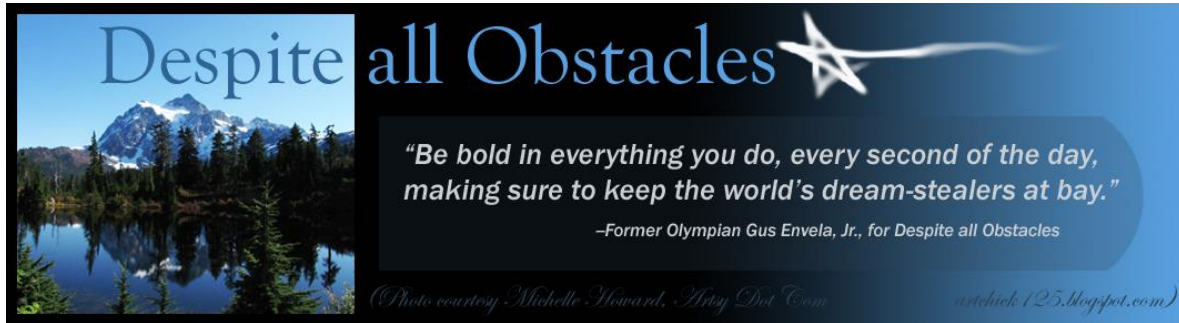


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Happy New Year!

Saturday, January 1st, 2011

Happy New Year, everyone! Time to shine! Time to stomp out that last pack of smokes, blow the dust off that \$70 container of Muscletech, and dig up that Bible you've been talking about reading! 2010 has brought some sweeping positive changes for myself, my family, and for this site. In 2011, *Despite all Obstacles* will be introducing some fresh perspective. For beginners, I'm excited to feature the artwork and photography of Michelle Howard, with ongoing displays and stories throughout the month of January. Visit her site, *Artsy Dot Com*, when you get the chance.

Ladies and Gentlemen, be bold this year. Time to step out of your shell in one area or another. Stop clinging to 'safe'... be wild and invigorating and exciting and contagious! The world is full of mediocre safe people right now. I implore you to dare! Invent! Create! Be dangerous! Break the rules! Don't break the law... I'm not preaching anarchy or destruction here. Rather, color outside the lines--break the mold! Be a force to be reckoned with! Step out in faith! I'm proud of you already. Happy 2011.

--MJ

A Day in the Life: Monopoly Hate and the \$10 Tract

Saturday, January 1st, 2011

"Hey Babe, let's play Monopoly!" "Yeah, Matty, let's not. I'll be honest, I never liked Monopoly. AT ALL... it's too boring." "Sweetheart, that's because you play by the rules. You need to play by modified rules. No 'once around' rule, no small bills, double the cash out, triple the property costs, double the rent. It makes for a fast game!" (Petra:) "Yeah, it just makes the boring pass more quickly."

So we added up our cash to tip the movers this weekend. They worked hard and we were looking to give them \$20 per head. We had to scrape around, but finally found

the last ten bucks we needed, in a folded bill. I wanna know who is responsible for making these religious tracts that look identical to ten dollar bills (on the other side, "Some things are better than money...John 3:16). Personally, I'd like to choke him. If I was homeless and somebody handed me one of these, I'd have half a mind to wipe my butt with it. "Here, have a plastic Big Mac. It looks and feels like a Big Mac, but is not." If some company went out of their way to produce millions of these and distribute them to the hungry, to prove the point that some things are more important than food, they would be wrong. *Well, whoop-a-dee-do to you and your Jesus. We're still hungry.* Next time, Company X, save the money that it costs to produce and distribute these uber-realistic \$10 bills, and invest in people instead. Invest in a single source--like a local mission, local ministry, or a solitary family. Your seed will bear more fruit. Yeah, in the end, we almost shorted one of our movers. I don't think he would have liked it either.

A Super Church

Sunday, January 2nd, 2011



This day is a bittersweet one for our family. On Thursday, our household items were loaded into a truck bound for a new home in Pennsylvania. We hung around a few days, packed the last of our belongings into the trunk of a long-outgrown GMC Envoy, and we headed to church for the last time (3n1 Church of Suffolk, VA). Once church was over, we said our goodbyes and hit the highway. Petra and I have been fortunate to call some great churches "home" since we've been married. The International Baptist Church (IBC) in Stuttgart, Germany. Christian Life

Center (CLC) in Dayton, Ohio. First Assembly of God in Pensacola, FL. Liberty Christian Church in Havelock, NC. River of Life in Jacksonville, NC. Faith Alive Ministries in Chesapeake, VA. None of these have been as critically influential to our spiritual and interpersonal relationship development, as 3n1 Church. By and by, it has become a very important part of our life; we couldn't wait to go to church each and every week for the last year+ that we've been in attendance (since its inception). One amazing part of this love story, is regarding the people of 3n1. Never have we been surrounded with such an abundance of beautifully-spirited people. The second part, an amazing freedom of movement. The worship, the message, the vibe... strikes a harmonious chord on the Jiminy Cricket scale; it feels spiritually 'right.'

Third and lastly, the pastor of this amazing church has indirectly taught me a very valuable lesson in spiritual leadership.

For years, I have been very selective of our spiritual leaders, to the point of criticism. In order to place myself, my family, into the submissive role of 'parishioner(s)' (for lack of a more fitting modern term), I needed to click with the pastor. More specifically, with his leadership style. Well, for whatever reason, Pastor Matt and I didn't seem to click. How selfishly wrong was my initial assessment... not only did I find that he was a good pastor, but that he was an excellent one!

I once mentioned in a previous blog post, how Pastor Matt dispelled the myth of the "Super Pastor," [Super Church, e.g]. While I wholly agree with his assessment that these instruments should not define one's Christian walk, and while I also believe that God can speak powerfully through any person or object, I also recognize the historical fact that certain mouthpieces of God have had a more profound influence on humankind than others (in a tireless example, the Apostle Paul). Biblical and post-biblical history recognizes the existence of Super Pastors, and shows their measured impact on Christianity and on the world.

Regarding Pastor Matt Stewart, having seen closely the heart of this man, I believe him to be a true man of God, and though he would reject such a title, a Super Pastor. Adding to the excitement of 3n1 Church, Matt has coupled with another Super Pastor, Steve Bellavia. Together each with his teammate wife, and with their leadership team, and with the following body of 3n1 believers, worshipers, and prayer warriors, the devil's area operations are in a constant state of spiritual disruption.

We will miss this church. The people of 3n1 are the type who don't grow on trees. If you are not a churchgoer, and you would like to see a real example of God's love, alive and active in 2011--with no sleight of hand, hidden agenda, or ulterior motive--you need to pay a visit... it's worth the trip. What you'll find here is God, good people, and a good week-by-week road map for your personal development. Oh, and the coffee ain't bad either :)

Sunset Tree

This is a painting that Michelle Howard simply calls, "Sunset Tree." I'm a big fan of bold, vibrant colors, and also of sunsets; I'd have to say that this is one of my favorites of her works. Convenient to note: Michelle sells prints of her artwork in various sizes; for specific pricing and ordering details, visit her *website*.



The 2010-11 Speights Family Letter

Saturday, January 8, 2011

Dear Everybody,

Hey! Great to see your bright shining faces. I can't believe it's that time of year again. So much has happened with us, I don't know where to begin. For starters, this family letter is in its fourteenth consecutive year! Petra and I will be celebrating fifteen years of marriage this summer. We're really excited about that! A pulse check on our family--we currently have four kids: Joshua (9), Caleb (8), Lily (3) and Ayla (1). We haven't owned a dog since we've had kids, but hopefully we'll remedy that before you receive our next family letter.

In our last family letter, our family was wrapping up a month-long visit with my sister's family in Alaska. Since then, we've been movin' & shakin!' We made the Orlando/Disney World pilgrimage with the kids; spent an amazing week at Magic Kingdom, Universal Studios and Universal Islands of Adventure. Florida... where

kids and dads alike never tire of coconut palms, citrus groves, and gator heads for sale at every gas station.

Petra and I spent a long weekend in the San Francisco Bay area. We walked the Golden Gate Bridge, visited Muir Woods and Lombard Street and several city attractions, drove South along the coast to Monterey and Carmel via Highway 1, where I ran the Big Sur International Marathon. It was a fantastic trip, and we fell in love with the area!

We all finally made the annual Buchholz Family Reunion in Dayton (mom's side)... it had been years since we'd all been able to attend. My grandma and grandpa Buchholz celebrated 60 years of marriage last year!!! They've got 11 kids and who knows how many grandkids and great grandkids to help them ring in the celebration.

This past fall, we stayed a weekend with friends Melissa & Mark in a cabin in Tennessee. It was a first cabin camping experience for my whole family. We had a blast! Took some great photos. We're eagerly awaiting the day that you and the rest of the world get to know Mark and his longtime band, Salient. They seem to be on the verge of going big! We're praying for divine favor.

The boys are back in public school this year, after 2½ years of home schooling. They seem to like the change, though both admit that momma was an awesome teacher! Speaking of momma, she was dedicated all year to rockin' & rollin' with the praise & worship team at our amazing church, 3n1. She was even fortunate to recently lead praise & worship! It made her day. This year, my year was made by coaching football—both Josh and Caleb played Pop Warner tackle football in the 7-9 year-old division; Josh played superbly at fullback, guard, defensive tackle. Caleb had a great attitude, but admittedly isn't sold out to football. We discovered something about Caleb... that boy can DANCE!!! I mean he can really get down. We're impressed and proud of both of our boys.

The girls are amazing. They're so cute, it's hard not to focus all attention on them sometimes. I find myself taking pictures of them all the time, because I think everything they do is adorable! Lily loves lollipops and she is a serious daddy's girl. Ayla is definitely a momma's girl, but she loves to smother daddy with love! Couldn't ask for a better family... three gorgeous bellas and two strapping fellas, I'm in heaven.

Work was slow this year. I dabbled between construction contracting, mechanical contracting, and being a pro bum. Then this blessing literally comes out of nowhere through two friends, and I'm working in the oilfield with a great salaried job, and a bunch of perks and bennies. This week, we relocated to the Pittsburgh area of PA, where Patterson-UTI drilling company's Appalachian Division is headquartered. I've been living up here by myself for going on three months. Love the industry, love the people, love the work. It's an exciting opportunity! Petra's excited about the

relocation, as are the kids. The house we're renting is in one of the nicer neighborhoods that we've seen, it offers a purchase option, and the house itself looks great—its location also offers an amazing scenic view. The Allegheny Trail runs through our neighborhood... this paved run/hike/walk/bike/ski thoroughfare runs all the way from Pittsburgh to Washington, D.C. Supposedly, the schools in the region (and in our district specifically) are amazing. What's best, there's a great neighborhood babysitter directly next door, and Petra has already made a friend here!

We're believing great things for 2011. I have my sights set on the first week of October for the Budapest Marathon... it would give the kids a chance to meet the other side of their family, culture, language, etc. We'll play it out, but once I purchase tickets and schedule vacation days, it should be a go! Petra's sights are set on a bigger vehicle, as we've long outgrown her Envoy.

Well, that's the nutshell version. Be safe, be blessed, be prosperous in all that you do. Be tenacious and aggressive in the pursuit of your goals, and give glory to God with each victory!

Love,

Matty, Petra, Josh, Caleb, Lily, Ayla

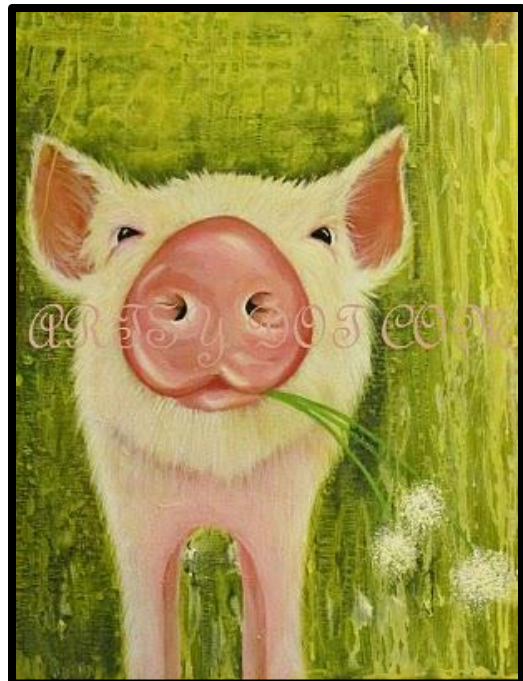
Some Pig!

Sunday, January 16, 2011

This adorable pig reminds me of Wilbur from the movie *Charlotte's Web*, shortly after he received his buttermilk bath. This month, Despite all Obstacles is showcasing the works of Michelle Howard; this is a piece from her series on 'factory farm animals.' The series was painted to raise awareness of, and support for, humane farming. Myself an animal lover at heart, I was moved by her plight.

For more information on artist / photographer Michelle Howard, visit her website, Artsy Dot Com. From there, you can find information about the artist, about her other works, and even details on how to order prints.

--MJ

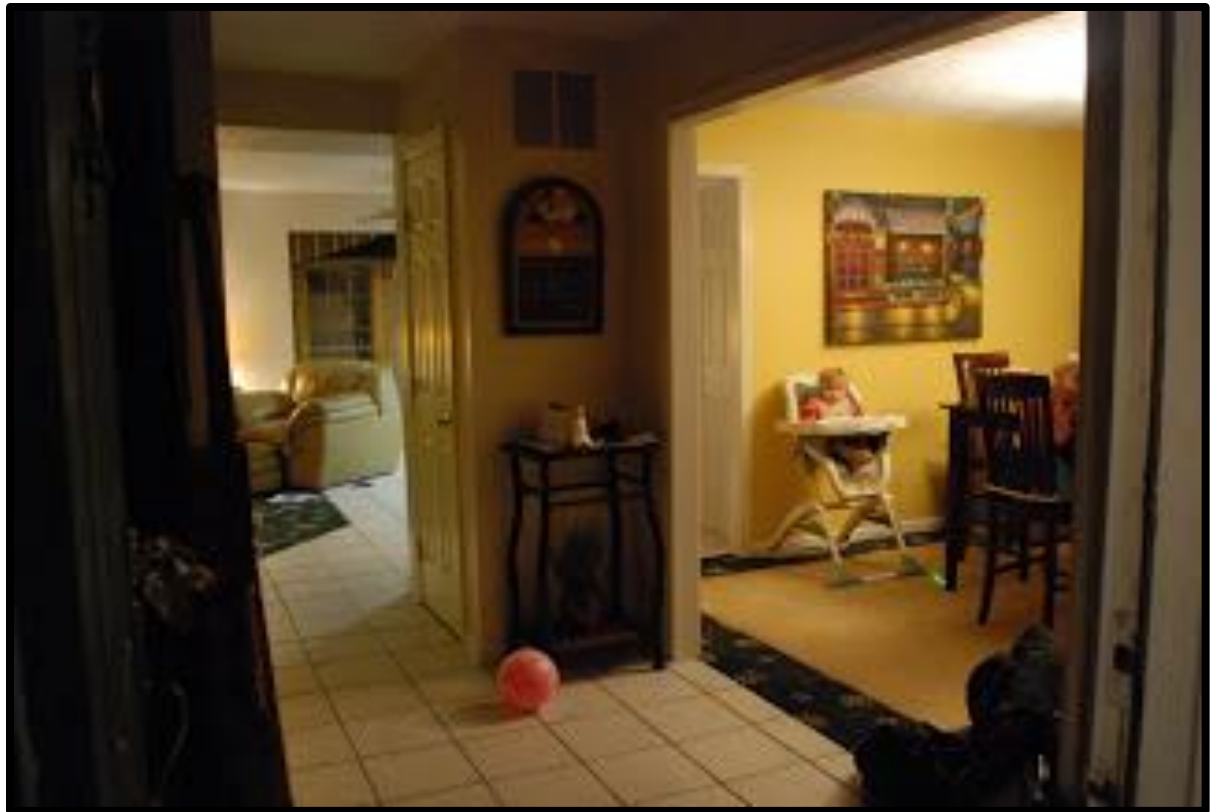


Our New Place

Sunday, January 16, 2011

Here are a few pictures of the new house. The view from the back of the house is amazing... it overlooks a valley teeming with busy little neighborhoods... Every morning, the sun lights up the valley in living color; in the evening, we've got an amazing view of the sunset; at night, the hills are lit up like a thousand Christmas lights. Deer and turkey all over our yard, all through our neighborhood. We have a paved running / biking / skiing trail less than 500 yards from our back door... and it goes all the way to Washington, D.C! Very friendly neighbors. The kids love their school! Schools in PA are funded through a separate tax. We're 15 minutes from downtown Pittsburgh, 15 minutes from my office in Eighty Four, PA, and we're off to check out a church right now, called LifeStone. Been snowing every day since we moved in. Snowing right this second, big flakes. We're loving this place!







Adorable

Monday, January 17, 2011



What is it, Daddy? I was just playin' Cinderella with Tony!



Sweetheart, Tony really doesn't want to play Cinderella right now. Please take her off his back. *Good Tony, way to be a sport, Bud.*



Ayla, why don't you give Tony a hug for playing with you?







A Cold Week on the Rigs

Tuesday, January 25, 2011

Friday night, I was changing out an encoder on Rig 261's Top Drive. This part is almost identical in size and function to a Speed-Sensitive Control, which I used to swap out on KC-130's over a decade ago. It's a routine task on these rigs, but I was miserable. That night was what I like to call a triple-fleecer, meaning that I wore all three of my zip-up Marine Corps-issued fleece jackets over a T-shirt, before donning my Flame-Resistant Coveralls (FRC's or FR's). It was the first of two nights this weekend when temps across Pennsylvania dropped into the negative teens.

Now, on a rig site, all vehicles are backed in when parked, pointed toward the exit in case of a major rig emergency. We're drilling for natural gas, not oil, and in a worst-case scenario, an ignited blowout could cause a major explosion and melt everything to the ground. For this same reason, there is an overhead "Geronimo" line--a steel emergency escape cable for the Derrickman to slide down--that runs from the board halfway up the derrick away from the rig and down to the ground. I drive under the Geronimo line and back my truck in. Fleece up & don FR's. grab my gloves, flashlight, small toolbag with lanyard, safety glasses, hardhat with Egyptian

Pharaoh-esque "zero hood," and I'm ready to go. Open the door and step into the blistering cold. Sign in on the 'Site Visitors' clipboard, located in the oversized mailbox outside the Toolpusher's shack. The ground is extremely slippery... three inches of compacted snow and ice cover the ground around the entire site. When driving to a rig, I blast the heat down at my steel-toed boots to keep them warmer & dryer longer.

I walk the stairway to the floor, and enter the pressurized driller's cabin to link up with my counterpart, Nick. He has already removed the encoder and is readying the new one. We both put on harnesses, exit the driller's cabin, and lanyard-climb the derrick up to the Top Drive, which at that time was suspended twenty feet. The air gets twice as cold when working above the windwall. It gets nastier when you're sitting on, laying on, or leaning against freezing steel for an hour or more (had to replace the cable barrel end of the encoder's cannon plug as well). Note to self: don't lick the derrick. Nick heads down to function-test the encoder at the drive house.

At these temps, it is necessary to keep all operating parts and pieces of equipment functional and free of ice. To foster this, boiler-generated steam is routed to locations around the rig, with particular focus on the rig floor. The steam is actuated every 15 minutes on this night, and it's blasted with enough pressure that it creates a warming cloud that encompasses the area in which I'm working. The tiny steam droplets cover my body, particularly my ears, nose, and fingers (gotta take the gloves off to do intricate work). Then the cloud goes away and the night is instantly cold enough to physically hurt. At this point, the steel in my boots are working like ice cubes to numb my toes.

Finally, the job is done. I shake hands with Nick and head off site in a nice, toasty truck. On to the next job. My heart goes out to the roughnecks, who work the cold shift day in, day out for fourteen days at a time. It's tough working outside in this kind of weather, but the drilling will continue!

Saturday Evening at Giuseppe's

Wednesday, January 26, 2011

It's a quiet night in Dushore, Pennsylvania. I walk around the corner from the small strip-mall lot where I'm parked, to grab some cash out of the sidewalk ATM... with few exceptions, this is a cash-only town (leave your plastic in your pocket). On the hilltop over my right shoulder, just a home run hit away, are two large cathedrals. The bells from one of them begin to ring. Then rings the other, following a fifteen-second delay. Albeit muffled by the soft snow, the sounds are beautiful. They echo over the bare streets of Dushore's postage stamp-sized downtown scene.

I walk back in the direction of Giuseppe's Pasta House. The restaurant is, in fact, the only sign of life in town at this moment, save for the gas station a half mile away. I

walk in and am instantly greeted by Charlotte. It takes a moment for her to recognize me, then she gives me a big smile and tells me to sit where I'd like. Since most of the tables are taken, I seat myself at the least intrusive one. Charlotte heads back to the kitchen window. "You'll never guess who just showed up," I hear her say, presumably to Gianni.

My first visit was back in early December. I was impressed by the authenticity of the restaurant, and its surprising location in tucked-away Dushore. Gianni and I had hit it off great, and I really had a great time talking with both himself and with Charlotte. I knew instantly, that on the weeks when I have to make this five-hour trip from Pittsburgh, this would be my place for good home cooking. It is also a place where I



can forget the stress of my day, and come in to spend an evening in good company.

"You've got to try the tiramisu, at least sometime," I said to the couple seated next to me, just as they were getting ready to leave. Gianni really should make a sign to put out front.

"Giuseppe's: Home of Incredible Tiramisu and Fine

Espresso." We had just finished introducing ourselves to each other, when Charlotte showed up with my water/lemon and a big smile. "Would you like to hear our specials?" She asked. "Sure!" She expertly fired off the first special. "Shrimp & Scallop Principessa with garlic and tomatoes simmered in white wine..." I stopped her right there. "Done." Soup of the Day was Italian Wedding Soup, which I loved last time--"Let's do that, too. Thanks Charlotte!"

So I'm back to the couple at my right. Gayle and Marvin are locals here; she's originally from the Williamsport area and he's from right here in Dushore. Later this year, the two will be celebrating their twentieth wedding anniversary. Happy Anniversary! Marvin had the same meal I ordered, and he said it was amazing. The topic shifted back to Gianni, who poked his head around the corner to say hi. They said a lot of nice things about himself and his family. "His wife used to come in here with the kids and she'd wait tables," they informed me.

Saturday night was a busier setting for Gianni than the last time I saw him, so we didn't get to chat as long. But after thoroughly enjoying my tiramisu and an espresso, I ordered another espresso and sipped it while standing near the kitchen window and talking with Gianni. He came around to the front for a few minutes. We're trying to set up a time when we're both not too busy, so I can meet his family. I'm hoping to bring my family up with me next time, so that he can meet mine as well. I really enjoy his company, and I believe we will be good friends.

Before long, he headed back to the kitchen, and I resumed my seat while Charlotte rung me out. Marvin and Gayle had said their goodbyes, and replacing them at the table was a handsome silver-aged couple who strolled in with their own bottle of wine. "That's how we do it here," Charlotte informed me. How very cool. I love this place.

Ice, Ice, Baby!

Took a couple cool ice pictures over the last month. I love the one with the icicle shadow, also the river rock phenomenon.











Return of Pee-Wee, a Horrible Ciabatta, and the Softball Owl

Wow, I've had two weeks' buildup of random, worthless information in my head... and no time to write it all down.

First order of business: Pee-Wee Herman. Pee-Wee's Playhouse is directly responsible for 95% of the weirdness I absorbed / emulated as a kid. HE'S BACK!!! Pee Wee's Playhouse has gone Broadway. Looks authentic. HBO's covering it soon.

Lily can write her name! She writes it everywhere. She's three. Ayla loves babydolls, like crazy. She's one. Josh and Caleb have new sledding buddies... similar-aged cute sisters next door.

And now, the Common Food Review (drumroll)... Nestea's Pomegranate & Passionfruit Red Tea is the bomb-diggity. Lately, I've had one glued to my hand at all times. Burger King's Breakfast Ciabatta Club Sandwich tastes like a handful of mealworms and tomatoes. I recommend not buying one, unless you're a vulture. Or a catfish.

Speaking of vultures, saw a pair of beautiful red-tailed hawks crawling in and out of a snow tunnel. Stopped for a second to investigate; the tunnel led to a dead deer, frozen under a 3' snow drift. Hawks aren't typically scavengers. I guess food gets scarce under a long-term blanket of white.

Found a tiny owl the other night. Not a baby, a full-grown owl that was roughly the size of a grapefruit. He hung out next to me for about five minutes, out on a range road. I was *this close* to catching him (wanted to get him into the light and take some pictures) before he flew off.

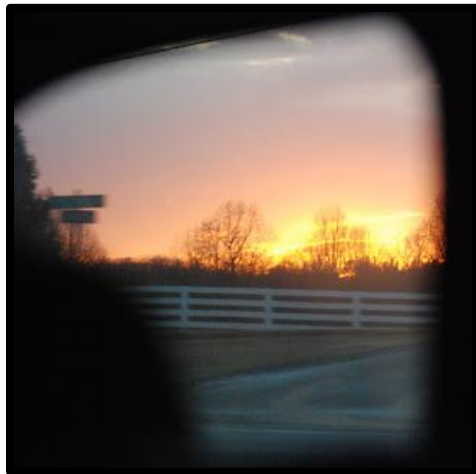
I need to write and call a lot of folks back, and I'm sorry for not being on top of that. Working on it. Not enough time in the day! I need another me. The movie *Multiplicity* comes to mind... *"I like peetha (pizza). I like it!!!"*

February's blog posts will be focused on the forging and maintaining of stronger relationships (marital, pre-/post- marital). "Bridging the Gap." At the same time, I'm slammed with work right now, so the gaps between posts may be long.

Sun's Crush on Pennsylvania

I'm tellin' ya, the sun's got the hots (np intended) for South Carolina by morning and Pennsylvania by evening. Here are some more scenes that prompt a reactive application of pressure to my brake pedal. Sky looks like an artist's canvas every other day. Loving this place.











Little White Churches



...Are an integral part of every small town in the Northeastern corner of PA. They are sad-looking, almost eerie. As I watch the parishoners drag themselves in and out on Sundays, I infer that most of these churches--weighed down by the upholding of antiquated religious customs--lack the power they preach. Their greatest accomplishment: endurance. Bragging signs point to which church was established first. 1854. 1889. 1776. In many cases, you can see how the towns and thoroughfares were established around their respective churches. Most have active bells in their steeples. Their greatest contribution: each church is the feeble guardian of several hundred cold stone slabs. This honorable gesture is of little value until your loved ones have passed, and the church places the keeping of their mortal remains in their charge. I don't know whether these stale churches are assets or liabilities in spreading God's good news in 2011, but each is a community staple, intent upon holding their ground for centuries to come (2nd coming notwithstanding).

The Quilted Corners of Wyalusing

There's a small, but spread out, town in Northeast PA named Wyalusing. If you drive through the town, keep your eyes peeled for the hand-painted squares all over houses and barns. They look like the elements of a patchwork quilt, and are known by locals as "The Quilted Corners of Wyalusing." I took a couple random drive-by shots with my cell phone.





Photos: Wyalusing Train Stop









Last of January's Random PA Photos

Thursday, January 27, 2011





Ha! Let's try two miles.



Church in Pittsburgh... surprised at the quality of this 60mph capture



Tunkhannock Viaduct



Oilfield impact visible at small town banks... if you're a landowner, you know you're curious. P.S... you might want to start buying land in surrounding States! It's too late in PA; everybody's on the gas rights wave.



Another visible oilfield impact



Pittsburgh by Night. Tip: If your photo's blurry, but you still like it, bring it up in Photoshop and turn it into a watercolor or quasi-abstract work of art.



If your name is Gay, flaunt it!



10 miles from Dushore



Pastel house



Don't Give Up on Love

Tuesday, February 1, 2011

It's February. Commercialism has choked this month with oversized teddy bears, cheap waxy chocolates and candy hearts that now say whatever the heck you'd like them to. In this sexed-up, watered-down society, it's easy to get caught up in the hype of painted-on love.

This year, I'm deeply saddened at the number of couples--friends of ours, no less--who are each tossing in the towels on their marriage. Whether by the influence of drugs, alcohol, or tobacco, or by the more common mind-blowing extramarital affair, couples with amazing love stories and significant histories are turning their backs on each other at the cyclic rate. The mind-blowing part is that they make



those selfish decisions with blatant disregard to impact. Impact on their futures, impact on their kids, impact on their every relationship. I know, this might just hit you where it hurts.

Then there was one. One girl, woman, mother, wife. She reached out to her husband's estranged friend, spilling her guts about her undying love for the man whom she married--who for over a year has been living with a younger woman, getting his jollies. Why was she hanging on? Because after more than a year of raising three kids on her own, she was still in love with her husband. In desperation, she reached out to find someone who was willing to reach in. I was shocked. Love CAN still survive after a storm. In a society that says, "oh well, walk away," she has not acquiesced. Against the will and advice of family and friends, she's fighting for her marriage. She's fighting for her family. And she's believing that God will bring her husband home. She's believing that her husband will step up and be the man she knows he is. Go, girl.

It is for Tyne, for Ed, for Matt, and for heaven's sake everyone whose marriage is getting run through the ringer, that this website is dedicated this month. Just a little fuel for the good fight. Take a stand for your marriage in Jesus' name. Do not simply

accept to be denied your relationship after months or years of block-upon-block building.

This month, the topic of this site will be 'bridging the gap.' That means compromise, right down to the elementary differences between men and women in a relationship. The terminal objective is to forge and/or sustain strong pre-marital and marital relationships, and to know how to cope when a relationship is irreparably damaged. For broader confrontation of these issues, I've invited a select few individuals to write for *Despite All Obstacles* this month. I believe that their contributions will have a great impact... if one single relationship can be affected, it's an astounding win.

--MJ

The Deadly Small Stuff Sins of Marriage, by B. Janet Hibbs

Thursday, February 3, 2011

Remember the adage, "Don't sweat the small stuff—and it's all small stuff?" Well, that advice is dead wrong—at least as far as marriage goes. Couples' therapists can tell you that early marriages (years 5-7) end because of volatility and high conflict, but the second rise in divorce occurs between years 18-20. And that's the small stuff blip. What my clients call their "stupid fights." The "you left the dishes in the sink; you left your dirty kleenex on the bed; you don't do your fair share of the housework, you're never on time, we have to see your family too often, you spent \$40 on flip-flops; you burp in public" arguments. Finally, researchers and journalists are writing about the small stuff problem for couples. It's one of the four violations of fairness (Family loyalty, Growing pains (money, children, kids & sex) and Enduring injustices (alcoholism, abuse of power, verbal/emotional/physical abuse) that I highlight in *Try to See It My Way*.

Here are some tips to keep the everyday irritants shrunk to size and to keep your marriage healthy:

1. Nobody's perfect—decide what you can accept about your partner's quirks and (graciously) do so.
2. A rose a day is better than a bouquet once a year. Offer appreciation daily...it's good to give (and get) credit where credit is due—and it's good for your relationship.
3. Get over "being right." You can be right or you can be married. Sometimes just do it your partner's way to show that you care.
4. If the small stuff makes you feel unloved, talk about that, rather than restating your complaint.

5. Turn blame into claims. Instead of implying, "You're the problem," take a risk being vulnerable and ask for what you need. "It would mean a lot to me if...you'd turn off your Blackberry while we're eating dinner."

Life is hard, but you can make your relationships easier. Have some compassion for yourself and your partner. Begin by sweating the small stuff.

*This article was re-posted with permission from the author. The **original text** may be viewed at her blog, **Being Fair in Love and Marriage**.*

Dr. Hibbs is a renowned professional in the field of love relationships. In her book *Try to See It My Way*, she stresses the importance of being equitable with a 'fair or fail' point-of-view. "For lasting love, the relationship has to be fair, or else everything can fall apart." If you'd like to give your own relationship a self-assessment, visit her **book's website** and take the "fairness questionnaire." As you'll read, "If you'll commit to becoming fairer, your reward could be a lifetime of love." Thank you, Dr. Hibbs.

A Packers Fan in Pittsburgh

I don't want to get off the topic of this month, and football has nothing to do with relationship building (at least not in any example that comes to mind, off the top of my head), but I wanted to share some photos before Superbowl stuff becomes untimely.

I found myself in an interesting position this year. Petra and I were invited at to a SB party hosted by one couple from the church we started going to, Lifestone Church (Pittsburgh / Southside). Never have I been to a Superbowl party where so many people unanimously favored the same team. 1, 2, 3... ALL of them. As badly as I wanted Green Bay to win, I also didn't want to see the crushing disappointment on the faces of a city full of die-hard fans. This is our new home, and I have to live with these people! I say "I" because Petra is a Steelers fan too, as are my kids, by default of their surroundings.

So I had to see the downtown scene around kickoff time. Not a soul on the streets in even the busiest parts of Pittsburgh. Then I stopped by Primanti Brothers to snap a few photos. Then off to the house for a good time with some good people. Without further adieu:











Melissa Duckworth on Synching Styles

Tuesday, February 8, 2011



We promise to love each other through thick and thin, better or worse; to honor and respect.... but we will NOT tolerate your bachelor pad furniture!

Everyone wants their home to be a reflection of themselves so shouldn't that also carry over to creating a home that reflects BOTH husband and wife? This post is going to give you some ideas for overcoming the hurdles of decorating *together*.



A house that doesn't reflect both partners feels unbalanced. (side-note: can I just tell you I really really really wanted a canopy bed when I was little- loved them! Now, not so much) Does it look like a *man* would be comfortable here?

But, we've all seen typical bachelor pads so.... well.... it makes sense that most of the time men don't get a say. I DO recognize how easy life would be to have a cooler in the living room and 3 TVs. No more fighting about what show to watch. You can watch them all! Once you start down this road, though, it seems as though the next logical step is to find chairs that double as toilets. Gross? Maybe. Practical? If you don't think about the logistics of plumbing, then yes.



Denying your spouse a voice is a 2 way street. I have a friend who is "not allowed to use floral" in their home and I have another friend who has a dark paneled basement but she isn't allowed to paint it because her husband thinks it's a great man-cave. Does it matter that no one (including him) uses the basement? Nope. What a waste of square footage!

Enough pointing of fingers! How can couples decorate/remodel as a team? First and foremost you have to love and respect your spouse enough to give them a voice. Next, I recommend looking in magazines (separately, not together) and pulling out pictures of styles you like. You might be surprised how much you have in common!



Can someone with modern taste find a compromise with someone who has cottage style? Sure. There are so many furniture options out there that I guarantee you can find something that meets in the middle! Keep accessories simple and artistic and limit the throw pillows. ;)

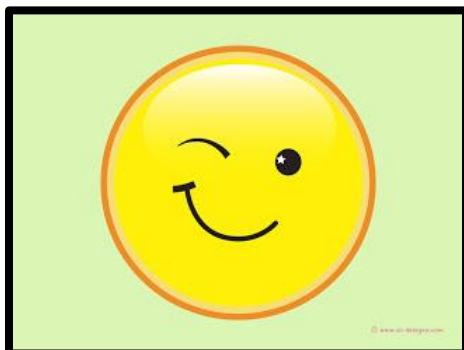


So what happens when one of you loves color and the other is overwhelmed by it? That's tough but one of the best ways is to give yourselves a neutral back drop (walls and large pieces of furniture) but brighten it up with pillows, curtains, rugs and accessories. Usually those of us who love color tend to change our color obsessions seasonally anyway so don't invest in an orange couch unless you have loved orange your whole life!



The room above is a perfect example of bringing in color with pillows and accessories but keeping the rest of the room neutral. You don't have to miss out on style when you keep it neutral. Check out all the textures that add interest throughout! Easy to change and update.

Let's get some team decorating done; ALL you need is an open heart, an open mind and an open wallet!



Thanks to Matt for inviting me to guest write for him! I truly enjoyed creating this blog and I hope you enjoyed reading it. ~Melissa



Melissa is a staging professional in Nashville, TN. She is also a gifted writer and, above all, the dedicated wife and mother of a beautiful family. This site maintains a link to her personal website, [I Blinked and Life Happened](#), her business website, [Home Perfection](#); as well as to the site for her husband's band, [Salient](#). I'm honored that Melissa took the time out of her very busy schedule to be the first guest writer for [Despite all Obstacles](#), and with such a great article, too. Thanks Melissa! --MJ

Shifting Gears

Well, it's February 17th--I was hoping on a few other guest-written love stories & advice articles that related to 'bridging the relationship gap,' but no joy. I received one that was extremely well-written (great job L, thanks); a little racy, but a good love story nonetheless--unpublished mainly out of respect for one of my readers, with whose current love situation it conflicts. That being said, I'll let 'racy' segue into my next post. It's all about sex. Now I just need these drilling rigs to stop breaking, so I have an evening to type it up. :) Be safe, be blessed, work it out. --MJ

Great Sex

Thursday, February 17, 2011

I'm not a doctor. Not a therapist, or any type of healthcare professional. I'm not a relationship counselor. I'm just a guy. A guy who's had an amazing marriage for fifteen years--which these days, seems so uncommon it's a freakin' anomaly. Quality sex in a marital relationship is every bit as important as deep conversation, fairness, and frequent laughter. But how is quality measured in this area? By frequency? By length of session? By intensity? We'll define that at the end of this post. To get from here to there, let's use the old *crawl / walk / run* method.

Let's start with the basics, shall we? Respect the bedroom. Note that I didn't say *bedrooms*. That's right, a great sexual relationship doesn't begin with you and your spouse sleeping in separate rooms. Or in separate beds, for that matter. Kids in the bedroom? If the long-term health of your marriage is important to you, you're going to have to accept the fact that as a parent, sometimes you have to hurt your child's feelings. Keep the kids out of the bed. Make exceptions to that rule a rarity (thunderstorms, illness, the occasional bad dream, etc.).

Some more basics: on respect--guys, life is not a porno movie. Gratification is a two-way street--it's not over just because you're finished. By the way, most human beings don't like to be gagged, choked, or slapped, either. Shame on you, seriously. Ladies, don't fake the big O. There is a physical, spiritual, and emotional closeness that can come from having sex with your partner, and this great relationship-building potential is compromised if you're lying. And as for the untimely 'headaches,' we're on to you.

Okay, going from 'crawl' to 'walk'... Here's a possible point of contention: toys. Sex toys overstimulate the senses, de-sensitizing the body and making it more difficult to stimulate each other naturally. The same goes with artificial lubricants, little blue pills, pornographic materials, and in extreme cases, extra players or secret trysts--which as we know are in their own category as morally wrong. Regarding the latter two, yeah, what happens in secret may seem fun and fancy-free, but when you've created a fantasy world for yourself to live in, I'd imagine it's pretty difficult to find your way back to reality--to buck up and face the ones you've hurt--and to then develop or repair deep intimacy with *any* one person. If you've already botched this up, God is the only one that I know you can turn to for the rebuilding of damage caused to yourself and others. Not trying to sound preachy. Basically, forget all the extra "stuff." Keep your relationship real. One man, one woman, one fantastic time.

How often should you and your significant other engage to be considered 'healthy?' Who's to say. Based upon conversations with others (who I esteem as having good relationships), and in the firsthand experience of my own marriage, I'd say a healthy marriage can thrive on once a week. If you're going without for two, three weeks at a time, there might be another deep-seeded issue that needs to be resolved. The

excuse of "stress," whether due to financial difficulty, raising kids, or whatever, is a weak crutch to lean on. When times get tougher, get closer. Four kids and a boatload of financial stress never kept us from trying to rock the boat at least a couple times a week. I see that grin... yup, that's how the four kids came about.

A similar question, how long should a session last? Both the frequency and the session length will depend upon the couple, their living conditions / situation, and the quality of their relationship outside the bedroom. Let's not forget attraction! It is every bit as important to be attracted to your spouse--and for your spouse to find you attractive--as it was when you were dating. Attraction plays a huge role in both the quantity and quality of sex in a marriage. The enemy of attraction? Complacency.

Even if your relationship is great, you should vie for your spouse's attention as if you're competing with a jack stud or a perfect 10. Now, attraction can be either physical or emotional. Physical traits of attraction include good looks, good hygiene, and good carriage or bearing (the way you hold yourself). Being physically fit--cardio, weights, healthy eating, good sleep habits--covers two bases, in that it helps you look good and it gives you sexual stamina. Having fresh breath, a clean body, tight grooming and a splash of his/her favorite smellgood will also go a long way on the physical side of attraction.

Emotional attraction comes from bonding on a deeper level, which is where common interests and views become very important. For goodness sake, talk to each other. Laugh together. Use your spouse's first name once in a while when talking face-to-face. These are the building blocks of intrinsic emotional bonding. Honestly, so much more could be said on attraction, but let's move on.

On location and setting the mood: obviously, there is a lot that can be written on this subject. Spontaneous sex is great too, but there's something about creating a spa-type atmosphere that really kicks the intimacy level into overdrive... which is great for your marriage. Make eye contact. Again, say his/her name. Be gentle. Regarding location, if you haven't taken your physical relationship to the great outdoors, you need to! Being outside from time to time is amazing. Okay, enough about all that.

Okay, so somewhere over the last couple paragraphs, we went from 'walking' to 'running.' Many of you reading this are Christians, and like myself and my wife, want to know where God stands in relation to our "relations." Understand that this is the gospel according to MJ: Be respectful. I don't believe God wants us to have a boring, lacklustre, missionary-position physical relationship with our spouse. In marriage, God gave us the amazing, tangible gift of each other. While I think that the privacy of the figurative bedroom offers a moral 'safe haven' for how we use our bodies to please one another, we should not stray from the practice of doing so respectfully. Also, there is a spiritual bond that occurs when a man and a woman become 'one flesh,' and the Bible alludes to this. There are some amazing relationships between sexual purity, our first sexual experience, and our long-term physical relationships

that directly correlate to our intimate relationship with Christ. That's why it's so important to teach our children to practice abstinence before marriage (study up on biblical *blood covenant*). Thankfully for many of us, God's forgiveness allows us to have long-lasting, healthy relationships beyond a possibly regrettable first sexual experience.

Okay, last bullet. This post has been covering procreation in the context of pleasure. What about when you're trying to get pregnant? Well, I'll be the first to say that if it feels like work, I'm less excited about it. Planning to have sex at a specific time during a woman's cycle can get stressful! No, I do not know that one from experience, but I see people who are trying to get pregnant and it seems way too structured. One episode from the TV sitcom *Friends* comes to mind... (*Monica to Chandler:*) "Pants off, Bing!" If Wednesday night is the right night to make a baby, then don't talk about it like it's a doctor's appointment. Instead, send a sassy "bring it on" text message, or start ripping off your spouse's clothes when they walk in the door from work. Just because you're trying to have a baby, doesn't mean you should stop being sexy. Talking to both parties here. By the way, don't stop having sex once you're pregnant! I know a few couples that have done that, and it's bad for your relationship! Few people can hold out for nine months. By the way, pregnant sex is great. If you don't believe me, ask around. Just be careful when you get within the last six weeks or so--you might induce labor or at least labor pains.

Well, I hope this has been a positive read. I jumped around a little, sorry. I've never written about sex before, but it's really important and right now a lot of my friends are dealing with marital issues that are in some way related to the bedroom. To sum up: have sex regularly, mix it up, keep it real, have fun, be respectful. If you do these things, you've got a quality sex life... and that's half the marital battle!

After Fighting Fair has Failed

Sunday, February 20, 2011

"Do not let the sun go down on your anger." "Never drop the 'D' word (divorce) during a marital spat." "Do not use superlatives, such as 'never' and 'always,' as blame words in a relationship." "Don't fight in front of your kids." These amusing nuggets of wisdom are straight off the first page of *Marriage and Relationships 101*. But what happens when every foul word in the world has been slung? In front of your kids! You just punched your wife, or you said some really nasty things to your husband? You have lied to each other enough times to annihilate the idea of trust? What book do you turn to then? (insert Bible verse here) The fact is, they do not make the book you're looking for. No counselor can impart the wisdom you seek, and make you (or your spouse) actually abide by the rules of fighting fair. Sometimes people just want to fight or be mean, regardless of what they've learned. Human nature! There are a million anecdotal remedies for your marriage out there,

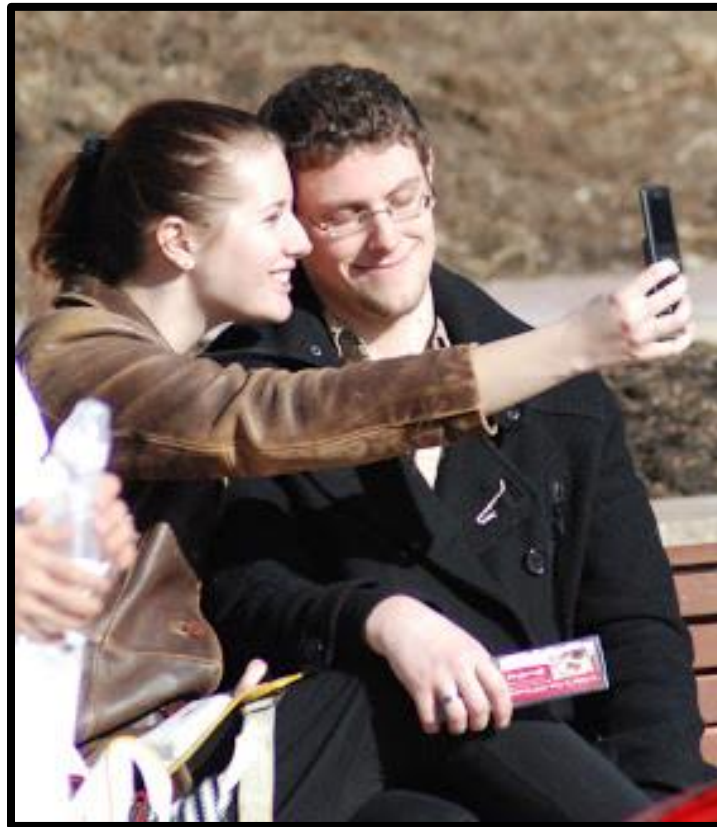
but the real-deal fix points to you and you alone. You can't change your spouse, only yourself. You can influence your spouse through your words and actions, but he or she has to choose to change his/her own self.

Two side bullets: (1) I use the words spouse, wife, husband, & marriage a lot when talking about relationships. Understand that girlfriend/boyfriend/fiancé/fiancée are implied where applicable. (2) If you are on the receiving end of a verbally or physically abusive relationship, GET OUT. You can re-evaluate the relationship after time has passed and you are viewing it from a safe vantage point. If you can't get out of an abusive relationship, call for help! Call a pastor, call a doctor, call a lawyer, call the cops. Call a friend!

Anyway, here's a great, great tool to put in your marriage survival kit. "The Umpire." When fighting has devastated the respect you have for one another, and your personal credit is shot, get a relational co-signer. Reach out to someone or some couple that your spouse loves and respects (preferably, someone whom you also love and respect), and ask them to mediate for the two of you. What I mean is, ask them to referee for a marriage conversation that would--in your own living room--usually be prone to violent eruption. Getting your partner to jump on board may be difficult, but that's why the mediator has to be someone they respect... and someone they wouldn't want to lose their cool in front of, if such a person is available. If you are initiating the process, talk to the person or people you have in mind, and ask them to persuade your spouse to join in. Once time, location, and all involved parties align, the mediator should then establish an equal playing field. "She speaks, he speaks, no jumping out of turn." "No low-blows, no expletives (profanity), stop when I say stop, etc."

My wife and I, while dually agreeing to have a great relationship, have had some brutal fights along the way. C'est la vie, non? An Ump was called in on our behalf about a year ago, and it was probably the most fruitful--fair, indispensable, timely--marital conversation that the two of us have experienced in a long time. I would recommend this to anyone who values their relationship but is struggling to communicate with their mirror (mate).

Love and Life in Pittsburgh























Bring Your Own Bottle to Giuseppe's

Monday, February 21, 2011



Saturday night was the beginning of a long workday. Wind-driven snow in unbelievable gusts pummeled me while I wrestled 130 feet of frozen, tight-fitting electrical cables through a winding chain until the sun came up. Sunday's work schedule offered little respite, but I smiled the day away in anticipation of leaving my cares at the door of Giuseppe's that evening. Thankfully, I had the foresight to steal away Friday, to buy the bottle of cheap red wine that would accompany me to the restaurant.

I'm on the road a lot with my new job. In just a few short months, I've found a place in the Northeast corner of Pennsylvania that feels like family. Giuseppe's Pasta House, located in Dushore, offers a fresh shot of Italy right to the jugular of this sleepy town. Dushore is a pay-cash, one stoplight municipality where the lights go off after dark. All the lights, that is, except for Giuseppe's--where familiar faces gather in a *Cheers-meets-Mama Pena's* atmosphere.



I walked into the restaurant last night, angry at myself for the sudden realization that my Cabernet was sitting right where I left it... on the desk in my hotel room, twenty minutes away. You see, at Giuseppe's, you bring your own bottle. Though I'm certain that the reason falls somewhere between liquor license issues and the prohibition-era laws concerning alcohol in this State, I find the BYOBottle requirement to be rather romantic. "Matty!" greeted Charlotte with a smile. "You want to sit where you sat last time?" It was nearly a joke, since the house was packed except for that two-chair table. "Of course!" Regrettably, I settled for a water with lemon. I didn't bother looking at the menu or listening to the day's specials. "Charlotte, bring me something fabulous." "Okay, gotcha!" she responded naturally. "Soup or salad?" "Soup, please." "Great."

I washed my hands before walking back to Gianni's kitchen window. He's the owner. From his spot in the kitchen, Gianni can make magic and converse with his customers at the same time. "I thought I heard Charlotte say your name a minute ago. How you doing? Why you always gotta visit when I have a busy night." We chatted for a minute, and then I let him get back to his culinary genius. The set of twenty-something couples beside me were talking about some random grape drink on the market that tastes like Dimetap children's cough medicine. Mmmm. Sounds delicious. The large party on the other side of me was engaged in a passive argument about... I dunno. Something **yawn** incredibly boring and apparently forgettable. A mid-thirties couple sat at the booth across from me by the door. Like Petra and I, they also had two older boys and two young girls. The far side of the small restaurant was occupied by a handsome-looking family, and at the corner booth by the window were two old couples. Every table's party had brought wine, save myself and the family that mirrors my own.

Then the night got even better. "Hey Matty, would you like a glass of wine? Those folks left half a bottle on the table." My smile must have sufficed for an answer, as Charlotte appeared quickly with a full glass of a semi-sweet, very good wine. "I can't vouch for whether it's good or not," she warned. "Thanks Charlotte, you made my night!" She then took the bowl in front of me which previously contained Italian wedding soup, and replaced it with a large plate of chicken pasta--covered in what I presume to be a white wine cream sauce with sun-dried tomatoes. With every bite, I marveled in Gianni's cooking skills. It's amazing, when comparing each of the spectacular meals that he's prepared for me, how they taste so much like Italy and in no way like the meals at, say, *Olive Garden*. I'd forgotten the taste of real Italian food until the first time I ate here. The difference is, Gianni takes great pride in using certain food products that come straight from Italy.

I had just finished my meal when Charlotte introduced me to an upbeat couple who walked in the door. They took the table next to mine, "so you won't look so lonely," they said playfully. While his lady friend's name escapes me, the gentleman introduced himself as Jon... Jon F. Crane, the owner of the nearby *Bird Song Winery*. His accompanying friend was once a German language teacher, and her

family comes from Hungary. Jon has some presumed Jewish roots, based upon his language (among other indicators, "Kibbutz-style" communal living at his winery). Jewish, German, Hungarian, plus whatever I am, all under an Italian roof. Only in America. I love this country.

The couple introduced me to everyone around the room. Then they offered to grab me a bottle of wine from their vehicle, which I politely refused. The two older couples slowly got up to say their good-byes. I stole a glimpse of one of the men helping his wife into her jacket, which was previously hung up near the door. "That was John and Marie Crestman," said Charlotte after they left. "Really nice people. The older couple that was with them, those were their neighbors." Gianni, taking a breather on the evening's downturn, stepped out from the kitchen to join in the conversation. "They come to eat here every Sunday night," Gianni continued. "Always at that table."

Charlotte brought me the tiramisu I'd asked for, and I enjoyed it with espresso while listening to all the Dushore exclusive. Gianni and I walked back to the espresso machine. He showed me the can of Italian grounds his father just sent him from Jersey. He packed the cup methodically while talking about family. His family's at home sick, as is mine. He talked about his sister in North Carolina, her fortunate ability to visit the family in Napoli rather frequently, and at length... "Charlotte, did you break my coffee machine? I'm gonna break you!" "Okay, never mind, I got it. I think I put too many grounds in it." Ah, perfect. That's good espresso, Matty--when you can float the sugar on top of the foam before you sink it and stir it up."

Somewhere between the chicken, the coffee, and the cultured conversation, I forgot all about work. I forgot the tough night before and I forgot about the sleep I still needed to catch up on. I can't wait to bring my family up here, to meet Gianni & Charlotte & the other opportune familiar faces I'm sure to know by name (with time).

Should you find yourself in the vicinity of Dushore, make the trip to Giuseppe's, and share in this cultural discovery. Meet the family. I think you'll find that there's really something special about this place.

For more on Giuseppe's, check out some of my older posts:

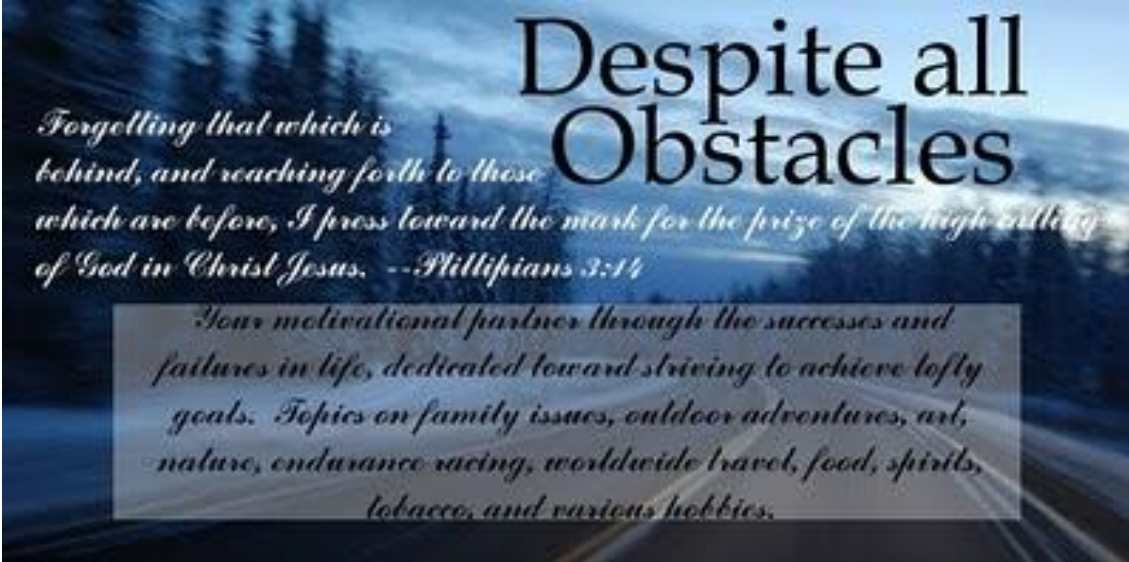
- (1) Giuseppe's Pasta House
- (2) Saturday Evening at Giuseppe's





Despite all Obstacles Cover Art, 02/09 - 06/11

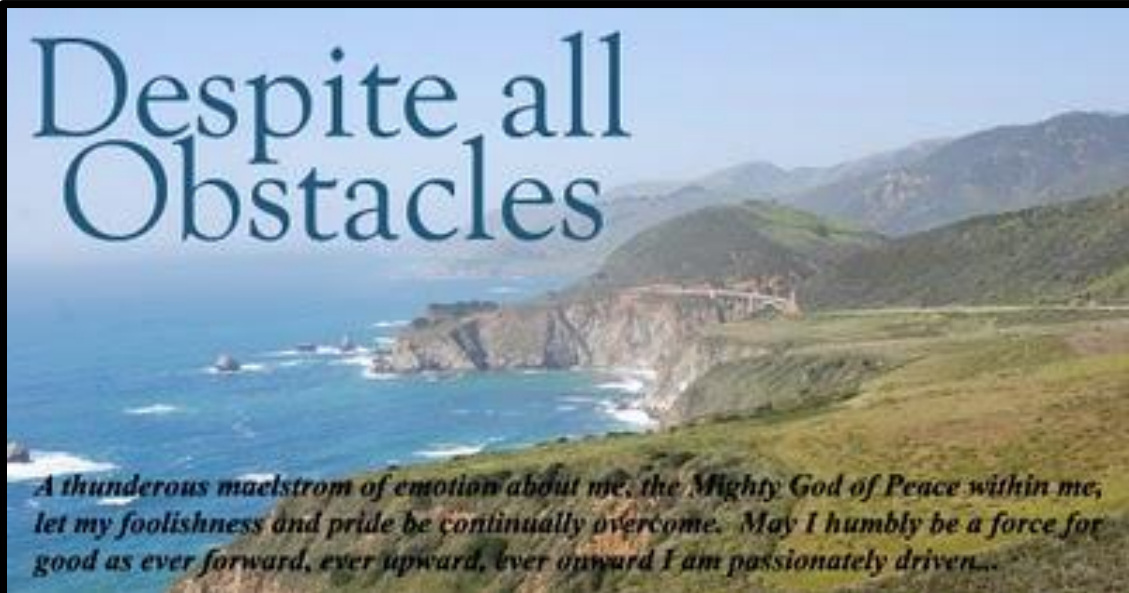
Despite all Obstacles



Despite all Obstacles

Forgetting that which is behind, and reaching forth to those which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. --Philippians 3:14

Your motivational partner through the successes and failures in life, dedicated toward striving to achieve lofty goals. Topics on family issues, outdoor adventures, art, nature, endurance racing, worldwide travel, food, spirits, tobacco, and various hobbies.



Despite all Obstacles

A thunderous maelstrom of emotion about me, the Mighty God of Peace within me, let my foolishness and pride be continually overcome. May I humbly be a force for good as ever forward, ever upward, ever onward I am passionately driven...

Despite all Obstacles

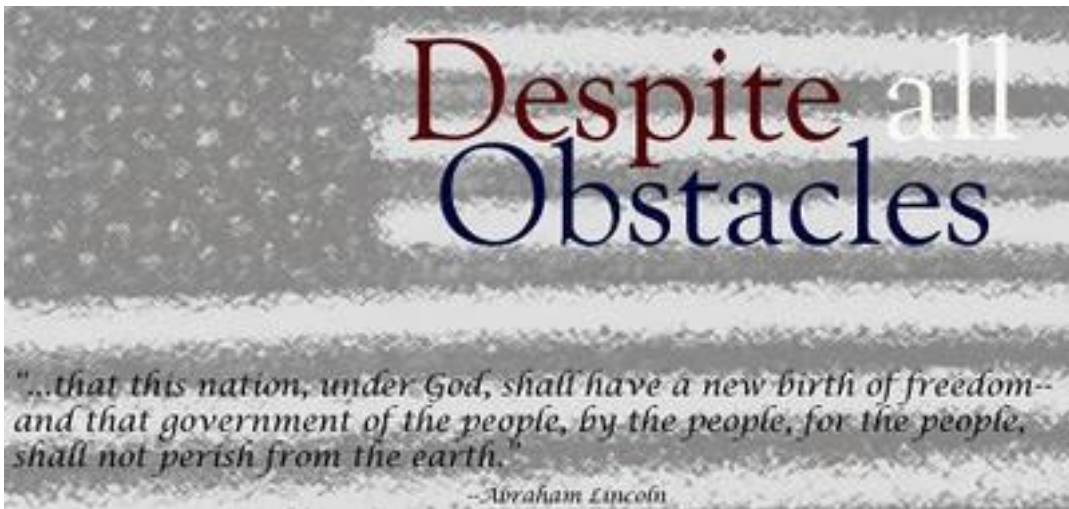
The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly; who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at best, knows the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the least, if he fails, at least does so while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

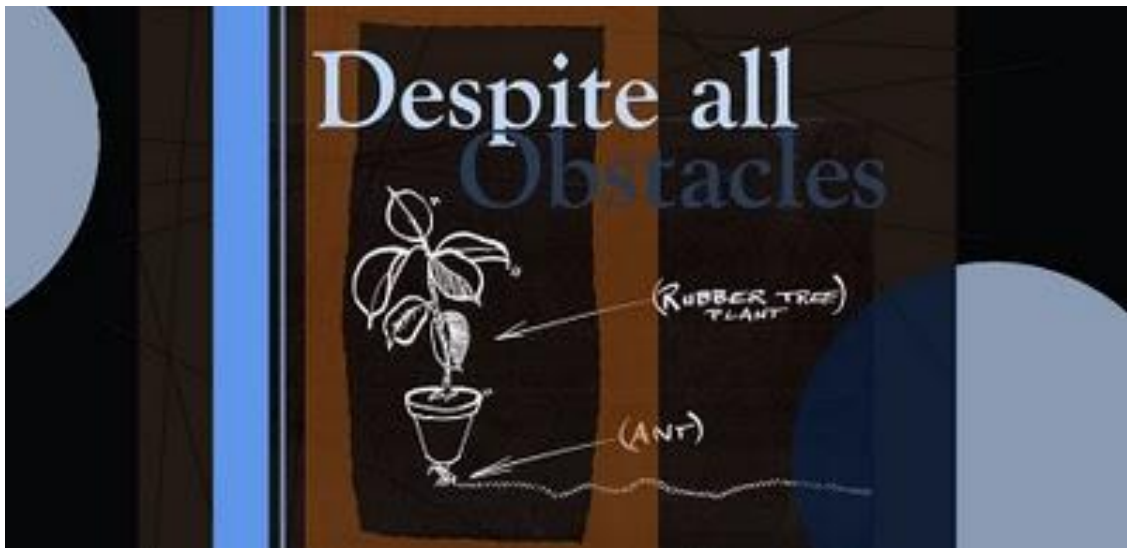
— Teddy Roosevelt

Despite all Obstacles



There are three things that all people have in common. Everyone has a story. Everyone feels pain. And everyone has a mighty Father in heaven, who is bigger than ANY circumstance. He knows our imperfections, our addictions, our secrets, our faults... and He loves us. He is the mender, healer, and restorer of lives, and He will hear your prayer.





LOVE. POWER. VICTORY. BOLDNESS. FAITH. MERCY.
WISDOM. GRACE. TRUST. FULLNESS. GLORY. LIFE.
Despite all Obstacles
STRENGTH. HONOR. PATIENCE. FRIENDSHIP. HOPE.
ENDURANCE. JOY. COURAGE. INTEGRITY. FREEDOM.

*Ever forward,
Ever upward,
Ever onward
By the Grace of God*

**Despite all
Obstacles**

Philippians 3:13-14

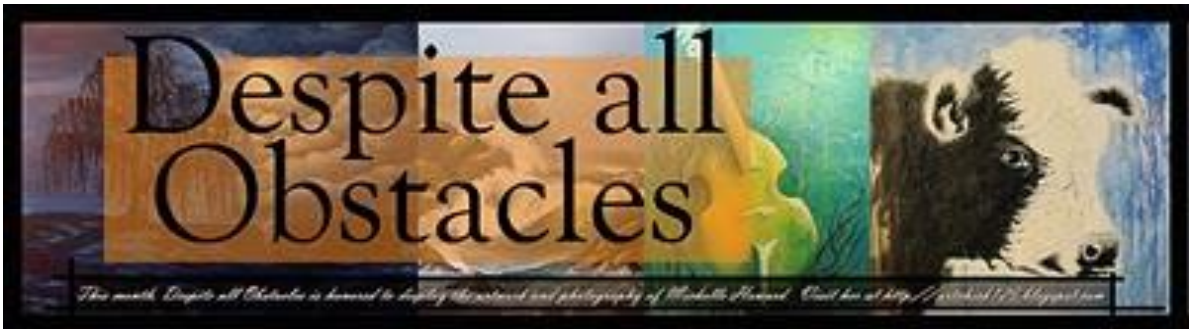
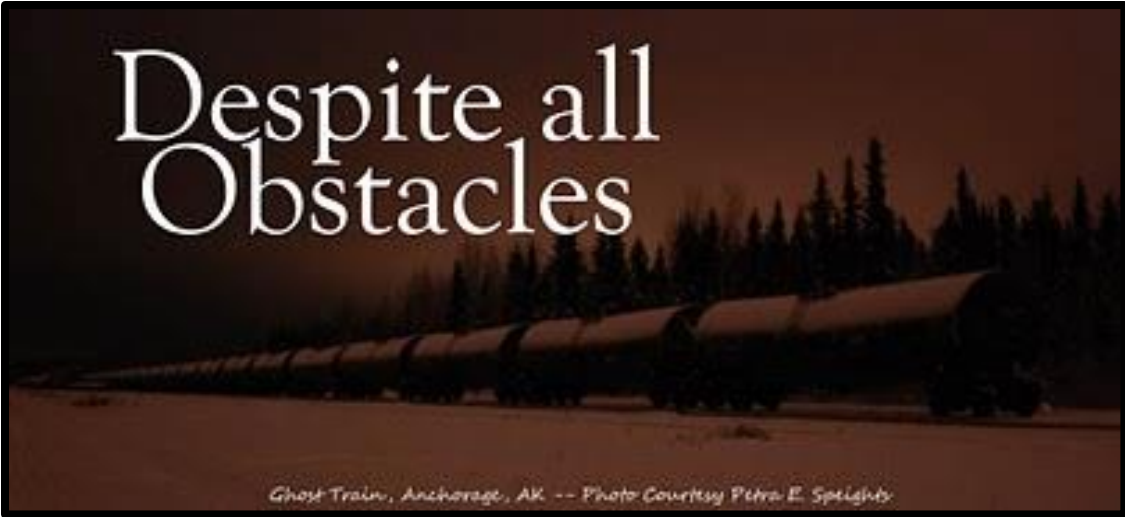
Despite all Obstacles



I will lift up mine eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, Maker of heaven and earth. Psalm 121:1

**Despite all
Obstacles**





*does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil,
hears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

Despite all

Love never fails.

Obstacles

And now abide faith, hope, love, these three, but the greatest of these is love.



Despite all Obstacles

Simple inspiration from a life imperfect and enjoyed

Despite all Obstacles

Dum spiro spero

MS-150 Ocean to Bay Ride 2011: Day 1

June 6th

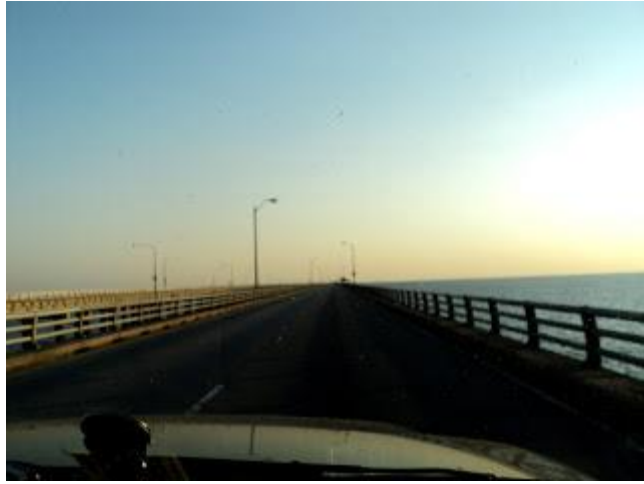
Every race has its story. Here's ours, in photos:



Matt's Drunk.



Mmmm. Greasy American McBreakfast.



\$12 each way across the Chesapeake Bay-Bridge. Ouch.



Cape Charles Lighthouse in view (left). Just approaching start line...running very behind.



Okay, let's go pick up our packets.



A Railcar Named SoCo. How very cool.



Picking up our race packets. We're the "Snot Rockets."



And they're off! I do mean they. We left the start point 40 minutes later! We've never been dead last when starting a race, and as it turns out, there's a lot to learn from this perspective. No people to follow, water stations closed by the time we roll up, etc.



We would be seeing this guy throughout the course. The bike fairy.



Matt's doing a map check. 3 miles into the course and we're on Highway 13. Turns out, we missed the right hand turn 1/2 mile before, because of the three yard sales that blocked our signs from plain view! The race director runs into us at this point, and she won't so much as let us walk our bikes along 13. Looks like we're getting a ride in the straggler wagon.



Way too much personal pride coursing through our veins. Get us back on the course and drop us off. Quickly! Thank you, Gents!



First rest stop was buttoned up and gone. We caught this 2nd rest stop by the skin of our teeth. They were in the process of tearing down as we arrived. No food, but we were appreciative of the cold water.



First accident scene. Ambulatory personnel all over. After passing this area, I looked backward and saw a small helicopter coming from that general vicinity. Found out later that someone got hauled off in a helo after an accident.



Got a good picture of Matt



Ended up bumping into Mr. Pixie several times throughout the course. Turns out he's a Marine. Go figure. Our first real resupply checkpoint was here, at rest stop # 3.



This is the halfway / lunchtime point.



Where there are port-a-johns and racers, there will be lines.



Awesome volunteers at every station!



Bumping into him at each stop became a regular occurrence. At this point, he becomes the documentary. At around the very moment this photo was taken, he mentioned how--with all the photographic attention (from guys like me, presumably), he'll probably be seeing the photos on facebook. Wouldn't want to disappoint him.



The ice-dispensing volunteers--my favorite kind.



This was our safety man on a motorcycle. Kept us motivated.



These are The Princesses. Note the tiaras that have been zip-tied to their bike helmets!



Dedication plaque at one of the stops.





We love these guys. The "Killer Bees." Two years ago, when I first participated with Matt in this race, we would literally get swarmed by killer bee riders, and then they'd all pedal backwards really quickly (creating a loud humming "buzz") Cute. Didn't hear it this time.



This team is called the "Sprocket Protectors." Seems like a good team.



Here are our token Army representatives. They were always smiling and seemed to have great attitudes throughout the race... which cannot be said of everybody else.



Princesses in motion... one of the gals had an awesome ipod speaker that fits inside a bike's water bottle carrier. She picked it up off Amazon.com and it seems pretty handy. Thanks to her, everybody was jamming out to Nickleback, Rascal Flatts, Garth Brooks and a number of other multi-genre artists.



Next year, you can forget walking, running, or biking for MS. I'm driving, baby!!! We saw so many vehicles with this official-looking "Stamp Out MS" magnet driving up and down the route, you'd swear that there are more drivers than bike riders!



Upon riding into YMCA Camp Silver Beach (75 miles out from the start line), you get an ice cold wet towel thrown around your neck and a pat on the back. Then you stow your bike along one of the rows of bushes, and get in line for your first dose of free chow: a greasy hot burger, some cold drinks, chips, etc.



You can camp or cabin out here. We always camp. I picked up a little 1-man Eureka just for this event back in '08. Love it. On the way to this part of the camp, you'll pass an inviting truck full of free cold beer.



After setting up camp and grabbing a couple cold brewskis, we head to the swimming pool, soaking while hanging out along the edge where the hub of activity is located. Hours later, shower, get dressed, and head to the cafeteria / chow hall.
Pig out.



Here's part of the chow hall.



After stopping by to chat with the *Princesses* on the steps of their cabin, I meandered out to the beach. There, I found many of the camp workers engaged in post-workday chillaxin' activities. In this picture above, some of the crewmembers can be seen sitting on the second level of the pier's end, contrasted against a soft pink sky. They sang *Beatles* songs until well after the sun dropped. In the foreground, some of the camp counselor girls watch a rugby tourney that's taking place off to the right. Most of the counselors are on a work program called *Camp America*, and they're working through the summer. They hail from Sweden, Germany, Scotland, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, e.g. I'm glad this picture wasn't completely jacked up. Today is the first time I used this little Sony camera, and I dumped twice as many bad photos as I kept quasi-good ones. Not thoroughly impressed.



Took a right turn at the pier, passed the rugby game, then looked out to my left at this scene. Beautiful evening, perfect weather. Great riding weather for the weekend also.



I meandered up the beach to the jetty you see protruding out into the water.



Just beyond that outcrop was a decent-sized bay. Four young adults--or nearly so--were hanging out around a bonfire. I took up a slice of sand between them and we chatted about all kinds of stuff for the better part of a half hour / 45 minutes. Good company. They were all race volunteers, and I ran into a couple of them at the last checkpoint on Day 2.

MS-150 Ocean to Bay Ride 2011: Day 1 Random Photos

June 6th































MS-150 Ocean to Bay Ride 2011: Day 2

June 7th



Wake up around 5:30, last two hours rained and thunderstormed... one of the near lightning strikes made me second guess our tent placement right up against a metal soccer goalpost in the middle of an open field... Matt didn't throw up his rain shield so he was wringing out his sleeping bag in this picture. Still wasn't as bad as two years ago, when the tent full of girls next to us woke up crying because they had 3" of water in their tent!



Mobile shower unit



Grab chow





Grab bikes and head to the start line



Final prep, inflate tires, hear an occasional "pop" in the distance from over-inflation, usually followed by an agonizing groan and a few choice words



Father-daughter tandem, pretty cool. She was handling the bike by herself from the camp site to the start line. They've been doing this race for years



And we're off! Notice I said 'we' this time... we were out the gate on time today. Now for 75 more miles of agony. Most of our conversations along the ride have to do with something on our bodies hurting... butt, back, shoulders, arms, neck, hands, knees... yeah, the Sally really comes out on day 2. See the wheat field in the background? Such vast and beautiful landscapes, devoid of life and known for high winds, plague almost every distance race on the planet. They're the demoralizers of marathons and bike rides alike. Good for us, this course is incredibly flat, the winds were not gusting, and the weather on both days was exceptional for an event like this!



Skipped the first stop... feel sorry for the volunteers that took the time out of their morning to man that station, 'cause I think everybody skipped that stop. Moral support was good nonetheless



This killer bee has the winged helmet to match



Heh, heh



One of my favorite shirts this race. Seems like every biker has some sweet sponsor shirt (and tight shorts with a padded crotch). Taco Bell, Discovery Channel, you name it when it comes to sponsorship. Bikers are their own breed; they call out warnings for everything. "Car back! Hole! Gravel!" They sound like hash runners, or like Marine recruits... "VEHICLE FROM THE REAR! (VEHICLE FROM THE REAR!) (repeat, repeat, etc.) Once you grow out of that stuff in the Marines, it becomes rather "belt fed," or robotic, and is usually the subject of jest. Play with these serious athletes and they'll get pissed or give you this expressionless 'cannot compute...cannot compute' look. The extreme bikers, like extremists in any sport, are especially fun to laugh at. One guy comes around the corner and says, "CLEAR! (referring to traffic) GRAVEL! HOLE! DOG!" all in the same breath. We couldn't help but laugh. Matt and I, you might've guessed, are not bikers. We're just experience junkies. As he points out, the only time gravel is a hazard to him is when someone yells "GRAVEL!" into his ear as they're passing him.



Looks like they were posing, but it was just a timely shot. More bars in more places.



And here's our cookie. Thanks, random Boy Scout. The scouts did a terrific job at this event. I saw two of them picking up snail trails of trash that the gelatinous finishers left on their way to the finish line chow tent.



And... everybody's spent. Crazy to think that we all do it just for the great feeling at the end.



Right about now, Tiny Tim would say "God Bless us, every one." Food was delicious.



Back at the parking area, saw a pirate ship docked, and an older couple holding hands on their way to check it out. Thought it was a cool picture.



That was at the end of day 1's ride



That was at the end of day 2's ride



I don't care who you are, if you participate in endurance/distance events, it always feels good to see people coming in an hour behind you as you're driving off. Another great ride for the Snot Rockets, hope to do it again next year.

Catching Up, Moving Forward

June 8th

Catching Up

So this last week ushered in two milestones and some life-changing fantastic news.

Milestone 1 was the completion of the Ocean to Bay MS-150 Ride (see previous posts), which is my first fitness event of the year--a late start for my race season and a much-needed body cleanser that I hope will kick my butt into high fitness gear.

Milestone 2 was that I caught up my blog; as some of you know, I love to write--and was prompted to scrub my blog after a family security scare at the end of February. This weekend I finished editing and re-posting all those stories, sans intricate family details (such as our annual family letters)--still nearly 400 stories all-in-all, along with photos. I kept some family pictures on there because I don't want to be afraid to post the same type of material that is published about families in newspapers and magazines all over the country (for example: "Photo above: Jane Smith and her daughter, Janie, enjoy an ice cream by the pool near their home in Smithfield, New Jersey"). The hardest part of this compromise? The fact that I only publish the photos of my kids that make them look less than gorgeous.

And now for the big news....(drumroll)... WE'RE PREGNANT! That's right, five kids! And we're ridiculously excited about it. Petra's already got a girl name picked out, and I'd like to weigh in on a boy name. By our guesstimation, she'll be due in late January. Of course, Petra's less than ecstatic about gaining weight, as she's well on her way to a low weight, high fitness goal. I assure her she's got no worries! She has a rockin' body and she has repeatedly proven to herself that with her fortitude and determination, calories don't stand a chance. I wish I could say as much about myself!

Other than that, work's good, location's good, the kids are good, and all's right with our little world!

Moving Forward

With this blog being all caught up to where I left off, now begins my initiative to fill in the gap with a bunch of stories that have been on my mind. There's Galveston TX, Philly, Gettysburg, the Pittsburgh Strip District, and a slew of stories about people, personal development, and the oilfield in Pennsylvania.

Houston Night Photos

June 12th

The few times I've been to Texas, I had an enjoyable time. Had to make the trip to El Paso, to cross over into Juarez. Liked Dallas and Fort Worth. Loved San Antonio. Used to fly into Abilene just to go to this great Barbecue joint. On my list of Texas places to visit: Houston, Austin, Galveston, and Corpus Christi.

Well, two months ago, I traveled to Houston and Galveston for work. Loved Galveston. Right up there with San Antonio, almost. Then there was Houston. I formulated a snap opinion, based solely on a nighttime visit to the downtown scene. Maybe I got the wrong reading, but I did travel up and down every single street in the city... I thought it was the most bland city I've ever visited. Ever. Nevertheless, I took pictures...





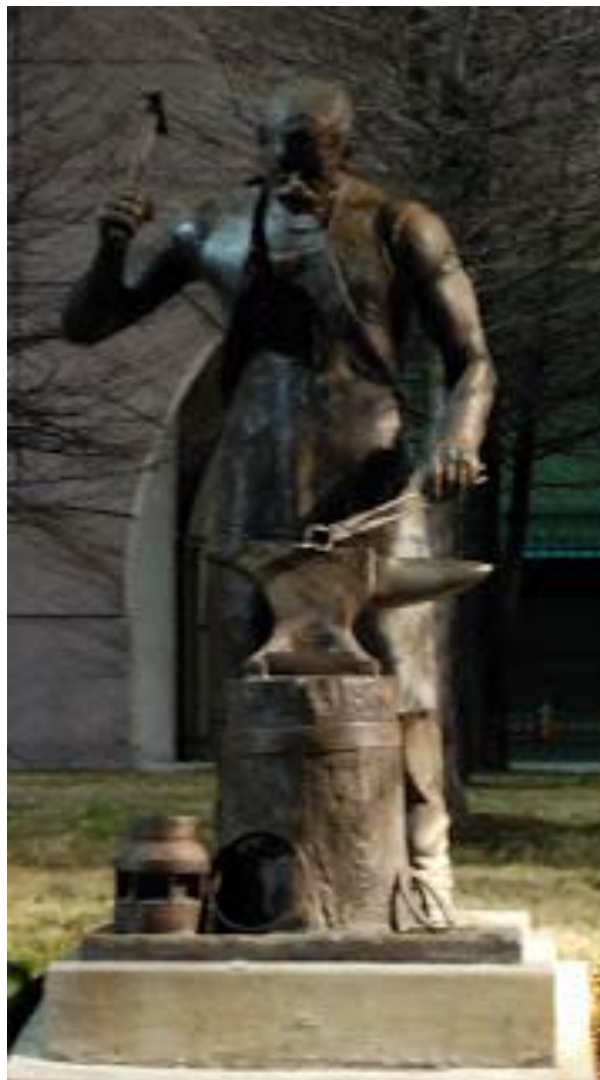












Galveston Photos

June 12th















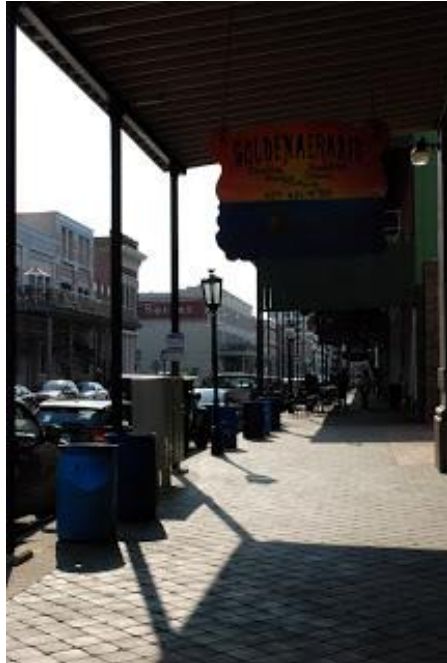






OLD GALVESTON SQUARE













Love and Life in Galveston

June 12th









Afro-American Pride in Galveston

June 15th

I stumbled across this house by accident. It has flair, I like it. Nice quote in the first picture.







Houston Sunset

June 15th



Bird Song Winery

June 17th



A couple miles just outside of Dushore, PA, is a very special winery. I met the owner, Jon Crane, one night at Giuseppe's... and when I returned to Dushore weeks later, I made it a point to stop by his vineyard.

"When you visit Bird Song, you're family," Jon reiterated the last time I saw him. I remembered that as I drove up the road to the winery, admiring the picturesque countryside to my left and the rolling vine-covered hills to my right. Inside the winery, surrounded by countless rows of vines, Old Glory flies high and proud. Directly below this, an Israeli flag--each cloth symbolizing the heart and soul of the man behind the wine.

I sampled each of his wines: Prarie Star, Landot Noir, World's End White, Frontenac, Rickett's Glen Red. A healthy splash of Special Port--which, due to the small, *unmarked bottle* reverence with which it was bestowed, required a somber and appreciative pause before sampling. With each cup of wine waxed our depth and breadth of conversation. We talked about people, about music, about food and wine.

"You've really got something special here, Jon." He replied, "Well Matty, my literal sweat, blood, and tears... are right here in this soil." Then he walked me to a window, one which overlooked the highest hill in his vineyard. "You see up there on top of the hill?" On the distant hilltop I could see a few low-lying objects, like the remnants of something that once was. At first, I mistook the items for a picnic site or some boxes of vine-tending supplies. "My wife and kids are up there."

Proof that I need to think before I speak, I presume he means that they're up there working or playing in the vineyard. Then it hits me, what he said. "my blood... tears... are in this soil." "They were killed in a house fire a few years ago," he explained. "One of my daughters survived; she lives with me now." I stared at the hill. His lifeblood is in the fruit of his vine. And the name of his vineyard is Bird Song. How touchingly appropriate. Then I turned my attention toward Jon, searching him... "How do you do it? Day in, day out... how do you keep going? How do you hold it together?" "My daughter. I had to figure it out--to be strong for her--and I did so by putting one foot in front of the other."

I left the winery shortly thereafter, in amazement of what I had just learned about this fascinating vineyard and the man who runs it. He is striving for Bird Song to be a top area producer of Kosher Wine--no small feat for any proprietor of fine wine. I left with a bottle of each label that Bird Song offered, plus an extra bottle of Rickett's Glen Red that Jon threw in for our next special occasion.

To Be Continued...

Posted 17th June 2011 by mj

Labels: vino jon crane john bird song Birdsong winery pa pennsylvania bird song winery dushore pa giuseppe's pasta house

[View comments](#)



Anonymous November 19, 2011 at 12:05 PM

What isn't to love about Jon Crane and Birdsong Winery? For the moments he spends with you, you are the most important person in his world and he in yours. You are and remain connected on such a human level. That is a rare and precious gift in a such a wearying world.



Anonymous February 25, 2012 at 7:53 PM

This comment has been removed by a blog administrator.



zach winter May 5, 2012 at 5:58 PM

I couldn't agree more with your opinion of bird song. I use too be a traveling salesman, wondering about the east and stumbled upon Jon and his great ricketts red. I had a chance to spend time with Jon pre and post tragedy, could say nothing but what an engaging experience. I miss my trips east and found this article in an attempt to find out how Jon was doing, I hope all is healing. Chicago



Joi Meeker June 14, 2012 at 7:14 PM

While touring wineries in Sullivan County, I stumbled upon Bird Song. I found the owner, Jon Crane, to be as engaging as his wines. A gentle and kind man with a spirit that reaches out to all, Jon welcomes all his visitors and makes them feel at home. He has stories to share, jokes to tell and a warm and loving heart. I visit whenever I get to the area and recommend wine lovers all over do the same.



Larry December 13, 2012 at 9:57 AM

****TRIPLE A (Absolute Amazing Atmosphere) - the energy at Bird Song is unforgettable. I met Jon back in 08, we were both volunteering at the Festival de San Juan. When he met my wife and two kids, he insisted on us visiting his vineyard. To the point he came out of his way picked us up; we spent a weekend there, and brought us home. I lost my job a little bit after that, without hesitation, Jon gave me a way to earn money and provide for my family. I love him and his establishment. If more people had a mind state like Jon Crane, the world would be so much more pleasant. For the record, I met some of his long time friends, and they informed me he was always caring and loving in nature. I first assumed the accident humbled him, they said "no way" he was always humble. ****



Anonymous December 15, 2012 at 8:51 PM

I've become a regular visitor of Jon's at the Birdsong. Often times I take my children because they love to run in the fields and live for Jon to teach them about things children dream of, places they will someday go and the wonders of what living honest can bring a person. Whether I happen by when there's a tasting room full of people or it's just the two of us, Jon has a way of making everyone feel as though they are the only person in the room. The wine is outstanding but the opportunity to befriend such an eclectic, caring, honest man is rare...finding both in one place is like finding one of those rare loves we all search for in our lifetimes

Bird Song Winery II... and Giuseppe's

June 18th



A couple weeks after visiting Jon at Bird Song, I returned with my family! It's a five-hour drive from our place, and after doing a few things at work, we were going to launch the long weekend with a coin flip. Heads Niagara Falls, tails New York, and then the wild card... Philly. We opted for the wild card, but not before an evening at Giuseppe's after picking up a bottle at Bird Song. This would be an

evening that my wife had eagerly anticipated... you see, she reads my stories too, and she has her favorites. She couldn't wait to finally meet Gianni and try some of this great tiramisu I've been talking so much about. She couldn't wait to visit the winery and meet carefree and fun-loving Jon--the man behind the two bottles of wine that she recently enjoyed so much.



When we arrived at the winery, the kids ran straight for the horses. Petra tasted each of the types of wine that Bird Song had to offer, trying to figure out which bottle to buy to take to Giuseppe's. Jon suggested the *Frontenac*, a medium-bodied red

wine that has just the right touch of sweet. He had just cracked the bottle for Petra to sample, and offered it up. She gratefully acquiesced. It was a good choice. We hung out with Jon for about an hour, and our conversations jumped from food, to travel, to Israel, to family. Jon asked Petra if she had a single sister. "Oh, Yay!" He replied excitedly when she told him that she did.



Before long, we decided to get going in the direction of Giuseppe's. We said our goodbyes and thanked Jon for everything. Then we made the two mile drive back into Dushore, where immediately on the left as you enter the town, low-lit Guiseppe's becons like a long-lost friend. We pull up, unload, and enter the restaurant. I'm expecting a big smile from Charlotte as we walk in the door; instead, we're greeted by a big-smiling stranger... a younger girl named Cathy Jo. She seated our family in the packed restaurant, and smiled again when she saw us set a bottle of local wine on the table.

Right away, I walked to the kitchen window to greet Gianni. He was surprised and greeted me with a big smile. "Matty!" "Hey Gianni! I brought my family with me this time." "Hold on a sec--I'll be right out to meet them." Then he did. It felt great to have my family finally meet Gianni, and vice versa. I ordered pasta my way, with choice of one of several different sauces. Petra asked for Gianni to surprise her for her meal. "Ask if he'll make me one of his favorites, or something that he likes making." Cathy Jo placed the order, then returned to ask Petra whether she's opposed to capers or shellfish or anything. Petra glanced around the table, eyeing Josh's plate. He's the oyster / mussel fanatic in the family. "I'm not a huge fan of mussels, but a few are okay," she replied. "Okay, thanks!" said Cathy Jo. Moments later, Gianni surprised us, strolling up to our table with an oversized plate while we were enjoying some bread and *minestra maritata*. "Move your plate, Matty... make some room guys," said Gianni. Then he presented an antipasti sampler of calimari & fried zucchini. "On the house. *Buon Appetito*."

We glanced around the dining room. One table was passing around a large glass of homemade wine, and it made its way to our table. "Elderberry," said the guy who made it. The kids tried it as well. *"Ha! I tried to make elderberry wine one year. It turned out horrible! Remember that, Petra?"* We chatted a bit about winemaking, and about elderberry, when the next thing you know, in walks Jon from the winery! He seated himself as Cathy Jo approached him. "Hi Dad!" she said. Then it all came together. Jon tried the elderberry wine, and when its maker asked how to make it better, Jon threw a packet of sugar in the glass, stirred it up, and threw glass in the freezer. Later, we passed the glass around again. It was really good.

When Gianni had finished making his last meal, he came out and joined us. Petra and I had finished our espressos, and were having a thumb war over the last bite of Caleb's tiramisu. We all talked, and shared wine, shared stories, and had an amazing evening. I was really glad that the magic of Giuseppe's did not disappoint-- that Petra and the kids were able to experience it as well, as I have each time I've visited. The only thing I regret, is not bringing the camera into Giuseppe's this time. When we finally bowed out, I asked Petra how she enjoyed her evening. "Wow, that was an amazing time! I see why you love it up here so much. Bird Song, Giuseppe's... felt like we were back in Europe. I can't wait to do it again!"



Philly on the Phly

June 19th

We headed to Philadelphia not too long ago, to explore the nation's first capital and seek out the greatest cheese steak. Very impressed by the city's culture, diversity, and embrace on the arts. Not impressed by the commercialism of our nation's history... tours



and money schemes are much worse than in D.C. All things considered, had a great time, if only on the fly during a hip-shot weekend. Can't wait to explore this city with more time on our hands.

Enjoy the photos.



Valley Forge



America's first neighborhood (photos of Elfreth's Alley by Petra)







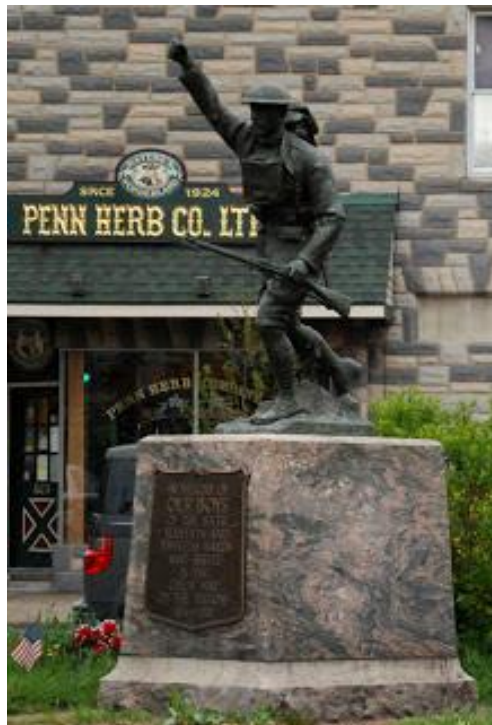


One of many cool city streets



One of many, many murals in Philly



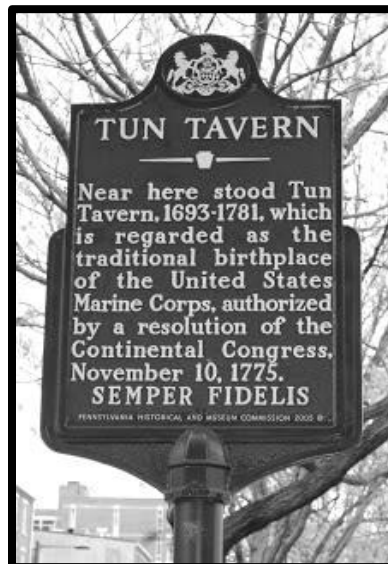


"In memory of OUR BOYS of the Sixth, Eleventh, and Twelfth Wards, who served in the Great War of the Nations 1914-1918"



My favorite thing about Pennsylvanians in general--they are highly patriotic.





Always wondered whether the place was still standing.





Betsy Ross House, um, historians think...





Acrobatic street performer



Steve Martin meets Mr. Bean



No clue what he was taking a picture of. I looked left... yeah, still no clue what he was taking a picture of.



This is Teddy. More photos of him on the *76 Carriage Company* facebook page





"Ride the Ducks" amphibious tour buses around Philly





And... there's Barry. In case you were wondering where he was.



"Lily, Sweety, get out of the Liberty Bell. Now." No clue how she got under the thing without someone making a stink. Wish we would have gotten the picture.



Independence Hall, under remodeling



The Franklins, covered in Lincolns and Jeffersons and Rooseveltts and Washingtons



...And here's my 2011 Proof Set from the U.S. Mint in Philadelphia. They're priceless!



Lily & Caleb on the upper steps of the *Philadelphia Museum of Art*--among the largest art museums in the U.S.



Hard to resist running up the lower steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art... better known as "The Rocky Steps."





One of the U.S. renditions of *The Thinker*





Next post: a longstanding cheese steak rivalry in South Philly...

Leaders Defined: A Quote by Dr. Robert Jarvik

June 20th

"Leaders are visionaries with a poorly developed sense of fear and no concept of the odds against them. They make the impossible happen." --Dr. R. Jarvik

Fin Harder

June 20th

0430. *U.S. Army Special Forces Combat Dive Center, Key West.* It's Sunday I think. Maybe Monday. Today's timed fin is no different than any in the last eleven weeks. Our class woke early. We ran the obstacle course a few times... it's one of those deceiving short courses with high-in-the-sky ropes and nets that smoke your bags just when you think you're ahead.



The Army is notorious for tall O-courses. A classic example would be *Darby Queen* at *4th Ranger Training Battalion* in Benning. The prussik climb is a frustrating soul-cleanser. The Marines have a relatively standardized O-course across the board--which is designed to harden your body--and a few different 'confidence' courses, to test your fear of heights and your ability to think clearly through the cloud of that fear. The Navy has a great short course in the deep soft sand at the Rescue Swim School in Pensacola... it takes mere minutes to complete, but you'll be sucking hard wind when you're done. The SEAL O-course at Little Creek is surprisingly disappointing... it is a combination confidence/obstacle course that takes a while to navigate but is not particularly difficult in comparison to the one we do each morning here at Key West.



Two weeks ago, we finished our month-long patrolling stint at A.P. Hill. Froze our nuts off. Got choked to death by an 'enemy' instructor when I nodded off at a security checkpoint one night. He pulled my rifle tight under my chin and wrapped me up. We rolled down the hill and it took everything I had to fight him off--I fought like hell for one good breath. Didn't fall asleep again! Trained on light demolitions, communications, land nav and survival. Fighting. Celestial navigation. Lots of patrolling, lots of CS gas, and lots of reconnaissance and surveillance missions in their purest state. This is *Amphibious Reconnaissance School*, one of the last "He-Man" schools in the Marines. Upon graduation from this rigorous course, I will receive a new Primary MOS in the Marines. No longer will I be a KC-130 First Mechanic, or a Flight Engineer Trainee. I will be what every hard Marine dreams of becoming: an 0321 Reconnaissance Man.

The Marines don't advertise Recon like the Navy does the SEALs. No PR campaigns, no movies, no autographs, no Hollywood, no glory. No money either, for that matter... none of the high-speed fancy toys. No Sundays off, like at BUDS. Same missions though: VBSS / Maritime Interdiction, hydrographic surveys, amphibious R&S, soft and hard hit raids, greenside / blackside ops, underwater combat, precise demolitions / sniping / target acquisition, forward observation, snatch & grabs, and advanced air/water/land insertion and extraction. Just before A.P. Hill's patrolling phase, back at our beach compound at Fort Story, we would wake up at 4 AM and run some of the toughest PT around. Beach log runs, sugar cookies, buddy drags, buddy presses, bull-in-the-rings, two-on-one grappling, surf runs, 10-mile 70-lb (double sandbag) mountain ruck runs, full-gear ocean swims, pond swims, swamp runs, soft sand runs, races up *Loch Ness* and sandy fights on

the way down. Run-swim-runs and hours of underwater crossovers at Little Creek.

Every day, the bus parked farther and farther from the chow hall, increasing the distance that we students would have to routinely fireman's carry a buddy to and from the facility at lightning speed. By the end of the 3-month course, we will be running with a buddy on our back (or on our buddy's back) nearly two miles each way, to and from the chow hall, three times a day. All for about *two minutes* of food inhalation... much worse eating conditions than Parris Island ever demanded.

"Fortune Favors the Brave." It's written on the banner of a long-graduated Army Dive School class, just as we enter their chow hall, heads steaming from a self-imposed rigorous thrashing. Not unlike Amphibious Reconnaissance School / Basic Reconnaissance Course (ARS/BRC), there are guidon-sized banners everywhere, proudly displayed as reminders of classes gone before... all the way back to the early 80's. "Hard Times Don't Last..." starts another one, with a picture of a knife-wielding diver, fighting for his air underwater. The quote concludes: "Hard Men Do." This chow hall is a treat. A civilian GS-13 chef cooks whatever we want, to specific order. Rare steak, western omlette, eggs benedict, all you can eat. We're on our time, though, and it behooves me and my fin buddy to duck in, duck out, and begin calculating our fin currents.

Jim Stivers and I will be choosing our Insert Point and Extract Point locations. Jim's callsign is Shaggy, because he's tall and lanky like the main dude on Scooby Doo. A former *Scout Sniper School* instructor at Quantico, Jim is a dedicated student in this program. He's also an excellent swimmer. Once he laces up his black Chuck Taylors and straps on his rocket fins, you're eating his wake. I'm in jets and I still can't usually keep up with him. The only reason we're fin partners is because, back at Little Creek when they sized us up, I was on top of my finning A-game that day, and Jim was sick as two dogs. Right now, we bust open our *NOAA Annual Tide Tables*, check the currents and their values at different times of the day, and plot our points.

Splash! Splash! We jump from a CH-46 (Marine version of the -47 Chinook twin-rotor) doing 30/30 (thirty knots at thirty feet), and we raise our arms above our heads making big "O's" ('we're OKAY') "Keep up, Speights." It's all Jim can say to motivate me. It screams "*Why do I have to be paired up with this freakin' slug?*" Gotcha Jim, lickin' chicken (loud & clear). We're connected together, chest-to-chest, by a buddy line, secured on each end by an around-the-body bowline... or maybe it was just two end-line overhand loops snapped into locking Stubai-85's. Can't remember. We're loaded full hilt, full deuce with packed-out DUI-lined rucks, rifles, etc. Uniform of the day is surf & turf; that's cammie tops with ball-dropping khaki UDT shorts, booties (Chuck T's), black fins of choice (the twin [split fin] jets were a hot topic at the time) dive knives and short-brimmed boonie covers.

The buddy line between Jim I was tight. He was an arm's reach and just ahead of me, facing the shore 800m away. I'm facing seaward. "Jim... (pant, pant)" "Yeah.

(pant, pant)" "Don't look now, but there's a shark... (pant) behind you (pant)." "Stop f'ing around, Speights." "Serious." He glances over shoulder. "Probably just a dolphin." "Dude, I know what a dolphin fin looks like." "Okay, let's head toward the shore." We're headed toward shore all right. I'm almost keeping up with him. You've heard the old adage. You don't have to be faster than the bear (shark), just faster than your buddy. Well, Jim doesn't seem nearly as nervous about a shark fin as me, and now the fin has disappeared back under the water. I grab my dive knife, dually psyching myself out and hoping that Jim doesn't see me... *There's a shark behind me NOW!!!* I stab my knife backward into the water, half-expecting to poke the eye out of the Great White that's about to sever me into two pieces. Okay, there's a shark behind me *NOW!!!!... ..NOW!!!* No shark. Just a retard, being dragged toward the shoreline by an angry Scooby Doo character. "Fin Harder, Speights!"

That did it. "Fin... Harder." It's one of two motivational phrases that are worn out at Amphib Recon School. Right up there with "It pays to be a winner!" These two phrases are usually blasted through bull horns directly into your ear. So now I'm finning my tail off. Legs straight, leaning forward, cheek leaning on my pack, rifle at the ready, low silhouette, eating every other wave that rolls in, fighting a half-knot cross current the whole way. We're moving back out to the buoy for our loop around to the extract point. No other bodies in sight, but then again, we don't know which routes the other teams chose.



My quads are screaming. Hy hams are screaming. Thirsty, hungry, and... back to my quads. We'll be jogging backwards out of the surf zone in 30 seconds. "AAAAAAAGH! There goes my right quad. Stick a fork in it. Jim grabs me and drags me the last fifteen feet. He sounds off. "Stivers!" Then me. "Speights!" The instructor looks at his clipboard, writes something, then calls us in on the radio. "Go freshwater

rinse your gear, get on the humvee, and get prepped to helo over to Truman Annex for your CRRC (Zodiac rubber boat) nautical nav practical application.



Jim and I are the first two to enter, just behind the yellow-shirt instructor

At the Annex, we're waiting on other studs to finish. Splash in the boat harbor with another team. Jellyfish galore, one on top of the other. (Ouch. Ouch. Ouch.) "*Speights! STOP!!!*" One of the instructors is yelling, and another student has grabbed me... I stop finning. Almost swam into a basketball-sized NASTY pink floating jellyfish. We're back out of the water. Instructor looks at us. How many jellyfish stung you? "Lots." That's because you're easy targets. You're freaking SLOW! The good thing is, we have a cure for that. Get back in the water! "*Splash! (x4)*" A bull horn crackles to life... "**FIN... HARDER!!!**"

Battle of the Beef

June 20th



In South Philadelphia, there is an existing feud of epic proportions. It is the great cheese steak debate, the battle of Geno's vs. Pat's.

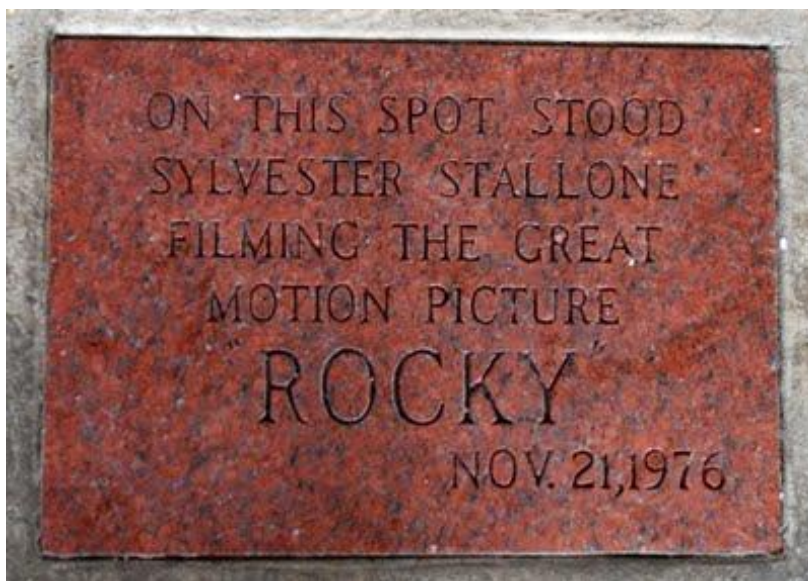
Now, to set the scene, each of the two steak joints occupy a long, narrow street corner opposite the other. Their location is in a gritty blue collar area that is typical of South Philly. Big Italian influence. Here reside the folks that give this country balls; the mom & pop shops, the paycheck grinders, the mouthy keepers of their fellow man, the die-hard patriots, the conglomerate backbone of America.





Geno's is all-American. Bright, flashy, newer on the block. More seats, more photos of famous celebs frequenting the establishment, and a proud patriotic owner, Joey Vento. Big support for cops, Marines, and pretty much all things American. Geno's was founded by Vento in 1966. At the sandwich order window, Vento proudly displays the controversial sign *"This is America. When ordering please speak English!"*

Pat's King of Steaks is lackluster in comparison to Geno's. Crammed, seating-prohibitive, and not at all flashy. Proudest visitor may have been Stallone, whose presence here during the filming of the classic American flick *Rocky* is memorialized by an etched brick on the ground. Pat's was here first--named for Pat Olivieri, co-founder of both the establishment in 1930 and the original Philly Cheesesteak in 1933 (along with Harry Olivieri). The place is now owned by Frank Olivieri, Jr. (Harry's grandson). The Olivieri family has split in a few directions over the establishment.



Both Geno's and Pat's use thin-sliced ribeye steak. Pat's chops theirs up. Both are speedy on delivery... like many steak places in Philadelphia, there are two ordering windows: one that cranks out steak sandwiches at the cyclic rate, and one where you order your fries and drinks. Ordering is simple. Two-word ordering: "Whiz With." "American Without." "Provolone With." The first word dictates which type of cheese you want on your sandwich. The second word indicates whether you want onions or not.



If you ask us which is better, my wife and I both say Pat's. The bread is better. The kids leaned toward Geno's. Philly natives that really love cheese steaks typically steer from both Geno's and Pat's, whose culinary feud has largely become a tourist magnet. Steve's Prince of Steaks seems to be pretty popular with the locals. When you visit, you can decide yourself, but don't pass up the opportunity to join in this classic American debate of Geno's vs. Pat's.







South Philly Ballin'

June 20th







Resident Historians in the Valley of Death

June 20th



The Battle of Gettysburg is historically known as the costliest American Civil War battle in terms of lives lost. Most of the losses during this battle were incurred in a small, lonely geographic bowl infamously dubbed "The Valley of Death."

In the 148 years that have passed between the Battle of Gettysburg and today, the scenery has changed... but not much. The trees are taller. There are paved roads running through many parts of the battlefield. But the hills have not seen much in the way of noticeable, active erosion. The boulders have kept their places.

The Valley of Death is loaded with boulders. I walked among them, studied them, imagined four troops from whichever side, taking cover beside me as I crouched behind a large stone that was low in the valley, facing uphill toward an enemy American whose unit held ground of strategic superiority.

The boulders of the Valley of Death, which appear to be smooth at the edges and largely undisturbed over the last century-and-a-half, are split in places, cracked... with wide gaps of growth between some of the cracks, and voids between two stones that were once split apart and now sit separate but perfectly fit as they protrude from the ground... ...these stones tell stories of the fighting--the impact of cannonball rounds, of bullets well-placed and flown astray... the distances and

directions of fire--that occurred in this somber valley in the first week of July in 1863.

Few battlefields in history are so well-fitted with large natural objects that change little over time. Because of this, few areas of such historical significance offer visitors the opportunity to see things as near to original placement as they once were.

When you visit Gettysburg, take the time to meander through this valley, and study the lessons of these earthen keepers of American history.

Go Girl!

June 24th

Somebody's running. Way up ahead, in my lane, coming at me. That's right, bike with the traffic flow, run against it. I'm driving through the middle of nowhere... a 30-mile stretch of dairy farmland nestled between the Endless Mountains of Northeast PA. A runner on this no-shoulder, truck-laden road seems out-of-place. Then again, that's the beauty of running; you can do it anywhere. Getting closer. Pink sweatshirt. Girl. No, woman. Nothing behind her for miles. Nothing ahead. Heavysset. Mid-40's. No ipod. Gettin' it. Uphill. Full bore. Gettin' it!!! No kids. No husband. No bills. No phone. No gossip. No depression. No facebook drama from Susie. Just air & the opportunity for her to pump it through her burning lungs. Max O2 through the blood to the brain. Just passed her, gave her a wide berth. Whatever's coursing through her veins was apparent in her expression—the kind of motivation fueled by passion or revenge. Or both. She's cresting the hill in my rear view mirror. And I still see long strides. Get it, girl.

A 21-Photo Salute to Gettysburg

June 20th

"One country and one flag, the strife of brothers is past."













A Little Fun With the Boys from Virginia

June 25th



Bum...bububum...bububum...bububum...bububum...BUBUBUM...BUBUBUM...BUBU
BUM...



...BADAAAAAAA!!!! GETSOME GETSOME!!! What a dork.

Bub's Service Center

June 28th

Get your kicks... on Route... PA-6.

Bing! The light comes on in my truck for the umpteenth time. **Change my oil, Dude.** So I whip into *Bub's Service Center* in Troy, PA. From what I can tell, *Bub's* is the area equivalent of *Jiffy Lube*. I walk to the counter and look to the man approaching me. He appears to be the BMO. "Can you do a full synthetic oil change?" I ask him. "Yeah," he says, "but it'll be a while." So I look for a beat up chair and a magazine rack. "I've got some time." I tell him. "How long?" He grins. "**Three weeks.**"

Pittsburgh's Strip District

June 28th



Strip District on a Saturday morning



PenMac, Stamoolis Bros., DeLuca's



Josh enjoys some street music



Nice variety of fruits and vegetables... picked up a melon, some strawberries, and a bunch of garlic.





If you're going to DeLuca's for breakfast, you'd better come early... and be prepared to wait an hour or better!!!



Another packed restaurant--Pamela's Diner. Again, come early.



I actually joke a lot about being busier than a one-legged man... this guy doesn't look that busy. Talked to him for a little bit.



Stamoolis Bros.



Leaving the Pennsylvania Macaroni Company, aka PenMac.



Specialty noodles at PenMac



So many types of cheese, you could choke on them



Blurry photo... but it shows Ayla, knee-high to a pepperoni stick





This guy had some amazing pistachio pastry treats





Josh grabs a boost of Joe... coffee is free game in our family at any age; was the same for me growing up in Germany, and for my dad growing up in Germany



Grabbed a loaf of fresh-baked Siebenkorn Brot to accompany the big salami in Caleb's hand. Bread displayed is handmade each day in the sidewalk-view window of the store



Waiting on kebabs to finish cooking





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Petra--a shopper, in her element

Skilled Photographers?

July 3rd



Where have all the great photographers gone? They died with the last of the analog cameras. It's easy for us these days... we can all be great photographers, because we can "click" as many times as we want. No setting up the 'perfect shot.' No film exposure discipline. We're not confined to 24 or 36 pictures per roll of film. I'll take 30 pictures of the same mushroom from different angles, and within seconds, I'll toss all

the ones that don't turn out. Oh yeah, and there's that amazing viewfinder to let us know that we just took the picture we wanted to take. I can hold my finger down on the button and take 400 rapid-fire photos during a thunderstorm, and guarantee that I can get a good lightning photo. These days, with few exceptions, we're not skilled, we're all spoiled. Spoiled rotten amateur photographers.

Anyway, here are my randoms for the week...





It's there, but it's subtle... check out the 6-part picture in the background



Checking gear backlash inside of an ST-80 gearbox



"Overheat" indicator gel tabs???



This is near that little strip of West Virginia I pass through between Pennsylvania and Ohio



A Far Off Thunderstorm

July 3rd

The view from our backyard offers wide lateral limits and extraordinary depth... which means that we can snack on popcorn in our camp chairs and watch the skies light up over several counties.





The Swedish Fish Conspiracy

July 3rd



"Swede! Swede! Swede! Swede!" I toss the last brave red swimmer down the gullet. Funny, I thought. It all started a year ago, I picked up my first dime bag of Swedefish. 10 Swedish Fish, wrapped in Saran Wrap, and sold for 50 cents. I'm all over that black market candy scam. The owners of such establishments are the stereotypical "Mr. Krabs" and Ebenezer Scrooges of our society who would sell their mother's soul for a nickel--I imagine their children spending hours each night, metal detecting the parking lot for loose change and individually wrapping handfuls of Swedish Fish from a *Sam's Club*-sized bag to resell to gas-station dwelling suckers like me.

The demographics are clear-cut. *No Bake* cookies and other unlabeled baked goods are products of American women in the South, or in the recessed podunk towns across the States. The Swedish Fish redistribution is something else. *Stanis*, you know--people of the "Stans," Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Turjikistan or however it's spelled--those are the re-packagers of the chewy, iconic American candies that I love. For all we know, these are the baitfish of a grander quasi-religious ideological scheme; some muslim extremist ploy to have us eating out of the palm of their hand before "*BAM!*" poisoning the well. I pondered this as I sat at the gas station, staring at the McDonald's marquee across the street, picking the remnants of those gooey, wonderful, poisonous bastards out from between my teeth. "Billions and Billions Dead," I imagined.

If I was a terrorist, I'd say screw the power plants, tall skyscrapers, tunnels and bridges. I'm filling out an application at whatever plant distributes the most Coke or Mountain Dew. I'm going for the storehouses of frozen McNuggets with a pocketful of cyanide. I'm going for the Swedish Fish.

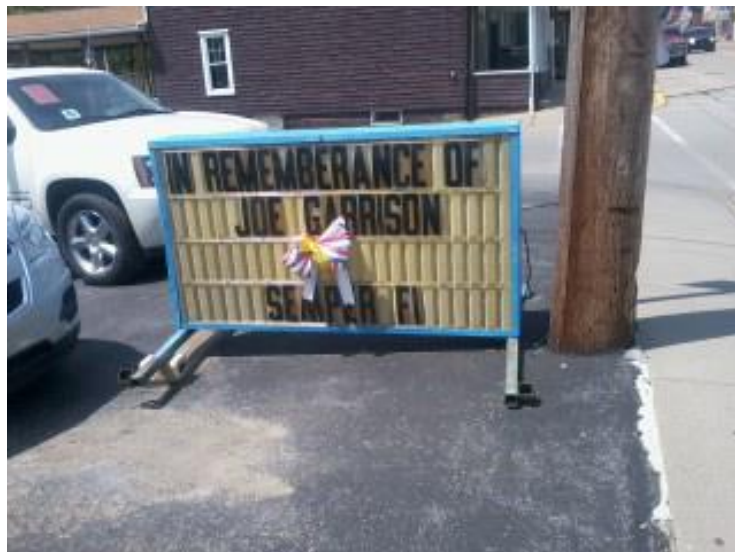
Sergeant Joey Garrison: Not a Statistic

July 3^d



Home Town, USA. Some little place in Pennsylvania. I was driving from one job site to another and I saw this town full of signs remembering Joey Garrison, a 2/8 Marine Sergeant who apparently died in Helmand Province last month. I don't know what kind of guy he was, or what he did that made it seem as if the whole town knew him personally, but he was loved. Far from being a statistic, he was their Marine. Their hometown hero. Thanks, Joey.









Anonymous September 5, 2011 at 12:00 AM

Thank you so much for putting together this set of images honoring a 2nd Battalion 8th Marine Hero- he was and will always be an American Hero.

-Lisa W.



lisa fox September 5, 2011 at 12:28 AM

Joey was an amazing marine and friend..There isnt one day that we dont think of him..His home town misses him very much...It brought the whole community together..there wasnt many ppl here that didnt know him or his family..Rip Joey..we <3 YOU



Anonymous September 5, 2011 at 8:40 AM

such a powerful statement of the love Americans do feel for our troops and in particular for this hometown hero. RIP dear 2/8 marine hero Sandy C.

Turkey for Dinner?

July 3rd



Life could never have been so cool for me growing up. A lover of wild animals, the only birds we used to feed were sparrows and pigeons... even they were skittish. Today, my family can't even get through a meal before we're visited by our local Tom turkey or another few members of his flock. My kids feed carrots to deer from the back porch, bread to wild turkeys right out the front door, and both of these wild animal groups are

like pets. They sleep in the yard, they walk right up to the door, they mosey over to see what the kids are playing with in the yard. Loving this place.





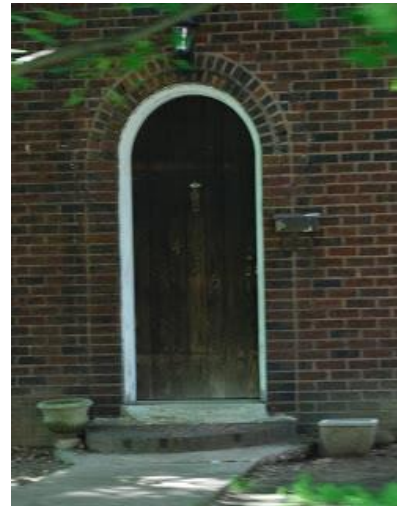




The Doors of Mount Lebanon

July 3rd

Something about flair that is super sexy. Being different. Well, one section of Mount Lebanon, PA is different than mainstream America... and they're proud of it. Check out these front-entry doors.





Pittsburgh 4th of July

July 4th



Our first Pittsburgh 4th Celebration... Wow!!!



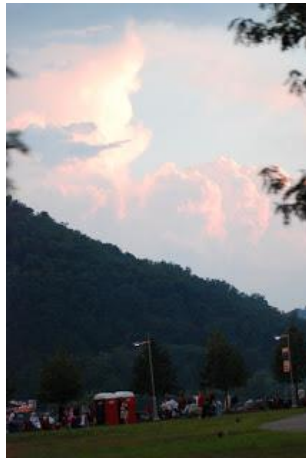
The hillside was packed. The buildings were packed. The bridges were packed.



The river was packed with boats



More bridge viewers. I understand that the West End bridge was smoked out due to fireworks proximity



Busted! Spike Lee with his illegitimate white baby



These clouds were too cool to pass up.



Full house at Heinz Field... free concert all day



"...and I'll be Luke Skywalker." "You're not my father! *Wooooong!* *Bzzzeeeeew!*



Bobby Bouche, fozz-ball is the devil!



Location, location, location... We scored a great spot to occupy!



Blue back lighting courtesy of police boats





Ayla watched about ten fire cracker explosions, then she quit looking





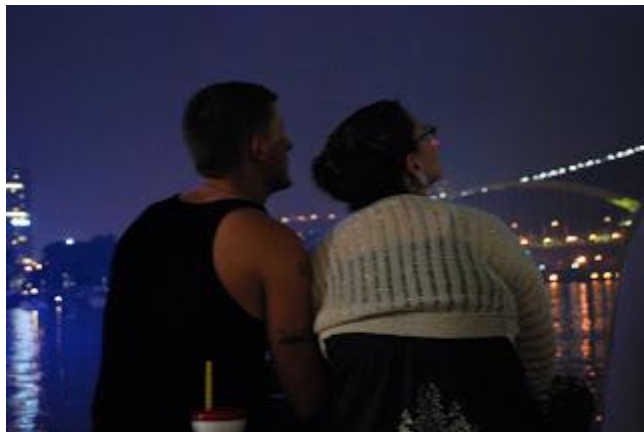
Not a terrorist attack.



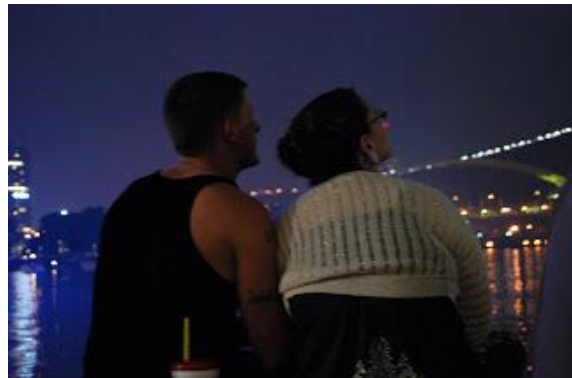
Heh, heh!



"Doo... doo... doo... doo... doo" (Close Encounters of the Third Kind)







Punxsutawney & Smicksburg for Two

July 10th, 2011

Yesterday was a working date day. Mom came up from Virginia and stole the kids for two weeks, and they left here around 10 AM. Lily cried and wanted fifteen kisses and hugs from momma and myself. She was going to miss us, but not enough to change her mind and stay here. Brava.

So now what? [Crickets, crickets...] "Wanna go to work with me?" I ask Petra. "I've gotta drop off some parts up in Punxsutawney, at Femco." Hmm... She thinks about it. "Sure!" "Cool," I tell her. "You'll get to see Amish country on the way there." "Oh, awesome! I've been wanting to see that area you told me about. Is it that same little Amish town?" "Yeah, 'Smicksburg.' That's the place! Maybe we can grab ice cream where all the Amish get theirs."

So we drive. Stuck in Pittsburg's Liberty Tunnel for an hour. Stuck in Saturday Pittsburgh traffic for nearly three hours! Ugh! My morale and mood were crappy. Okay, we're driving again. Grab some Wendy's. Recently bouncing between 220 and 240 lbs on the scale, I could care less whether I ever ate another burger this lifetime. Still gonna eat what I want, only in smaller portions. That's the game plan anyway. I'm also trying to cut back on my Achilles' Heel, SUGAR. Big chili, loaded potato, and an unsweet wild berry tea for me, please. Petra has a cranberry walnut chicked salad. Far cry from her favorite similar salad from Cheesecake Factory, which I'd swear to this day tastes like toilet bowl cleaner.

So we're back on the road. Stop at a gas station for Magnum ice cream bars, which I know happen to be Petra's favorite frozen treat on a stick. I see them every time I stop at that gas station, and think about her.

Dayton, PA. Gateway to this side of Amish country, from my perspective. Here I recently met an Amish father and his two boys, towing a small aluminum boat behind their buggy. They had just successfully caught a bunch of keeper bluegills. I gave the boys a big block of Italian soapstone I'd traded from Allen at Femco, and showed the boys the row of houses I was carving from a small block of Pennsylvania soapstone.

"The weather's a little warm for them to be outside, but you should start to seeing some Amish activity on this road," I tell Petra. Then we see a buggy. And another. A woman working in her garden. A man with his kids or grandkids out collecting and tying up bundles of straw or hay. "You'll know the Amish houses because they have no power lines coming from the street. Nothing's open Sunday. There's their church. There's their ice cream shop hangout. School is somewhere over here. Uncovered buggies for the unmarried." Petra is especially excited to see the little boys and girls in their traditional garb. "Amish babies! How cute!" Then she has an aside: "Why are other kids snot-nosed brats, but Amish kids so adorable? Hm." She changes the

subject. "Wow, look at that house. It's beautiful. What must the Amish women think when they look at a place like that. *Why can't I have a house like the one on that hill? Oh yeah, cause I'm Freakin' Amish.*"

We talked to a guy named Willie, who is 36 and has nine kids--five girls, four boys. "We're done now; my wife had her tubes tied due to medical complications during the last pregnancy." "What do Amish kids do?" I ask. "Play & fight," he replied. "Ha, same with ours," I said. "Kids are kids, I suppose." "So how does school work?" I continue. "One building, one big room, just like old fashioned school houses. 20-30 kids in all, grades 1 through 8." I asked, "What about high school?" "No high school. Just life." We chatted a little more about the subject, and then I asked, "Willie, where can I get a good Amish pipe?" "Nobody makes pipes around here that I know of. They sell pipes at Byler Harness & Shoe Shop, but not locally made." With that, we bid each other farewell and headed down to Punxy.

Punxsutawney is the self-proclaimed "Weather Capital of the World," home of famous rodent "Punxy Phil." For those of you who do not know, Punxy Phil is the famous groundhog whose cast shadow--or lack thereof--determines an early or late Spring season in this country each year. The first time I visited Punxy, I hadn't made the connection. "Why does everybody have carvings and posters and paintings of gophers and muscrats in their yards or in front of their stores?!" I'm looking for a high school sign that says "Punxsutawney High School: Home of the Smokin' Beavers" or something like that. Rodentville, USA.

So anyway, Petra and I are waiting for someone to come unlock Femco so I can drop parts and roll bounce. Joel showed up. "You guys been downtown to the Groundhog Festival?" he asked. "Yeah, we drove past it when I was showing Petra the downtown scene. We were thinking about heading back over there." "Well, when you do, head to the back right corner of the festival, as viewed from Main Street. Second tent from the corner, best meats in the State. Italian sausages, steaks, you name it. Tell 'em I sent yas and it's on the house."

We go to the festival. We're scrambling for change in Petra's purse, to put in the parking meter. We only find \$.45. "No problems," says Petra. "Check it out... '10 cents per hour, or 3 hours for 25 cents'... where the heck are we?" We check out the Groundhog Festival, listen to some live music, learn about Punxy Phil, bump into Dave from Femco, then head back to Amishville on the way home.

Driving back through Smicksburg, we read off various signs. "Amish made log furniture." "Blacksmith." "Dried floral arrangements." "Yoder's Baked Goods." "Sawdust and straw for sale." We mosy out to Windgate Winery, which is closed, and we stop near the Amish Pottery Store. Also closed. Then we take a walk through Smicksburg Park, and we follow the trails along the river nearby. Wade through the shallow river. Taught Petra how to catch a crawdad. Crayfish. Whatever. Stumbled upon a displaced two-piece headstone, in the river. Couple from the

1800's. Newer headstone.

Drive back through Dayton, enroute Pittsburgh. Old train station. Nothing fabulous. Picked up a brick for my brick collection.

Headed home. Lazy Saturday evening without kids. Photos to follow.















Honey, I Skunked the Kids

July 10th, 2011

If you scroll back a few stories on this website, you'll see photos of the wild turkeys that eat breadcrumbs off our doorstep. Saturday night, Petra and I returned from Punxy to four hungry mouths--and not the ones you'd expect; the kids are with mom & dad for the next couple weeks. We had a bunch of skunk babies under Petra's vehicle. There were six total, then two took off, and the other four chased me as I walked backwards all the way to the front door. Skunks like oatnut bread and bologna, by the way. We weren't scared of getting sprayed, because they weren't threatened by us. I kid you not though, I was three feet away from the business ends of four stink dealers, and I almost crapped myself when someone across the street let fly on a leftover screaming firework. True story.





Six Again.

July 10, 2011

Lost the baby at 11 weeks.

Speaking Life, and Power, and Victory Over Each Week

July 12th, 2011



We love our church. In a great compliment to both, *LifeStone Church* in Pittsburgh's Southside is as awesome as our last church, *3n1*, located in Suffolk, Virginia. Of course, each has its own individual flair. LifeStone, like *3n1*, has an awesome leadership team, a big vision for community outreach & impact, a great praise & worship team, and a very young body of believers (average age 30?). *Generation Real*, as I like to call us. Like *3n1*, Lifestone

is a non-denominational ARC plant, meaning that it was started under the increasingly-popular *Association of Related Churches*. We've been attending LifeStone for about five months now, and were fortunate to see them ring in their first year as a church.

What I love about LifeStone, which I find so unique compared to the churches of our past, is what we experience in the last two minutes of each Sunday meeting. In a gesture of "plugging in," Pastor Jack and Jamie Thomas both stand in front of the congregation with their arms outstretched toward the crowd. The crowd reciprocates. "Eyes open," PJack encourages with a big smile, "we're not praying." At this point, Jack--in his symbolic role as the leader of this rag-tag flock of God-fearing, people-loving, religion-rejecting followers--speaks life, power, blessing, victory, and inspiration over our week.

The power of life and death, the Bible tells us, is in the tongue. As Christians we claim life, and life more abundantly. We accept and believe it for our families and friends. "*Release bitterness. Take Narcissism captive. View your life as a vapor, not a marathon. Commit to making God #1 in your life!*" We're looking around the room, and we're all engaged. Then PJack tells us to have a great week. It's a great feeling and a great way to kick off the 7-day grind; we leave feeling armored up, positively

charged and ready for anything the devil has to sling in our general direction. Suggest that other churches do the same!



LifeStone meets each Sunday @ 10:00 AM, at the American Serbian Club in Southside. The address is: 2524 Sarah Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15203. Drinks, coffee, snacks, and childcare are provided. Great place to meet REAL people who love people, and who love God.

If you're living in, or visiting, the Hampton Roads area of Virginia, visit 3n1! If 'real' is what you seek, you won't be disappointed. 3n1 meets each Sunday @ 9:30 AM, at the Harbour View Grande 16 Theater, located at 5860 Harbour View Blvd., Suffolk, VA 23435. Drinks, coffee, snacks, and childcare are also provided.

4 Days, 3 ER's, One Tough Mother

July 13th, 2011

It started at church. Usually I'd try to stick around to help tear down the sound stuff. Petra came and got me instead. "Take me to the hospital. I'm bleeding bad."

At St. Claire's Emergency Room in Mt. Lebanon, we learn that Petra--11 weeks pregnant-- has likely miscarried, though an ectopic pregnancy was not ruled out entirely. We took the news hard, but because this happened early on, and we have four kids already, it did not seem devastating.

Later that night, Petra was emotionally devastated. I was not hit quite as hard... ironic because I was really excited about the baby. *"The Lord giveth and He taketh away."*

Monday around Noon, drive to Philly for a four-day class for my job. Took Petra with me--kids are with folks in Virginia. Check into hotel. Within two hours, Petra starts

bleeding profusely. Loses no kidding about 3 quarts of blood in an hour. Walk Petra to vehicle. Petra's mad at me for starting a fight with some SWAT cop in the parking lot who was impersonating a Marine (full digi utilities). Rush to Brandywine Hospital Emergency Room around 8 or 9 PM. I throw a fit after waiting 45 minutes in the waiting room. "She needs an IV... look at all this freakin' blood! Give me a kit and I'll stick her myself." Impatient jerk, I know. That's my wife. Finally in. Numerous tests. Blood everywhere. A few key discoveries made. Special thanks to Dr. Mishkin and a great crew. Bleeding slows. Discharged around 5 AM-ish.

Back at hotel, Petra sleeps until 1 PM. She wakes, I slip out for Chinese carry out, Gatorade, & more pads. Return, eat, Petra gets up numerous times because of heavy bleeding. I'm on the bed when she crashes out, nearly unconscious and completely limp and incoherent. Pale yellow-gray face, clammy skin, low pulse, slow capillary refill... dialed 911. Laid her on the bed, put a cool wet rag on her forehead, smacked her around and yelled her name until she stopped staring through me and started vaguely looking at me. Held her, got her to sip some Gatorade and I let her know the ambulance was coming.

Joe and the other EMT's drove her to the Chester County Hospital ER, because Brandywine didn't have an OB on duty that night. More tests. More blood. Meds. Young ER staff. Thanks Jessica, Thanks Lisa, Thanks Dr. Mike, Thanks nice OB Doctor lady, you're awesome! Sweet looking hospital. Spanish flair, many outside angles, stucco, terra cotta tile roof. Ducked out for a Wawa chow around 2 AM. Petra scarfed down a half hoagie like a champ. Zonked out. Discharged at somewhere around Noon.

"Home, James?" I ask, checking if she's ready to rock & roll out. "Hey," she says, "You promised me a killer cheesesteak this week." Divert to *Steve's Prince of Steaks*. Original location. Wiz With. Provolone With, add mushrooms. American cheese fries, 2 Cokes. Checking out the quality of meats they slapped down before cooking, I'm sold. Not as fast as *Geno's* or *Pat's*, but really good steaks. "I still like Pat's," Pet declared flatly. "Better bread."

Head home, arrive around 7PM back in Pittsburgh area. Condition stable, current operation: sleeping like a baby. Rough week. Tough, beautiful Girl.

Birthday Girl

July 14th, 2011

It's freshly the fourteenth of July. Petra's 33rd Birthday. The sleeping beauty beside me is exactly one month older, two chess moves smarter, and four fingers better looking than I'll ever be. I'm such a lucky guy. I am so in love. In four days, our 15-Year Wedding Anniversary! What a great time for us.

I'm really excited about today. This evening, we'll pick up Petra's friend Emi from the airport, and shortly thereafter--probably around 11 PM--Petra will be unfolding a very unique birthday present, 18 months in the making. I think she's gonna love it. Thanks for your help (you know who you are)! Check back for photos and reaction sometime in the days to follow...

A Beautiful Day in the Life

July 15th, 2011

It's my long weekend off. Woke up early this morning, to meet Lady X from Craigslist at the gas station... she bought the microwave we haven't used in a year. God bless Craig, wherever he is.

Today is the last day to vote for the best ice cream joint in Pittsburgh. That's gonna be a tough one. American Idol tryouts are being held at Heinz Field as we speak... some 30,000 people trying out. A few weeks ago, it was the casting call for paid & unpaid extras in the upcoming Batman / Dark Knight movie that's being filmed here in the 'burgh.

Coffee at the gas station was straight from the cow, so to speak. Good stuff. Give that girl a raise! Hand off the microwave and head to Giant Eagle, the coolest grocery store on earth--they have everything and they are awesome. Light blue chicory blossoms load their hardy stems along every roadside and hillside along my way. "Chicoria," my mom-in-law would say.

Sunflowers for sale today in Giant Eagle, potted or cut. Grab a few for Pet? I'll come back to them. Cilantro, check. Sweet corn to replace the great-tasting but super grainy corn we bought at Wal-Mart last week, check. Strawberries, check. Rhubarb!!! Awesome. Check. Heavy cream, check. Milk, check. Coffee beans, check. Out the door. Redbox. Hm... nah. Drive home. Crap, forgot the sunflowers. 'Tsokay. She's still got her orchid... feed it three ice cubes a week and that puppy will be in bloom for two months.

One in four houses flies an American flag; par for the course, as I've noticed since

we moved to PA. One of the great things about this State... it's full of patriots. Mind wandering... yesterday was a nice, low-key birthday for Petra. Nothing extravagant--the highlight of the day was curling up on the couch together, nibbling a shared chunk of Asiago between sips of blackberry wine. We were watching *Chocolat* with Juliette Binoche and Johnny Depp, and yes, we surrounded ourselves in chocolate.



The Montour Trail is packed this morning. Beee-youtiful weather. Runners, bikers, dog-walkers, bench sitters, you name it. I'm in a cooking mood today. For starters, I'm gonna let the girls wake up to some fresh, warm strawberry shortcake. By the way, if you haven't made strawberry shortcake the Bisquick way, you're freakin' wrong. Under no circumstances would I normally recommend recipes that can be commonly found on the back of a box, but let this be the exception to that rule. Been doing this one for years because it's awesome. Whip your cream fresh, though, and don't sweeten it--the strawberries in light sugar will be enough.

It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor--would you be mine...



Success!!! Petra's 33rd Birthday Project

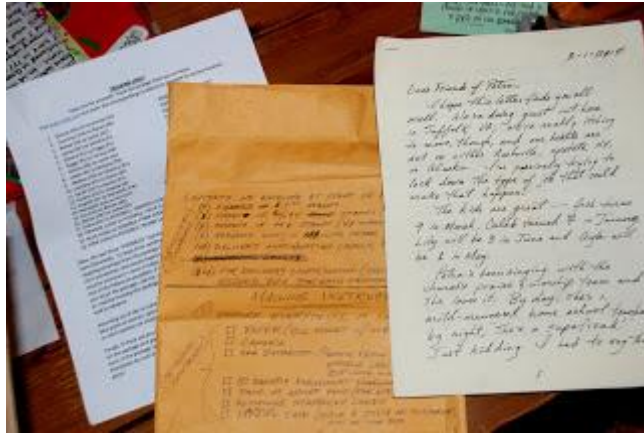
July 15th, 2011

Birthdays, in our family, are typically much less bedazzling than, say, your own. I eat beer and cake on the Marine Corps birthday each year, usually in the company of other Marines. That is usually the most birthday celebrating I do. My own personal birthday usually equates to a wish granted for my belly; i.e., Pet will make me Eggs Benedict for breakfast, or something amazing for dinner. Two years ago, Petra amazed me by resurrecting my favorite birthday cake--one which, according to my own research (founded upon a crazed craving), I believe has been discontinued by Duncan Hines and Betty Crocker and everybody else since I was about 12 years old. "Cherry Chip" with cherry icing. Petra literally chopped up maraschino cherries into fine bits, added them to vanilla cake mix, and she pulled the gig off nicely--*memory lane, party of two...* On the kids' birthdays, they get presents and their choice of events for the day, unless we're broke, then we carry over to the next payday in a double-birthday deal.

Petra has had a couple crappy birthdays since she's been with me. Flat broke and fighting and crying. She's had some good ones though, too. Big-ticket birthdays with Prada & Louis, for instance. I think the most interesting one I've thrown Petra was on her 22nd B-Day... I took pictures of different people holding up a sign that read "Happy 22nd Birthday Petra!" Cops, firemen, postal workers, passing trains, girl broken down on the side of the road, you name it. 120 Marines outside the barracks spelled out "22" on the lawn and I took the photo from the 3rd floor. Subway spelled out a birthday message on a sub. Wildlife ate food off the sign. The local cinema changed up their marquee for Pet. It was fun taking her around and showing her all the photos, half of which were blurry and didn't turn out very well. She loved it though.

Because we have moved so much on account of my job choices (12 times now), I feel increasingly horrible for always ripping Petra away from her friends. Each year on her birthday, I think about re-uniting Pet with her girlfriends somehow. Since I can't afford 20 plane tickets and a weekend spa rent-out just yet, I covered postage for a package to be sent around the world to all of her friends, and facilitated with mailing instructions and tracking info. Then the girls just took it over. The package was lost a few times, misdirected a few times, and finally it ended up on our doorstep last week (thanks Amanda, excellent timing)! Petra opened it up last night and she had a blast going through all the stuff and reading all the beautiful things that the girls had to say.

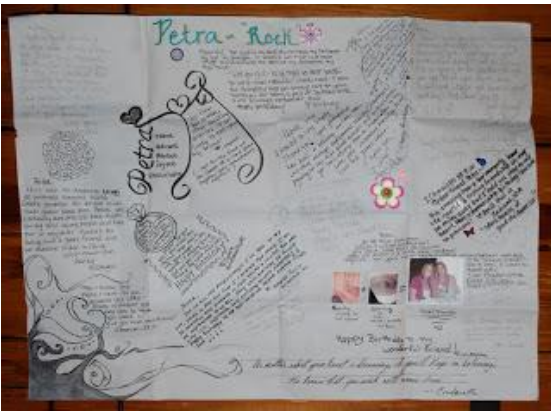
So right now, I'd like to first apologize to all the girls who didn't get to join the fun, especially those of you who were waiting on it... I started the package in January of 2010 and it was intended for her birthday on July 14th, 2010... but how was I to know that it would take 18 months for the package just to make it around the States, and that we would relocate (again), etc. I had intended to add more gals to the chain



What is this?!



Petra starts reading all the comments scribbled on two big sheets of vellum paper



Petra has to rotate the sheet to read Angela's cryptic message



Pet & Peg... that was the time I ordered two *Big Mamas* for us and I underestimated how big a Big Mama pizza could possibly be. Couldn't fit one through the door!



A photo of Angela's family made it on the cover of their local Chamber of Commerce brochure!



Photos from Jamie



Kaese Spaetzle! I know what Petra's making tonight!!! Whose birthday is it again?!



"Look at how pretty Mandi wrote my name. That's so cool."



"Omigosh, Angela. Right on time, grrrr!!!! Seriously!"





What's this?

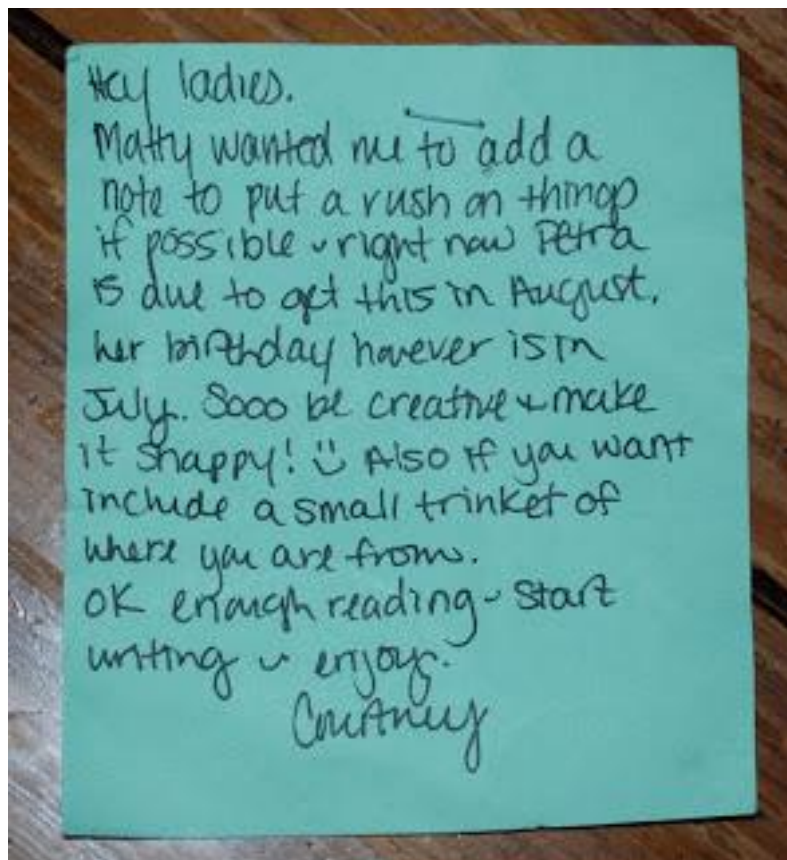


Renee H. actually made a book of all Petra's facebook comments and statuses. She put accompanying random photos next to each. Pet was thrilled! It was funny to read, too. Renee, where the heck did you get the photo of the albino squirrel?!





Heh heh...



"Okay enough reading. Start writing." Whip cracka! That's why you're awesome, Courtney.



Cinnamon Smencils? Sweet!!!



The phantom soaps... Who sent them?



Wow, Teresa! We've never seen these. Pet looks like Rachel McAdams (*The Notebook*, *Time Traveler's Wife*)!



There's that 22nd Birthday!



Oh wow! Your boys are getting so big! Love ya Cha & John!

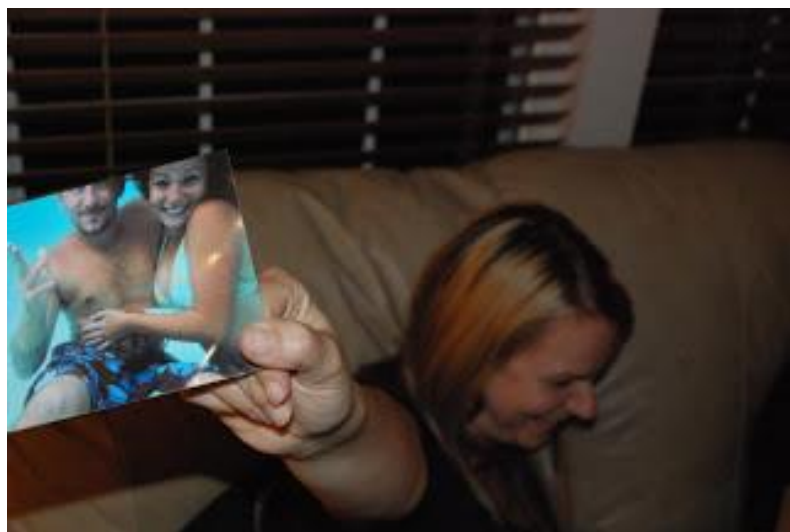


YES!!! Petra said she'll make this up this week! Thanks Sara!





Mandi, she was crying over these! We're adding them to our coffee table book of St. Lucia photos (the only photo album we keep out), half of which are of you and Tim





The Moose's Tooth!!! Yes!!! When you visit the Moose's Tooth restaurant and brewery in Anchorage, you'll see photos of people all over the globe wearing this shirt. The joint has a cult-like following. Thanks Ren!!



Deidre, we're blowing this one up. Great photo, great caption!!!



Sheryl got hers in at the last minute, since I wasn't able to get the package to her in a timely fashion

— — — — —

I can't thank you all enough for making Pet's birthday so special.

Today at the Strip District

July 16th, 2011

This afternoon, Pet and Emi are watching movies. I'm vegging out on the couch, selectively watching the movies and playing on PhotoShop all afternoon. *Julie and Julia*--amazing acting, Meryl. *Time Traveler's Wife*, also good. These pics are from this morning on the Strip.



Fresh roasting peanuts for sale



Freshly baked bread



Wholey's Fish Market... Huge. All kinds of deals.



Petra and Emi near Wholey's Fish Market





Long Dress and Sunflowers



Saw this guy last time at the Strip. In fact, saw a bunch of people whom I presume to be regulars.



Pittsburghers are fanatical. About Pittsburgh.





Labad's is setting out a fresh tray of pistachio-filled pastries



Finally got into Deluca's! The wait wasn't that bad, and the food was great. Big portions! Great coffee, amazing orange juice.







I love how all sorts of ethnic foods are represented here. Oriental, European, African, Middle Eastern, Mexican, you name it... all within a few blocks





The Pennsylvania Macaroni Company (PenMac)... if you can imagine any type of cooking oil, vinegar, pepper, noodle, cheese, olive, or pepperoni-style meat, you can buy it here. Also coffees, spices, fruits & veggies, etc.



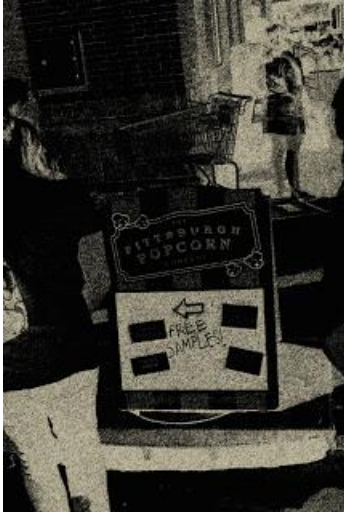




PenMac Still...



Tap Dancer





Big Moon Over Pittsburgh

July 17th, 2011



Love the one at bottom right. Turned out good for not having a tripod.





In *It's a Wonderful Life*, George lassos the moon. In our wonderful life, MJ eats the moon.





Petra and Emi are crushing the moon!



A Pittsburgh Saturday Night

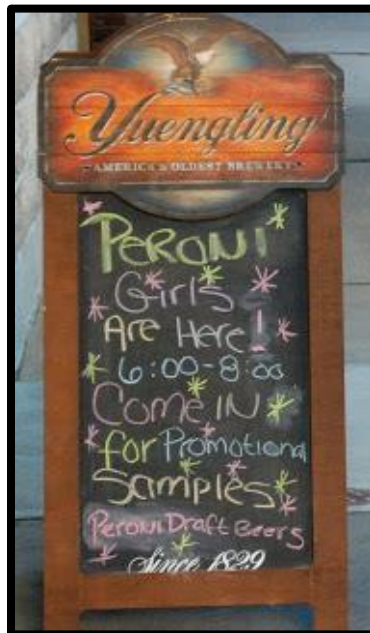
July 17th, 2011



Restaurant overlooking Pittsburgh



View from the historic Duquesne Incline

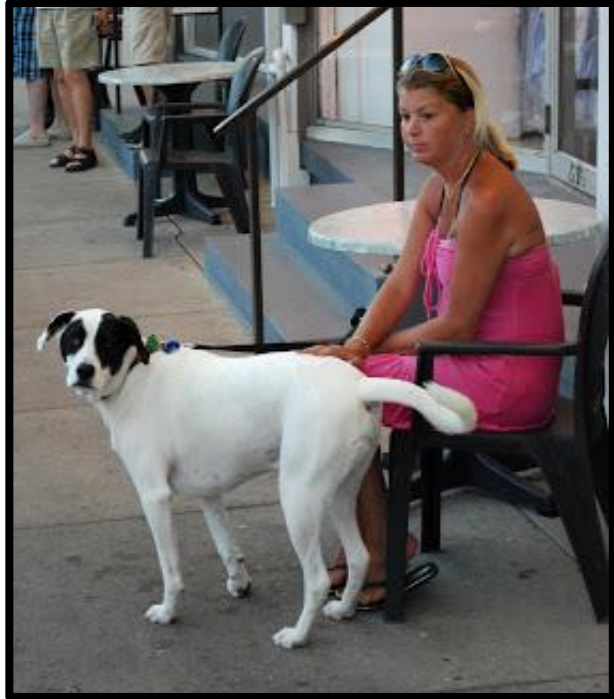


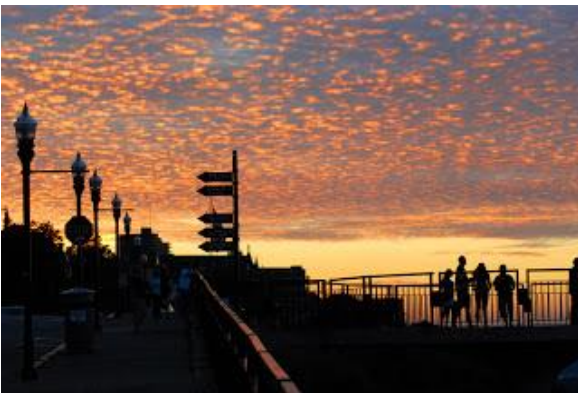
Peroni! The Italian staple. Ah, here come the memories...

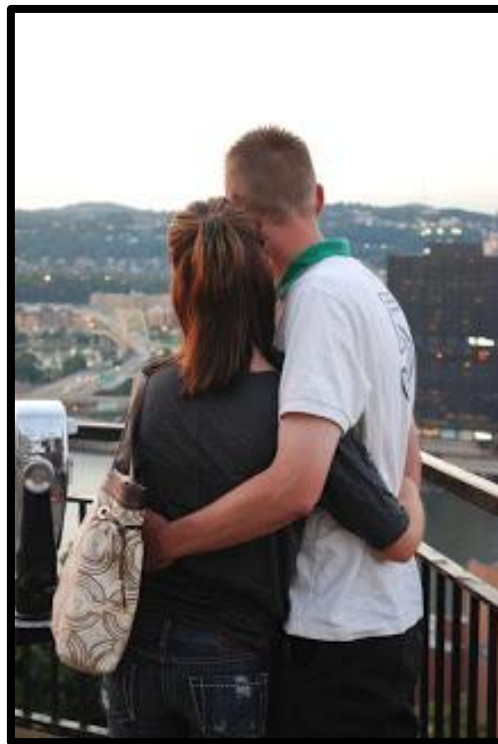


Carnegie Library. Above the door: "Free to the People"

















A Pittsburgh Saturday Afternoon

July 17th, 2011



Primanti's Brings the Magic--The individuals above are in town for a huge magic show competition / convention. Each is a professional magician. They provided our meal entertainment gratis as adjacent guests at Primanti Brothers in Market Square. A live band plays in the background.







How cool is our waiter, taking snapshots for his guests. We ran into this pair again at the Duquesne Incline later.









A bummed *American Idol* contestant? Just walked out of Heinz Field as the try-outs started wrapping up.



Last of the thousands of *American Idol* contestants. Next stop: Charleston, WV.

Bouldering at McConnell's Mill State Park

July 27th, 2011

This last weekend, we capitalized on the brief opportunity to link up with longtime friends Amy and Natcher. They were two hours away in Ohio, I was 'on call,' and they found a State Park online--located within 45 minutes of Pittsburgh--for a link up. What a catch! It turned out to be awesome. Really cool climbing rocks and photo opps. In the future, we can check into the whitewater rafting they offer. Did some lite hiking and toured the old mill. So anyway, here are the pics:







Uncle Natcher, Gunner, & Bergin









