

Watch for the "BRAIN-MOBILE"

In the ever-zealous quest to distinguish ourselves from the "normal" folks in our neighborhood, the Brain household has gone mobile, literally. But, I'm getting a bit ahead of myself, and there's no need. You're more than capable of skipping to the juicy parts of the letter by yourself. Just come back.

Slave drivers that we are, Julie and Jim started 2002 by adding to Brent's responsibilities. The slacker had managed to go 3.5 years avoiding much responsibility at all, and we were fed up. So, prepared with the knowledge that anything could happen, Jim grabbed 100 feet of plastic sheeting, took it and the family to the basement, and started the task. The task? Toilet training. Yes, no more would Brent get a free ride, no more diapers, and no more pull-ups. We both had dreaded the transition, having heard "horror" stories of soaked furniture, continual accidents, and regressions. We also knew Brent was a tad "lazy", as far as learning new skills was concerned. So, we took advantage of some extra time off from work, resolved to help Brent through the transition, and trudged down to the basement. Things started off badly (pretty much 0% success), so Julie looked up some information from Dr. Sears (online, of course!). We had already tried the normal suggestions, but a final one intrigued us. Sears suggested simply removing all of the child's clothing. It was recommended for warmer months, but we cheated a little. Off came the clothes, on went a t-shirt, and up went the thermostat (we're not entirely without compassion). Brent and Jim played games with the plastic, while Julie and Jim watched for any signs Brent needed to relieve himself. When we noticed anything, we whisked him off to the bathroom and demonstrated. You'll all look at us funny now, or maybe it's a rarity, but let's just say the plastic went unused. 2 days, and Brent was toilet trained. A few accidents happened, to be sure, but most were due to Brent inheriting his Dad's flair for procrastination. Brent dutifully calculated EXACTLY how much time was needed to get to the bathroom. It works most of the time, but detours around a misplaced toy or, forbid it, an occupied restroom, leave only a messy Plan B to invoke. He getting better, but if we should visit and Brent announces "Gotta go the bathroom", STAND CLEAR! That tone of urgency is genuine. As well, when Brent needs to spend some time in the restroom, expect a loud, boisterous "WHO'S GONNA WIPE MY BOTTOM" to break the silence. Yes, and it'll happen at home or in the restaurant!

After playing with Brent's LEGO blocks (with Brent, Julie makes them share), Jim decided to move into the big leagues. Jim bought 200 (200!) 3x6x9 inch blocks off eBay, having remembered using similar blocks in kindergarten. They're plain brown, but they only cost \$.30 a box, and the boys have a lot of fun. A discarded freezer box makes a fine roof, and there's nothing like a 1/2 scale igloo in the basement to reiterate that it's cold.

In February, the Brain family finally moved beyond 13 inch television. For all of our friends who kidded us, it was not because of you, but rather that squinting to make out the credits across the room is hard, and the probability of receiving his and hers magnifying glasses for TV

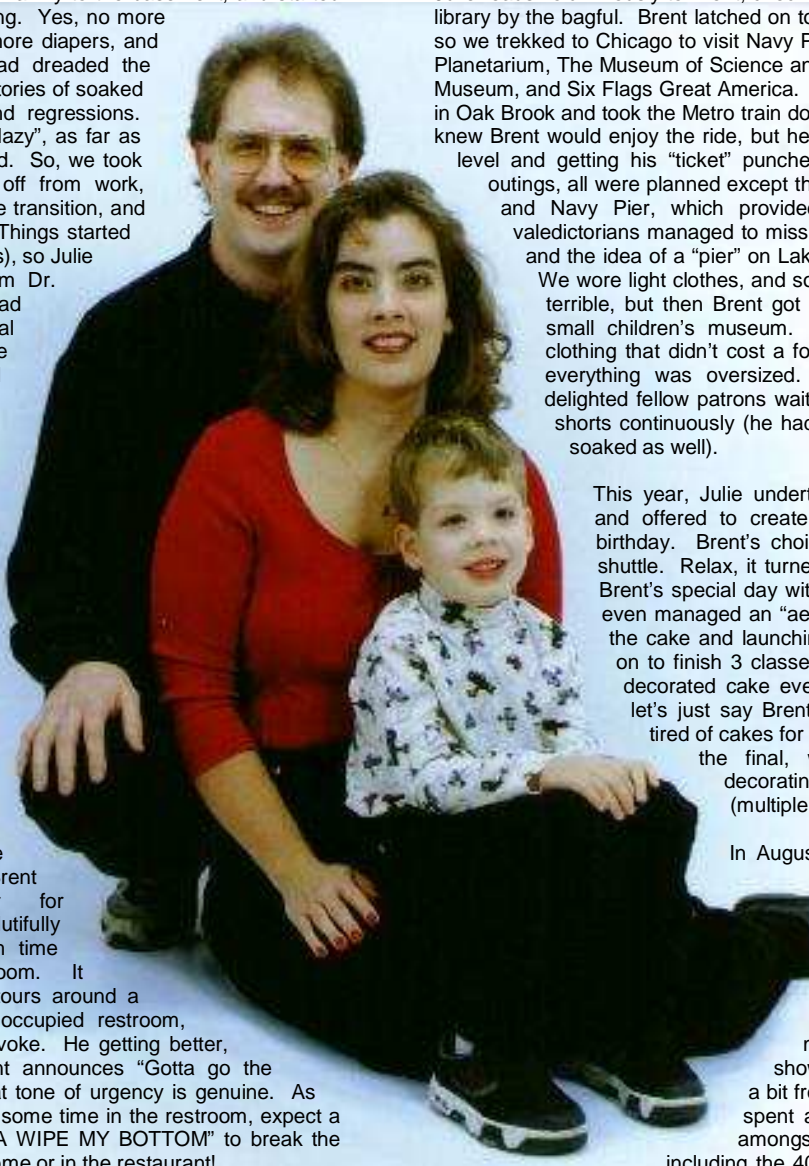
viewing being somewhat low. Geek that Jim is, we passed on the \$3200 big screen set at Best Buy, and procured a projector screen, a used PC projector off eBay, and a TV card for a computer. It now sits upstairs in the hot tub room, along with a double chaise lounge we bought instead of theater seating. 100 inch TV is fine, but DVDs look as good as the theater, and the movie can be paused for "bio-breaks". (We can eat artery-hardener-in-a-bag popcorn as well) Total cost: \$900.00, total weight, 50 lbs., total floor space used: 0ft (mounted on ceiling).

Julie reads voluminously to Brent, checking out children's stories at the library by the bagful. Brent latched on to a story about roller-coasters, so we trekked to Chicago to visit Navy Pier, The Shedd aquarium, the Planetarium, The Museum of Science and Industry, Dupage Children's Museum, and Six Flags Great America. To be near friends, we stayed in Oak Brook and took the Metro train downtown a couple of days. We knew Brent would enjoy the ride, but he thrilled in riding on the upper level and getting his "ticket" punched by the conductor. Of the outings, all were planned except the Dupage Children's Museum and Navy Pier, which provided a classic memory. Two valedictorians managed to miss the significance of a cool day and the idea of a "pier" on Lake Michigan in the "windy" city. We wore light clothes, and so we chilled, literally. It wasn't terrible, but then Brent got wet playing with water in the small children's museum. Julie and Jim searched for clothing that didn't cost a fortune that would fit Brent, but everything was oversized. We did our best, but he delighted fellow patrons waiting for the bus by "losing" his shorts continuously (he had no underwear, as they were soaked as well).

This year, Julie undertook cake decorating classes and offered to create a "theme" cake for Brent's birthday. Brent's choice: one shaped like a space shuttle. Relax, it turned out fine, and we celebrated Brent's special day with his grandparents in IL. We even managed an "aero" theme all day long, eating the cake and launching model rockets. Julie went on to finish 3 classes in cake decorating. At one decorated cake every other week for 12 weeks, let's just say Brent got his fill of icing, and Jim tired of cakes for a while. Luckily, Julie skipped the final, which included baking and decorating a complete wedding cake (multiple tiers).

In August, Brent and Jim returned to IL. Brent went to terrorize his grandparents, while Jim spent a day looking at rows and rows of red tractors. "Red Power", an International Harvester tractor enthusiast magazine, held their national show in Pennfield, IL, up the road a bit from Julie's parent's home. Jim spent a day in the hot sun walking amongst 1400 red IH tractors, not including the 400 cub cadet lawn tractors on display. Needless to say, Julie did not care to attend. Jim saw numerous rarities, including the IH "turbine" tractor on loan from the Smithsonian. Not much else to say, other than Jim is "different" from most folks. Bet that surprises everyone, right? We'll talk about Jim's complete wall of shelved red toy tractors another time.

Still, most of the Summer, we embarked on a search, a search for the newest addition to the Brain family, a search for the straw that may finally cause our neighbors to respectfully request we move out of the subdivision, a search for the solution to the year old problem of Brent waiting until the last nanosecond before announcing a need to visit the boy's room (refer to first reflection). To Brent, it is appropriately named the "house-on-wheels", while its proper name is "recreational vehicle".



We like to call it the "Brain-mobile", though. We'd looked in Omaha, NE in 1 BB (Before Brent), but our little bundle of joy arrived, and we didn't have the money anyway (or the time, at the time). After shelving the idea for a while, we decided Brent was old enough to enjoy camping. Odd birds that we are, we decided on a "truck camper" (sits in bed of truck), but we found "Grimace" the Ram was not up to the job. Since we weren't sure we would like it, we decided on a self-contained unit (a motorhome), but couldn't find a unit in good shape that satisfied our criteria at a reasonable price locally. Jim decided to look online. He found a 1984 unit in good shape and in our price range with the features we wanted. The fact that it was in New York and an eBay online auction purchase gave us only a moment's pause (we'd purchased a house sight unseen in 1996, so this was nothing). The dealer offered to sell it outright, arranged for delivery, and we FedEx mailed insurance papers and a bank draft. It arrived on Labor Day weekend, and we used it that weekend. After getting 4 trips in before cold weather came, the Brain's have decided taking the house with them suits them just fine. Concerning the unit, it's as advertised, with a full kitchen, full bath, 1 full bed, 1 queen bed, 2 swivel chairs, a dinette, cold air, ample heat, hot water, no leaks, working generator, and ample storage. Never one to leave things alone, Jim replaced the back 6 feet of the roof to address some questionable roof repairs.



snowman. And, no throwing of snowmen in the house, especially rectangular ones..."

Concerning crafts, Jim demands to know what can be done about a serious problem in suburbia, one far worse than school taxes and new subdivision development. Yes, he's talking about ladies home "parties". Jim watches as Julie receives invitation after invitation to events designed to sell Tupperware, baskets,

candles, herbs, kids toys, cosmetics, etc. They share one trait: all are not cheap. And, little known to males of suburbia until it is too late, there are unwritten RULES about these parties (calling sales pitches 'parties' is new twist, Jim wants to try that at work). If you host a party and your friend attends, you are REQUIRED to attend a subsequent party at the friends house, and you are REQUIRED to buy something of equal or greater value at said subsequent party. Excuses to parties are ill-tolerated (We suspect you'd get a pass if you were personally ill, or were physically out of town, but be prepared to prove it.) If you have multiple friends, you are REQUIRED to attend each of their parties, lest one of them feel slighted. Jim wonders if men can be coaxed into this behavior: "Hey Jack, you better come to my Longenberger power tool party, and bring your friends. Cheap tools at expensive prices, that's the theme. You better be there, because I came to your Tupperware nail organizer party the other night and bought a finishing nail caddy for \$100.00." Jim and some otherwise sane husbands have decided to create the "No-Party" party. Everyone will still be required to come, but folks will simply pass a crisp \$20.00 bill to the person on their right. That way, the need to "spend" money will have been satisfied, and all products come with a \$20.00 rebate. Valuable time will thus be left to actually "party", as it were.

In the education department, Julie has been working diligently with Brent on his letters, numbers, counting, phonics, etc. We're going to home-school, so Julie's started perusing curriculums, looking at online resources, and checking on the legalities. From Brent's side, he's learned how to count to 50 easily, can do 100 with a bit of help, can write all of his numbers and letters, and can (see below) print his own name. Teaching him is a challenge, since he shares his Dad's lack of attention and refusal to "practice" much. Thankfully, he's a quick study, and picks up things on a single usage, including phrasing Julie and Jim use. It's a definite blessing that we hold civil tongues. Outside of the "classroom", Brent took swimming classes at the local YMCA, and now loves the water (just like his aunt Tricia). Bathing time has taken on a whole new direction. Note: snorkeling works, diving does not.

For Thanksgiving, we spent the holiday with family in IL, but we're celebrating Christmas in Iowa this year. We were planning to end the year with little fanfare, but Brent and Jim celebrated Jim's first night of vacation by playing too hard, which resulted in a trip to the emergency room. Brent now sports a temporary cast on his left wrist (a torus "buckle" fracture), so he'll be celebrating Christmas a bit slower this year. Julie is surprised, given Brent's antics, that this is the first bone related injury. However, it's the most common children's fracture type, it's not a broken bone, and it heals in 3-4 weeks. Brent's still getting used to it, though. Nonetheless, five hands wave to all of our friends and family as we wish each a Merry CHRISTmas and a Happy New Year.

Jim, Julie, Brent, Sherlock, and Watson Brain

Julie BRENY

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September brought the annual pilgrimage to the "Farm Progress Show". This year, Jim and his Dad drove to mid-state IA. They "cheated" this year; instead of walking the exhibit field, they terrorized fellow farmers by zooming through it in record time on a rented golf cart. Now, Jim wants one of his own. Yeah, right. The neighbors already think we are strange, with 2 trucks, a motorhome, and a motorized GoPed scooter. We'll fit in better with a golf cart, I'm sure. In 2003, the show will be held near Henning, IL, so we'll bring the Brain-mobile with all the Brains home to attend.

As we've shared here in the past, Julie is active in the local Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS) group in town. Never one to say no, Julie accepted the position of craft organizer for a new chapter in town. Actually, we all accepted the position, as Julie recruited the Brain family to cut felt, saw branches, gather pinecones, and pick up acorns. Julie enjoys the position and the group, so we'll start in again after the holidays with pipe cleaners, crepe paper, and dowel rods. Jim's favorite MOPS craft (from another MOPS group): A doorstep made from a red brick painted to look like a snowman. Jim's comment: "If I were a mother of preschoolers, the first thing I'd want in the house is a brick my kids could get to. 'Now kids, you cannot play catch with the