

## OUR YEAR



began much as the one before it did, with me carrying over vacation weeks because projects at work suddenly ramped up "unexpectedly" with a critical deadline of December 31st. So there it was, New Year's Eve, at the office in a sweaty panic finishing up the final reports with project stakeholders calling into work from their New Year's Eve parties to review and approve all of the carefully consolidated and summarized data that represented weeks of overtime, double shifts, sleepless nights, plan changes, tail-chasing, re-starts, and bloody chaos (literally, I manage testing of a medical device that sucks the blood out of people then treats it and pumps it back to the patient) in a marathon scramble to meet the end of year deadline....in other words business as usual.

Carrying over vacation time into the next year has a catch. It needs to be used up within 30 days. So there was time to celebrate the holidays finally. But Christmas in January just doesn't seem the same after the holiday music stops playing on the radio and dead evergreens line the streets awaiting pickup by the refuse company. So I knew what had to be done! As the cold winds rapped against the windows, I planned a trip to Florida for the family. Disney here we come! But just before the flight was booked, someone in a position of higher authority decided that it was best not to subject the kids to a nice



vacation two years in a row (read "money in the bank for new windows later in the year"). The trip was off. Maranda and Samantha had entered Kindergarten and a totally new school environment. Suddenly faced with a large classroom that was twice as crowded as their pre-school class, and with a much broader "spectrum" of children, the start of the school year left Maranda overwhelmed trying to adjust to a noisy group of obnoxious children who were still struggling to learn their letters and numbers. Some mornings found Maranda curled up underneath a table reading books to escape the chaos! Samantha was the Kindergarten social butterfly...seemingly eating up the chaos and lack of structure that her sister found unacceptable. Fortunately, with a different teacher and smaller class of like-minded students in First Grade, Maranda is a social butterfly and absolutely LOVES school. Samantha is a bit more reserved next door in her own classroom, but they are both enjoying an opportunity to make their own special groups of friends and

learn about independence. As Kindergarten came to a close in June, the twins were ready for full-time summer fun with Mommy. However, I'm not sure that Amy was ready for the "fun".





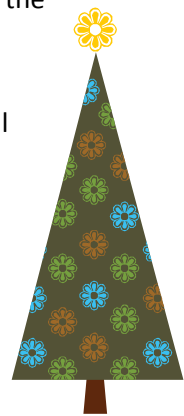
Part of the busy schedule of the parents of twin girls is keeping up with little girls' dreams of being ballet dancers. The girls took ballet and tap dance lessons with one of their best friends last school year. Late afternoon lessons made it possible for me to pick them up from lessons a couple of times last spring. What chaos. A small dressing area with what seemed like hundreds of crabby little girls and psycho Moms (usually with Starbucks in hand, cell phone stuffed between shoulder and ear, and crying babies in tow) struggling to get tap shoes and tutus adjusted in time for their "turn" in the dance class. Groups of kids were shuttled in and out like cattle every twenty minutes or so while some woman with eyes shaped like dollar and cent signs collected tuition renewals, dance uniform and shoe payments, and sold tickets to upcoming dance recitals. Mothers lined up to buy tickets for unwitting family members who would soon be subjected to an afternoon of "entertainment", sitting through hours of awkward tweens and teens bouncing around in ill-fitting costumes while waiting to watch their little darling parade across the

stage for a minute or two in a glittery outfit that resembled a mortgage payment. Maranda easily recognized the ridiculousness of this charade and was not amused by the chaos that went along with it. She managed to get herself expelled from the dance class just before the recital (though not before we had already purchased her recital outfit). Samantha managed to keep it together through the dance year and performed in two (expensive) recitals, receiving a fabulous three-inch acrylic trophy for her award winning performances as a puppy in one and...well... I couldn't quite figure out what she was supposed to be in the other...but she was fabulous!

Along with school and dance lessons and gymnastics lessons and birthday parties and play dates and pony camp, Maranda decided that she wanted to be an equestrian (cha-ching). She took riding lessons and was preparing for her own shows at the riding academy while Samantha finished out the



dance season. The horses helped her find herself and were actually very beneficial for her in dealing with social situations. The day of her final show was challenging and a little scary for her, but she walked away with two ribbons and a feeling of pride and self-worth that jump-started her on the path to first grade!



The summer came fast, and Amy met the long days head-on with museum membership, YMCA membership, summer camps, play dates, wine, and beer (not necessarily listed in actual sequence or equivalent magnitude). Amy and the girls ran their first half-marathon together and they led the parade to the finish line at this year's Webster Fireman's Carnival.



We did have time for a few short family adventures on weekends and holidays. There was the big trip downstate



for a Garrison family reunion to meet up with cousins the girls had never met or hadn't seen in years, and spend time with their favorite Westerlo cousins, Bridget and Logan! We broke the long trip in half with a visit to the Herkimer Diamond Mine, where we all donned safety goggles and carried hammers out into the quarry in search of the prized Herkimer Diamonds! Then there was



a trip to Niagara Falls where security collected us out of the Niagara River before we potentially slipped in and got swept over the falls.



Fourth-of-July with Grandma Loris brought another opportunity for the girls to spend time with their favorite fire-cracker cousin, Christian! They love spending time with Christian, and when they get together with him the energy they create between the three of them is almost enough to ignite fireworks. An Erie Canal cruise with Grandma Loris was both fun and educational. But the family time I enjoyed the most was when we had a visit from Aunt Irene (**Hurricane** Irene that is). It's not very often that a full-fledged hurricane hits New York State. Although at its closest approach to Rochester it was no longer a category 1 hurricane, a strong and sustained gusty wind provided our lakeshore community with just enough wind and wave action to provide the backdrop for a family hurricane party. We enjoyed making hurricane treats and ventured out into the wind to experience the forces of nature. Although it was fun for us on the edge of the storm, just a few hours to our East the hurricane flooded many communities and caused widespread damage from which many are still recovering.



The coming of Fall in our family is a time to celebrate many birthdays. In early September, as the stores are decorating for Christmas and pricing Valentine candy in the stockroom, we are planning for major events on a similar scale. It is time to start celebrating the birthdays of all of the Ty Beanie Boo animals. These events rival the celebration of the birth of the Christ child himself. Decorations are made and hung around the house. Cakes are baked and presents are wrapped. Joyous songs of celebration are sung to wish the tiny, bug-eyed bean bag animal a happy day. In comparison, celebrating the birthdays of their human family counterparts' pales by comparison. But then again they are still at the magical age of six, when their world centers around playtime and imagination. So we help with the fun (while secretly pretending that some of the celebration is directed at us for being such wonderful and beloved parents). Keep in mind that there are about a dozen Beanie Boos in our "family", each with a different birthday. The exception is for the twin panda bears who share the same birthday. For their birthday, we celebrated with Great-Grandma and Grandpa Thorn. Grandma made home-made angel food cake for the celebration, and brought out party favors (thanks, Grandma!).



As Halloween approached, nearly every weekend brought cold, flooding rains. The much awaited annual adventure in "Pumpkin Town" was a wash-out. However, the anticipation of Trick-or-Treating made up for any lost weekends of fall fun. A couple of weeks before the big day, Amy and I traveled to Connecticut for a dear friend's wedding. The girls stayed with Grandma Mia and Poppy for the weekend and carved Jack-o-Lanterns that came home with them. The weather stayed unusually wet and nights stayed above freezing. On the day before Halloween, the Jack-o-Lanterns promptly rotted and collapsed into a flattened pile of mush overnight...never having even been lit and enjoyed. A quick trip to the nearest farm market for some emergency pie pumpkins (the only ones left) was in order. I helped with a



quick carve job and they were ready for the front porch in time for the big night. The twins (dressed as Cinderella and Ariel) were full of energy and prepared for a long night. Amy and I took turns with them, but it was clear that they hardly needed adult supervision as they raced ahead with their neighborhood friends. They wouldn't give up until their pumpkin buckets were so full and heavy that they could no longer carry them. It

was a phenomenal haul for two kids who don't really enjoy candy. But fortunately, there was lots of good stuff that Mommy and Daddy like!

As we come full circle to the Holidays once again, I find myself in the same position at work as I was when this letter opened. The schedule at work is ever changing and although there was once some hope of slowing down and postponing projects until next year, it now looks as if all projects will be due again at midnight on December 31st. But I have adopted a new motto..."Merry Christmas...Make it Happen!" So I am! The shopping is finished, the music is playing, and the nostalgic feelings that surround the passing of another year are ever present (especially when I look in the mirror or at my kids and notice they aren't "little" anymore). Hopefully the spirit of Christmas is already with you and your loved ones and you will find a way make the magic and the memories happen. Here's wishing you a special 2011 Holiday Season and a bright new start in 2012!!



*Season's Greetings!*

*The Vallones*

*(Don, Amy, Samantha, & Maranda)*