

Florida 2011 – Trip Diary – Part 2

Sunday January 16 – We drove over to Congo River mini golf to try to feed the gators they have there, which never works out because it's usually too cold in January for the cold-blooded gators to care much about eating, and this time was no exception. But we spent a long time just watching the gators and their habitat-mate turtles climbing around and over each other, getting in and out of the water – kind of like a free little zoo exhibit. My kids are too little to enjoy or let us enjoy playing mini-golf, so we went to Sizzler for an all-you-can eat lunch buffet. We spent the afternoon relaxing at the house so Hubby could watch the Chicago Bears game and the kids could swim, and we even took a dip ourselves at half-time. For dinner, we went to Medieval Times, which is a dinner show – it is SO fun!!! Everyone is seated around an arena, and the audience eats a Medieval-style feast while watching a show complete with horse, knights, and jousting. You are assigned a seat in a certain color section (we were green – note the crown in the picture below), and you cheer on your color knight in the jousting and games – it's a blast!!



After watching the knights duke it out, Grandma took the kids back to the house and we took Jamy on the extreme go-karts at Fun Spot. The track called The Vortex is wicked; you wind up and around 3 or 4 times until

you reach the top, and it's strange to be up so high in a go-kart. But you don't really have time to think about that, because there is a steep drop down, followed by a couple of hairpin / bowl-like turns that you have to navigate as driver of the kart! Super fun, though not for everyone. We thought this is what caused Jamy's back injury that ended up plaguing his trip, but turns out it was something else. And we took our daughters on these go-karts later in the week – with helmets of course – and our oldest hated them and wouldn't let me use the accelerator; it was SO frustrating!! Our daredevil 6-year-old Sammie loved it though, and I found her to be a passenger more willing to go my speed – pedal to the metal!!

Monday January 17 – We ate breakfast at Sizzler at their breakfast buffet, and then headed out to Universal Studios as planned despite the dire forecast of rain all day, and the weathermen were not mistaken. It was like a monsoon when we arrived, and scarcely let up all day. Many of the rides at Universal are indoor, but Hubby and I did take a bit of a gamble (and lost) when we got in line for the new Rip Ride Rockit coaster. They had to shut the ride down when they saw lightning, and wouldn't you know it, we were first in line! After investing that much time waiting, we really didn't want to get out of line, but the kids were waiting with Grandma and Jamy, so we called them to see if they were ok and able to stay dry. We waited probably about 20 minutes, and it was fun to try to read the different hand signals and procedures the staff was doing to see if we would get to ride soon or not. Finally, they opened the coaster, and we were first – test rats. This coaster looks more intimidating than it is, mostly because the first lift is straight up, face pointed at the sky, your back is parallel to the ground. Other than that, it's a pretty lame coaster; the best thing about it is that you get to choose a song to listen to while you're on it, and your song choice plays in the speakers behind your head. I chose "Devil Went Down to Georgia" which made a very good

coaster theme song, but the coaster was so tame that I was able to do some air-fiddling along to the song. I heard Hubby beside me rocking out to Gloria Gaynor's I Will Survive, and that seemed like fun too, but I wasn't about to wait in line again for this ride. The other thing that stank about the Rip Rockit is the rain – riding a coaster in the rain is not a lot of fun. The rain pelts your face; it hurts and you can't see anything, so it takes a lot of the fun out of it. And oh yeah, this is how soggy we looked when we were done riding:



Most of us made the best of the rain; after all, where we were from in Ohio the weather was sub-zero, so rainy 50's still felt good to us. Our oldest was not a happy camper, however, and she soon grew tired of walking around in the rain, even though Grandma splurged and bought the kids ponchos – I didn't think to bring any, but maybe I will next time. It never does the all-day-rain thing in Florida! It usually rains or storms for less than an hour and then the sun comes back out so we were unprepared for the all day down-pour. But seriously, how could Universal be anything but fun? Even though the rain slowed us down a bit, we were still able to catch our first glimpse of the Wizarding World of Harry Potter – it was very cool!!

Hogwarts castle was amazing, and I guess I must have misplaced the picture I made Hubby take of me in Hogsmeade, which was beautiful at night. We got some Butterbeer, and it was yummiier than the version we attempted at one of our game nights here in Ohio. The Wizarding World has 3 rides, and we

only had time to get on The Forbidden Journey on this day – that's the one inside the castle. While you wait in line, there is plenty to see – it looks like you are on the movie set except better because it doesn't look like a set – it looks real! The portraits move and talk, and there are 3D projections of Harry, Ron, and Hermione that look like real people. As you wind around the corridors of the castle, you get to explore many scenes straight from the books and movies: Dumbledore's office, Gryffindor common room – even the Sorting Hat makes an appearance! And the ride itself is *amazing*!! If you are a Harry Potter fan, this area is a **must-see**!! Though we did have a slight oopsie – while trying to rush over to the Harry Potter World before the park closed, we skipped lunch, so now we were cold, wet, and hungry. It would have been ok, except that once we snaked throughout the corridors of the Hogwarts castle, we learned that the Forbidden Journey ride was down. After waiting in the dark hallway listening to the Sorting Hat give his spiel over and over and on empty stomachs, we had had it – especially grumpy oldest who, if you remember, was not happy with the day at Universal in the rain to begin with. Our torturous wait in the hallway of Hogwarts became so irritating that I wished my husband had bought the flaming wallet we had seen at the magic show – so we could throw it at the Sorting Hat, flames and all! ☐

We did finally get on the ride, and it was awesome, but my oldest neglected to try it – she doesn't like anything faster or more thrilling than the Scrambler. As I said, the ride was amazing, so now we were all famished after a day at Universal. But being budget-conscious we wanted to leave the parks before finding dinner, though I must confess: I was so hungry that the idea of the 'whopper bar' on Universal's City Walk that had turned my stomach that very morning was actually sounding quite good after a day walking around in the rain! We ended up at Denny's, which is a place I hadn't been to in probably over a decade, and while the food wasn't great, it sufficed.

(to be continued in part 3)

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!!!