
MERRY CHRISTMAS



Great googly moogly! The Season™ snuck up on me this year. Twas but just half a fortnight ago when I found myself standing before the couch, about to collapse and relax for the evening, when I caught Elise's eye as she was sitting on the couch. I realized aloud, "Crap! We're already knee deep into December and I have to write the damn Christmas newsletter."

"That's the holiday spirit!" she said. So here I am, your humble narrator, again at this time of year. Thanksgiving feels like it just happened at 8 a.m. today, and I'm debating on mowing the lawn before we put the Christmas lights on the house and trees this weekend because it's 70-degrees outside.

When I originally started drafting this year's newsletter, I was really struggling to figure out what I was going to write about. Usually it's just an exercise in recounting the highlights of the past year. And that process involves consulting with Elise, and going through the Facebook and Janicek.com entries for 2019 to curate the events worth documenting in this newsletter.

I admittedly procrastinated in that yearly review process, and I guess in my subconscious I was holding off until a spark of creativity hit me like a 2-ton heavy thing. But that creativity boulder never landed on my head.

While Maly was at lacrosse practice this past Saturday morning, Elise, Mara, and I found ourselves sitting toward the back of the Oak Hill Methodist Church during Bob Stapleton's memorial service. In October, Bob lost a battle with Multiple Myeloma at the age of 51.

If you and I were standing together on the sidewalk discussing the evolution of non-stick bakeware and Bob Stapleton walked up, I would say, "Hey, Stephanie, this is Bob Stapleton." And then you would look at me in an odd way until I realized that your name isn't actually Stephanie. But you see, I don't think I would've been comfortable saying, "This is my friend, Bob Stapleton." Bob was more of an acquaintance. Actually, I'd only met and spoken with him once. Bob had cancer and he ran 5.5 miles with me a couple of years ago on a really hot afternoon in May. He and I were Facebook friends, so I kind of kept tabs on his life. Then I find myself sitting in a church, listening as his friends and family are telling funny stories about Bob's life and tears are slowly trickling down my cheeks.

For whatever reason, in that moment, I remember thinking to myself, "There is no other place I'd rather be." I could've been at Maly's lacrosse practice. I could've been running. I could've been taking a nap on the couch.

I needed and wanted to be there at that moment. I was able to pay my respects, take stock in my own short time on this big blue planet, and think about the legacy I'll leave for my daughters. It was a tough moment to be in.

Life is always changing. Our own personal lives ebb and flow. In our 20's and 30's, we and our friends start having kids. We all have to deal with the death of loved ones in some capacity throughout our lives, and those experiences only increase as we get older. Navigating that part of life brings it's own sets of challenges and just sort of makes life what it is.

On July 27th, we said goodbye to Elise's grandma. I'm not even going to try to put into words how her death affected her blood lineage. Her death was hard on me because she was like a grandma to me. I met "Grandma T." twenty one years ago, shortly after Elise and I started dating. I met Grandma T. before I met Steve (Elise's dad). I don't know what I said or did to make a first impression, but Grandma liked me. After that, she always treated and talked to me like one of her own. She was always socially correct, but could have a sharp tongue and be judgmental in grandmotherly ways that always made me laugh. I like to think she and I were a lot alike, and that's why we got along so well. As I think about her now, I'm inclined to say that I knew her better than I knew my own grandmothers. My dad's mom died when I was just a little boy. My mom's mom died when I was a teenager. And my mom's step mom, the woman I actually called "Grandma" lived in Hawaii and Las Vegas with Grandpa, so the opportunities to know her were limited.



Elise and the girls drove up to Des Moines shortly after Elise's parents called to tell us that Grandma's time was nearing. Steve and Joanne moved her into hospice care and while no one knew when, everyone knew soon. I stayed in Austin a few more days because of work obligations and then flew to Des Moines. Elise and the girls picked me up from the airport and we all went straight to see Grandma.

She didn't have much energy, nor many words to spare. She smiled when she saw me. I sat in the chair next to her bed and held her hand. I don't remember what all we talked about, but we talked about some inconsequential stuff. I didn't think about when her time would come, nor about having some kind of personal, profound final moment with her. I just took in that interaction and I let it be what it needed to be. I kissed her on the cheek a bunch and I told her that I loved her. She squeezed my hand and told me that my hand was cold and that I should eat more.

Grandma gave me a lot of love, and I loved her. She also gave me an amazing mother-in-law who I think of and can talk to like my own mom. She gave me an uncle-in-law who has given me sage life advice and will always be a running inspiration for me. She gave me another uncle-in-law who I only met once, but that interaction still makes the family laugh knowing that I got the full Uncle Mike experience. Because of her, I have a brother-in-law I call my own brother, who has a heart of gold that's bigger than the sun. And because of her, I have my wife who is my everything, and the most faithful and selfless person I know. In Grandma's honor, it will be my wife that I lean over to, in the one or two times per year that I attend mass, when someone's wearing too much perfume and say, "Ugggh. That's horrible. Too much. It stinks!"

On a lighter note, as I was stringing up the icicle lights on the roof this year, I found myself in a real piss-off mood. It was hot outside, my feet were sweating, and I was losing the much-needed traction in my flip flops. I was almost done securing my fourth strand of icicle lights only to find half of the strand was dead. I threw the rest of the strand across the roof, stood up straight, wiped the sweat from my brow and thought, "Why the hell am I even doing this?" I had other productive things I could be doing. I don't know if my wife or kids even care if I put the stupid Christmas lights on the house. Our neighbors across the street do such an immaculate job with their Christmas lights that their efforts should suffice for our whole street. Putting up all the damn Christmas lights just means I have to take them all down, and that's just going to compound the post-holiday blues in early January.



And then I thought, "No. Tacking up iridescent lights that look like icicles all along the front of a modest 2,100-square-foot home in the suburbs while staring down at a 15-foot fall that would definitely result in a broken shoulder or femur is exactly what Jesus would do to celebrate his own birthday." I shook my head and then thought about how if I were to ever meet Jesus, I would introduce him to the piñata. And then I made a few trips back up and down the ladder and got all of the icicle lights up and working.

Life around here this past year has been pretty normal. In August, Elise took a hit to the knee by the other team's goalie during a soccer game. That caused some damage, so she's been going to physical therapy once a week and hasn't been able to play soccer. Since she hasn't been as physically active, and considering she's much older than me, she's beat up, old, and crotchety to the point where her current past time is throwing empty beer cans at us as she yells for us to go to the store to get her more cigarettes and lottery tickets.

I know it's been frustrating for her to not be able to play soccer, but she's been diligent with her rehab and I know she'll be back at it in the weeks to come. In the meantime, she's been staying busy as always with keeping the household running. She volunteers in the offices every week at Mara's elementary school and Maly's middle school. She's room mom for Mara's 2nd grade class. And for the better part of the entire spring, which culminates into 5 days, Elise is still standing strong as the director of Vacation Bible School at church.



Maly is a teenager. That's about all I have to say about that. She's 13-years-old. How the hell did that happen? She's an amazing kid. Because she takes after me. She's in 8th grade this year, which will be her final year in middle school before becoming a high schooler next year. She's done a fantastic job in school throughout her life and continues to do so as the subject matter gets more difficult and intense. Speaking of intense. Did you know that you can't run through a campground? Yeah. You can only ran. Because it's past tents.

Maly seems to have chosen watching Alec Benjamin videos on YouTube and lacrosse as her hobbies. She made the track team last year. However, the track team only takes the top 2-3 athletes for each event to meets. And, as much as I chided her late this past summer, she didn't show any interest in joining the cross country team.

I really wanted her to run cross country so I could live vicariously through her as I feel like I missed an opportunity when I was her age to get into running. That, and I'm really banking on her getting some kind of scholarship if she wants to go to college. Don't tell her I said this, but I've had to spend what little money we set aside for her education on Elise's cigarettes and lottery tickets.

Mara continues to be our sweet little angel. She's now seven and in the second grade. Last year we had her tested and learned that she has dyslexia. This year she has flourished and really enjoys reading. She takes a huge amount of pride in finishing one of her books. She really turned a new leaf this year as reading used to be daunting and something she didn't enjoy. Now she finds joy in it. I attribute that to all of the time she spends in her room as she hides from Elise's crotchety and crippled wrath.

Mara is also quite the artist. She loves to sit down and draw all kinds of things. It's fascinating and exciting to see these new skills grow, and it's like a switch was flipped almost overnight. What really leaves



Elise and I scratching our heads is that Mara is really good at meth! It took her about four or five weeks of working her tail off in the kitchen, but she finally formulated a pure synthetic strain of this controlled stimulant that has the kids at school going absolutely bonkers. She's bringing in cash by the backpack. Every kid in the school is missing teeth and their faces are riddled with pock marks now, but that's okay because Elise and I are having to use shovels to stack the cash between the mattresses.

I meant *math*. I totally meant math. She's really good at math. Disregard everything you might've just read above. Elise and I always get impatient, frustrated, and discouraged with daunting math problems. Mara has this weird indomitable tenacity that invariably sees her through. She'll get frustrated, but she doesn't like to give up. I love that about her and frequently find myself seeking motivation from her.

2019 brought us all kinds of adventures and experiences. Elise and I experimented with a vegan diet in January. After a month, Elise introduced lean meats back into her diet. I remained on a strict vegan diet well into March until I accidentally smoked a delicious brisket. For spring break, we loaded up and went camping in Garner State Park. We had a great time hiking, swimming, exploring and waiting a really long time for our campfire to get hot enough so we could cook meals. We had to cut our trip short one night because of a thunderstorm rolling in. A split decision was made and we busted hump for an hour to load the car and get ourselves out of the path of the storm. We kept checking the weather on the drive home only to find that the storm fizzled out before ever hitting the park.



In May, a couple of friends and I headed west for an ultra-running adventure to traverse the Grand Canyon from rim-to-rim-to-rim. Forty-two miles, 10,000 feet of climbing, 30-degrees in temperature changes, and the possibility of dying from things like dehydration, rattlesnakes, or falling. We set out from the south rim and started descending the South Kaibab trail at 4 a.m. on Saturday, May 14th. They say that only 1% of the 5 million people that visit each year go below the rim of the canyon. I'm here to tell you that you should definitely be a one-percenter. I can't put into words the beauty that is the Grand Canyon. It's the closest you'll ever get to going back in time. The geography and geology are amazing and ever-changing. The scenery is mesmerizing and serenity is unmatched.

The course of our adventure was changed only 4-miles into our descent. Yours truly landed on a rock, not unlike any of the other trillions of rocks we'd already covered that morning. My right ankle buckled and I heard a snap. I hollered a profanity not worth repeating here, but managed to stay on my feet. My friends stopped to check on me. I stared vacantly at them as they awaited my self-assessment. I took a few bounces on both feet which was an indication that nothing was broken. So I said, "All good. Let's go." We kept running down, down, down, further into the canyon, until we reached the mighty Colorado River. We stopped for a while at Phantom Ranch to

refill our water bottles. It was at that point that I looked down at my ankle to see that it was swollen to the size of a grapefruit. The Canyon is rugged and it's advised that if you go down into the canyon, you've got to get yourself back up. That applied to me, and considering I wasn't in too much pain, I was going to get myself back out. So we trudged on and started our 16-mile ascent up the North Kaibab Trail to the north rim.

We were a mile from the north trailhead when I decided that my ankle wasn't going to make the trek back to the other rim. I'm happy that I can say I ran the Grand Canyon from rim-to-rim. My two friends ran back to the south rim while I took a sad and uneventful 4-hour shuttle ride back to our lodge at the south rim.

We went to the emergency room in Flagstaff the next morning where I was diagnosed with a grade 2 tear of the anterior talofibular ligament, also known as a really bad sprained ankle.

That ankle sprain benched me from running for 8 miserable weeks. Late last year, I signed up for the Mt. Hood Marathon in Oregon, which was held on June 29th. Since I was injured and unable to train for the marathon, I had to cancel my registration. The goal of that race was to use it as another Boston Marathon qualifier as Elise, Maly, and Mara really want to go back to Boston. And for some reason I don't seem to understand that we can just go to Boston without a marathon being involved.

In late May, my mom sold her house and 35 acres in Cat Spring. That was the house and land that I called home. It was the home my parents built and the place where they were going to live forever. So needless to say, it was hard to say goodbye to it. The girls and I visited the land a last time as we helped Mom pack up to move to her new place in the suburbs.



Before we knew it, summer was upon us. Since I signed up for the Mt. Hood Marathon, Elise had already booked our travel and accommodations to the Pacific Northwest. The girls and I flew into Portland and spent a few days with our friends, Chris, Jackie, and Kellen at their house in Beaverton. Then we road tripped it to Mt. Hood and spent a few days in an awesome little cabin that backs up to the Sandy River and is two miles from the Hunchback Trailhead. After lots of Portland sightseeing and Mt. Hood exploring, the girls and I said our goodbyes to Chris, Jackie, and Kellen. We loaded into our rental Nissan and drove to Washington for our weeklong stay in Seattle. We visited with our friends, Jennifer, John,

and Addison as we walked around Pike Place Market. We celebrated Independence Day at Gas Works Park and watched an amazing fireworks display over Lake Union. We took the girls to see the Freemont Troll, the Ballard Locks and fish ladder, ate ice cream at Molly Moon's, took a ferry to Vashon Island, went to the top of the Space Needle, toured Chihuly Garden and Glass museum, and hiked around the base of Mt. Ranier.

Summer wound down for the year, but not before we sent Maly off for a week of summer camp at The Pines with her long-time friend Julia. School started back up in late August and the entire family was back to the grind.

The fall and end of the year are a blur with all of the school, work, and running activities. This October, a group of 11 friends and I ran the 10th annual 223-mile Capital to Coast Relay from Austin to Corpus Christi. It was my 5th time running the relay, and my 4th and final year as the team's captain. After 5 years, I found that my heart just wasn't in it as much as years past, so I decided to pass the baton. The following week I ran the Run for the Water 10-mile race here in Austin and set a personal record of 1:04:37. Those two races fell roughly in the middle of my marathon training block, so I think it was a good opportunity to get out and push myself in race conditions as this was a relatively uneventful race year for me. I'll be running the Houston Marathon for the second time on January 19th. I have a few goals for myself in Houston and I've been following a difficult and regimented training program for the past 16 weeks. If things go as planned, I might consider hanging up my marathon shoes and taking up beer drinking and lotto ticket scratching with Elise.

I'm kidding. I'm also signed up for a 50-mile race in northern Arizona's Antelope Canyon in March. After the race, the girls and I plan to spend spring break in that area visiting the Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon, and Zion National Parks. I'll tell you all about it in next year's newsletter.

Until then, we hope you've had a wonderful and joyous Christmas and exciting New Year! We wish you and yours all the best in 2020!

With our love,

Jack, Elise, Maly & Mara

