

Smaller and Larger

Have you ever welcomed the weekend, slumping into the couch with media remote in hand or a favorite book to read, or maybe lazily embarking on a pet project while enjoying some well-earned downtime? The weekend just meanders along, without a care in the world. And then, Sunday night as you prepare for bed, you spot the Monday schedule, which assumed completed tasks now almost too late to begin? That begins to describe our 2019, where it seemed the family found 3 or 4 years' worth of adventures that must be enjoyed before the door closed on this decade. There were weeks where one needed a map and an itinerary just to keep track of your own whereabouts at a given minute!

On our first stop on the Brain adventure tour, we welcomed Samantha Ott into the family. Since getting to know each other years earlier while both attended the local community college, Brent and Sam started the next phase of their lives in April of this year. I'm not sure anything prepares one to watch a former newborn stand with his bride-to-be and share vows and a kiss in front of friends and family. Of course, while the rest of the reception guests sit down to their meal of pork or roast beef or chicken, complemented with exquisitely prepared greens and starches, the staff bring out a gourmet cheeseburger (PLAIN!) and fries meal for the groom. And then you remember. Yep, that's your son.

From the "be careful what you share with your spouse" department: At the beginning of April, Julie shared a link to the upcoming epic 22 film, 59 hour Marvel Movie Marathon with the comment: "Wow, I thought the Star Wars Marathon was insane. Can't believe they're actually doing this, but I'm sure there are people lining up for it!"

Response: Jim bought tickets for the Chicago multi-day event, beginning at 10AM on April 23th and finishing with an advance showing of *Avengers:Endgame* at 5PM on April 25th. As the title suggests, the theater showed each film in release order separated by 20 minute breaks over the 3 day period. Some of you were regaled by Jim's Facebook updates throughout the event, noting the mood of the rabid fanbase and how folks handled fatigue. Committed to the cause, Jim missed not a one of the showings!

Many fathers and daughters step out together for a show or a dinner or a movie, cherishing the precious time together. I suspect far fewer attend a computer show in Chicago and work alongside each other as vendors, seeking customers who desire computer peripherals and/or baked goods. Yet, in what has become a yearly ritual, Jim and Belinda made the early May trek to the Windy City once again. With products from edible to



digital, both spent the early May weekend satisfying their regulars' demands. New this year: Belle accepted pre-orders and special requests. After subtracting the cost of raw ingredients, her booth still generated a very healthy profit margin.

The weekend trip also allows both to enjoy numerous cuisine staples, including the Friday night Krispy Kreme "Hot Doughnuts Now" run, the Saturday lunch at Portillo's (with a piece of famous chocolate cake each!), the evening BBQ dinner, finishing with the Sunday MacAllister's Deli lunch. Having had so much fun, Jim and Belle scheduled a repeat Chicago engagement in early September at a second computer show.

With not even a free weekend to spare, Brent graduated from Coe College in Cedar Rapids, IA mid-May. For a myriad of reasons, not only Brent but the entire family, including Sam, was glad to finish up this educational chapter. Still, the family and his new bride showered the graduate with appreciation, food, and gifts after he walked across the stage and picked up Bachelor's of Arts degrees in both Math and Physics. As he prepared to further his education in early 2020 at Iowa State University, Brent helped other students in our local community college's tutoring center and parlayed that into an assistant teaching position during portions of the fall semester.



Substituting for a professor on paternity leave, Brent took over classroom duties as the semester progressed. We see it as practice for his possible eventual professorship.

Just as we earlier witnessed Brent and Sam start their lives together, Jim and Julie celebrated their 26th wedding anniversary in late May. Having still not managed to decide on a proper 25th anniversary destination, both managed to



sneak up to Decorah, IA for a few days. Though not a primary vacation destination, the laid back trip, slow pace, and small town charm of the home of Luther College proved a great respite from the previous pace. With Julie's appreciation for all things Laura Ingalls Wilder in mind, they drove north to Burr Oak, IA for a visit to the Master's Hotel, a short lived childhood home for the beloved children's writer. Enroute back home, they took in the Bily Clocks Museum (such beautiful hand carved clocks!) and the tiny St. Anthony of Padua Chapel, a testament to a mother's promise to a son who made it back from the war.



As June rolled into view, both Brent and Belle celebrated another year upon the Earth, while Belinda showed off her skills at the Iowa State FFA Floriculture CDE (Career Development Event), bringing home first place individual overall, first place floral production and management, and first place team awards. She and her team advanced to the National FFA Convention contest in November, where Belinda took 20th place out of 178 entrants and the team placed 8th. Interestingly, offers by both mom and dad to attend and support during the State event were diplomatically declined, though both were allowed to attend the National event awards dinner.

It's interesting how both Belle and Brent can be instantly recognized as sharing similar traits yet offer completely unique perspectives. Shepherding Brent into the driver's seat of a vehicle, for example, required constant persuasion over multiple years after he turned 16. Driving held about as much appeal as taking out the trash or cleaning a room. Contrarily, Belle counted the days until her chronological age allowed a school-restricted driver's license. Thus, before the month ran out, the Brain family gained a newly minted vehicle operator. As the school year started, driving someone to school functions became a rarity. Of course, now someone is counting the days until the restricted license can be traded for a full one. Actually, many are counting, as that date will officially see the retirement of mom and dad's chauffeur hats (for a while, anyway).

As summer approached, we all agreed on an impressive destination: a Staycation! After all of the events earlier in the year, everyone just wanted some downtime to regroup and recover. Brent wielded a hammer and drywall knife and helped with home improvement projects, including adding a deck to Belle's Tiny House, while Belinda took home 1st and 2nd place awards with her annual Muscatine County Fair flower judging contest entries in July. Father and daughter enjoyed another life-affirming moment together as they partook of greasy fair food, funnel cakes, and various types of meat on sticks.

July saw Jim, Julie, and Belle heading over to Le Claire, IA to visit the American Archeology (more famous as the home of "American Pickers") and the Buffalo Bill Museum, which we all agree should really be



renamed, as it contains far more memorabilia from the town of Le' Claire than items pertaining to Buffalo Bill (cool stuff, all of it, though!). Rarely can someone say that they accrued knowledge about a Wild West icon, the various types of barbed wire, the many variations of the Mason Jar, and the inner workings of the airplane "black box" recorder, all in the span of 2 hours, while never leaving the building. Yes, it's that eclectic.



Flexing her flair for the dramatic, Belle once again joined the Davenport Junior Theater this summer for an August performance. Watching an actress in a theatre production portray an actress in a soap opera episode makes for a very "meta" experience. She especially enjoyed this year's material, as she regaled all of the theatre patrons by dramatically "dying" on the set of the soap opera. Sadly, her instructor time-limited her efforts, so we were not able to witness the full "spaghetti western-style" death.

Jim decided 2019 was the year to hit all the Midwest farm shows. First up was Historic Farm Days in Penfield, IL, followed by Half Century of Progress in Rantoul, IL, capped off by a visit to the Farm Progress Show outside Springfield, IL. After all these years, you'd think he'd remember to wear a bit of sunscreen or otherwise stay out of the elements! However, he did make some progress on restoring his Farmall 'M' tractor. The entire family accompanied him to the Midwest Old Thresher's Reunion in Mt. Pleasant, IA. Contrary to the name, there were exhibits and interesting items for the entire family.

Though Brent waits until January 2020, August signaled the beginning of a new school year for Belle, who continued to attend college credit agriculture courses held at the local high school and enrolled in her first college chemistry course at the local community college. Though she fits in well in both educational environments, her homeschooling background does offer some interesting insights for both her and her classmates. It's surreal to hear her firsthand accounts of new experiences like school bus rides, substitute teachers, and unruly students during dinner. Nonetheless, she possesses some wit. The teacher jokingly mentioned learning the Latin terms for tree species, only to stand amazed during an oral quiz as Belle recited one after another in Latin!

With the increase in eligible family drivers in 2019, Julie finally broke down and selected a new vehicle. 'Twas a difficult decision, not due to color or interior amenities, rather the preponderance of "assists" and "aids" unwanted by the woman of the family. Finally settling on the Ford Edge, which offered a truly civilized ride and accommodated superior ability in disabling such unhelpful electronic "intrusions", Julie delegated her trusty and dependable Honda Pilot to the youngest and newest driver.

As we close out this action-packed year, everyone is gearing up for 2020. As I write this, Brent and Sam are packing to settle into an apartment in Ames in expectation of the spring Iowa State semester. Sam, currently reservations coordinator for the upscale Blackhawk Hotel in Davenport, will soon transition into a new virtual role for the hotel that allows her to work remotely. Belinda prepares for a new semester at community college in the spring, while Jim continues as Vice President of Technologies Services at HNI Corporation and Julie researches college options for the budding horticulturalist in the family. With Sam's introduction, both she and Brent heading off, Belinda driving and yet driving off, our family gets larger and smaller all at the same time.

Merry CHRISTmas to our friends. Please stop by and see us if you're in the area!

Jim, Julie, Brent, Sam, Belinda, Toby, Susie, Crush, Rosie, and Chocolate.

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