



# MARLER

## Christmas Newsletter



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Another year has flown by so we're preparing to ring in 2003! As last year, we continue to pray for World Peace! May we avoid war and keep Jeffery home safe & sound. That sentiment is sent out to all our service member friends and their families! In 2002 our family has had excellent health, a duty station relocation, moved into our new home and humbly accepted a new way of life for our children's special needs. So, let's get started and quickly catch you up on this very busy year!

In December of 2001, Jeff completed his Pavhawk training at Kirtland Air Force Base in Albuquerque, New Mexico. By mid month we packed up the U-haul and our minivan and headed out in the snow to our next duty station. Between the weather & driving in separate vehicles, with toddlers and dogs, we called it a night in Flagstaff, Arizona. That night it snowed quite a bit more, but the frozen Marler clan pushed on the next morning with plans of reaching warm Nevada by dinner. We had an apartment stocked with rented furniture awaiting us in Vegas so we unpacked and bedded down for the night surrounded by our things. Our new home was ready in December but we wanted the entire punch list to be completed before moving in and starting the mortgage payments. That happened a day or two before the New Year. We managed to throw together a little Christmas tree and get word to Santa where he could find Braden & Keegan in time for Christmas Day. We dressed up and had dinner on the Las Vegas



strip.

By January 2002 we moved into our new house. We had lived in two different apartments for most of 2001 so it was nice to finally call someplace home and mean it! We spent the first few weeks painting rooms and unpacking our household goods. This was our 8<sup>th</sup> time packing/unpacking since leaving Birmingham, Alabama last April. We were finding it hard to get motivated. Besides, when you do it with toddlers under toe, you go slightly insane! We also met with Keegan's new team of Doctors, enrolled Braden in his preschool class at an elementary school and Jeff started his new assignment. He is a Combat Search & Rescue helicopter pilot with the 66<sup>th</sup> Rescue Squadron (the Jolly Greens) at Nellis Air Force Base.

In February, Keegan had her quad-annual MRI. She handled it like a pro and results were excellent. No reoccurrence of tumor. That news is still powerful and emotional for us. Reminds us of how well she is conquering her battle with cancer. Keegan had an EEG. It showed she was having a lot of seizure activity and would remain on Tegretol twice a day. Braden was being evaluated as well and diagnosed with his own battle. He is autistic. If there is a silver lining in that

news it is that he is high functioning and with great intervention Braden will have an independent, productive and blessed adult life. Because of the evaluation results, Braden was placed in a special program for autistic children. Kristy's Mom came to visit us, as Jeff was leaving for Washington State to attend the Air Force's Survival school. Grandma is always great help while Jeff's away.

As March arrived Jeff returned home, Kristy's Dad came to attend Keegan's 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday (Hello Kitty) party, Jeff & Kristy had a night away (1<sup>st</sup> time since having children), Grandma & Grandpa Lappin then returned to Maryland and Keegan too was diagnosed with autism. Jeff and Kristy anxiously took an evening away at the Treasure Island hotel and had Grandma & Grandpa baby-sit. Of course Mom & Dad left late (way after the kids bedtime) but still managed to club it up, sleep in late and eat a buffet brunch before returning home. It was such a treat and a welcomed time out for Kristy. The next day Keegan had a lovely time at her birthday party. This year she was taller, healthier, stronger and blessed with curly, blonde hair. What a difference hair



makes! She was so happy among the party balloons and many presents. That same evening Kristy treated her parents to the Sigfried & Roy show at the Mirage hotel. They were thrilled they took in a vintage Vegas show. The two magicians need to retire. The show was a bit odd. We also had Keegan assessed by the school district to check her development. The evaluation showed Keegan was delayed and needed home schooling as she lacked some of her immunizations. After learning the signs of Autism we felt Keegan was also affected. A visit to her neurologist confirmed our suspicions. There will never be a definite answer to whether it is a genetic link between our children or a result of her brain trauma. Either way data proves that early intervention is the key so we sought help for Keegan as well.

In April we continued our autism research. We made some local contacts and joined a support group-FEAT (Families for Effective Autism Treatment). That gave us the knowledge and power to take the next step. It has been a Godsend. Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is a methodology, pioneered by Dr. Ovar Lovaas, that teaches autistic children how to learn. The data is conclusive. We applied to LIFE (Lovaas Institute For Early Intervention) at UCLA. We were accepted quickly so we needed to secure the funds, hire a staff, and arrange to have an initial workshop. Our Lovaas consultant, Erin Carres, contacted us and it got us very focused and motivated. While hiring trained ABA therapists, we met with the school district to help fund this expensive necessity. We had

many IEP (Individual Education Plan) meetings proving our dedication to the project and our desire to move forward with or without them. But, we desperately needed their funding. Slowing we gained approval, funding and therapy hours. April also brought the Easter bunny and Kristy's 36<sup>th</sup> birthday.

In May, once all details were settled and the workshop was scheduled, Jeff deployed to Afghanistan. Kristy had to go it alone and try to focus on the autism but was also constantly worrying about Jeff fighting a war on terrorism. It was very hard for both Kristy and Jeff. They were used to fighting battles together and having each other's support during the rough times. Kristy basically started a small business. She hired a team of therapists, set up a therapy room and stocked it with supplies, worked out constantly changing work schedules, arranged and hosted workshops, arranged training and took care of payroll. We broke Braden in first. He was attending his special class for autistic children 5 1/2 hours a day and enduring an additional 25 hours of ABA therapy at home. To get it all in, he only had Sundays off. It was difficult at first allowing ourselves to accept such a rigorous schedule for our 4 year old son. He would scream out of frustration, exhaustion & anger and Kristy's heart would break worrying if it was too



much. We trusted the data and we pushed on.

In June while Jeff was on the other side of the world, Keegan started ABA therapy. Keegan was receiving 15 hours of home schooling weekly as well as 10 hours of ABA to slowly break her in. Another struggle! She resisted initially as she had no exposure to an academic environment or having demands placed on her. She had a trust issue as well. With her medical past she seem petrified that there would be pain involved. She eventually accepted the new way of life



and really enjoyed it. Las Vegas temperatures were soaring in the 120's! We had to worry about exposure and dehydration. Jeff's youngest brother, Randy, and his wife, Andrea, made a Vegas trip and took Kristy for a pampered night out at Caesar's Palace. Kristy enjoyed fine dining and a bit of luck with the slot machines. Braden earned Student of the Month for his class and got his award at a school assembly. He ran up to the stage when his name was called and proudly accepted his award. While on stage Braden congratulated all the other winners from K-6<sup>th</sup> grade. One of those moments that makes your heart burst with pride!

July started with Braden losing his first two baby teeth, a week apart. A bit early but a milestone nonetheless. On Independence Day Braden & Kristy watched the Las Vegas strip fireworks from his bedroom window. Jeff returned home soon after. We were relieved to be together again. Jeff noticed the children's progress from the ABA. Braden celebrated his fifth birthday with a Sponge-Bob SquarePants themed party. He had a great time and received many of the gifts he had been eyeing at Toys-R-Us. Kristy and Jeff celebrated their 14<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary with an overnight stay at the Paris hotel.



Therapists stayed the night with the kids. Kristy & Jeff were given a suite upgrade for free. Can you say "Ooh Laa-Laa!" They had dinner, saw a movie and partied at infamous Studio 54 into the wee hours of the morning.

In August, Keegan had her now bi-annual MRI. She once again handled it like a champ and the results were perfect. No tumor and still in remission! We headed back to the school district to renegotiate the children's therapy hours & funding and were met with open arms and well wishes. Our financial burden was lifted. Therapy is costly. Workshops, supplies and payroll runs about \$ 3000.00 a month per child! A couple of our therapists returned to out-of-state college so we needed to hire and train new staff. A transitional period, which is stressful and met with resistance by the children. Braden finished up his summer schedule in his autistic class. It was the last time he had a great teacher.

In September we signed Braden up for Kindergym-tumbling class for the typical peer interaction. He interacted well with his



classmates, followed directions and loved learning the tumbling skills. This proved Braden was ready for inclusion at school. ABA taught him the skill of Imitation, which is a huge accomplishment in the world of autism. We went back to his IEP team and designed a new plan, which allowed Braden time in an autistic class, as well as a regular Kindergarten with an aide. Braden started his track break so we decided to take a trip to Thornton, Colorado to meet our newest family member, Connor Patrick Kanoa Hinkle and have a Lappin family reunion. Connor came early! He was to wait for his Auntie Kristy's arrival so that she could be part of the magical moment. As in the meaning of his Hawaiian name, "Kanoa" just needed to be a **free one!** He is beautiful and looks just like his Mommy did at that age. It was nice being around a baby again! Braden & Keegan enjoyed spending time with cousins Christian, Connor and seeing their Grandparents again. That trip also allowed Kristy to visit



her best friend and her lovely family in Colorado Springs. It had been 14 years since they were together last. It was a very special moment for Kristy & Tina!

Braden returned to school in early October. We had his 6-month review IEP and told the team we wanted Braden moved to his home school in regular Kindergarten class only with an aide. Braden proved to everyone that he did much better surrounded by typical peers. He made the transition well and loves his new environment. His ABA prepared him well. Jeff celebrated his 36<sup>th</sup> birthday on the



21<sup>st</sup>. Braden & Keegan took part in Halloween this year. Braden was the spitting image of his Daddy. He was an Air Force pilot and Keegan made an adorable "Dorothy" from the Wizard of Oz. They didn't care much for the candy but enjoyed the trick-or-treating. Braden also had special allergy testing done. It turned out he was severely allergic to a few things he ate everyday. Cow's milk, peanuts & yeast were at the top of the list. Once removed from his diet, his behavior improved and attention span increased. We are striving towards a Gluten & Casein free diet. Keegan

needs to be tested also.

We had a big scare in November. Our staff was fighting illnesses and Keegan ended up with a virus. She became so ill, we had her in the ER fearing a shunt malfunction. She



built up a lot of pressure in her head from all the vomiting. She suffered with unbearable head pressure for days until she was able to stop vomiting and drain the spinal fluid. We were so relieved that she avoided surgery! She was still ill over Thanksgiving so we stayed home and Kristy cooked a small feast. Keegan had no appetite and Braden's new diet didn't allow for most of it. Jeff & Kristy had turkey sandwiches for a week!

Now that December has arrived we are trying to celebrate the season without dwelling on the "moment notice" deployment orders Jeff has received. We had a holiday party for our staff. A small thank you for their dedication to Braden & Keegan's education. We are surrounded by incredible, intelligent and compassionate women. Thank you- Tara, Tearsa, Jamie, Kimber, Stephanie, Cassandra, Kathryn, Dani, L'ynssa, Kim and Lucia! We love you! We have a revolving front door to cover Braden's 25 hours and Keegan 20 hours of ABA. They receive an additional 15 hours of school, occupational therapy and speech. Braden at the dinner table and Keegan in the therapy room. To avoid distractions we hang out in our bedroom. The kids are mastering programs at a rapid speed. It's proof that all the hard work and the combination of therapies have been worth it. We continue monthly Lovaas workshops and scheduling ABA shifts. Keegan will continue bi-annual MRI's through 2006. This is her "**cured of cancer**" date! We are



pleased to see how our children are rising to the occasion, dealing well with their challenges. The children remain our greatest joy and constant worry. We still feel truly blessed! We plan to spend Christmas at home with a special dinner on the strip. Santa knows Braden and Keegan were really "good" this year so there will probably be lots of presents under the tree.

May you and your families remain blessed, safe, healthy and together this holiday season and during the New Year. God Bless you, our service members & their families and America! Merry Christmas & Happy New Year!

Remember, if you find yourself in Las Vegas and have a little free time, call us so we can see you. The more notice you give us the better. We have staff and therapy to consider!

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