

Wayland Town Crier: May 4, 2006

Making memories at the Big Top

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It's that time of year again. The Big Apple Circus is here. I saw the full-page ad in the newspaper. Once again I was drawn into the perpetual promise of unbridled joy. Two years running it had been just the ticket to help me survive April school vacation with my four children. So I thought.

Two years ago, I took three of my four and I remember the day as a great success. Trapeze artists hung, swung and climbed in ways surely their shoulders were not built for. Jack, my eldest, stared in admiration as a woman spun so many hula-hoops she looked liked a human slinky. Claire danced and Tom clapped to the music as Grandma the clown danced to Pink's "Get the Party Started," and everyone laughed, full belly, at Vallery, the King of Slapstick. Hugh, the baby, stayed home with Vivi our babysitter.

Last year, my four kids, Vivi and I sat under the giant blue big top, Ring 8, Row G, in last-minute seats. We were adjacent to the bandstand. Our bird's eye view was of everyone's derriere. Jack, 9, and Claire, 7, jockeyed from seat to seat, trying to get the best vantage point. After trying every seat in the row, Claire rolled her eyes, "harrumphed," into her folding chair and declared what no one wanted to admit: "These seats stink!"

We waited with anticipation, wet with perspiration. It was at least 103 degrees under the tent. Four-year-old Tom sat on Vivi's lap. He was red and wet from the heat and blue and sticky from the cotton candy. Poor Vivi had looked cool and refreshed when she arrived at our house that morning. Two hours later she was completely wilted She pulled her sticky feet from the floor with a "thwuck" as Tom absent-mindedly wiped blue spun sugar all over her white sweater.

Next to Tom sat Jack, with a stack of paper plates on his lap. The grease from a giant funnel cake soaked right through to his shorts. At almost 10, I am sure he went to the circus only for the fried dough. Claire sat next to Jack with an identical funnel cake. Powdered sugar covered her face, shorts, shoes and the cloth-covered seat. She munched her dough and the cotton candy she swiped from Tom, happy and oblivious to the mess. Hugh refused to sit in his or any seat. When I could corral him onto my lap, he squirmed, kicked and even pinched to get down. It was like wrestling a wet seal covered in taffy. By the time the band played the overture for the opening number, I realized that was not how I had envisioned the day at all.

My desire to make Hallmark moments for my children lures me into believing that I can control their memories and manipulate their experiences. I seem to think I can ensure guaranteed pleasure through sheer willpower. I bought the circus tickets thinking my experience would match my glowing memories. I remembered Claire's bright eyes, Jack's thank you and Tom sitting mesmerized on my lap. But when I sat there hot and sticky inhaling the smell of wet sawdust and horse poop it came back to me that the year before my kids pouted because I refused them more snacks at intermission. Jack twisted his ankle and hopped all day, Tom couldn't see and Claire had to go the bathroom right when the second act started. That was what I should have expected, but I didn't. I actually expected "unbridled joy!"

When I told my friends I was going to the Big Apple Circus they applauded me. "Oh, I just love that circus!" they would say. "What a good idea!" When I got home, I called them and told them to save their money. All I could think of was that I spent a whole lot of money herding a brood of sweaty, sticky, squirmy, sugar-infused, greased-soaked children all day. I could not wait to wash the circus off me.

Two days later, I found Tom leaping through the air and trying to land on one foot. When I asked him what he was doing he said, "I'm playing Big Apple Circus!" The next day I found Jack and Claire chuckling together rather than bickering.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"Oh we were just laughing about the circus and how you couldn't watch the guy spitting ping pong balls," said Jack. "Remember? You said it looked like he was going to choke."

"Yeah, that was so funny. You're such a wuss you even covered your eyes," chimed in Claire.

I wanted to create the quintessential childhood experience, but my kids just went to the circus. I have no idea what they remember. Jack maybe recalls that I sprung for slushes, Claire the dogs in high hats or that I embarrassed her by pulling juice bags out of my purse because I was too cheap to buy circus drinks. Tom might recollect the acrobats, or simply that I wouldn't buy him a black, plastic ninja sword. Maybe Hugh will mark it as the year he got to go to the show. Whatever the memories are, they are their own.

Sarah Banse is a writer and mother of four. She has been a Wayland resident for 10 years.