

## 2006: ticket please...

We use tickets all the time. A ticket in hand represents an invitation, a privilege for the holder; it enables access and often implies a journey, a new destination. A used ticket reminds us of an experience, a place, a memory. But tickets expire if left unused. Some cost a fortune, and sometimes we're lucky and get them for free. As we look back at 2006, the Eksteen family holds a bunch of proverbial ticket stubs that remind us of all these things – new destinations, places we visited, memorable events, experiences we had - a year of new opportunity and access to new areas of family life. We received a lot of tickets this year, yet with all of them, the activities were less significant than the relationships they enabled and established – in our own family and with you!

Undoubtedly the biggest fundamental change for our family was Louis' work, which took on a new destination. At the start of the year he began taking the reigns as CFO of one of the largest churches in Los Angeles, called The Church On The Way. It is also the church we have been attending the last eight years, so it is a very familiar and friendly environment and closer to home (and as a co-worker says, "the people are really smart and good-looking too"). He is thoroughly enjoying this change in work-life to a non-profit cause emphasizing people development and communicating the Bible's solution for life's fundamental issues. Professionally, Louis is able to be challenged and utilize a variety of prior experience in accounting, finance, real estate, software and reporting. The larger organization has numerous agencies, a communications affiliate and is completing a third facility north of the city to serve the congregation of many thousands.

Needless to say, this change has had positive results on the family as a whole. Louis can still come home with enough time to be his children's hero, soak them in the tub, teach some math, read a story, tuck them in bed, make his wife a latté, give her a neck massage, before reclining with a good book. All in a day's work. (\*)

With four kids, life never really goes slower than about 80mph. So we persistently labor to simplify our lives. We scaled back on activities and spent time at home – together. We can see the light at the end of the tunnel – a day with no diapers... or even better, a day when one of the kids can drive us around for a change! Significantly, this is the first year in several that Lee hasn't been pregnant. As of now she is still nursing one infant, however, but has made big New Year's resolutions for Elize! And after having all these kids... Lee's figure is back! (but that's kinda how this all got started...).

We had some memorable visits to our home this year... One of the best was a friend who, after a few weeks with our kids, interrupted his stay to go to Israel for some "peace and quiet" ☺. Lee also enjoyed having video evenings with some friends, in particular Elizabeth who had a miraculous recovery from a neck injury over the year, with each visit having verifiably improved – in March needing a wheelchair, by December walking briskly without aid.

In March, Louis out did himself by hosting a surprise "elegant birthday celebration" for the anniversary of Lee's 25<sup>th</sup> birthday [read "husband secures season tickets for years to come"]. Lee was completely overwhelmed (instantly the low-key flowers-and-a-card of recent years were all but forgotten...). The Ragsdale's performed Lee's favorite of their songs and her heart was warmed by a special evening with dear friends. We hosted some other, larger events this year including a summer BBQ for fellow Sunday School volunteers and their families, and a home-school graduation reception for scholars, families and friends, complete with certificates and pictures (and an MC!).

In the spring, Jake played in his first baseball little-league, and his team (Yankees) went on to win their championship. The younger sisters were rooting on the sidelines, and Dad actually got to go to most of his games, which really made for a memorable year. Jake has some big trophies to remind us. Speaking of trophies, this letter would be incomplete without mentioning that Louis made it back onto the golf course this year and was on the winning team at two charity events. (Ok, it has more to do with the team mates than the South African roots, but details, details...). More importantly, Louis and Jake started going to the driving range together this year, which has improved both their games!

In a remarkable confluence of events this year, Louis and Lee were invited to a National Convention of Foursquare Church leaders in Washington DC. We were further part of a small group to tour the White House, west wing, oval office and press room. This ticket/trip coincided with Louis' birthday 35 years before!

The pool and summer was another successful combination. (Lee fired the pool cleaner we had last year and actually did a much better job). Watermelon became our family's favorite poolside fruit - so much that it was the theme for Emma's 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday party in July. The back yard remains in its perpetual state of... preparation. We did manage to replace some fencing, lay some terraces, install some irrigation, and remove some trees. And this year was a fairly slow year for our handy-man - only needed to replace some lights and ceiling fans. In September, Louis did finally (and spotlessly) clean out the entire garage (refer last year's letter).

After summer Jake started 2nd grade and Cathy-girl began Kindergarten at a quaint school just down the street from us. On Cathy's first day, Daddy walked her hand-in-hand to her classroom - filled with new classmates and emotional parents. As she sat down on the little chair, her Daddy (remembering as if yesterday the hospital morning he held her for

the first time) desperately clutching to the moment (lest it pass and he blink his eyes only to see her hand being given in marriage), and quick to perceive his darling's limit under the weight of this occasion, kneels by her side asking "Cathy...are you okay?". To which she glances up at him, smiles, points to the door and says "Daddy, you can go now".

Emma and Elize are really enjoying having their Mommy to themselves in the mornings now. Emma, still with her newborn hair (her crown) is blossoming into a vivacious beauty. Some days Lee and I look at each other and wonder "where did this gorgeousness come from?" And Louis' reply is usually... "From her Dad." Emma's vocabulary has multiplied and her creative playing and interactive conversations with "my friends" (dolls, nemo-figures, veggietales) is remarkably entertaining. Elize (1 yr old in June) started walking this year and has become adept at unloading a remote's batteries (actually all our remote's batteries) in the blink of an eye.

We celebrated our tenth anniversary this year by taking the whole family to the island of Kauai. Louis, Jake and Cathy spent quality time snorkeling and marveling at the proximity and multitude of nemo-esque fish. Sea turtles, monk-seals, koi-fish, rock crabs and frigate-birds are just some of the island animals we saw, with waterfalls, empty "blue-lagoon" beaches and palm trees inspired visions of paradise.

At the beach one day, Louis remembers wading into the waves with Emma (3): "I wasn't scared (I'd done this many times before), but she was nervously along side really entering breakers for her first time. When the small waves approached, I held out my hand, which she grasped instinctively. After a while, when the big wave came, she began panicking, clutching harder... and then... suddenly I yanked her up into my arms allowing the wave to crash underneath her feet. Rapidly her eyes were fixed on mine and the biggest smile popped out on her face, exhilaration and relief, joy and gratitude all at once covered her face. A rush she never thought possible! In that moment I saw a beautiful analogy of what we feel with our heavenly Father: walking beside Him (without a real clue of what can come our way), just holding His hand. And He knows (because He's done this before) just when danger is about to come crashing down on us, and is able to yank us up into his arms and hug real tight. What a thrill!"

Emma started swimming overnight (actually we'd been telling her for six months that she can do it, she just believed it one day in Hawaii) and especially liked doing it in the shoo-shoo-cuzzi. (Emma speak for hot-tub).

In the fall we began doing gymnastics on Saturday mornings. All the kids have a class they love and Mom and Dad help Elize in her class. In December we all joined the club in the Chatsworth Parade - Jake leading with the banner and Cathy doing cartwheels, much to the crowd's applause. Reaching the end she asked "can I do cartwheels all the way back?"

The winner in the kids-say-the-darnedest-things-department came one day with Dad imparting to Jake the wisdom of being patient so that it can work in us until we are perfect and complete and lacking nothing, and Jake responding instinctively, "Dad, but sometimes I just want to give patience a head start."

We used a variety of tickets this year - plane tickets (Denver, DC and Kauai), theme parks (Disneyland, Knott's Berry Farm, Hurricane Harbor), and Dad had the kids to a variety of events such as the Ringling Bros Circus, watching speed bikes at California Speedway for Jake's 7<sup>th</sup> birthday, Dodger baseball and the Azusa Street Centennial. With our feet we also voted for LA's best eateries: Rubio's Fish Tacos, Panda Express (chinese yummy), Jamba Juice (smoothies) and Nick & Willy's pizza, with the melted chocolate chip cookie!

So what have we learnt this year?

- We are starting to become a team where all members contribute.
- Even the smallest contribution by the smallest of team members, has the biggest of potential impact.
- Life is a perpetual transition.
- Quality time comes in the midst of quantity time. It just does.
- The value of reality-based discipline.
- We don't need many activities to be happy - we need to be together.
- It is actually possible for the entire family to wake-up, get dressed, get in the car and be on time, without someone getting killed. (\*)
- To forgive each other for our shortcomings.

Thank you for the role you play in the life of our family and for the opportunity to share our life with you. We look forward to seeing you soon, and again, in 2007.

*Louis, Lee, Jake, Cathy, Emma and Elize Eksteen.*

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(\*) Actual results may vary. Certain restrictions apply. See store for details.