

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year from Mike, Jean, Paul, and Gretchen!



This year we survived the remnants of hurricanes Ivan and Jeanne, the onslaught of presidential candidates trolling for Pennsylvania votes, tuition at two private colleges, and a hornet's nest in a tree 30 feet from our front door (it became an outdoor Christmas ornament). We've also progressed from being "dinks" (dual income, no kids) 20 years ago to being "ducks" (dual unemployment, college kids). But we were blessed with Margaret (Jean's mother) living nearby, visitors from St. Louis, bluebirds and hummingbirds, less than 21 inches of snow, a pleasant summer, and the peace of an empty nest.

Gretchen had a great senior year at Central Bucks East High School. She drove to school each day, won a writing award, wore a cheongsam on her date to the prom, sang with the CBE concert choir in Orlando where it won all the trophies, and graduated in the top 10% of her class. Her advanced placement scores in five subjects earned her almost a year of college credits (good news for her parents!) In August she entered Wittenberg University in Springfield, OH where she is majoring in English and honing her writing skills. However, she was bored by her first English room her first semester because her roommate of one week returned to Nashville. She has adjusted to college life and the logistics of getting between trips to the Wittenberg campus and the Dayton or Columbus airports for Philadelphia. And to think we weren't sure she would survive kindergarten!



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Paul finished his freshman year this spring with honors and is now a sophomore at LaSalle University in Philadelphia. He is majoring in Latin and secondary education—he still wants to be a Latin teacher. He overextended himself this semester with a heavy course load that included three languages (Latin, Greek, Japanese), student teaching Spanish one day per week at a Catholic high school, tutoring three LaSalle students in statistics,

performing in a production of “Cabaret”, and working at the snack bar on weekends. His passion is video gaming, especially online competition. In August he made his second trip to the annual Otakon Japanese anime convention in Baltimore. He wore a kimono to fit in with 20,000 other anime devotees dressed as their favorite characters. Imagine a weeklong Halloween party!

Jean lost her job with the Bucks County Library in January when Gov. Ed Rendell diverted state library funding to pet projects. However, in August she found another position at the Richboro Library, a community library about 12 miles from Doylestown. Jean continues to look after her mother, Margaret (82), at Lakeview Assisted Living in Doylestown. Jean has also been fortunate to have frequent visits from Layne, her sister in St. Louis, who retired this year.

Mike continues to sing tenor with the 100-voice Bucks County Choral Society. He maintains the choir’s database of nearly 6,000 names and serves on the marketing and fundraising committees. In late June and early July he traveled with a group of 70 including 47 singers on a 10-day concert tour to St. Petersburg, Russia during the “White Nights” when the sun sets at 3:00 a.m. and rises again at 6:00 a.m., and Tallinn, the medieval walled capital of Estonia. In addition to singing in both Russian and English in St. Petersburg, the choir toured the palaces of the czars and the Hermitage museum, cruised the canals, visited a rural dacha, and drank a lot of vodka. In Tallinn the choir sang in Estonian along with 27,000 Estonian singers at the national choral festival held every five years. There were 150,000 people in the audience. In the past, the festivals were used as emotional, nationalistic protests against Russian occupation that ended in 1992. Estonia is now a vibrant member of the European Community and NATO but still fears the giant on its eastern border. The tour ended with a hydrofoil trip from Tallinn to Helsinki, Finland before flying back to New York City.



After spending six months looking for work in 2003, Mike decided to become an insurance agent for Bankers Life & Casualty, which specializes in insurance products for senior citizens. After being recruited by Bankers, he studied insurance law, passed the state licensing exam, attended classroom and field training, and went to work setting up appointments and interviewing prospective clients in their homes. Although he enjoyed hearing a lot of interesting life stories, he intensely disliked the sales process being used at the Bankers branch office. One Friday afternoon in late June he had an epiphany and decided that selling insurance to senior citizens was definitely a bad career choice. After returning from the choir trip and moving Paul and Gretchen into their college dorms this summer, Mike began conducting an intense search for a suitable job in business analysis, marketing research, or project management. The tepid job market, turning age 58 in July, and being bound to the Philadelphia area have made job hunting challenging. In the meantime, he has done a good job keeping the dog run free of poop.



Our English cocker spaniels, Rupert (8) and Otis (3) continue to amuse and disgust us. Squirrels invaded their dog run this summer and now both dogs are on alert; they charge through their dog door at the slightest noise to confront varmints, real or imagined. Even old Rupert has become excited about going on three-mile walks with Mike because there's always the chance of encountering a squirrel.



If you are ever in the Philadelphia area, please come see us—we'll be here. You can reach us at 215-340-9276 and at jmueller@safeplace.net or muellerm@yaho.com. We hope and pray that you will have healthy, safe, joyous holidays and abundant blessings in 2005!