

December 2008

Hey Funks!

Everything remains the same in the Ballard household in spite of the fact that the nest is empty and the following events: Jambo the Wonder Dog died; Sam lost his job; Drea's house burned down; Leah's college announced its closing, and Gina's long time hairdresser moved back to Thailand. These occurrences are not listed in order of importance. Gina's struggle to find a good colorist has remained a foremost concern.

That's probably enough information to make all *your* holidays seem merrier, but this letter must continue with the excruciating details:

Exactly where the expected free time went when the nest emptied is still a mystery to Sam and Gina. Yes, they've returned to real dinners at the table each evening, but that has been the only resurgence to life BK (before kids). Dinners have evolved from last minute frozen pizza to mixed green salads, quality vegetables, and choice cuts of meat, but now shopping and preparation is considered and consummated rather than rushed. Sam still watches his sports, but now attends a few more UNLV sporting events. Gina has replaced rushing to "kid related" responsibilities to rushing to the post office to mail care packages to the kids. Time for evening walks and conversation has been rediscovered. Perhaps the rest of the free time has been spent repeatedly speed dialing the kids. They often are too busy to answer.

Really great pets are impossible to replace, but the Ballards had to try. Rufus, a mostly Schnauzer, was acquired not long after Leah left for college. A need for a pet wasn't the sole factor for their decision. Leroy, the stinky (literally) cat, had become much too complacent in his perceived role as "king of the house". Punishment for his obnoxiously aloof behavior was needed. Frisky inadequately describes the dog. Yes, he has appropriately terrorized the cat, but he has also assimilated the cat's obnoxious behavior. Yes, floor messes are an issue which is slowly being reduced, but he also has developed cat like behaviors like pouncing on prone targets, intentional tripping, battling plant fronds, and howling in the moonlight. Although not as inherently attractive as the cat, he is absolutely adorable. He has actually learned to walk on a leash, but he waits for carpet for his real business.

Mounting budget cuts at the city left Sam jobless for about three hours. Although he had six weeks before unemployment offered endless possibilities for potential home projects, as soon as Sam heard lay offs were eminent in the City of Las Vegas building department, he sought and found new employment. Yes, the possibility of a lucrative retirement based upon public employment until his 70th birthday was lost, but his new position offsets potential homelessness in the golden years. He is working as a project manager for a company that builds subsidized housing for the elderly. A bonus is that he's very popular with the female residents of the completed units and is often invited to the pot luck luncheons in the club house. Thus far, there are no other fringe benefits.

Indecision as his senior year loomed caused Drea to reconsider his major. Due to dwindling scholarship funds, counselors suggested replacing engineering/physics as a major with education/physics. That is still a happy possibility for a diploma, but he has also chosen to tackle the possibility of a cash deficit. In addition to parking cars and full time school, he has begun teaching skiing at Diamond Peak. This allows him to telemark ski for free, too. He has coordinated the schedules so the only day he has to do without sleep is Thursday. That's the day he plays bass with an "old man" blues band. He's a musician as well as a "tip" draw. Yes, during finals week last May he lost all but his truck, 1/2 a work uniform and his text books (which were still shrink wrapped in the truck) in a fire that destroyed his house and the bulk of his worldly possessions. Since then he has discovered how to build a guitar from scratch and that "people are really nice to you when your house burns down". His four months of "couch surfing" proved the latter. He's established in a new house now.

Needing gray skies to enhance her blue eyes led Leah to choose Portland, Oregon for college. It was a bonus that a small college gave her money for soccer, track, and academics. She has even developed two "baby dread locks" due to the humid climate. Unfortunately *that* college will close at the end of this year. Fortunately, other area colleges have expressed interest in her athletic and academic skills. (She continues to tout her musical prowess - tuba, but often the skill is met with skepticism due to her size.) She made 1/3 of the total team goals for her college soccer team and, thanks to supportive coaches, has the DVD to prove it. She paced the cross-country team once soccer had finished and, in spite of not officially participating, earned a personal best time in a local meet. Training for a potentially superb track season has already begun. She plans to lose the "freshman five" gained in spite of daily distance runs. The weight gain must be due to acquired ear piercings or moisture in the dreads.

Ego was placed aside as Gina settled into a new salon. She now attends monthly "do" and dye sessions with her mother's stylist. Due to experience with the otherwise geriatric clientele, the new hairdresser has coiffed her in an artificially brown "shag". Now that her hair has returned to the '70's, perhaps her body will go "retro", too. Administration continues to enlighten and entertain. The challenges are daily but not overwhelming. She recently completed an administrative intent form stating she wishes to advance to a principal position and does not intend to retire until at least 2020. In spite of needed bifocals, that date was appropriate for her professional vision.

Determination in spite of adversity has become the Ballard battle cry. We look forward to continued success in spite of set backs. Humor and hope is injected in to each new endeavor. May this holiday note remind you that possibilities are always present despite unexpected occurrences.

The Ballards.