

What is in a play?

I was sitting here wondering why I decided to get involved in another play right after the last show I was in. The first play was extremely fun, but it cut into time I could spend with family and friends. Getting right back on stage kept me from spending a lot of time doing Christmas shopping for my family. This show will take up all of January and again cut into time for family and friends.

Of course, since I am an amateur actor, the only pay I receive is the emotional support of the audience. That is what makes it all worthwhile. That emotional surge the actors get from the audience gives life to the show. It is what makes a live show so much different than a movie or TV show. The actors live, breath and die with the reaction of the audience.

The sound of applause, the gasp of tears, the bubbling of laughter make an actors day. We put in a lot of time for those few shows. And our audience rewards us.

So, that is why I do it. I live for that recognition. It is a good feeling.

The Phantom Bowls For Pizza or... The Bucks Meet the Ducks

New Years Day... the traditional wrap up to the holiday season. Parades, football, and one more day when you can indulge in snacking and not feel guilty. After going to bed following New Years Eve festivities around 4AM, I woke to find a great documentary on the making of the stage production of *the*

Phantom of the Opera. All of the build up, near closing turmoils leading up to its West End premiere, and backstage drama were retold.

The first of many traditions came next: the viewing of the Tournament of Roses Parade. Always a toss up as to which network to view it on as there are so many that broadcast it. I always enjoy Al Roker's colorful play-by-play full of moans and groans from his one liners but he is never boring. A few of the highlights for me were the Ohio State School for the Blind Marching Band. When I heard that they would be marching their way through the five-mile route, I was amazed. Each member had a guide beside them tapping their shoulder for right turns and left turns. Really amazing... they never did say how they learned the music, but if Beethoven can compose some of his best music deaf then why can't a blind group play and march?

Another highlight was the float for Dick Van Patten's Natural Balance Dog Food. It featured a number of various breeds of pooches snowboarding down an incline and then being taken back up the hill in a motorized contraption. Really adorable! Sorry, could not find a video to show.

A non-highlight came with a half hour to go in NBC's coverage. Our affiliate decided to go to a Time-Life music of the 60s infomercial. So we decided to turn over to ABC in time for the Capital One Bowl in which Penn State defeated LSU 19-17 in the Mud Bowl.. **GO BIG 10!**

Then... **the granddaddy of them all...** the 96th Rose Bowl Game. Time to see if Coach Tressel could lead the Bucks out of their bowl game funk and "Young Terrelle Pryor could finally silence the critics and come out fighting! First Buckeye drive proved just that: five plays=7 points! I have to laugh every time Brett ("the Mustardburger") Musberger exclaims "nothing doin". Sounds like a good drinking game to me.

Ok... time for my gripe pitch. Amidst the homemade pizza we were enjoying, the Duck's Marching Band was shown playing the National Anthem at pregame. They were then given three or four minutes of halftime air time and the song they played was easily recognizable as "Highlights from Back to the Future." If you throw in the yellow and green pukey windsuit outfits and ball caps they remarkably call uniforms, we were left with a rather unimpressive performance. I wanted to shout out a rather colorful expletive that rhymes with Duck and it was not "Shucks."

And where pray tell was the Best Damn Band in the Land (sorry, but that is their official designation... many people would not recognize the acronym TBDITL)? If you count the time they were shown being covered up by those nay saying analysts behind the desk at halftime and the 30-45 seconds they were shown unimpeded, then I guess you could say they were given equal screen time? **NOT!**

But the outcome of the game kicked off the New Year in splendid fashion. Sophomore Quarterback Pryor lived up to the remarkable hype put on him by the media and fans (He's only a sophomore, people!) by having a season day. The Bucks erased all memory of the horrendous defeat by that other Pac-10 team early in the season to rest by beating the Ducks 26-17. So much for the critics... most of which put the Buckeyes in the L column. Including a former Michigan player (Really... where do they get these guys?)

So... 2010 has kicked off to a fine start in the sports arena... let's hope that it continues all year long... **GO BUCKS!**

 **And Now A Real, Non-Nike Band Uniform:**

Waiting, and more waiting

My daughter, her husband and their children are on their way home. It is a long drive from Ohio to Mid Florida. I talked to them when they were north of Lexington KY and then again when they were north of Macon GA. From what I can determine that was about 12 hours of driving. They have 6 to 8 more hours to go. The father in me is waiting for that call to say they made it safely.

I'm not sure if I worry and fret more than most parents, but sometimes it does feel like I do. Then again, I am worrying for two parents.

My wonderful holidays will be complete when my daughter and her family make it home. Then I can worry about the more mundane things. Like daughters in College. Or daughters who just got married. Daughters who have been married for a few years. Do they have what they need? Are they doing well. Are any of them sick. Is there an alligator in the back yard? ☐

Yes, I love my children. All of them. The girls I helped raise, and the men they picked to join our family. I'll continue to worry and wait.

Ringling in the New Year

I was supposed to celebrate the New Year with friends. My daughter and her family were supposed to head out from Toledo last night. This did not happen. They had to get some service on their vehicle and this delayed the packing for the trip. A late dinner and some traditional New Year's Eve food was shared with my daughters, sons and Grandchildren. It was another wonderful evening with family.

I was disappointed that I was not able to spend the evening with friends, but I was able to spend time with my family. I don't get to spend as much time I as I wish I could with any of my daughters. Any time I get to spend, I enjoy with all my heart. I try to spend as much time as possible with them. I was able to spend four additional hours with my Florida family. I JUMPED at the chance.

I had no games with friends, but a granddaughter sitting on my lap while watching "Muppets' Treasure Island". No streamers, party poppers and noise makers, but hugs from daughters and grandkids.

Family and the New Year. I'm not sure if there is a better way to bring in good luck for the coming year.

A day in the life of a car photographer

I had to write this up for work, and I figured it would make a pretty good blog post as well. Some may be edited from the original:

I wake up and first thing charge my devices if I haven't the day before- the handheld every time, the camera battery maybe every other time. After eating and getting ready for the day I will turn on the computer, plug the handheld into the USB port on the computer, and while waiting for the Windows mobile software I will load the web browser and go to the web site. By now the mobile software has loaded (seems to take forever, and often doesn't load so I will have to either turn the handheld off and back on or unplug and replug it into the computer), so I will click to connect without setting up the device. On the handheld, which is still on the sync screen from the last upload, I will select the right dealers and download. Back to the computer and web, I log in and one at a time go to the dealers for the day and the missing photo report page for each one. For most I have to do nothing but select print (I used to sort the list first, but have since learned that the printout is sorted by stock number even if the list on the screen is not). For my Oak Park store, I have to select all cars first. I used to only select new, but whenever Doug (used car manager) is working he stresses the priority of the used cars. I think this is unfair to Tim since he's the used car guy over there, but I can't really argue with the customer. Fortunately Doug seems to be off most Fridays.

So after syncing the handheld and printing the missing photo reports, I am ready to head out. I put the battery back in the camera if I charged it, check to make sure I reinserted the memory card the night before, then put everything in the camera bag (handheld included). I put the missing photo reports on my clipboard, then take the clipboard, bag, and printer bin (in cold weather I bring it in each night) and head out to the car. The bin goes in the trunk while the clipboard and bag go with me in the car. On to the first

job. What time I leave depends on the day. Oak Park means I leave earlier because that dealer takes longer. I may only have my Elmhurst dealer on Friday so I will leave for that one after lunch to make sure more cars are ready, back from detail.

Arrival- time to walk the lot. When walking the lot I will mark off each car by the row or section it is in so I can find it again later. I generally look for stickers in the window, and at one dealer I can also check that I marked off a car on the windshield with my marker (I only got into that habit at one dealer for some reason). Of course, with this so far wet winter, checking for our mark on the windshield is difficult since snow usually covers it. After walking the lot, I will plug in at some of the dealers (in Naperville I wait until the end since the outlet is out of the way, and a couple others don't require stickers so no point plugging in until the end at these places). I will usually talk to my contact at this point to go over the list, though a couple don't really want to be bothered unless there's a question about whether or not to do a car (clean but not detailed, in a place that may indicate it is sold, damaged, etc.). After verifying the list, I will get the keys. Usually I get them all, but if there is another vendor around I may have to coordinate and share with them. Sometimes keys are out- as mentioned another vendor may have them, or a sales person, or repair. Really, they can be with just about anyone. At sites with computerized key boxes the system may tell me who has the key, but for manual systems such as keys on hooks I am on my own. Usually I will just take what keys are there and come back for the rest when I'm done- I don't like bothering the people there unless I have to. So, with the keys on my key ring (so I don't lose any) I will fetch the first car and bring it around. Unless I am losing the light of the day and have to scramble to get the pictures done immediately, I will start

with the handheld. Before starting, I need to make sure the wireless has connected to my router by clicking on the wireless icon at the top of the home screen (only screen that shows it in the handheld software) and making sure it shows my router in the wifi box. If it doesn't, I turn off the wifi by clicking in the wifi area, then turn it back on. Rarely, if it still doesn't connect (and the router is verified to be on) I will have to go to settings on the handheld, connections, and then wifi, and play around with the settings until it shows I am connected to my router. At my Naperville store I will skip this entire connection step (I may even turn wifi off and leave it that way so I am not bugged by the constant "connect to..." popups) until I am ready to print all the stickers and the invoice. So anyway, most cars are in the handheld so I can just select the right stock number (after selecting the correct dealer first on the home screen of course, then selecting the "no photos" option). For those that aren't I will check to see if the car is already there and has photos by refiltering to show all used cars, and if not I will manually add the car with the add vehicle menu item. I suppose it would be faster to just skip looking and just go right to the add item- if a VIN already exists it will find it that way and the stock number box will be filled. In this case I will jump immediately to the photos screen to see if it has photos already, marking it for restickering later if it does.

At this point I will go through the screens and adjust the mileage, make sure the correct style is selected, add the appropriate colors (choosing generic colors when I can't figure out what color the manufacturer meant- some have really odd names and sometimes there is more than one version of the color. Color codes can help, but not all manufacturers put them on the door and some of the color names are so long the color code doesn't show on the handheld), add "Cloth" or

"Leather" (occasionally "Leatherette" or "Vinyl"), etc. By the way, when checking for the transmission type sometimes the field is blank. In this case, if the car is an automatic this will be a big clue that I will have to deselect "manual transmission" under the mechanical options tab and find the automatic transmission in the installed options. Once I view it and discover what "speed" the transmission is, I will quickly go back to the screen where the transmission type is and change it as oftentimes the automatic has one less than the manual. Once this is done, I will head to the options and go over what the car has, starting with exterior. A couple special notes here- often it shows that the mirrors are heated, but most of the time there is no evidence of this so I will have to deselect it and select our "power outside mirrors" option in its place. Also, if the vehicle has a power sun/moonroof, this is very often not shown on this page and will have to be added under installed options. There are others, but sun/moonroof is by far the most prevalent. Next I will look at mechanical for a couple of the options- most on this page I just have to trust the car has. Wheels (sometimes under exterior) and transmission are the biggest things here. Next up is the safety tab where I check primarily for the airbags (sometimes unchecked, probably by the dealer so in this case I leave it unchecked even if it has the airbags) and also look for "OnStar" here (usually in the interior options but sometimes shows up here). Last tab I go to is the interior options. There is so much to check here that it takes the longest. While going through the installed options, I make a mental note what doesn't show up and look for them in the installed options. Now that the installed options show the details, I have to read them to make sure I can select them. For example, I have found that that the rear DVD system option might show that headphones and remote are included, but since these are used cars these are often *not* included as they tend to get lost so unless I see them I cannot select this installed option but instead have to settle for our own "rear entertainment" or "DVD system" option. Any options I

still can't find listed I will have to go back to the appropriate tab and add our generic option. Note: some older cars have no VIN explosion so I have to painstakingly find each generic option that is listed, and even add some on the installed option screen if important enough. Fortunately most cars are new enough that they are in the handheld.

Once I finish the options, I head to the sticker screen (some dealers require pricing to be entered, but I don't serve anyone who does) and select the appropriate sticker and buyer's guide then print (unless I am at my Naperville store where I save printing until the end. If this is the first sticker at the dealer for the day I will verify the printer options and margins. Next, the billing screen where I check off the correct option before clicking done. Finished with the handheld, I turn it off, retrieve the stickers from the printer, move the car to the photo-taking spot if not already there (often I park the car by my car so I can retrieve the stickers quickly), take out the camera, and shoot the round of pictures. When it's getting dark or I am shooting indoors, especially for the interior shots I will often take more than one shot. If I can, I will lean the camera against something to keep it steady when shooting the interior. Sometimes I have to use the flash but I try not to if possible. I switch between four camera settings: P and closeup if the flash is needed, no flash and mountain if not. Each setting is useful in different situations. When shooting, I will skip any shots that will show damage such as dents or heavy scratches. Once I finish the shots, verifying each on the camera screen and reshooting when necessary, I turn the camera off, roll up the windows, put on the stickers (taking down any if necessary- usually buyer's guides), and repark the car. I will also make note on the missing photo report of the order of the photo set- 1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc and write our mark on the bottom corner of the windshield, at least at the one store I do this

at. Then it's on to the next car.

Once all the cars are finished, I return the keys I have and check for any keys I didn't get the first time. I may have to ask around at this point. Then I repeat the above process for these cars. One note, at any time I may have to towel down, squeegee, brush off, or wipe off some smudges on the cars. This is all part of the service provided to the customer. Don't want any of the cheap companies to steal our customers, right? ☐ It takes longer, but is necessary. A dry summer is so much better than a wet winter...

Once finished with all cars, I will reprint any stickers for cars that have photos but are missing the stickers, put them up, and mark "reprint stickers" in the billing tab on the handheld for that car. Then I will print out two copies of the invoice- one for me and one for the customer, and see my contact to sign them. I may have to take the dealer copy to their accounting office, get a PO, or both. Once done, I exchange goodbyes, unplug, and head to the next store, or home if this was the last. At home, I will take everything in- the camera bag, my clipboard, and the printer during the winter. I may rest at this point, but before I go to bed sometime I will connect the handheld to the computer, wait for the mobile software to load again, click the button to connect without setting up on the mobile software dialog, go to the sync screen on the handheld, and choose to upload. Once it begins I will remove the memory card from the camera and insert it into my computer. Once the explorer window pops up, I will go to the picture folder and then copy all the pictures to the folder I have set up on my hard drive by doing a ctrl-a and dragging all of them to my hard drive folder. Then I will go to that folder and start going through the pictures, saving the best of each shot and deleting the rest. Sometimes the

best shot will be too dim (common for flash shots) or too bright. For these pictures I will load them into Paint Shop Pro and adjust the brightness. Rarely, I will have to adjust color- for some reason I sometimes get shots that are way too blue. I may have to crop off part of the photo if the car isn't centered properly or something undesirable shows up in the photo (like a light wire at the new Glenview store used for the indoor shots). These are the only things I will do to the photos- nothing else. Anything else can be considered unethical, like "fixing" damage. Most of the time damage will be fixed anyway by the dealer, but that is up to them. Better to just delete such photos. Anyway, getting off my soapbox, once I have gone through the photos, I will rename them according to the stock number of the car from the order I wrote down while shooting, then load up the photo uploading program. In this program I will import the pictures, then match them up for each dealer I was at during the day. Before uploading, I will verify the cars match the descriptions and that the order looks right. Then I will upload. As soon as the upload is complete I will close the program, go to the web site, close out the invoice, delete the pictures from the memory card (which I had saved up to this point in case something went wrong), safely eject the card and put it back in the camera, unplug and turn off the handheld, and if early enough charge up the camera battery (every other time unless I had a very busy day) and handheld. If there isn't enough time before I go to sleep, I will save charging for the morning.

GOODBYE To 2009!

As if the month of December 2009 wasn't negative enough for our family, we spent the last days of the year with the stomach flu – all 6 of us. It's just an interesting end to an

interesting month, and I have to admit I am glad to see 2009 go. Hopefully, a year like that only comes along once in a blue moon... Actually, after reading about [blue moons](#), I'm hoping our family's bad luck years occur much less frequently than even a New Year's blue moon, which we will enjoy this evening.

But my point is, have a happy and safe New Year's celebration! If you drink, don't drive, and if you drink and drive, you're not invited to read my blog anymore.

Happy New Year to you and yours!!!



Bring Out The Old... Bring In The New

AH... 2009, where have you gone? Some really high points and some really low ones. Lets deal with the low and end on a high (not **THAT** kind).

- We lost Michael Jackson who was one of my favorite performers growing up and even throughout his wierdness was a genius.
- Aunt Carol is still hanging on however little. But good thing... the doctors did not give her until Christmas and she is almost to the new year of that we can be thankful. So, I guess that can be a good thing

disguised as a bad.

And now the GREAT which looking back can easily outweigh the bad:

- Back in January, after being passed over for a role in a WCCT show, my brother recommended me to the director of *Meet Me in St. Louis* and that led to three unforgettable shows at a new favorite venue. I also met some great friends through the VPs some of whom have also transported to the WCCT. When one door closes, another is soon to open up. Good words to live by.
- Last Spring, I got to take another bite out of the Big Apple while once again assuming my role of Manny for the best friends ever. Buses notwithstanding.
- The return of *Star Trek* to the big screen... nuff said.
- A Halloween road trip to the Big City with loads of friends.
- ***THE YANKEES WIN TITLE NUMBER 27.***
- The evilness of one Mr. Henry F. Potter.

Of course, we cannot forget the fact that I do have a job in this turbulent economic time and have reasonably good health and a loony bin of a family (wouldn't have it any other way) and the best group of characters anyone could possibly hope for that I love to call my friends and second family. Thank you all. **Happy New Year and may 2010 bring you good health, good times, and good fortune.**

Year Number Six

It is now the 30th of December. 6 years ago my wife of almost 20 years died. Today is a day to remember all the good times. It is also a day to remember the bad times. That was what

marriage was all about. There were good times and bad times. They all need to be remembered. Today is one of the days I set aside to remember.

A few days late, but...

it was an almost perfect Christmas.

The day started with going to a movie with my grandchildren, their parents and my youngest daughter. The movie was not my first choice, but it did impress my grandchildren, and I was happy to be there.

Then came dinner with my wife's family, with all of my daughters and their respective husbands (if any), my grandchildren. Dinner was very good. Turkey, hot and cold vegetables, bread, stuffing, jello, pie, cookies, cake were all shared. Good talk with wonderful company.

Presents were unwrapped and almost everyone enjoyed themselves. One young man did not want to be part of the Christmas festivities, but that comes with his age. My day was filled with family and good times.

Feelings of loss also were in the house. Parents who lost children, a husband who lost a wife, the loss of a good friend, and the loss of grandchildren. These losses colored the gathering, but did not overwhelm. Colors that enhanced and shadow the picture. The colors give everything depth and meaning.

What is life, if not sharing good times and loss. That makes a very Merry Christmas indeed.

A Not-So-Cynical Look At The 2009 Holiday Season

I was thinking about our family's 2009 holiday season, now come and almost gone already, and I was envisioning words to describe this wonderful season, despite the fact that this year ours was peppered with unpleasant familial dramatics. But about a week ago, I made what was a conscious decision to pull myself up from the depths of despair I had fallen into after losing a beloved family member just one week before Christmas. So, in my good humor, I chose 24 of the best words to describe my holiday season, each beginning with a different letter of the alphabet. Here goes...

Avatar – Saw it and actually liked it, despite my typical sci-fi reluctance. But I liked Avatar so much that I'm really hoping the timing and budget work out so that I can see it again in 3D at a more technologically savvy theater.

Big Family Christmas – We traveled to Illinois on Christmas Day and got to take part in a huge gathering of my husband's large extended family. His 92-year-old grandmother, who speaks with a thick east-coast Connecticut accent (and who smoked 3 packs of cigarettes a day from age 16 until age 70!) told many of her infamous stories that had everyone in stitches! After hearing one of Monie's stories, I could have used the words Blue Boob for B, but I will spare you those details... ☐

Christ Was Born – We went to a beautiful church service on Christmas Eve to celebrate and reflect upon the entire purpose of the Christmas holiday.

De... There are two words that come to mind for this letter

based upon certain recent events in my life, but I'm not going to go there; this is to be "A Not-So-Cynical Look..." blog post. So here, D will stand for Dumbledore, since I'm almost halfway through my first Harry Potter book and lovin' it!

Elf – My favorite holiday movie, and we actually had time to watch it this year! It, unlike a few other favorite Christmas experiences, did not lose any magic this year. I still felt that warm and fuzzy "Christmas Magic" feeling after I watched this movie – I'd pull it out more often, but it's not the same unless it's Christmas!

"I love smiling; smiling's my favorite!!" – Buddy The Elf

Friends – We are so blessed to have such wonderful friends, and I can't thank them enough for the things they did and just for being there during this bittersweet time.

Grandparents – We were able to visit 3 of our grandparents this holiday season! Even being in our 30's, we have 3 surviving grandparents among my husband and I – we were blessed to be able to spend time with all of them this year!

Homemade spaghetti – Best. Christmas. Gift. EVER!! My mother-in-law sent us home 4 huge frozen batches of her out-of-this-world spaghetti sauce! AND a large bag of grated Asiago cheese. AND... something I'll save for another letter...

Ice – Drove through plenty of it to reach IL and get back to Ohio on Christmas day. Luckily, traffic was light and travel for us was smooth and safe. The kids were good as gold and slept for the majority of both drives.

Jill – Screwed us over again! This little story begins with Walmart. Since this is "A Not-So-Cynical Look...", I won't go off about Walmart, but I will simply state the facts: the pump in our windshield wiper cleaner fluid dispenser stopped working after the last time we got an oil change at Walmart. We didn't really need it until Christmas night, when we were driving past the city of Chicago, and apparently smog + snow =

some sort of disgusting pollution paste. So visibility is limited, and we still don't know exactly what happened since we've driven this route dozens of times, but basically the express lanes on I-90 seemed to suddenly dissolve into city streets. So now it's 10:30 on Christmas night, and we're wandering around in the city. We can't see out the back of the car since there's tons of Christmas presents, and we can't see out of the front of the car because of the pollution paste. This is where Jill comes in – and she directs us straight back to I-90. Only problem is, our van can't just jump guardrails; we needed an entrance ramp, and Jill was only directing us to streets that crossed over the expressway and didn't actually intersect with it. So we crossed bridge after bridge, and we criss-crossed I-90 until one of those streets had an entrance ramp. Then Jill freaked out and tried to get us off of the expressway again, but she got her power button pressed – we knew our way from there.

Kalachkies – I have a fun memory of a Christmas years ago when my forgetful Polish grandmother was sitting in her wheelchair, instructing my equally Polish uncle and myself how to make kalachkies, a usually delicious Polish cookie. The end results were inedible and referred to as “hockey pucks”. This year at Christmas, my husband's cousin made homemade kalachkies – real ones, no hockey pucks, and they were delicious! Thanks Lilly!

Late night drive – One night, we took the kids out in the car in their pajamas with some snacks, and we drove through the snowy countryside to a town about 30 minutes away for a drive-thru lighted display that's just wonderful. Late night drive could also refer to my husband's and my peaceful drive home (after the unscheduled tour of the city) while the kids were asleep all the way from Illinois to Ohio – nice.

Mashed Potatoes – My mother-in-law is a great cook! I guess it's been awhile since the last time I had her mashed potatoes, because I didn't remember how they tasted. But I

told her the truth after Christmas dinner – they were the best mashed potatoes I've ever had!

Noodles – My mother-in-law's spaghetti sauce also came with EIGHT pounds of whole wheat gourmet organic pasta! I love whole wheat pasta – it actually tastes better, and you don't get the pasta-stomachache / horrible stuffed feeling that can accompany pasta over-indulgence.

Onions – One of my favorite holiday dishes is creamed onions, and it was a nice surprise to see this dish on the Christmas buffet. Fortunately for me, my husband can replicate the taste of his mother's creamed onions – yum!

P.A.S. – Pompous Ass Syndrome – my poor brother-in-law is a victim. Enough Said.

Quiet – With 4 kids and Christmas celebrations spread out over 2 weeks, there really wasn't much of this.

Revenge – My brother and sister-in-law gifted our kids 3 little gumball machines. Cute, but not when you realize how many gumballs needed to be pried out of our candy-obsessed toddler's little hands, for one thing. Who would give little kids gumball machine gifts? Wait, isn't that what we got her 3 kids last year?!? I'm all for re-gifting; I really think it's a smart thing to do. But maybe next year I'll choose our Christmas gifts more carefully...

Snow – It's been snowing on and off for a week and a half here in Ohio. The Chicago area was unexpectedly blanketed with about a foot of snow on Saturday – thank goodness we left for Ohio on Friday night!

Turkey – We ate it and it was good.

U-Turn – see “J” – Jill the GPS. Besides the time we were lost in Chicago, Jill caused us to make at least one other U-turn on this trip.

Vile – Odor in Gary Indiana – I don't care what the Music Man had to say – Gary Indiana STINKS! Literally!!!

Weather – I was worried about it all week, but thankfully, it didn't impede our journey in the slightest.

X-changing gifts – Ok, that's too generic? What else could X stand for, the rating of Monie's Blue Boob story? We x-changed gifts many gifts, and that's all I'm going to say.

Yellow Puppy – When our friends heard about our family's heartbreak, they gifted us a gigantic (stuffed) dog. This cute puppy's headband wouldn't even fit on my head, and she wears a sweater that could probably fit me – or at least all 4 of my kids in it together... so cute and so thoughtful, and the kids LOVE her!

Zoo lights – With everything that was going on during this December, I'm so thankful that we were able to make it to one of our favorite Christmas destinations this year – the Toledo Zoo for their Lights Before Christmas displays. Beautiful lights in a peaceful atmosphere, and if you get there early enough, you can see some zoo animals, which is probably my favorite thing to do in the whole world!

Hope you had a Merry Christmas, and best wishes for a great New Year!!!