestown. The next day Hurricane Isabel came ashore and headed up I-81 through Virginia where he had just driven. That day Mike, Jean, and Gretchen avoided Isabel by driving 600 miles west to the Columbus, Ohio area to visit colleges. In early October Layne chartered an "empty leg" on a corporate jet, plucked Margaret out of the nursing home in Harlingen, and escorted her on a 3 ½ -hour flight to Allentown, Pennsylvania. Margaret is now at an assisted living facility in Doylestown. Jean is enjoying the opportunity to spend more time with her than in recent years.

Finally, lest we forget to mention them, our reddish English cocker spaniels continue to amuse, (and occasionally disgust) us. Otis (1) loves to walk and play while Rupert (7) loves to eat. Otis is the dominant dog but runs to hide when strangers come to the house. Rupert eagerly greets all guests.

Please do not hesitate contact us at 215-340-9276 or by email at jmueller@safeplace.net or muellerm@yaho.com, especially if you are ever in our area. We wish you health, happiness, and many blessings this holiday season and throughout the new year.