

Harvey, You Were Awesome

I was thinking that I should get in one more blog post before the New Year. I was going to write a general update about my beautiful family, but before I got to writing it, I found myself thinking of Harvey.

Let's begin at December 26, 2011. My husband and the kids surprised me with a wonderful Christmas gift: they had **all** saved and planned for months to buy us a zoo membership. Our family loves zoos and has had a membership to the local zoo (whichever zoo happened to be local at the time) for as long as Hubby and I have been married. I remember that our most recent zoo membership expired on April 1st of last year – I remember this because I made sure to visit on April 1st for what would be our last visit to the zoo for many months. For budget reasons, it didn't make a lot of sense for us to renew the membership because I was expecting our 5th child in October – what pregnant lady wants to take her 4 kids to the zoo in the summer? Not this one. So we let the membership lapse. I missed our visits to the zoo, but at the same time, plagued by pregnancy related nausea and fatigue, followed by post-cesarean surgery recovery and the joys (and trials) of caring for a new baby brother to 4 other kids, I didn't *really* miss our visits to the zoo...

But then my family surprised me with that membership. Now that I'm healed from the surgery. Now that the baby has stayed with the babysitter a few times and actually liked it. Now that I can take my home-schooled kids to the zoo any time I feel like taking a field trip!

This past week was a great one! Hubby was able to flex his work schedule to spend a lot of time with the family, and we all enjoyed the break, which included visiting the Toledo Zoo. In our travels to zoos over the years, we saw many amazing things and learned many amazing things. Among them:

zoos are GREAT to visit in the winter! Many animals are so much more active in the cold weather, and there are many less people, allowing visiting families opportunities not normally offered (Example: my kids made bird feeders as a craft at the zoo and *loved* it!!).

Being winter, some of the exhibits were closed. Other animal environments were rearranged from the last time we had been there, so we couldn't quite keep tabs on our familiar favorites. We did notice that the Great Apes area was rearranged. There was a sign saying that the Great Apes area was going to be closed for the Lights Before Christmas event, but we saw the gorillas and orangutans, so we didn't think much of it. Until we didn't see Harvey the Chimp. When I got home, I looked in the Toledo Zoo's newsroom online and saw that Harvey had passed away in August. It was sad for me; Harvey's exhibit was one of my favorite stops at the zoo. He was an elderly chimp who loved little kids, and here is a video I have of him playing with my kids. I can't be too sad though; Harvey died in his sleep, at the healthy chimp age of 52 – DOUBLE the average life expectancy of a chimp in captivity.

My other favorite exhibit at the zoo, the orangutan family, was also rearranged – during our visit we saw only the mom and daughter – what happened to Boomer (my favorite zoo animal until Harvey stole the title), the patriarch of the oranges? Such things are commonplace in zoos, and I'm thankful that I once again have a membership that gives me insight to studying the wonderful creatures inhabiting the zoo. As much as I mourn my old favorites, I will be looking forward to watching the new additions as well: baby Lucas the elephant, the new baby tigers soon to be exhibited, and the new addition soon to be announced to the public due any day! Yes, I have inside info! One thing I love doing while visiting the zoo is talking to the volunteers, and one was beside herself with the awesome news of an impending birth! So much so that she

couldn't keep it to herself, even if she was supposed to!
Would I do the same if I was a zoo volunteer? Dunno... but in
the meantime, a HUGE THANK YOU GOES OUT TO HUBBY AND THE
KIDS!!! I've already enjoyed my zoo membership more than you
would have ever hoped for when you planned and saved!! LOVE
YOU GUYS!!!

I wish everyone reading this a very happy and safe New Year!

Here are tribute videos to Harvey the chimp – watch how he
played with my kids! We will miss him!

Meet Marty

Question: What's the best way to dislodge me from a "case of the Mondays"?

Answer: A surprise trip to the zoo on a work day, of course! Hubby knows me so well ☐

Tangent: If you have your own "case of the Mondays", rent the movie Office Space – it's hilarious!

So we took off Monday for the zoo, and we were torn between which side of the zoo to visit – Toledo Zoo straddles a major highway, the Anthony Wayne Trail, and we never visit both sides in the same day because it adds a TON of walking, much of it up long ramps pushing a heavy double stroller. We usually park in the back and opt for the larger side of the zoo, but we have been visiting a lot lately, and since it was a work day and Hubby had to get home at a somewhat decent hour to get back to work, we opted for the smaller side of the zoo. This side might not have many exhibits, but there is this almost-year-old baby polar bear that I've been wanting to see, so it seemed like the right choice – until we saw the sign at the gate that read, "Our baby polar bear, Siku, will not be on exhibit today." WHAT?!? Well, we had already parked, unloaded kids, and walked into the zoo, so visiting the other side was no longer an option. We trudged on, determined to make the best of it.

And lucky us, it all worked out wonderfully! We may not have gotten to see a super-cute baby polar bear, but we got to see a full-grown male polar bear up close, nose to nose – I'm talking within inches. Sure, there was a pane of glass separating us from the polar bear, but that's a given – look

at this:

In case you're wondering, Marty the polar bear (Siku the cub's dad) has a bucket containing frozen fish in an ice block. We watched him conquer the first bucket and devour the fish, and then he bullied the 2nd bucket away from the other polar bear and worked on it for a good 30-40 minutes – we had to leave before he got to the fish from the 2nd bucket. I could not decide which video was best, so I'm just going to post all 4 – they're all under a minute long anyway so they don't take forever to unload off my camera. All of the videos were taken while Marty was working on the 2nd ice bucket. You can see how he dips the bucket in the water and even dives into the water with the bucket in his mouth in order to let the water loosen up the fish ice block for him.

In case you're wondering, being up close and personal with a thousand pounds of polar bear (give or take a few hundred pounds) is really as amazing as it looks!!!

And my two little ones had a great time also – at first my son was afraid of the polar bear, but he got over that once he realized that Marty was much more interested in his bucket than some zoo visitors. Here are the kids posing in an “arctic cave”:



And the kids' favorite part of the day? Climbing on and posing on this mock dung heap near the giraffe exhibit. Kids – gotta love 'em!



BLACK Raspberry – A New Meaning

Labor day weekend was a busy one, but it was packed with lots of fun family time. On Saturday, we packed up the kids and drove out to South Bend Indiana which is kind of a hike but worth it as you'll see in a minute. They have a nice little zoo there, the Potawatomi Zoo, and our Toledo Zoo membership gets us in free in South Bend also. There is also [Megaplay](#), a fun place for the kids (and adults!) to play. But this is the first time we've been to Megaplay when my son is old enough to play there, and he thought the ball pit (perhaps one of the last remaining in the world?) was just about the best thing he's ever seen! After Megaplay, we were all starving, and some research on the internet before we left told us that a favorite place of ours on the way back from South Bend (Dakota's in Elkhart Indiana) had closed. So we were left to find something new, and that we did – there is an excellent BBQ place right across the street from Megaplay. They had the best dessert I think I've ever had: pig ears, which is some kind of fried dough with butter and brown sugar or something else yummy sprinkled on top. I'm not normally a dessert person, but I probably would have taken on all 4 of my kids for a pig ear. It wasn't necessary though, since I ate theirs while they were in the bathroom ☐

Last time I blogged about Megaplay, I think I mentioned how the strip mall where it's located looks like it's from the 80's. I don't know how else to describe it, but every time I'm there, I feel like I've been in a time warp. It's difficult to explain, so I tried to take a video, but it didn't turn out. Next time...

Sunday was kind of a restful day, and each of our two oldest daughters had friends over. They were well behaved friends, and we had fun.

On Monday, my husband had to work unfortunately, and rather than try to pass all day with all 4 of my kids at home, we took off for the Toledo Zoo. I know, 2 zoos in 1 weekend? But what can I say, I am a zoo addict. The only problem was that the zoo was MOBBED – probably the most crowded I’ve ever seen it. Good for the zoo, but not for the mom there by herself with 4 kids trying to navigate a large double-stroller through the crowds. We couldn’t get near the great apes to see them, and the rest of the animals weren’t doing much of anything except for the hippos. Toledo has an underwater viewing glass on the hippo exhibit, and their two extremely large hippos kept swimming past. One opened his mouth underwater, and the other one rose out of the water, opened his mouth REALLY wide and shook his head back and forth; it was great. The hippos made the entire trip worthwhile. Not that a trip to any zoo could ever be a waste of time for me. Even if I can’t see that many animals, there is just something about zoos that make me feel happy and peaceful. Besides, the kids got to play on the playgrounds for a long time, so they were happy too. The only problem was we had such a big day that all of the kids fell asleep on the way home. And the 4:00 nap did not set them up to go to bed at a decent hour to get enough sleep for school on Tuesday after their long weekend. Oops...

We got back home only 10 minutes late (there was traffic! Labor Day, who’d a thunk?) for our dinner date with Dad. Last week we discovered that Friendly’s restaurant has kids’ nights, which means that kids eat free with purchase of adult meals. That means for our family of 6, we leave with a bill of just over \$20 to eat out, and that includes all we can drink (kids too, and they don’t have to get water – they love this!) AND dessert for all of us. But while we were eating, the lights kept flickering; they went out but came back on again. But then they flickered again and went out for good (we still don’t know why, there was no storm or anything). But luckily we had already eaten, so we didn’t really have

anything to worry about. The kids were a little frightened, and of course all of a sudden the 3 girls had to use the bathroom, which had the employees scrambling for a flashlight for us to use. As I held the flashlight for my kids in the bathroom, we had a little talk about Amish people and how they live and how maybe the rest of us are too dependent on electricity. I made a bad joke about my black raspberry sundae since I was eating it in the dark, and that's where I got the title for this post.

So overall, a great weekend, though I should add one thing. At Friendly's, my husband overheard a college-age kid at the next table mutter something rude after our family prayed before our meal – "Jesus freaks". I feel badly for him that he has to think that about people who appreciate taking time to thank God for their blessings throughout their days. We were quietly minding our own business, so his comment was completely unnecessary. We do our thing, he can do his. I didn't even say anything when he and his friends were casually tossing around the f-word during their meal, even though my kids were sitting right next door. But people are people, and as I said, I feel badly for him. Besides, God gave us an opportunity to really help someone before we left the restaurant, and I hope that maybe our kindness can show the light of God to others. Maybe the mutterer was still there to witness God at work.

Hope your Labor Day, your "last hurrah of summer", was safe and happy. Here are some pictures from our wonderful weekend:



Ok, and I have to include the following pictures for the Star Wars fans. Megaplay has all these life-size cardboard cut-outs of Star Wars characters hanging up. Sorry the pictures aren't better, but I took them from far away since I was trying to fit as many into the pictures as possible. Look for them high on the walls, near the ceiling:



And my favorite of the cut-outs – I've always liked Marvin the Martian:



Zoo Snoozin!

Last week I got an email from my friend Carol – she had planned a field trip to the zoo for a ‘Zoo Snooze’ and a few of her students backed out at the last minute. Since the trip was pre-paid, the spots were paid for, and Carol wanted to fill them – so she thought of me, her friend, the zoo lover, and I of course JUMPED at the opportunity!

I took my two oldest daughters since the age requirements for the trip excluded my 3-year-old Disney and of course my almost 2-year-old, who I wouldn’t have wanted along anyway. Poor Hubby had to stay home with the little ones, and how I missed him! (and the little ones) But other than that – Best. Zoo. Trip. EVER!!!

Because of legality reasons, my daughters and I were not allowed to ride the school bus with the rest of the group. So my friend Carol graciously arranged for us to ride with one of her student’s parents who were chaperoning – they were the nicest people! They were actually going to take their pickup truck, but upon learning that they’d have 3 hitchhikers, they switched vehicles to their SUV without complaint – how accommodating! We followed the bus to the zoo, and we hiked across the zoo carting our sleeping bags, pillows and backpacks, and I was EXCITED beyond belief!! We set down our stuff in Nature’s Neighborhood (where the birds were screaming) and walked over to the primate building where we got to watch the primates after zoo hours and listen to a zookeeper talk about her interactions with the primate families. We then went into the Museum of Science building (this is at the Toledo Zoo, don’t know if I mentioned which zoo it was...) into a classroom in the basement to listen to a worker tell about 3 animals – a box turtle, a salamander, and

a rat (my girls were more than happy to volunteer the info that they had FOUR pet rats at home!). After listening to facts about the animals, we got to touch them, and I had already promised myself I would touch it no matter what – not a big deal, I love animals, so I don't have a problem touching regardless of species... except for my fear of frogs, but had there been a frog, I was going to touch it! We switched classrooms and did the same thing with 3 more animals: a cockroach, an agama (type of lizard – cute!), and a fox snake. Because the group sizes for Zoo Snoozes are supposed to be 25-50 people, they had actually paired our group of 11 with a rather large school group from Northern Michigan. When we were in the classrooms doing the animal activities, they separated our groups, and I was so glad because it would have been difficult for our kids to see and touch the animals if we were still combined with the huge Michigan group.

Next we went to the Carnivore Cafe (used to be an exhibit building that housed animals and they left some of the cages up for kids to eat in – they get a big kick out of this) for our snack of pizza, raisins, juice, and animal cookies.



the kids eating in an
animal cage at the
Carnivore Cafe

We then went for a night hike, and walking around the zoo in the dark under the full moon was amazing. We could hear the lions roaring, the snow leopards making cat noises, and when

we walked past the cheetah exhibit, they were quite active. One sprayed a tree, and then he began stalking us, slowly walking toward us and then running at us and jumping on the fence! I didn't have my camera out when he jumped at the fence, but here he is stalking us – listen for the little cheetah “meow” at the end:

The zookeeper said that the cheetahs like to stalk toddlers who can barely walk, and they especially have fun with this during the zoo's Halloween celebration when parents bring their kids who dress up like cute and cuddly things – like little bunnies or other tasty cheetah snacks.

So we took a night hike to the aquarium, and it was neat to see the keepers turn on the lights for us. Even the fish were acting differently at night – some fish appeared that we don't normally see during the day when we come, and others were swimming in schools when they don't usually do that during the day.

After the night hike, we made enrichment treats for the animals – there were four to choose from: melon bombs for the elephants (you make holes in watermelons and stick carrot sticks in there), pumpkin cookies and paper towel tubes for the primates, and snack bags for the elephants. My oldest daughter made primate tubes, and Sammie and I made elephant snack bags – you put an apple, a pear, and a handful each of peanuts and popcorn in the bags and roll them shut and decorate them. We were incredibly surprised the next morning when we watched Louie the elephant (and it was his 7th birthday!) take our treat bags and pop the whole things into his mouth (bags and all!) without even opening them first! Here is a video of Louie eating our bags – too bad I couldn't get out from behind the girl with the ponytail:

After making the enrichments, we went back to a classroom and played an animal training games using a training clicker – I have to get myself one of those and follow the puppy around for a day or two to housebreak him! Wonder when I'll find the time for that? After the game, it was finally time for bed, and we got to choose if we wanted to separate from the Michigan group. We chose yes, leaving them to sleep with the screaming parrots – I get enough of that at home! And sure enough, they reported to us the next day that the birds were up and screaming at 5am. I would not have been too happy about that, especially since we didn't get to bed until 1am! So we took our stuff and slept in one of the classrooms in the basement of the Museum of Science which was pretty neat – it's a well-kept 1930's Works Progress Association building, and we got to wander the winding basement hallways back and forth to the bathroom. Never mind that the building is home to hundreds of frogs and toads – they were upstairs, and I didn't give them any thought.

I think I will end it here and save day 2 of the Zoo Snooze for another post – this turned out to be a rather long post, and even though it's difficult for me to understand, not everyone loves zoos as much as I do. I don't want to bore the heck out of anyone!

Crazy, Rain Day Of Late Winter

I kept telling people that the 60+ degree temperature and sunny skies of last week was premature. This weekend saw a return to more seasonal weather. Saturday, I tagged along to the zoo. Since I had to be back for mass at 6, I drove

myself. I did fine until I exited the turnpike and took the wrong branch off. Fortunately, my mistake was remedied quickly as all I needed to do was turn around and head back.

Upon paying for admission, I decided to get a membership to the place since for some reason, I have been quite a bit of zooing lately. Not that that is a bad thing... as the slogan goes "I Love My ZOO!" and not a bad deal either. Discount prices to many zoos throughout the country plus I can bring a friend free each time. Plus, I got to help a complete stranger by allowing him to get in on my pass.

Because the weather was cold and rainy, our band spent most of the few hours in the indoor exhibits. The little ones spent a large part of it at the indoor play area. They even took part in an activity in which they made toys for the birds! The little one occupied himself with chalk and a beehive. My little buddy!

After the zoo, we checked out Crazy Prices! A very cool store with CRAZY Prices! I picked up a fleece OSU blanket for \$5 which usually runs upwards of \$30. Will come in very handy later tonight! I looked at some hooded sweatshirts that were just as reasonable... BUT... wouldn't ya know... the largest they had was a Medium. I'm sure I'll be back!

After returning and singing at mass, a friend and I closed the evening by watching *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian*. And this leads me to wish everyone a Happy Pi Day. If you don't get the connection, watch the very fun film! We won't get into the hour loss. Just happy that is behind us and can now catch up on a bit on the rest! What a Super Saturday!

I've Always Been Crazy, But It's Kept Me From Going Insane

I had to borrow the title of this blog post from one of my favorite Waylon Jennings tunes because I talk to animals, and some people would say that makes me crazy. Crazier yet is when the animals talk back to me...

As it is always tremendous fun for me, yesterday's visit to the zoo did not disappoint. And while we made our way to the exit near closing time, I was turning over in my head the questions I ask myself and my co-visitors after every zoo trip: what was your favorite animal that you saw today and why? I was having a hard time deciding; everything was great, but nothing stood out as being extraordinary... until my chat with the cheetah. He was looking directly at me, and I said, "Hi Cheetah!" and he said, "Mew." I couldn't believe it, so I said it again, to which he gave me another, "Mew." Now I didn't realize that cheetahs meow and sound just like your average housecat, but upon much research when I got home, this is one thing I learned about an animal that never fascinated me as much as others until it talked to me. From now on, I will always stop by the cheetahs to say "hi" because I think we are now buddies. I also found a cute little video of cheetahs meowing, much like my new friend at the Toledo Zoo!

Staycation

Even if my plans for travel fell through, I was sooooo not at all disappointed in my time off. It began last Sunday when I was invited to attend services at my friends' church. I thought the service was very well done. A timely sermon (even if the pastor attempted to parallel it with an hour in the life of Jack Bauer).

Monday, I visited the zoo with the same friends... minus admin who was stuck working. But [taylhis](#) and company had a great time, as always. I then went to auditions for the dinner theatre that I will be part of Valentine's Day weekend. I hope by now that the cast has been set as the director was lacking a few key roles. As I previously mentioned, the play involves improvisation... just the word alone scares me. But after learning who my character is... I am so ready for my new challenge.

Tuesday night, I introduced my friends to the cinematic adventures of Harry Potter. I am pleased to say that all enjoyed the movie. I agree, that while the movie does take a certain amount of liberties, as a whole the movies are really entertaining.

Friday night, I watched *Mystery, Alaska* for the first time. I really enjoyed the "adult take on *The Mighty Ducks*."

Saturday and Sunday nights were spent with some of my new friends of the Village Players. Megan and I went to Mary's and played Disney Scene-It, Movie Scene-It, more Trivial Pursuit, and Megan and I stayed and played cutthroat Scrabble with Mare and Trav.

And the climax... [Mary](#), Travis, Jen, Megan, and I went to see

Sherlock Holmes on the huge Rave screen with Digital Sound and Picture. I must say that the ads for the movie do not do the movie justice. THANK GOODNESS it was not all Robert Downey, Jr. with his shirt off... and very little of it actually was.

What we did get was a superb mystery, action thriller in the finest tradition of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's characters. The chemistry between Downey and Jude Law (as Dr. Watson) was great. Irene Adler and Inspector Lestrade (two other Doyle creations) were also instrumental elements of the movie. The way definitely paved the way for a return to late 19th Century London. We definitely left the movie pleased and (myself, at least) am ready for the sequel.

So sometimes, the best vacations are spent right here in the backyard.

My Favorite Amphibian

Recently, a friend and fellow tangents blogger wrote a [blog post regarding her bucket list](#) – for those who haven't seen nor heard about the movie of said title, a bucket list is comprised of things you want to do before you die. Her post got me to thinking about my bucket list, and maybe I'll post it in the future. For now, I know that one of the items on my bucket list – or many items, depending upon how I write it – will involve seeing certain species of animals; many of them endangered and rare. If seeing rare animals is on my bucket list, then I can cross off one item – last week I got to see several specimens of the [Kihansi Spray Toad](#) – an animal that is considered *extinct* in the wild!



Given my intense fear of them, I never thought that a frog or a toad would be on my list of animals to see – but the Kihansi Spray Toad is actually kinda cute! For me, it seems that the more brown and dry the amphibian, the more it creeps me out – not including salamanders, which I don't have a problem with at all. I'm not at all frightened by the beautiful blue Poison Dart frogs or other colorful species, which is strange since those are the ones that tend to be poisonous and harmful to humans. Weird. So anyway, I think the Kihansi Spray Toad is both extremely fascinating and very cute!

The Toledo Zoo is the only place in the entire world where people can view these special little toads who were first recognized as a species as recently as 1996. Not only that, it is estimated that over half of the earth's entire population of the toads live in Toledo. I am so glad I decided to venture over to the Museum of Science in the Toledo Zoo last week to see the spray toad! It was the highlight of my zoo visit; all of the other animals were kinda lethargic. Oh, there is one more thing – my 10-year-old daughter got pooped on by a bird in aviary! She was a really good sport about it, and it just **plucked** right out of her hair – no harm, no **fowl**. My daughter's unfortunate accident:



It was neat to see the local wildlife congregating in the unused Hippo-quarium. It's too cold for the hippos to be outside, but the ducks have a nice place to swim – who would have thought about what a group of ducks look like from under the water?



My 3 daughters fit into one giant egg!



This was taken on a different day, but I had to put in this

cute picture of my 2 youngest. My little guy is learning to say "CHEESE!" for the camera ☺



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!!!

Putting The Fun Into Labor...

Well, it was a last-minute attempt at a Labor Day outing with friends, and even though we strayed from our original idea of going to a Lake Erie-area haunted house and drive-thru zoo, we had LOTS of fun!

We went to the Toledo Zoo, always a great zoo, even if this Labor Day Saturday of 2009 equated to being one of the most crowded we've ever seen that zoo. It was just over 80°, so the animals weren't all that active, but we did get to see Louie, the "baby" elephant (who is now 6 years old and awaiting the completion of construction of his very own zoo exhibit area) lying down and taking a break, which was cool. We also saw one of their huge hippos swimming in the underwater hippo-quarium, which is always a treat because you can see a humongous hippo swim right past up close. After the zoo, we ate at one of our favorite places in the Toledo area – Nick's Cafe on Reynolds (not sure if it's actually Toledo or the suburb of Maumee). But the place is just north of Ohio's turnpike, I 80/90, and they have great food and almost *unimaginable* portion sizes – are they used to feeding GIANTS?!? Unfortunately for Nick's, the place was empty, but this is (just) one of the reasons we go to Nick's when we're in the area – they have GREAT food. Besides, **you** try withstanding the crowds to get a table at the Olive Garden on a Saturday evening, especially with 4 starving kids!

After dinner, we were going to head to another nearby Toledo suburb for a free exotic animal / magic show, something right

up our alley. But the combination of the big weekend, crabby kids and crowds at the zoo caused our driver and his wife to veto that great idea, so luckily we hadn't told the kids since it sounded like fun and they would have been disappointed (no matter their exhaustive state) to miss it. But we've learned that over-doing it with little kids along is **always** regretful, and so we happily prepared for our journey home after we gorged ourselves and piled leftovers into boxes at Nick's. But we grew distracted by a strip-mall across Reynolds from Nick's Cafe, and that's how we finally discovered what Nickel World of Toledo really is...

We had seen it in the strip-mall before, but we had always busily assumed that it was the 2009 incarnate of the early 20th century 5 and dime store. On Saturday night, we discovered that Nickel World is actually a family entertainment place, filled with **many** arcade, skill, and video games! They have a unique business model – they charge an entrance fee of \$2.50 per person, and then they sell \$5 bags of nickels for use on the games. Most of the games are just one nickel to play, some are two, and there's even a large selection of FREE games! The place is so cool; what a great concept! For about \$25, our party of 4 adults and 5 kids were easily entertained for at least an hour, PLUS the kids took home quite a bounty of prizes with the 5,000 tickets they were able to rack up in just that hour! Nickel World has just about every type of video game you can think of – two types of Skee-ball, multiple Crane Games, ball-roller games, basketball shooting games, racing games, Bozo Buckets, even air hockey as well as FREE! vintage arcade games like X-Men, Bust-A-Move, Dueling Dragons, and many more... We had a GREAT time, and Hubby and I are dying to return on a date night to fight, race and out-shoot each other without distraction from the kids! The only thing is that they are closed on Tuesday nights when we have our date nights... oh well, perhaps we can reschedule. If **you** are in the Toledo area, you **have** to check out Nickel World on Reynolds (US 20) – a rarity for an awesome

value in family entertainment in this day and age of recession! And while I'm on the topic, Nickel World reminded me of another cool arcade-type place in South Bend, Indiana. [Megaplay](#) has two indoor mini-golf courses, as well as lots of video games (some of the classics are free) and even an inflatable jousting area where they hold tournaments. I've never had the pleasure of participating in something like this, but it looks like lots of fun. If only I had discovered this sport before my sense of balance expired... I did see an indoor inflatable jousting space at another place in Toledo that we visited a few months ago. This place was pretty cool – they had adult-sized bouncy slides and ladders to climb, and my husband and I bounced down the slides and ran around like little kids until the unfortunate voices of reality (muscle strain and fatigue) made it loud and clear that we had better take it easy... But I can't remember the name of that place or where exactly it is, and I can't find it on the internet. Probably a bad sign that we were the only ones there at the time, I hope it hasn't closed down, but that's a lot of why it was so much fun – my kids weren't getting run over by eager older kids, and hubby and I weren't laughed out of the place by nasty teenagers...

So... back from my tangents. We had a really nice and safe Labor Day weekend free from any of the [speed traps we encountered in previous years](#). Hope yours was safe and fun also! God Bless!