

## In the eye of the shoe-tier...

As a father prepares his son to cross the street, before they step off the curb, he takes hold of the small hand and then, to activate the boy's enthusiasm while also settling some anxiety, says: "When we walk, we walk together". And so it was that when our family began walking this year that I was still adapting in a new job, Lee was nursing two babies and Jake was beginning a journey in pre-kindergarten. Throughout the year we learned to wait before we walked and we didn't walk until we could all walk together. Many times and in different ways, some of us got frustrated (mostly Dad) waiting to cross, some were crossing a street for the first time, and some were taking the first steps of their lives.

As a Father, one of my "early" commitments this year was to begin reading the Bible and praying with my children each day. Having Cathy and Jake run in and sit with me (and sometimes on top of me) in the 'pappa-san' chair in the corner of our living room, and seeing their eyes light up as they recall a story or "read" it to me, will be one of my best memories of this year. Bath time was another family tie (e.t.p.), especially when all or some would get in the new jacuzzi-tub (aka "the big bad"; and yes you should get one) and we'd tell stories, ask questions, practice swimming and even eat ice-cream.

In April, Lee and I went away for an entire weekend to a marriage seminar - to do some pro-active investment and to remember what life was like in the nineties (decade before kids). For his 5<sup>th</sup> birthday Jake had a father and son overnight camping party (Lee's idea). With six of his friends and their dads we took some hikes, had some biltong and boerewors, skipped some rocks and slept in tents. And told campfires stories. We even saw deer. And the boys found a snake.

Soon after this Jake learnt to tie his own shoes. Previously a mere routine, it became a symbol of burgeoning independence (and gear needed to cover new territory). Soon nothing would be too hard for this boy. Over the days of summer, Varna Avenue turned into a place of conquest. Jake began riding his bike without training wheels and soon we were at it every morning. Cathy joined in with her "princess" bike and the three of us made marvelous memories exploring the neighborhood sidewalks, corners and alleys, with pit-stops at the doughnut shop.

In July, Francois ("oom F") and Gwen ("Tannie Gen") came to visit over Emma's birthday and we took a memorable trip down to Sand Diego and Seaworld. Amazing how a three-year old can suddenly identify a whale as a killer whale.

Summer also meant swimming, which Jake and Cathy took to like, well whales. A group of friends had swimming lessons and with opportunity and practice the rest was history. We had our annual Eksteen breakaway weekend in Santa Barbara this year, and although the hotel was really nothing more than rooms around a pool, it was the pool that counted! The kids went from monkey-walks to going underwater to doing cannon-bombs. We also did a lot of beach-days which was fun for everyone - we tanned, swam, dug, crawled and Jake got a boogey-board. It's also Malibu, so you get to see a lot of lifeguards, helicopters, boats and police cars and then people swimming.

Emma began to demonstrate a remarkable ability to relax in the midst of commotion. No less active than her siblings, she's just less rushed. After all the trouble of getting into this world, she's here to enjoy life. She took her time to begin walking mainly because she really enjoyed crawling! Now that the year is out, she strolls and wanders and rolls and climbs. She is a study in contentment. She has conversations in her crib when no-one is there. You can take her anywhere without a whimper as long as she has her "babba" (blankey). She can also put herself to sleep and even sleeps through the neighbor's jack-hammering (this gifting apparently comes from the Eksteen side of the family). She sucks her thumb (not in a way that conveys dependency or nervousness, but more like she's saying "I'll just wait here till you figure out what you're doing"). From her mother's side, she has expressions more persuasive in their subtlety; she smiles with her eyes. And because she contends with Jake and Cathy, it's not surprising that one of her first words was "wo".

We started having "Eksteen Family Fun Nights" where we'd change things around a bit - like going to a nearby high-school football game, or watching Black Stallion with a tub of popcorn, or decorating the Christmas tree, or having hands-only rib-dinners with extra sauce (before having another "big bad"). We also enjoyed some quadrennial events, like watching the Olympics and the Presidential Election campaign and explaining their importance (and apparent distinction) to inquisitively assertive young minds.

Cathy began adoring all things “princess” and had her first birthday party – a princess tea party in our garden with her friends and their Moms. She dressed up in her “Belle” dress and Custom-fit-by-Dad princess shoes. Cathy excels physically: climbs monkey-bars, somersaults and even startled her unassuming gymnastic instructor with an unprompted bar “routine” and dismount. She is a good helper at home with Emma, who actually lets Cathy change her diaper. This is great except last week when Lee wasn’t in the room. Have I mentioned our new washer/dryer?

For Louis’ birthday Lee arranged a surprise party at LA’s South African restaurant (well think big screens, rugby, and begins with an “S”, you get the idea). But the biggest gift this year was hearing Jake say (uncoerced): “Dad, I love spending time with you”.

In October, Lee began complaining about being extremely tired. So being the good, compassionate husband that I am, I explained to her that it was the result of mothering three exceptionally active children. And then a few weeks later Lee discovered that in fact she was pregnant. Remember that marriage seminar back in April?

Around the same time, after having talked about the possibility of moving to a bigger house, Lee called a friend and on the first day of looking, found a wonderful house she knew was “it” (see Proverbs 31:16). In a very short period of time we bought, painted, packed and moved into a wonderful house in a new community. The larger lot has a pool, fruit trees and even a stable (hence, “the horsie house”).

We continue serving in our church’s Sunday school pre-school group and each week get to see the Lord bless children and their families as they grow in their understanding of God’s love. In her first stage appearance since high school, Lee did a brilliant performance as the villain in the Vacation Bible School drama presentation to about five hundred children. In November we heard a spirited 86-year old Billy Graham preach in the Rose Bowl for possibly his final crusade.

Throughout this year I’ve asked myself, “where are we going?”. Now, looking back over the trail of this year, we can see that we’ve walked a long way. After a striding and strident annum, the reward is that together, as our own family, we learned to be patient, to watch out, to signal, to step, to advance... and to tie a lot of shoes. In short, we walked together. It makes us realize that it’s not so much where you’re walking to, as it is whom you’re walking with. And the comfort that comes from knowing there’s a Hand to hold onto.

May you be blessed as you continue your journey in the new year and we look forward to the next time our paths will cross and we can tread some miles with you.

Let’s come alive in two-thousand-five!

**The Eksteen family**

(Louis, Lee, Jake, Cathy, Emma and one-on-the-way)

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