

Expansion Plans

In this day of questionable stock performance, I've decided the Brain family should inquire if the local St. Luke's Hospital is a publicly traded company. It only makes sense to invest in places you frequent.

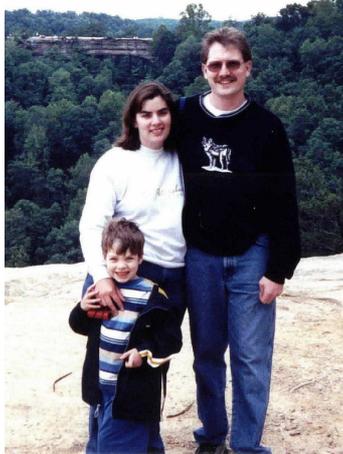
We started the year getting X-rays of Brent's fractured arm. As you may recall, Brent and Jim played a bit hard during Christmas break. After a few trips to the radiology lab, our physician declared the fracture on the mend. We weren't sure how Brent would handle the cast being removed (not sure if they still use a small saw or not), and it required yet another trip to the hospital, so we chose option B. Jim proceeded to gently remove the fiberglass cast with a pair of tin snips, much less traumatic, though a bit unorthodox. Brent got to keep his cast as a souvenir. On the upside, Brent rather enjoyed the trips to the hospital (except the first one, obviously). About the only lingering issue was Brent's recollection of the ordeal. For months afterward, Brent would start the story with: "I broke my arm 'cause my Dad threw me across the room..."

In 2003, Julie started "Innovative Desserts" as a side business. Coincidentally, a number of Julie's friends received blessed news, so Julie decided to bake some baby shower cakes as presents. She enlisted Jim to help with the cake "construction". The first creation was a cake crib mattress with a crib frame constructed around it. Not to rest on success, the next cake approximated a "bassinet". Jim arranged a solution to elevate the 10 pound cake on "legs", while Julie spent numerous hours applying "wicker" to the cake exterior. We finished the decorations ½ hour before the shower, so the Brain family

hand-delivered the labor of love to the festivities.

For his part, Brent received his swimming certificate, fielded in the YMCA baseball team, and dribbled the basketball during games in the Fall. Brent enjoyed both sports, but we found he enjoyed the camaraderie more than the sport itself. As a result, he was a great morale booster, but a bit less successful at hitting, catching, dribbling, and shooting.

Our newly acquired "house-on-wheels" carried us to the bluegrass state of Kentucky for our vacation this year. However, we are tempted to



call it the Wal-mart vacation. Many 24 hour Wal-mart locations allow RV overnight stays, subject to local zoning laws. Before we left, we decided that we'd take advantage of Wal-marts as a lodging last resort. However, in our 2 week vacation, I believe we spent 5-7 days at Wallyworld's campground. Of course, now we know WHY Wal-mart is so generous. Every morning, we'd visit the retailer for more groceries, incidentals, and trivialities. I suppose a future trip should drop any pretentiousness, and we'll just visit Wal-marts exclusively.



more he's soaking up. We traveled farther South into the mining areas of Kentucky, but weren't able to go into any. We walked across the trellis bridge at Big South Fork National Recreation Area, and we found a splendid waterfall at Yahoo Falls in the Park. We enjoyed hiking around the Natural Bridge State Park

Along the trip, we sampled some "finger lickin' good" fried chicken in Corbin, the birthplace of Kentucky Fried Chicken. We spent an afternoon in Bowling Green, visiting the National Corvette Museum. Of note, you can put a special code on your Corvette purchase and GM will deliver to the NCM (http://www.corvettemuseum.com/hcm_delivery/index.shtml).

We finished our whirlwind tour of Kentucky by visiting friends Bob and Marilyn Cartwright in Florence, Kentucky. Brent got to see a real life "Clifford" the Big Not-Red Dog, as Bob and Marilyn were playing host to their daughter's Great Dane while we visited. Brent suffered some "friendly fire", as the Dane used his huge mouth to try to get Brent to play with him. Brent took it well, considering the dog and he shared the same height.



The trip would be incomplete without a visit to Jim and Julie's favorite Amusement Park, King's Island. It's obvious we've been away for a while, as it is now Paramount's King's Island. Still, all the memorable rides are still there, such as the wooden coaster "The Beast", the twin wooden coasters, as well as a great children's area. As well, there were many newer metal coasters for Jim to try out. Brent thoroughly enjoyed the visit,

and he wants to know when we'll go back again.

We finalized the trip by visiting Julie's brother and sister-in-law in Indianapolis, and caught up on family events. While there, we took in the Children's Museum with the cousins. And then, it was time to return home. Two weeks had come and gone, and we were ready for our vacation to end. In fact, we each spent time by ourselves when we arrived back in Cedar Rapids. 2 adults, 1 child, and 2 dogs in a 26.5 foot motorhome for 2 weeks does get a bit crowded.

Upon returning home, we started a new chapter in Brent's life. School came to Brent, literally. We'd planned to homeschool, so we could start anytime. We decided to start a bit early, and take December off. In hindsight, we made an excellent choice. For his part, Brent took to his schoolwork well, digging into topics in earnest. Every week brought out a new topic to explore in detail. For a while, Brent latched onto the human body, and tried to learn as much as possible. He finally exhausted our ability to answer question, so we carried his questions to our family physician during his annual checkup. His question: "How does oxygen get into the bloodstream in the lungs?" Our physician was amazed at the depth. She stated it was a complicated answer, one that was not discussed until the later years of medical school. Still, she provided the answer, though I'm not sure Brent understood it completely.



Brent celebrated his 5th birthday at Daniel's Park in Cedar Rapids, with cake (lovingly designed and decorated by Innovative Desserts) and ice cream, friends, and presents. After the food and gift giving, all the kids went to the Daniel's Park Splashpad, a water sprinkler extravaganza. Jim had brought along two tubs of water balloons for games, but we ended up just handing out the balloons for kids to throw at each other. So much for organization.

Immediately following Brent's birthday, we continued our tradition of ditching him with the grandparents while we went to some interesting locale. This year, Jim had the opportunity to attend a conference in Phoenix, AZ, and he persuaded Julie (who does NOT like hot climates) to accompany him. Besides, it was a "dry" heat... Julie had to admit, it was not as hot as she had imagined, and the humidity was extremely low. Still, it's too far away from the grandparents, so we packed our bags and bid Arizona a fond farewell when the excursion was over.

In the Fall, regular activities started anew. Julie once again prepared crafts for Mother's of Preschooler's (MOPS) and signed Brent up for unit classes at the Marion Home School Assistance Program (MHSAP). Iowa offers school districts the option of starting such a program. If established, the program receives state funding. We decided to enroll for the classes and for the chance to work with other homeschoolers. We're very grateful such a program is nearly next door. It offers almost all the benefits of regular public school (classes, library, field trips, physical education at the local YMCA) that you can use to augment your homeschooling experience. On the church front, Brent decided to try choir and started weekly AWANAS Sparks.

Although most of the MHSAP field trips are simple affairs (police station, airport, grocery store), they do organize a weekend canoe trip in the Fall. This year, Brent and Jim went to Decorah, IA (2 hours north of us) to participate. They went with another Father/son pair, and the hot summer had lowered the river significantly, so they spent most of the canoe trip walking their canoe down the river. Still, Brent spent some quality time with Jim, and they both spent a wonderful weekend alone. Of course, Julie had a wonderful time without "the boys" around.

Jim and Brent traveled home to Henning, IL for the 50th Anniversary Farm Progress Show. They spent the entire week walking through the fields, starting first on the weekend with the Farm Progress retrospective show, then midweek with the main event. Normally, Jim and his father go to the second day of the event, but decided this year to go on Day 1. It's rather fortunate they did, as the following days were rained out. Someone gave Jim free tickets to the after-show

event that night, Brad Paisley live, so the three Brain boys took in the concert.

In October, the family traveled to Omaha to visit friends Dori and Jim Settles (who bought our house in Bennington) and the Omaha Zoo. Along the way, the motorhome developed problems and stalled on I-80. Jim tried in vain to rectify the problem, to no avail. Finally, we resigned ourselves to calling a tow truck. Earlier in the week, Brent had been reading about tow trucks and asked to ride in one. Finally, it all clicked. Julie recounted that she wasn't particularly fond of what a tow truck implies (stranded motorist), so she told Brent he could pray for the ride. The next day, the repair technician noted the gas pump was bad and needed replacement, but we could use the other tank to finish our trip and replace it later. I'll let you draw your own conclusions.

In November, Jim once again traveled to Florida on business. This time, though, Julie and Brent both came as well. We arrived on the weekend, and took in the Everglades before Jim's conference started. Brent found the un-fenced alligators immensely interesting, but heeded the warnings about getting too close. In fact, Brent preached to others about the dangers of bringing food and drink into the area.

As normally happens before a trip, Julie worries herself into illness for any trip, so we didn't think much of her feeling poorly after we arrived in Fort Lauderdale. However, on day 2 of the conference, Julie awoke and remarked to Jim that she had felt this bad only one time prior in her life. Finding a drugstore in an unknown city is not an easy task, but Jim obliged. Normally, one would go to get medicine, but not this time.

In case you haven't guessed it, that's the day we made our expansion plans. Julie is pregnant, and as with Brent, she's taken seriously ill. That morning, the entire family visited the Broward County Medical Center, Jim argued with the attending doctor over the medication his wife needed, and Brent watched Finding Nemo in the children's ward. Finally, with a 4 day dosage of Zofran in hand, we made the most of the situation until we could return home.

Which brings us to the end of the year. We traveled to Illinois for Thanksgiving, but Julie's spending most of her day in bed. We've arranged for Brent to visit friends and relatives through December and January. TO be sure, we're better off this time, as family is closer, and Julie's Hyperemesis Gravidarum condition was diagnosed earlier, but it's no picnic. As a result, Christmas this year will be a bit low key. Julie's parents are coming out to celebrate with us, and we're settling in for the next 6 months. As noted at the start of the letter, we've visited the emergency room a time or two since we returned from Florida.

Many have asked us if we planned a family addition. It's an interesting question. For years, we refrained from even trying, but we'd thought about it over the past few years. With so much time elapsed since Brent's birth, we weren't sure how he'd handle a new sibling, and we weren't sure how we would handle it. Still, we decided we weren't opposed to the idea. In the end, we decided to leave the decision up to God. But, we also decided if it was not to be by 2004, we'd make other plans. Jim, at least, sees a bit of humor in the timing. Julie, though, won't until later.

Thus, we'll wish you a Merry CHRISTmas from the Brain clan (and unnamed new member) from Cedar Rapids. Wish us well as we bring another Brain into the world!

The Brains (Jim, Julie, Brent, Sherlock, Watson, and baby-to-be!)

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For the "Lord of the Rings" movie fans: Jim secured a ticket to the back to back Trilogy Tuesday showing in Davenport. 12.5 hours in a movie theater. Jim said it was a once in a lifetime experience! I'd say it is a bit extreme.