



Mike & Jane's Annual Report

DECEMBER 25 2008

Howdy from Texas, where to transplanted Yankees like ourselves it still does not feel much like Christmas season without having to scrape an inch of ice off our windshields three times a week. But we continue to adjust. We have had quite the ramblin' year here, so grab an eggnog or two...



Maggie in Minnesota

2007 ended with a nice Christmas celebration with Jane's family in Wisconsin, *without* any bizarre travel glitches, which for us was pretty unusual. From there we split up for a few days: Mike and Dave headed back to Texas for Boy Scout Winter Camp, while Jane and Maggie took a side trip to check up on Mike's great aunt and uncle (now 94 and 99, respectively). By the time the guys returned shivering from having to sleep out in the cold, and the girls did the same thing just from spending time in Minnesota, it was 2008.

In February, we finally got going on remodeling our guest bathroom, and discovered an entire closet we never knew existed: a sign hanging in the space announced that it had been boarded up on February 28, 1967. It had hung there inside the wall for forty years. We were kind of hoping for hidden treasure too, but all we found was a nest of dust bunnies. Anyway,

we now have a bathroom suitable for visitors, so we hope someone will drop by and put it to good use sometime.

Also in February, Jane had her final reconstructive surgery, so now whenever she puts on a jacket you hear one of those "sproing" noises last heard on *The Six Million Dollar Man*. And she now has to carry a can of WD-40 wherever she goes. Anyway, we are hoping this marks the end of her journey through breast cancer: she checks in with her doctors regularly, and so far all is looking good. Spring Break in March was spent mainly hanging around and resting, since we had plans to be doing a fair bit of running around later in the year.

Our traveling started with Jane's company convention in Washington D.C. in June, where we got right back on track with our dysfunctional airline habits by showing up at her hotel at 2:00 a.m. after a three-hour delay. Next day, while Jane toiled away on writing speeches and folding napkins into origami auto batteries, Mike, Maggie, and Dave rode the metro downtown and took a few walking laps around the Capitol area. At one point, Maggie and Dave wondered why their Dad was practicing standing on one foot: Mike explained that the building behind him was the Supreme Court, so he can now tell people that he has "practiced before the Supreme Court." [Rimshot.] Jane took a dim view of him printing up new business cards for that, though. She was able to get some time to come out and tour eventually, and it was a nice excursion in general.

So. Rewinding back a couple of years: when Jane was first diagnosed with cancer and we were contemplating the rounds of surgery and therapy involved, we all decided we needed something to look forward to, so we began planning a trip to Europe. We made sure to buy trip insurance, since we were positive that at the last minute Dave would get arrested or Maggie would come down with mono or something. But in July the whole thing actually came together...



With Geelhands. In Brussels. With Mussels.

The beginning was not terribly promising, though. Our effort to catch a plane in Chicago was derailed by a rainstorm in Buenos Aires or something, so we wound up in Indianapolis of all places. Naturally, by the time we finally arrived in Chicago we had already missed our connection to Belgium and so lost a day stewing in a Holiday Inn sans luggage. We eventually got on the next day's flight to Brussels, where we were lucky enough to be able to stay with some friends in nearby Namur. The Geelhands showed us around their hometown on the Sunday we arrived, and were exceptionally gracious hosts, making room for us in their lovely home. The next day we drove up to Brugge (or "Bruges," in French – Belgium's kind of like Canada, language-wise, only without so much hockey) to meet up with some other friends: Alex (who until recently worked with Jane at Interstate) and his girlfriend Gretel, who drove in from Amsterdam together. Brugge/Bruges was picturesque and a lot of fun to wander around, as we navigated the repeating array of lace, chocolate, and waffle shops, plus various charming Baroque buildings.



With Alex and Gretel in Brugge/Bruges

Next day we left our friends early, allowing for plenty of time to get to Brussels, return our rented car, and board a train to Paris at our leisure. Since the newfangled American innovation of street name signs has not yet made its way across the Atlantic, it turned out that buying a GPS unit the day before leaving the States was a good move (although now every time Mike hears "*in one hundred me-ters, enter roun-dabout*" he panics). So we found the station just fine. But it took over an hour more to find out where to return the rent car, and we finally turned in our paperwork exactly five minutes before our train's scheduled departure. Luckily, our wild sprint through the terminal was not in vain: we made our train with two minutes to spare, only leaving Dave behind in the station lavatory.

Just kidding. We got to Paris, spent another hour wandering around and trying to figure out how to use the Metro, then finally gave up and had a taxi take us to the hotel. Mass transit and bales of luggage do not go together well. Paris was delightful; we visited many of the major sites (Notre Dame, Eiffel Tower, Sacre Couer, Arc de Triomphe, etc.) with one of our favorites being the Musée de la Orsay. After all that, Dave says he best remembers the chocolate mousse and the lemon Fanta. For Maggie it was probably the crêpes.

From Paris, our trip to Florence was via a couple of sleeper berths in an overnight train, which was a novel experience for us and great fun. The countryside was very pretty, but it seemed that graffiti covered everything in sight that was man made, and some things that weren't. No wonder Europe leads the world in spray paint production.



Some of Michelangelo's lesser-known work

We figured someone had made a mistake when we arrived at our hotel in Italy. In Paris our accommodations were pretty much a double-wide closet, but the Plaza Lucchese in Florence was stylish and spacious, with two roomy suites allotted to us. With a nice view, too:





The World Famous David
– and a statue

Florence was charming, and a wonderful place to wander around. After a couple of days of visiting the old haunts of Michelangelo and Leonardo, visiting the Duomo, several museums, the Bridge Over the River Kwai, and various pizzerias and bistros, we boarded another train and worked our way south.

The taxi driver who picked us up at the train station in Rome informed us that there are “several million” churches in the city. We think he may have been exaggerating, but if so it was not by much. We were already about cathedraled out after the 382 we saw in Brugge, Paris, and Florence, but gamely toured a few of Rome’s, including St. Peter’s and the Church of San Carlo al Corso. Of course we also went to the Vatican Museum and Sistine Chapel, but that actually wound up to be kind of tiring. As when visiting Versailles, one can only take so much Renaissance/Baroque/Rococo art packed into every square inch around you before your brain glazes over and you start longing to see a nice painting of Elvis on black velvet, or maybe some dogs playing poker. Anyway, Mike’s favorite part was touring the Forum, Coliseum, Palatine Hill, and various other Roman ruins, though everyone else’s enthusiasm flagged a bit after the first seventeen miles of walking. And soon it was time to head South.

Just before leaving on the trip, we told some friends about our plan of renting a car to run around Naples, Pompeii, the Amalfi Coast, and various places in that area. We thought this would be fun; they thought we were completely insane. Arriving in southern Italy, we soon figured out why. Rome was enough of a challenge, but Naples was a whole new world: at any given stoplight we were surrounded by dozens of motorcycles, scooters and mopeds, roaring randomly about in all directions, often with toddlers riding between their knees, and generally lacking helmets. Plus the hordes of “Smart” cars and Fiats, 90% of which were sporting significant body damage, zooming around like swarms of retarded bumblebees. All of them constantly used their horns as helpful signs to let everybody know that they were, in fact, in motion. Somehow Mike worked our relatively enormous Ford Mondeo through rush hour without driving into the ocean or killing anyone, and upon locating the hotel immediately decided to leave the car safely parked in the garage until we had to go back to Rome. This was the smartest move we made all trip, since instead of days spent taking our lives in our hands, we hired a driver to show us around instead. After Naples, Pompeii, and the Amalfi Coast, next we drove back to Rome for one last evening, attending Mass at the Pantheon, dinner (at a beer garden, of all places), then a choral concert in the Basilica of Saint Ignatius Loyola, then flew back home. We could of course report a lot more about the trip, but that’s probably enough for you all to know that we got what we had hoped for: some fantastic memories of the four of us together on this adventure.

Once back home, Maggie headed off to a Youth Leadership Conference (actually a speech tournament) in Austin, sponsored by the National Hispanic Institute. This triggered a flurry of interest in scholarships from all sorts of universities, so we are pondering legally changing our last name to Gonzalez.

As school ramped back up, in his last year at St. Paul the Apostle, Dave finally decided to fulfill his religious obligation and give football a try (in Texas, football and barbecue are the state religion). It went pretty well. He is really enjoying his 8th grade year. Maybe too much. He has been at the same school since kindergarten. When Dave graduates, we will have been running to that place almost every day of our lives for eleven years, so this will be a big change.

Dave also had his Confirmation ceremony in November. It has been a big year all around for him. He’s gained about 25 pounds this year alone (without even having discovered



Cathryn, Maggie, & Maddie, Pre-Homecoming



Dave at Confirmation and his Evil Twin Skippy

beer yet – so far as we know), and by the time you get this letter he will probably be taller than Mike. (Compare the Confirmation picture with the ones from our trip.) Although his guitar teacher quit early this year to focus on writing (which we *think* does not have anything to do with Dave – we hope), he is now learning from the guy who taught *him*, and getting pretty good. At least, that is what Brad says: when Dave's playing Ozzy, it is kind of hard to tell.

Maggie continues to thrive at Ursuline Academy. Weekends involve dances, parties, games and commiserating with her friends about how painful chemistry is. She had dates for Homecoming at two different schools (different nights), and had a great time at both. And in October Maggie announced that she was going to get a "Brazilian." Mike and Jane were quite relieved upon learning that meant we would be hosting an exchange student. Iuri Rios, a student in an Ursuline school in Ilhéus, Brazil, arrived soon thereafter. He was very considerate and a lot of fun, and we were thrilled to have him as our guest. Maggie may get the chance to visit him in the Spring, but we will have to cross that bridge if the iron is hot.

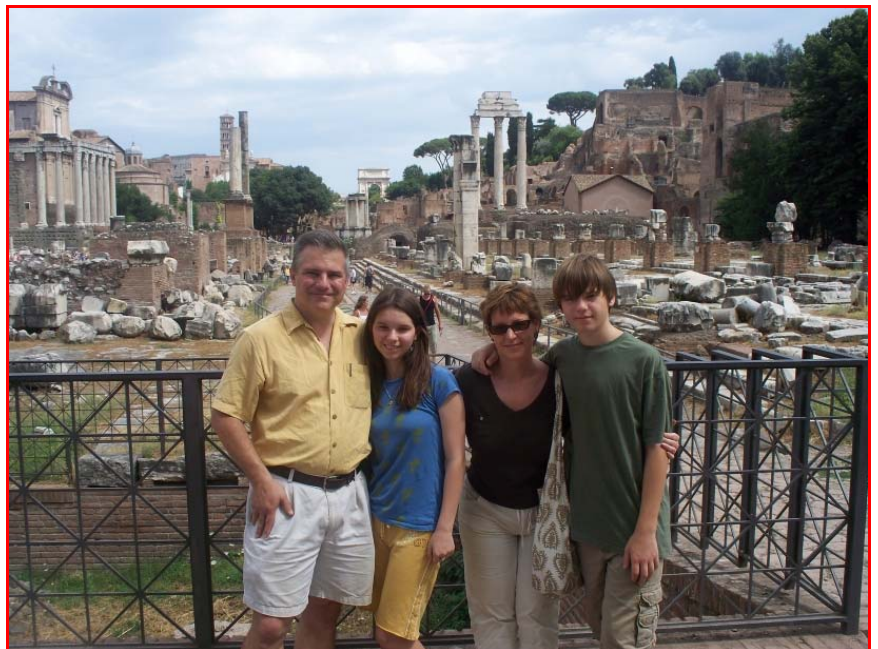
As for Scouts, 2008 included camps for fishing, a Catholic Scout retreat, Camporee, horseback riding, summer camp, canoeing, archaeology, an orienteering meet, wilderness survival, and finally Winter Camp at the end of December. Mike figures that comes to 28 nights spent in his tent, and does not include all the other Troop 728 events. He is almost halfway through his tenure as Scoutmaster, and hopes that by the time he is done he will finally have some clue as to what he is doing. Dave attended most of these, and on December 7 passed his Board of Review to become a Life Scout.

Troop 728 branched out by starting up a Venture Crew (formerly "Explorers, a co-ed Scout group for 15-21 year olds), which Maggie immediately joined. Her first camping adventure featured rock climbing and helping teach wilderness survival skills to Scouts. She had a terrific time.

In career news, Jane is moving into her 20th year at Interstate Batteries and continues to enjoy it. So far they are doing well and actually hiring. She got a new boss this year and appreciates all the changes he's making for a more positive, learning environment. Things pretty hectic now, as there is a lot of work to do AND they are trying to change up all their systems and processes, but it is all good stuff. Mike continues to work as a lawyer doing estate planning, probate, and business law, but is still open to the idea of playing second base for the Rangers.

So, as we take some time to think about our lives today, we remain thankful for all of God's blessings, including our wonderful family and friends. The economy may be tough, and there are challenges ahead for all of us: here's hoping that 2009 reminds us all of what is truly important.

Wishing you health and happiness...



Mike, Maggie, Jane, and Dave