

No, I'm Packraticus!

We're getting to the point in our lives where we can see the traits our children have inherited from their parents. Sigh... Yes, both have Jim's strong will and questioning attitude, which will serve them well in life, but they also have acquired Jim's packrat nature. In fact, they are arguably worse. "Dad, don't throw that broken paper towel tube away. I NEED IT!" Brent has acquired his mother's attention to rules and regulations, but Brent has also acquired his mother's attention to rules and regulations, if you catch my drift. "Mom, Belinda cannot play with this toy. It says 'ages 6 and up'. 6 AND UP!" I guess it's amusing in its own way, as if viewing yourself through a mirror, finally seeing what others have witnessed for years. We worry about their eventual spouses, though. Oh, and for the record, some of those traits must have skipped a generation, because we don't exhibit them, but our parents do.

Brent played basketball in the "Upwards" program in town, and he loved practice, the drills, and team, and the experience. Ironically, he was less enthused about the game itself. While on the floor, it's as if Brent actively sought to distance himself from the ball. When pressed, Brent admitted it's too



extravagant item on impulse, and after subsequently shopping for better pricing and deciding it was too large a purchase anywhere, the dealer made an offer that could not be refused and the family bid adieu to the old upright. Though the ability to play with headphones without attracting the attention of children, it's initial purpose, is heavily used, it truly is a family hub, with Belinda using it to play pre-recorded songs she can dance with and Brent using the microphone input and the speech processor to make himself sound like the "Chipmunks".

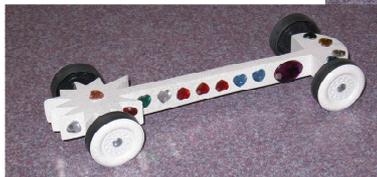
We finally loaded the camper in May for a multi-country trip. After arriving in Indianapolis to see family, Jim immediately departed with a friend for a long awaited trek to the Dayton Amateur Radio Hamvention. Wanting to go since he first became a licensed "ham" operator in 1994, this was his first opportunity. After rejoining the family, we pressed onward to Santa Claus, IN, home of Holiday World Amusement Park. Not only have many recommended the park for years, but Jim and Julie have wanted



Pinewood Derby, where he placed 3rd in Pack and Council with a car shaped like an arrow.



fast paced, and there's too much pressure, so he preferred to block and let others dribble and take the shots. Less fast paced was his last Cub Scout



Via some logic that only makes sense to 11 year olds, he's ecstatic, because he now has trophies of all three places (1st, 2nd, and 3rd) at the Pack level and 1st and 3rd at Council. This

year, Jim created a car for Julie to enter, a "rolling pin" car that ran a close tie for first.

For Valentine's Day, Jim and Julie finally realized one of Julie's dreams. For years, Julie, the pianist, has made do with a secondhand upright, and her attempts to play on it often resulted in little children crowding around her as soon as they heard her start playing. Such made it nearly impossible to enjoy. Julie had researched other options for some time, but it was without thought of purchase that Jim took Julie to the music store after their Valentine's Day dinner (Brent is now old enough to babysit). Julie had narrowed the choice to a Yamaha Clavinova, which the store sold, so she asked about the basic models. However, as one can expect, Jim drifted to the fancier models, asking about features and functions. In the end, they both agreed the more advanced model played better and offered more items of interest to a pianist. While never one to buy such an

to change up the normal birthday party plans. As expected, Jim and Brent hit the coasters first, while Julie and Belinda spent time in "Holiday Town". In the afternoon, everyone swapped shorts for suits and enjoyed the water park. Given the early timeframe, the park is uncrowded, so we enjoyed tube rides right up until waterpark closing, and then slowed down with funnel cakes and deep-fat-fried oreo cookies. Yes, they are as good as that sounds. Yes, they are as bad for you as that sounds. We washed it down with Brent's favorite feature of the park: free soda. Toby, on the other hand, having been boarded all day in the park kennel, was less enamored with the event.

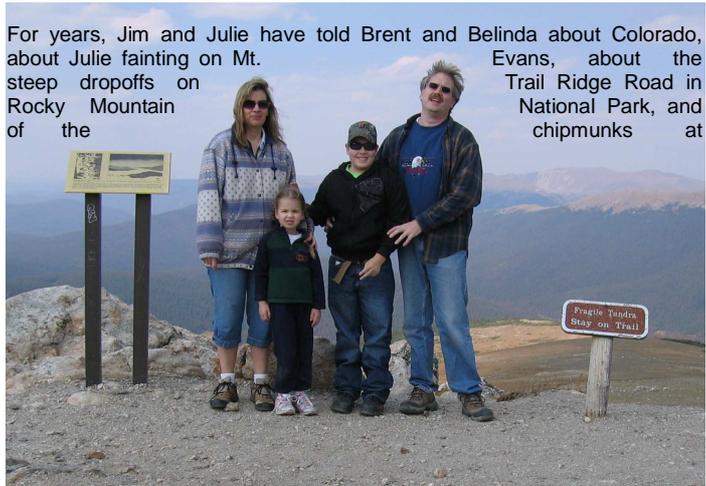
After a visit with Jim's parents while in Cincinnati, OH for a computer show, we raced to the finish. Starting June 1, Canadian travel required



passports, while Memorial Day Niagara Falls fireworks were not to be missed. Thus, we started North to get into Canada by Monday night and out of Canada before June 1. Of course, we get behind on our tight schedule by trying to fit in a short side trip to "Jungle Jim's International Market" north of Cincinnati. Jim and kids marveled at the size, but it's truly a spellbinding event for Julie, who picked up long wanted baking items. As we leave, we realized we'd only seen half the store, but we're out of time. As it was, we arrived in Canada mid afternoon on Memorial Day at the Falls, but it's enough time to enjoy the truly breathtaking evening show. We'd arranged for multi-attraction tickets, so we spent the next few days going behind the Falls, going over the river, and going up to the Falls via boat. Anyone need a cheap plastic poncho? We have enough souvenir ponchos to last a lifetime. It really is true, though. If you want to see Niagara Falls, see it from the Canadian side.

In July, Brent went back to IN for Conservation Camp, invited by his grandfather. Brent remarked he'd never before been to a camp run so much like a military unit, but he enjoyed the shooting sports, the airboat rides, and the fishing. Meanwhile, Belinda got a whole week of both parents to herself. We all came for Brent the following weekend, spending a day at the beach in northern IN and stopping at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago before heading home.

Along the way, we acquired a new member of the family, Sugar the Hamster (Cookie the dog, Sugar the Hamster, there's a theme here). Taking to her almost immediately, Belinda spent countless hours with the rodent. For his part, Brent initially enjoyed the hamster and continued to honor his promise to clean the cage, but mainly Julie and Belinda enjoyed the little furry creature. Sadly, 'twas not a long life she had. Julie and Jim suspect that Belinda's "mothering" instinct might be more like a "smothering" instinct at this point, so we bid a fond farewell to Sugar a few months later, complete with a tiny hamster grave in the backyard and a paint-stir-stick cross lovingly carved and typeset by Brent.



For years, Jim and Julie have told Brent and Belinda about Colorado, about Julie fainting on Mt. Evans, about the steep dropoffs on Rocky Mountain of the Trail Ridge Road in National Park, and chipmunks at

Seven Falls in Colorado Springs you can hand feed. As well, Brent has listened to so many Focus on the Family "Adventures In Odyssey" episodes, he can't wait to see "Whit's End" at the Focus headquarters in Colorado Springs. Thus, we headed to Colorado in the Fall. The thinner air didn't affect Julie as much this time, but it did affect everyone the first few days. The kids' sleep suffered a bit, though we still managed to hit a sequence of interesting locations. We took a tour of the Denver Mint, sat on the courthouse step that's 5280 ft above sea level, and ate dinner at the Downtown Aquarium Restaurant. Brent and Belinda even got to watch a diver work and clean while we dined. One day, we rested and played in a natural hot spring-fed pool, and the next Jim and Brent walked 4 miles to the top of the large dunes at Great Sand Dunes National Park. They then sledged down the dunes. Well, Jim did. Brent did it once and decided it was too much work for not enough value. On the way home, The family stopped at the old house in Bennington, NE, now owned by Jim and Dori Settles. It was almost impossible to recognize, as Jim Settles bricked the house. Still, the "SuperDeck" was still standing tall and proud when we visited. Just like the house, the Omaha area has changed considerably. Thousands of housing units have sprung up nearly all the way to the old home, which used to be at least 10 minutes away from any subdivision. In a few years, the "subdivision in the middle of the country" will be engulfed by newer housing developments.

Mind you, each trip is an educational experience. Some are easy to grasp,

like the CO trip or Niagara Falls. Others are less obvious, but evidently are just as educational. Take for instance the late September trip back to Chicago. The computer show was not terribly educational, though Brent sold lots of Scouting popcorn to an eager and mostly captive audience, which was educational in itself. No, the education inadvertently happened after the show concluded. The hotel overflowed with guests of a recent wedding, all dressed to the nines, who thought they had booked the hotel's rec room. After determining they had not, they proceeded to unload the light beer cases in the foyer and party there. As it so happens, such is the same place the computer show folks gather after the show. Thus, Jim and Brent conversed with the show crowd, while the wedding party reduced their sobriety. Finally, the din became too much, the hotel called the cops, and everyone was ordered to their rooms. But, before that task was completed, a reveler detached a fire extinguisher from the stairwell mount and allegedly swung it, shearing a sprinkler right off the wall. The subsequent loss of pressure kicked on the fire alarm and the lack of a sprinkler in the stairwell turned the stairs into a cascading fountain of high volume water, encroaching on the first floor hotel rooms. Everyone ended up outside at 2:00AM, waiting for the 9 police cars and fire engine to restore order. Sleep returned at 3:00AM, only to be interrupted at 3:45 with another false alarm. In fact, the alarm went off again at 11:45AM, and Jim took pictures of the kids in front of the fire engine that subsequently rolled up to the front office. We later learned 36 "wedding revelers" had been hauled off to Lombard's jail that morning. Can you imagine the cost of water cleanup, the false alarm fees, etc.? Brent could simply not wait to use his newly acquired cellular phone to call Grandma and relate the entire morning's events. The verdict: Jim's mom calls him on Monday. "So, I hear you were educating your son about drunk people."



The years winds down with changes in the family. Belinda has learned to read and has lost her 4 front teeth (same as Brent, they all fell out almost at once, though 2 came back in and two are straggling along) while Brent is learning about life with braces while he learns to play the saxophone. Julie and the kids have had the Swine Flu (H1N1 for those who care), while Jim hopes to miss it. Jim and Julie attended another Civil War Ball this Fall, while Brent stripped his attendance down to the essentials: he wanted to eat the baked goods. Belinda, for her part, continues in Ballet, though she didn't like the Civil War Ball because everyone danced. We've now confirmed she wants to dance and she wants everyone else to sit and watch her. Anything else is not considered dancing.

Many years ago, when Brent was young (and Belinda was not yet here), Jim considered the perfect gift for Brent. He remembered playing with cardboard blocks in Kindergarten, so he ended up ordering 200 9"x3"x6" cardboard box blocks for construction projects of all kinds. Those blocks, coupled with years of large appliance boxes, have become the most often used toys in the house. One week they are forts, houses the next, and mazes the week following that. When friends arrive, the boxes are often the first item of interest, and sometimes the only item of interest. Still, as minds grow, it appears the designs become more complex, more raw materials are required, and thus more boxes are needed. So, you'll think us strange, but we're giving our children boxes again for Christmas. Well, you no doubt thought we were strange before, living out of a box in the back of our truck for weeks at a time and staying all night at Walgreens and Flying J's and Cracker Barrels, but this will remove all doubt. So, when they call and exclaim that Mom and Dad got them empty boxes for Christmas, remember they aren't in trouble. They actually requested more boxes. Packraticus INDEED!

Merry CHRISTmas,

Jim, Julie, Brent, Belinda, and Toby
(Grab a color copy at www.jbrain.com/christmas)