

N&O wins state press awards

FROM STAFF REPORTS

The News & Observer and its staff members won seven first-place awards in the N.C. Press Association's annual statewide competition, the association announced Thursday.

The paper's first-place awards included one for its "Tar Heel of the Year" feature on Molly Broad, president of the University of North Carolina system, written by Tim Simmons and Trish Wilson. It also won second place for general excellence, second place for overall appearance and design, second place for sports coverage and third place for general excellence of its Web site, www.newsobserver.com.

The paper won a total of 22 awards, tying The Charlotte Observer for first among the state's large papers. The Charlotte Observer also won the first-place award for public service. An awards presentation program scheduled for Thursday night was canceled because of snow.

Other first-place winners at The N&O were Barry Svrluga for a feature on UNC basketball coach Matt Doherty; Molly Hennessy-Fiske for a story about two blind parents raising a blind child; Todd Lothery for film criticism; Dennis Rogers for humorous columns; Judy Ogle for her design of the features section; and Yonat Shimron for a profile of a well-known divinity school professor.

The N&O's second-place winners

were Scott Lewis, for a photograph of a candlelight vigil just after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks; Shyam Patel for his graphics; Oren Dorell for a series about North Carolinians in Israel; Ethan Hyman for a photograph of an N.C. National Guard unit returning from Afghanistan; Dennis Rogers for serious columns; and the features staff for a special section on the arts.

Third-place awards went to Joe Miller for criticism; Chip Alexander and Dan Kane for a story about the Carolina Hurricanes hockey team's success in Raleigh; Tim Simmons and Susan Ebbs for a series on relationships between minority parents and schools; Ruth Sheehan for serious columns; and Ned Barnett for sports columns.

The N&O competed in a category of newspapers with a circulation of 35,000 and above. The only other Triangle newspaper in that category, The Herald-Sun in Durham, won 12 awards, including three first-place awards for sports coverage, sports news reporting and sports photography. The Herald-Sun also won four second-place awards and five third-place awards.

Newspapers owned by McClatchy Newspapers Inc., which owns The N&O, won a total of 61 awards. The other North Carolina newspapers owned by McClatchy are The Chapel Hill News, The Smithfield Herald, The Cary News, the Knightdale Times, the Wendell Clarion and the Zebulon Record.

MCCLATCHY WINNERS

■ The Cary News: first place, general excellence, staff; first place, humorous columns, Sharon O'Donnell; first place, news feature writing, Ann Claycombe; second place, sports photography, Jason Ivester; second place, profile feature, Lisa Coston; second place, special section, staff; second place, sports feature writing, Lea Delicio; second place, sports news reporting, Lisa Coston; third place, feature writing, Lisa Coston; third place, general news reporting, Ann Claycombe; third place, sports columns, Alex Bass.

■ The Chapel Hill News: first place, community service award, staff; first place, investigative reporting, Kirk Ross; first place, literacy feature, Jonnelle Davis; first place, sports photography, Grant Halverson; second place, feature writing, Dave Hart; third place, editorials, Ted Vaden; third place, special section, staff.

■ The Smithfield Herald: first place, appearance and design, staff; first place, feature writing, Suzette Rodriguez; second place, general excellence, staff; second place, news feature writing, Suzette Rodriguez; second place, photo page, Becky Kirkland; second place, sports coverage, D. Clay Best.

■ The Knightdale Times: first place, general news reporting, Kerry Watson; first place, general news photography, Kerry Watson; second place, literacy feature, Kerry Watson; second place, news coverage, staff; second place, use of photographs, staff; third place, sports columns, features.

■ The Wendell Clarion: first place, photo illustration, Don Fuller and Caroline Upchurch; first place, special section, staff.

■ The Zebulon Record: first place, feature writing, Solja Nygard; first place, literacy feature, Solja Nygard; first place, sports photography, Don Fuller; second place, photo illustration, Don Fuller; second place, feature photography, Don Fuller; third place, news coverage, staff; third place, sports coverage, staff.

CARY NEWS WINS TOP PRESS AWARD

The Cary News has won first place for general excellence among the largest community newspapers in the state in the N.C. Press Association's annual competition.

The newspaper also won 10 other awards, including second place in the special-section category for Cary Today, the paper's annual guide to Cary that features people, places and events around town.

Staff writer Ann Claycombe won first place for a story about Cary police officer George Almond's return to duty after he was shot in the head during a traffic stop. Claycombe also received a third-place award for a series of stories about a professional safecracker.

Staff writer Lisa Coston won three awards, including a second-place sports reporting prize for a story about Green Hope High golfer Chris Brady. Coston received a second-place award for a profile on Lucy Daniels, benefactor of the Lucy Daniels Foundation and Center in Cary, and a third-place award for a lighthearted feature about the frenzy around Cary before Christmas.

Former staff writer Lea Delicio won second place for a sports feature about the slam-dunk contest at The News & Observer's annual Hot Hoops tournament. Sports writer Alex Bass won third prize for sports columns.

Columnist Sharon O'Donnell won first place for humorous columns.

Photographer Jason Ivester won second place for an action photo of a Carolina Courage soccer player.

The Cary News competed in a category of newspapers with a circulation of 10,000 and more.

The Cary News is owned by McClatchy Newspapers Inc., which also owns The News & Observer and three other community newspapers in the Triangle.



their bets on the projects would happen.

For Cox in particular, the projects offer the chance for the renewal of a neighborhood that she says once betrayed her. It's been almost a year since Cox was jolted awake late one July night by the sound of someone trying to break into her home.

A police investigation of the in-
SEE **DOWNTOWN**, 7A

This week on carynews.com



Columnist Sharon O'Donnell is getting ready to send her son off to college. Read her bittersweet musings on how time flies when you're raising children.

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Mother knows best, eventually

When my oldest son, Billy, moved into his N.C. State University dorm room a few weeks ago, his roommate's mom and I found ourselves in the odd role of being a visitor in our son's room.

THE HOME FRONT



SHARON O'DONNELL

We wanted to stay and help organize things, but it became clear that the guys wanted us to leave. This was their turf now.

No matter how cool you ever were before at home, no parents — nor their advice — are cool at college.

One mistake I made was buying an erasable memo board for Billy to hang outside his door.

He pulled it out of the bag and asked, "What's this for?"

"When I was in college," I explained, my voice filled with the wisdom of experience, "everybody had memo boards on their door so if someone came by and you weren't there, then they could write a message that they had stopped by."

I looked over at Billy and realized he was trying to politely suppress his laughter.

I was obviously a source of amusement for my child. "What?" I asked, defensively.

"Mom," he said, smiling broadly, "now we just text each other."

"Yeah, but," I started to reply and then stopped, knowing I had no response.

Yep, there had been some

advances in technology since I was in school.

"Well, it was always exciting to come back and see if you had a message on your door," I told him, defiantly. "You're missing out."

"Do you still have the receipt?" he asked.

While doing my back-to-school shopping, it was so obvious which moms had daughters leaving for college and which ones had sons.

The ones with daughters were discussing towel colors and room décor.

The ones with sons were by themselves, wearing forlorn faces, buying the bare necessities.

I made another merchandise drop from Bed Bath & Beyond and Target.

Billy was impatient. I went to the laundry room to see if the washer only took quarters or if it would accept his ATM card.

I discovered it would only take quarters or the special campus card, but not ATM cards.

I attempted to share this with him, but he cut me off. "OK, Mom," he said with an exasperated glance.

I offered him some quarters, but the look got more exasperated.

It was time for me to leave.

A few days later, my husband called Billy.

Billy was walking to Hillsborough Street to get quarters because his dorm office and the student store turned up quarterless.

To his credit, he apologized for not listening to me.

Ah, sweet validation.

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Taking things literally is 'a guy thing.' Literally.

Living with my three sons and husband can be especially frustrating because they have a significantly different style of communication than I do.

THE HOME FRONT



**SHARON
O'DONNELL**

My guys seem to take everything very literally, accepting things without asking any questions or considering the possibility that there is more to the

story than meets the eye.

Case in point. Several years ago, my family went to Cooperstown, N.Y., for my middle son's AAU baseball team to compete in a tournament. Since all our players couldn't make the trip, the tournament director had substituted a local boy on our team, and we'd meet him at the first practice.

Upon our arrival, a few of the parents were talking together and the conversation turned to the new player.

Someone asked if anyone knew the boy's name. My husband Kevin said, "I can't remember it right now, but I remember it was unusual."

He was lost deep in thought for a moment and then brightened.

"Player, that was it."

"Player?" one of the parents asked. "That is different."

I immediately realized where Kevin had gotten that name. The coach had sent out a team roster via email before we'd left, and yes, beside the 9th spot, there was listed the word, "Player."

I doubted that was the boy's real name and that our coach wasn't sure what his name was so he just typed in

"Player." I quickly changed the subject so that I could keep the "Kevin damage" to a minimum.

A while later, when we were alone, I told him that I thought the coach had just filled in the word "player" because he hadn't known the boy's name at that point.

"No, I think that's his name," Kevin replied.

"I don't think so," I told him, but he insisted that it was. Later that afternoon, our team met the new player, whose name was Chris. Kevin looked over at me and shrugged. Honest to God, I don't know what men would do if not for the shrug.

It conveys "Oh well", "Oops", or "Who cares?" so very well.

This literal meaning problem has trickled down to my sons, too. When my middle son, David, was in kindergarten, the teacher sent home a note saying that David needed to write his name on the line provided on his worksheets. I reminded David every day when he went to school, "Be sure to write your name on the line," but still he wouldn't do it. Finally, he became exasperated at my telling him again, and he said, "But mom, I did write my name on the line." He held his paper up to show me. "See," he explained, "I wrote it right in the middle of the line". Indeed it was on the line, and I suddenly understood his perspective.

"David," I said, shaking with the sheer excitement of possibly having a breakthrough, "Write it on top of the line."

The light bulb went on. "Oh," he said and erased his name that had been smack dab in the middle of the line so it wasn't even legible. "Nobody ever said it had to be on

top of the line," he remarked, rewriting his name in the proper place. I bit my tongue, thinking ahead to a day when he would have a similar miscommunication with his wife, bless her heart.

I'll have to tell her that I tried my best - I really did, but it had been me against nature, and nature won.

Jason, my youngest, has done some similar things. On a first grade math worksheet, he did the first two sections. Then on the third section were some addition and subtraction problems with the words "addition or subtraction" as the heading. Jason wrote "both" in the space provided and moved on to the fourth section without solving the problems because he'd interpreted "addition or subtraction" as a question.

Even Billy, who usually is a pretty clear thinker, has had his literal moments. On a warm spring day, Kevin told Billy to put the fan in his bedroom window so we could circulate some fresh air in the house. Later when Kevin didn't notice any breeze as he should, he went to look at Billy's window only to find the fan whirring away, but the window was closed.

Billy had indeed put the fan in the window, but that was it; he'd taken the instructions very literally.

I know taking everything so literal is a guy thing, and it's not worth my time to worry about it. Still sometimes, I have to wonder what chip in their brain is missing. I'm quite positive that women having to deal with this speeds up our aging process. Thanks for my wrinkles, guys.

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Picture perfect card is a daunting task

THE CARY NEWS

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2009

Six years ago, I dreaded the annual task of taking the Christmas card photo of my three young sons.

As time has gone by, unfortunately, it hasn't gotten any easier.

You'd think since the guys are 18, 15, and 9 now, that the picture-taking duty wouldn't be as hard as it used to be.

But it is — for different reasons.

It's hard enough to get all three of them at home at the same time, much less home at the same time and willing to embark on

the always grueling Christmas card photo session where our goal is to get one elusive picture where the boys all look normal with no closed eyes or forced, unnatural smiles.

Oh yeah, or no arguments breaking out between them, which has happened in the past.

Taking the photo is such a pain that it has fleetingly crossed my mind before just to send out last year's picture again and hope nobody will notice.

It would have been easier to let a professional do this over the years, but I liked the idea of having what looked like a natural, candid shot grace the front of our Christmas card.

There was one year I remember in particular — 2005 — when it was especially difficult to get that perfect shot for our card. We tramped outside, and the boys took their positions on the front porch steps as usual. That year we added our dachshund, Fenway, to the photo, too.

Billy, who was 14, held Fenway because he was the only



Getting the family to pose naturally can lead to some interesting photos. In 2005, Sharon O'Donnell captured the arguments and fidgeting that preceded a memorable Christmas card.



In a photo destined for the 2005 Christmas card, Sharon O'Donnell's children, from left, Billy, then 14, Jason, 5, and David, 11, pose sweetly.

PHOTOS BY SHARON O'DONNELL

one who could keep the dog still.

Jason, 5, couldn't seem to understand that smiling did not mean squinting until his eyes were totally closed.

In several shots, the boys were looking down at their shoes or up in the sky rather than at the camera.

And the dog didn't want to be a part of this at all, so we had to make him stay still by giving him a few doggie treats.

Finally, at one point, I looked through the lens and saw a perfect shot waiting to be snapped.

But then 11-year-old David

made a face at Jason, which of course, infuriated him, making him scream and hit David on the head.

I snapped the camera anyway, thinking maybe I'd keep these shots to show the 'real story' of taking the Christmas card photo.

Then David laughed and hit Jason back, which caused my youngest to start crying. I snapped that, too. We ultimately got a great looking shot of the three boys and Fenway, even though thanks to the fake potted flower behind him, my oldest son appeared to have red flowers growing out of his head.

A minor detail when Christ-

Very Popular

Christmas Card
column

Christmas Card column

Continued

mas is only two days away and the cards have still not been sent.

So we went with the only decent one we had, despite the flowers. The bottom line was — we got the cards mailed before Christmas. Hallelujah!

Some people have suggested that we include our whole family in our Christmas card photo.

Are these people nuts?

We sometimes receive cards that include photos of the entire family — not just the kids, but mom and dad, too.

These photos absolutely amaze me, and I tip my hat to those families. Getting a good photo of the kids plus the parents is a daunting task indeed.

Mission: Impossible.

Even the thought of attempting that makes me hyperventilate. I want our friends and relatives to marvel at how much the boys have grown, not to comment about my increase in wrinkles or weight.

Yet after each of the boys was born, we sent out birth announcement photos that included the whole family. The reason I could handle sending a birth announcement photo with the entire family was I had a good excuse.

If it was a terrible photo of me then people would understand and say, "Oh well, she just went through labor."

But I can't use the labor excuse about a bad Christmas card photo, darn it.

And once again I'm procrastinating taking the photo because I don't have the stamina to go through with it. In our pile of mail, I came across a very tempting coupon from a local photographer. This just might be the year to let the pros handle it.

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Cliffhanger on 'The Home Front'

Will Jack Bauer save the day? Will mom be missed?

Will the laundry get done?

I admit it. I'm addicted to the show "24." It's the one time a week I put aside whatever I'm doing and relax, totally caught up in the suspense of the plot.

It all started quite simply enough. It was New Year's Day, the pace of the day was much slower than normal and football games droned on downstairs on the TV in the family room. My 5-year-old was coloring in his room, unconcerned just then with my whereabouts. The two older boys were going back and forth between the football games and playing video games. My husband was asleep on the couch, our dog curled up beside him.

Perhaps, I thought, I should do some laundry. But hey, I was only two loads behind instead of

my usual five, so it didn't seem that dire of a situation. It suddenly occurred to me that I could sneak away for a few minutes of peace and possibly nobody would notice. It was kind of like those TV episodes where prisoners are left alone for a millisecond but they take that opportunity to escape or overtake their prison guards. Freedom was oh so close.

I looked left. I looked right. I tiptoed up the stairs and closed the door behind me, retreating into the master bathroom where I had plans to take a long bubble bath. I ran the water and got out the bath oils I had gotten two Christmases ago but never had time to use. As I sank into the foamy bubbles, I felt the tension in my body disappear.

"Mom!" my 5-year-old, Jason, yelled from the hallway. I winced, ignoring him, hoping he would go downstairs to find his dad. "Mom!" he yelled again.

I sighed. "What?" I shouted back.

THE HOME FRONT



SHARON
O'DONNELL

He opened the bedroom door and asked, "Where's my Power Rangers SPD coloring book?"

My mind did a quick inventory of the household. "Family room bookcase, second shelf on the left," I replied wearily, a little disturbed I would actually know this information.

Later, while I was getting dressed, I switched on the TV in our bedroom and saw it was a re-run of that show starring Kiefer Sutherland. Mildly interested, I watched the action as I pulled on my jeans and T-shirt. Getting more involved in the show, I crawled into bed and pulled the covers up to my chin.

During the next commercial break, I tried to turn the TV off, but found I just couldn't do it. Ten minutes turned into 20, then 30. Jack Bauer was in big trouble and I couldn't take my eyes from the screen. At the end of the thrilling, cliffhanger show, I discovered the next episode was coming on immediately afterwards; my God, it was a "24" marathon. Did I dare watch another?

Pretty soon, my family would realize I was missing and come looking for me. I had to buy some more time.

I raced over and opened the bedroom door, yelling for all to hear, "I'm cleaning out the closet!"

This was mother guilt at its finest: I didn't feel right actually relaxing and doing something I wanted to do, so I made up an excuse. After another episode, I began to feel a little strange that nobody had come in after me yet. I opened the door a crack, afraid of what I might find. "Guys?" I shouted.

"They're all outside playing basketball," my husband replied, groggily.

I stood there for a second, staring at the mound of laundry in front of the washer. I knew what I should do, but I didn't. "OK," I said, closing the door behind me. There were still three more "24" episodes to go.

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March 15 - 06

My moment as Dolly Parton

THE
HOME
FRONT



SHARON
O'DONNELL

An acquaintance who is expecting her first baby is struggling over the decision between breast-feeding and bottle feeding. That choice can sometimes be tough. I still remember how exhausting the first two weeks of breast-feeding my first child was years ago, how I wanted to quit but kept going. After a few weeks, the process became easier for some unexplained reason, and I loved the bonding between mother and child.

Yet what I recall most vividly about that particular time in my life was the weekend I went away. It was the first time I had left my 3-month-old son overnight with my husband and I had mixed feelings. I was excited about going with a college buddy to a good friend's

THURSDAY, AUGUST 26, 2004

O'DONNELL

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wedding a four-hour drive away, but I worried about leaving my son. Plus, pumping milk to leave behind was no picnic.

After filling a notebook with precise baby instructions for my husband; arranging baby clothes, medicine, and food in the proper places; writing down doctors' numbers by the phone; and packing for myself, I was finally ready to go.

As my friend Amy and I drove across North Carolina to the seaside town where the wedding would take place, Amy shouted over the sound of the radio, "I can't wait to hit the beach!" She glanced at me, excited. "How about you?"

"I just had a baby two months ago," I told her. "I don't want to even think about fitting into a bathing suit."

She giggled the carefree laugh of a woman who didn't have to worry about such things.

I was the matron of honor, so I had to get there on time, but we encountered traffic delays and began to get nervous about being late. I still had to change from my jeans and T-shirt into the dress I had bought for the rehearsal.

When we were off the highway and out of the traffic, I sped up, zooming down the two-lane road toward the coast. The road seemed endless. We weren't going to make it in time.

At last we reached the small, rustic church, arriving 15 minutes late. It had been hours since I had last breast-fed Billy, and I was — how should I say this — about to pop.

There was no time for the breast pump. We rushed into the church and searched for a restroom to change in, but could not find one. A side door to the sanctuary was ajar, and we peeked in to see a very reserved, well-dressed wedding party already taking instructions from the minister. I had to find a place to change.

Quickly, I ducked into the dim janitor's closet and put on my blue floral sundress. No mirror to look in, but it would have to do.

When I had picked out the modestly revealing dress at the store, I hadn't just gone seven hours without breast-feeding. I didn't think about that until I stepped out of the closet into the hallway where Amy was waiting. She turned and stared at me.

I caught a glimpse of myself in a hallway mirror, cleavage bulging out of my suddenly tight-fitting dress. We doubled over in laughter, bringing our friend Michelle — the bride — out to see what was going on.

"Whoa!" she exclaimed upon seeing the "new" me. When I entered the sanctuary, people did double takes. The elbow nudges and whispering started because evidently the rumor began that I'd had — well, let's just say, some elective surgery. "Hey," I wanted to tell them, "they may be temporary, but they're real." I contemplated for a moment keeping a breast pump in a closet for the rest of my life: Voila! Cleavage for a lifetime.

The situation was a bit embarrassing, but having never been the center of attention for this reason, I decided to enjoy it. I did notice, however, that when

the solemn minister caught his first glimpse of me in my lower-cut-than-it-was-meant-to-be dress, his eyebrows furrowed with what I deemed a disapproving look. I made a point of mentioning to him later — nonchalantly — that I taught Sunday school and was on a committee at my church, the goal being to salvage my reputation.

I felt like a cross between Dolly Parton, Jezebel and Cinderella at the ball as she waited for the clock to strike midnight. I knew it might be wise to leave a little early, which I did.

Later, when Michelle told me the rehearsal photos didn't come out, I was disappointed. What a waste. I promised myself the next time I went so long without breast-feeding I would take advantage of the situation and accidentally run into an old boyfriend. I imagined him telling others: "Wow, she turned out better than I thought she would."

Definitely something to consider in the baby-feeding decision.

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The awkwardness of being a certain age

As I reach my mid-forties, I find that it can sometimes be difficult to adjust to getting older. "Aging gracefully" might have sounded fine and admirable to me 10

THE HOME FRONT



SHARON
O'DONNELL

years ago, but now it sounds more like a last resort. In between age 44 and say, oh, 44 and 3 months, my entire body started falling apart. Middle age sneaks up on you quietly, like a thief in the night, robbing you of things more valuable than gold.

I was dealing with this OK until I was the recipient of one of those off-hand comments someone makes that becomes a sentence that echoes in your mind for months or maybe years afterward. The kind of thing that haunts you.

A few months ago, I was at a bridal shower for my niece when I walked over to show her future mother-in-law a photo of my 6-year-old son, who would be the ring bearer. As she was looking at it, another future in-

law, one of the grandmothers and matriarchs of the family, came over and peered over her shoulder. "Aww," she said, as if she were about to say he was cute. But instead she said, "Is that your grandson?" I about choked on my miniature spinach quiche. I tried to appear unfazed by her comment, but I'm sure my face betrayed me. I felt my eyes bulge out, my mouth fall open and my face grow hot as it turned red.

I tried to regain what was left of my composure. "Ahmmm, ahhh, no," I stammered, "he's my son." Then somebody oohed and ahhed about one of the gifts, and everyone, including these two ladies, turned to admire it. I stepped away, hoping nobody had overheard our conversation or noticed my strange reaction. But for the rest of the party, I kept to myself over in a corner, sometimes tugging at my crow's feet, smoothing out laugh lines, or bending my neck to see how much of a double chin I had. It was all I could do not to sneak off to a closet, flip out my cell phone and call information for the number of Cary Plastic Surgery.

Later when I got in the car with my mother and two sisters, I told them what had happened, and they all burst into laughter. Not an ounce of sympathy. Yet,

it was comforting they found the thought of my being a grandmother comical. They also pointed out that there are actually some grandmothers who are my age and younger.

I felt better until three weeks later when I was shopping at a department store for some clothes for my three growing boys. I happened to find a number of items they needed and placed the pile of clothes on the check-out counter. The cashier rang up the purchases and then said to me, "Today is senior citizen discount day" in a happy tone of voice like she was telling me I'd just hit the jackpot in Vegas. She paused, holding the price scanner in mid-air as she grinned at me, expectantly.

It took me a moment, but I realized she was waiting for me to acknowledge that I was indeed a senior citizen and eligible for the discount. I was speechless. It had happened again. Tired of waiting for me to respond, she hit some keys on the cash register and said, "I'll go ahead and give that to you." I was now in a daze, almost a coma. She handed me my bags and receipt, saying cheerfully, "You saved \$16 today." I wanted to grab her by the collar and yell, "Who cares about 16 bucks!? You just called

me a senior citizen!"

Friends and family later said the cashier was just trying to be nice and gave me the discount as a favor, even though she knew I was not a senior citizen. Note to all cashiers and clerks: Please don't do me any favors. I'd have gladly paid the extra money than have to endure more age-related humiliation. Besides, if she really gave me the discount to be nice, then I wish she had handled it a little differently, maybe winked as she rang up the discount, like she knew she was cheating a little. Or hey, maybe she could have whispered, "I know you're not a senior citizen, but I'll let you have the discount anyway." How hard could that have been?

These two instances have caused me to spend considerable time reflecting on the meaning of "aging gracefully." I looked up the word "gracefully" in the dictionary and it said, "elegantly," "with poise," "charmingly," "stylishly." Not exactly words that go hand-in-hand with aging. The antonym listed was "awkwardly." When I saw the word, I realized I'd just coined a new phrase: "aging awkwardly." Yep, that pretty much hit the nail right on the head for me. Can Geritol and Lawrence Welk runs be too far behind?

'Twilight Zone,' or 'Guy Zone'

THE
HOME
FRONT



SHARON
O'DONNELL

There's a place in our solar system that defies all logic, a place where common sense and the ability to pay attention disappear. It's a place I like to call "The Guy Zone."

One of my first encounters with this zone happened a few months after my husband and I got married, when we attended the wedding of one of his college buddies. On the way there, Kevin told me about the reception plans and mentioned the couple would be honeymooning in a very posh resort in Cancun, Mexico.

Later, standing in the receiving line after the wedding, I tried to think of something to say to the bride other than the trite "best wishes." When our turn came, Kevin shook his friend's hand and gave the bride a peck on the cheek. I gave her a quick hug, said the wedding was beautiful and added, "I know you can't wait until you get to Cancun!" Her smile froze and her eyes glazed over. The groom looked mortified.

But the people behind us in line leaned in, boisterously offering

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column

O'DONNELL

FROM PAGE 1B

congratulations and thereby switching the couple's focus to them. Kevin put his hand on my back and steered me ahead.

"What was the matter with them?" I asked, perplexed.

Kevin winced. "Well, he was kind of keeping the location of the honeymoon a secret from her as a surprise."

I felt sick. "What? You knew Cancun was a secret and you left out that one tiny little detail?"

"Who knew you'd bring it up?"

"Who knew I wouldn't? It's a very strange thing to leave out something so important."

He shrugged. "I didn't think about it."

Aha. There are the five little words I've become so familiar with during 17 years of marriage: "I didn't think about it."

It's the guy zone, folks — a scientific theory that will be proven in my lifetime.

My eldest son, Billy, 13, used to be my companion in laughing or complaining about the silly things my husband does — such as not remembering a conversation everyone else seems to recall.

Kevin would say, "You didn't tell me about that."

"Yes, I did," I would reply.

"No, you didn't."

I'd pause for a moment to replay the conversation in question in my mind. "Don't you remember?" I would ask. "It was Thursday night after David's baseball game and we were driving home."

He'd stare at me blankly while I began to question my sanity.

And then Billy, God bless him, would come to my rescue. "Yeah Dad, she told you that. I heard her. It was in the car."

Having a witness is always a good thing — a requirement if you're married to a man who has testosterone-induced Alzheimer's.

Billy and I also were co-observers of my husband's

inability to locate a single, solitary thing I have ever asked him to find — in the kitchen, garage, our closet or the grocery store. I can't count the number of times we saw Kevin swearing up and down that an item was not where I said it was.

Take a can of tomato soup. "It's not here," Kevin would say firmly, standing like a statue in front of the pantry, never bothering to lean over and take a closer look or move cans around. He'd peer into the rows of cans and bags of snacks as if he thought the can of soup would raise its hand and wave: "Yoohoo, over here by the green beans."

Billy or I would stand beside him, glance into the pantry, and pluck the "lost" item right from the shelf in front of him. "Oh," he'd mumble. "I didn't see it." I was always so glad to have Billy there for sympathetic support.

But I fear those days are ending.

Entering his teen years, Billy has started to display some of his father's traits. I didn't want to believe it, but there's no denying it. Billy is no longer my little boy. He's a guy.

He still tells me play-by-play moments of Red Sox games and verbatim dialogue from every episode of "The Simpsons" or any James Bond movie. Yet if I yearn for details of real events in his life, I'm left to scrounge for crumbs.

Last year, after a seventh-grade dance, this effort in futility became obvious. I picked up Billy in the carpool line. He hopped in the back seat and we exchanged hellos. I decided to risk it: "So did ya dance?"

He mumbled something that sounded like yeah. My heart soared.

"So you just walked up and asked her?" I asked, tentatively.

"No."

As someone who lives with four males, I knew this meant I had to interpret his answer, connect the dots. "You mean she asked you?"

In the rearview mirror, I noticed a slight smile tug at the

corners of his mouth. "Yeah."

There was a wealth of information I wanted, but I had to play it cool and casual. "Who was she?"

"I'd never seen her before."

Mmmm. Intriguing. "So what'd she look like?"

"I dunno," Billy muttered.

"You don't know what she looked like?" I repeated incredulously.

He scoffed impatiently. "It was dark, Mom."

"How do you know you didn't recognize her if it was that dark?"

No answer. We drove in silence, as I watched a group of giggling girls in the car ahead of us, chattering away with the mom in the car. Sighing, I tried again. "What was her name?"

He shrugged. "I dunno."

"She didn't tell you her name?"

"Yeah she did but ..." He paused. Then I realized it was not a pause at all; he'd simply stopped talking and let his sentence dangle in mid-air.

"But what?"

"I didn't hear her." I glanced at him in the mirror and looked away, shaking my head in frustration.

"It was loud," he said, as if that was a sufficient explanation.

OK. It was dark and it was loud. I felt like an FBI interrogator trying to get a confession out of somebody.

That's when I realized this conversation seemed all too familiar. It was the pulling-teeth kind of talk I'd often had with — a chill ran down my spine — my husband. Billy was slipping over the edge, into the vast wasteland of the guy zone.

Suddenly I wanted to reach over the back seat and grab him, pulling him from the abyss as I screamed, "Billy, Billy, come back to me." Yet I knew it was too late.

One son down, two to go.

Contact columnist Sharon O'Donnell at sjo@nc.rr.com. She has developed a Web site for mothers of boys at www.momsofboys.org.

Dinners at the table are just not a reality in our house

When I was growing up, my mother, who is a wonderful cook, would have a sit-down dinner for our whole family every night. Unfortunately, family meals like these are becoming a thing of the past. My husband, three sons,

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and I are on the go just about every night, making it a logistical nightmare to try to make and eat a "real" homemade meal at the table.

In our house when we do have time to eat together, I'm ashamed to say that it's usually while we are watching a Red Sox or Carolina Hurricanes game on TV, not sitting around a table sharing our days and bonding like we're supposed to do. Imagine my delight and guilt relief when I read about a

recent study that determined eating together in front of the TV is still beneficial to the family members.

A few weeks ago, one of those rare nights occurred when we had no place we had to be. So I decided to take full advantage of this and make a home-cooked meal of country style cube steak, potatoes, green beans and rolls (well, the rolls weren't homemade like my mother's and the beans were from a can, but it was all cooked at home so officially it qualifies for home-cooked). Then I called my sons to come eat, and they came downstairs staring at the table, blinking and rubbing their eyes like they'd been wandering in the desert and were trying to figure out if what they saw before them was a mirage or if it was real.

After the blessing, one of the boys asked if they could turn on the TV, which is conveniently visible in the family room from the kitchen. I explained to him that we needed quality time together to reconnect as a family, and that no, we weren't going to turn on the TV. Dr. Phil would

have been so proud of me.

"There's a 'Canes game on," my husband Kevin said, sounding innocent but secretly trying to sabotage my good intentions for the sake of a hockey game. Our sons all looked at me with hope showing on their faces. I remained steadfast in my plans and went on asking bonding questions that were answered with "I don't know," "Sort of" and "Yeah." After five minutes of their silent chewing, exaggerated sighs and forlorn glances at the television, I gave in.

"OK, OK," I relented. "I'll turn it on, but ..." I paused seeking some type of compromise so I wouldn't be seen as totally caving. "But we'll mute it." Of course, since they couldn't hear anything, all of them kept their eyes glued to the TV.

Pretty soon, two of the boys started an argument about some silly thing, the dog started barking and the noise level grew. Kevin clicked the mute button on the remote so the volume came back on. When I found myself yelling, "Don't eat

the potatoes with your hands," I surrendered and retreated to my room.

And through all this, I really think I've come up with something home builders should offer that guilt-ridden, overworked women will love. You know how all these mega-communities now have their own gyms, their own pools, their own playgrounds, their own everything? My idea is to offer an on-site cafeteria that serves nutritious meals, has a prepaid meal plan and is accessible for kids. Don't have time to cook or to go to the grocery store? No problem.

"Mom, what's for dinner?"

"Honey, we don't have time for that today. Why don't you just hop on your Big Wheel and ride on down to the cafeteria?"

I'm telling ya, it's the next big thing in real estate.

Contact Sharon O'Donnell at sjo@nc.rr.com.

Life the way it ought to be

I had a roast in the oven, and the tempting aroma wafted through the house, mixing with the evergreen fragrance of the Christmas tree. With the hectic holidays upon us, I was determined that day to make a real dinner

instead of going to another fast-food drive-through to save time.

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I wasn't finished with my shopping yet, but I vowed for that one night to forget about wish lists and sales, even if it meant I'd wind up at the mall on Christmas Eve when even those Chia pets start to look like pretty good gifts.

For once, there was nowhere we had to be that evening, no projects, no meetings.

My 16-month-old son, Jason, watched a Barney video tape, squealing in delight. He's at that wonderful age now — the age where I can pop in a video, hit rewind when it's over, and then play it again, giving me some much-needed time to do other things. I cleaned the kitchen and then worked with David, my 7-year-old, on his multiplication tables. June Cleaver would have been proud. This was the way life is supposed to be: calm, organized. I almost expected "the Beav" to come in any minute.

Instead it was my oldest son, Billy, 10, who came inside after playing basketball, grabbing a juice box and telling me his neverending stories about what happened at school. Usually, on those hectic days, I'd stop him in mid-sentence, saying we had to go somewhere and he'd have to finish his story later. That day, though, I listened.

I popped in a new Barney tape, this one a reunion of the kids on the show over the past 10 years. I used to watch Barney with Billy when the show first became popular. There was one kid on the show named Michael, a blond who was sort of

the ring leader of all the children. So when he was introduced on the reunion tape, now a teenager with a deep voice, my eyes got a little misty as I realized how much time had passed. I pointed to Michael and asked Billy, "Remember him?"

Billy looked over at the TV. "Mom," he remarked, "he's like 17 years old and still dancing to 'I'm a Little Teapot' dressed in a costume."

He rolled his eyes, evidently not touched by the passage of time as I was.

Later as we wolfed down the roast beef and homemade mashed potatoes, my husband and I talked with our boys at the kitchen table. I recalled similar times while I was growing up when my family ate "supper" together, relaying the day's events. Those times meant a lot to me, and I still recall them fondly. As I looked at my sons' faces glowing with the excitement of the holidays, I savored that moment at the table together. But I knew life and all its demands would once again intrude on us. With the new year approaching and with all that had happened in 2001, I suddenly realized how important it is to take time to be a family, to get to really know the ones we love most. So that is my resolution — to slow down and not always feel like we're in a hurry. Life goes by fast enough; why rush it?

Later that night Jason played on the floor, wrestling with his brothers. He was grinning from ear to ear, his blond hair tousled. Billy sat up and gazed at Jason, a look of pure love on his face. Then he turned to me and said wistfully, "I'm going to miss him when he's not a baby any more, ya know?"

I stared at Billy, my firstborn, who's now so tall he wears size 16. "Yeah, Billy," I whispered, smiling slightly. "I know."

Home repairs put us in a fix

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A lot of men feel calling in experts to solve a problem is a way of admitting failure. They often utter the words, "I can fix it myself."

I grew up hearing these words from my fabulous father, a mechanical engineering grad who can repair anything, even if it means doing so with duct tape and paper clips. He has always possessed a lot of ingenuity, even inventing and patenting a ruffling machine for the sewing industry that has been very successful.

I have no doubt of the man's brilliance, but I've also seen how frustrating his go-it-alone exploits have sometimes been for my mother — like when he'd rig up an unsightly contraption attached to the toilet so it could flush without overflowing. He'd spend hours "perfecting" this contraption.

Despite being impressed with my father's knowledge, I silently vowed to marry a man who would simply

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pick up a phone and call professionals — the plumbers, carpenters, landscapers and electricians of the world, God love 'em.

Instead, I have my husband Kevin. He, like my father, insists on doing fix-it projects around our house by himself. When I told my mother this soon after I got married, she sighed, shook her head and looked forlorn. She knew what I was in for.

One of the problems with a do-it-yourselfer is that it takes a while for him to get around to doing it. Sure, I know you're busy, but that's the whole point of CALLING SOMEBODY ELSE!

Several months ago, I was downstairs in the kitchen and happened to notice a rust-colored stain on our stucco ceiling — right under the toilet in our sons' upstairs bathroom. I knew right away there was a water leak; actually, I'd suspected such a few days earlier when I saw water around the toilet base. I'd told Kevin, but he downplayed my suspicions. The stain was now proof.

Kevin went up to take care of the problem. When he was done, I went to look. There was a blue towel wrapped around the toilet base. "Can I pick that up now?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I think I fixed the problem, but the towel will still have to stay there just in case." Thoughts of my father came zooming into my mind. "For how long?"

"Forever, probably," he replied.

I dropped my head and peered at him to make sure he wasn't teasing. He wasn't. I was incredulous. "Or ..." I paused, trying to select my wording

because I knew this was delicate territory. "Or you could just call a plumber."

And there it was on his face: the "You just offended my manhood" look.

"I can do it myself just fine," Kevin protested.

"Yep," I said, visually inspecting the towel on the floor. "You did it yourself all right."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"I just wish that once and a while we could go through the Yellow Pages like most people do and call somebody who knows what they're doing." Oops. The words poured out before I could stop them.

"You don't think I know what I'm doing?" He looked hurt, like a boy who just struck out in Little League.

I shrugged and spread my arms out, palms up, then gestured toward the towel. I thought the evidence spoke pretty well for itself.

Undeterred, Kevin said, "Is there water on the floor?"

I surveyed the area. "Well, no."

"Then the problem is fixed." He strode out, leaving me open-mouthed, staring at the towel.

Then there was the time the dryer wouldn't work because the door wouldn't close. Until Kevin had time to look at the problem, we used the old standby, duct tape, which didn't work very well. Crunched for time, he actually told me to look in the phone book and find a repairman. As I flipped through, I was absolutely giddy; goosebumps went down my spine.

Alas, it was too good to be true. Kevin had some sort of epiphany about how to fix the dryer. I had to cancel the repairman. After looking at the dryer intently, studying it like it was the enemy, Kevin said, "I know what to do." He was a

man on a mission. The result: two trips to the store to buy two different metal latches and time spent installing these two separate latches (the first one broke). With all the laundry we do, it's only a matter of time before the second latch breaks due to wear and tear.

The latest broken thing at our house is the telephone on the wall. Now, I know most people have gone cordless and mobile and everything else, but I firmly believe in having at least one phone still attached to a wall. In our house, that's the only way we can be sure we can find a phone when it rings. Our mobile ones are always lost.

A few weeks ago, Kevin was walking by the phone on the wall when his shoulder hit it, knocking the phone out of position. Now every time we make a call we have to hit the "tone" button first and then dial. We discovered this by trial and error. To Kevin, this means the phone is fixed, because it is usable. Whenever I mentioned getting the phone repaired, he'd reply, "Just hit tone."

My point was, however, that we weren't supposed to have to do that every time and I wanted to know why the phone was like that.

What if we had an emergency at our house and a friend needed to call 911, he or she couldn't get through because of not knowing to hit "tone" first. Yeah, I know, only a mother could worry about such a scenario, but it's possible.

So for Father's Day, I can tell you what my husband and dad will NOT be receiving: not a toolbox, not a drill, not a Home Depot gift card. This would only encourage them.

And they wonder why they always get ties.

Contact columnist Sharon O'Donnell at sjo@nc.rr.com.

Camper wasn't so bad, was it?

For the past several years, I've sometimes written about the vacations that my family takes in our camper and about the fact that I am not particularly fond of camping — even in a 30-foot home away from home with air conditioning. Life in a camper can get pretty ugly pretty quickly with my husband, three sons, and our male dachshund who thinks he's a doberman. The roughhousing, the loudness, the competitive environment. At home if things get too testosterone-laden, I can escape upstairs for awhile; but, in our camper, there is nowhere to hide. Nowhere.

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When we got the camper four years ago, our boys were all a lot smaller. Now our 16-year-old is 6 feet 5 and finds it difficult to stand up straight in the camper without hitting his head on the ceiling. Oh yes, that's a perfect recipe for a vacation — walking around with a bent neck. The hot water tank that holds enough for a 90-second shower (I've counted) of lukewarm water before going cold.

Yet my husband, Kevin, an Eagle Scout, loves to take the camper out to commune with nature. My boys and I have gone along with it, particularly when we've camped where there is lots of recreation or tourist sites; we have to have something to do. Kevin would be perfectly fine just sitting in a folding chair in the woods and making camp fires at night. The boys and I would get bored, and soon that boredom would erupt into sibling fights.

Kevin does, however, have one logical prerequisite before choosing a campground. When he calls to make the reservation the conversation goes something like this: "Shady Pines Campground where the wonder of nature is just outside your door, may I help you?"

And Eagle Scout Kevin pauses and asks, "Do y'all have cable?" And if the answer is "no," he thanks them, hangs up and promptly crosses that place off his list. Watching ESPN is an addiction for some men, my husband and two oldest sons included — though my 7-year-old wants to get cable, too, because he likes to watch cartoons. I'm ashamed to admit that in our small camper, we have two — yes two — TVs, each one stationed at opposite ends of the trailer, one spouting baseball statistics and one playing the inspiring Sponge Bob theme song. An all new kind of surround sound.

Although they have to have their cable, I also benefit from their being entertained by their dual television system. It keeps them from fighting and sometimes I get to actually read a book while they are engrossed in games and cartoons. We do get our share of communing with nature also, but there is only so much communing you can do after awhile. I'm reminded of that time several years ago when my middle son's school had a "Turn Off the TV" week, and my son responded, "Don't they know the Red Sox and Yankees have a three-game series this week?" Obviously, the people who plan these things aren't baseball fans.

So now that I've set the stage for you about our feelings for our family camping vehicle, you can imagine my reaction when a few weeks ago Kevin said to me, "I'm putting the camper up for sale."

"What?" I asked in amazement, trying not to let the giddiness show in my voice.

"We need to sell the camper," he repeated. "With the guys' schedules on weekends, we are always too busy to take it out anymore."

I nodded that was true. He continued, "Besides with the cost of gas and the money I pay each month in storage, it just doesn't make sense to keep it."

Ah, so the frugal (cheapskate) Kevin many of his friends and family know so well had overcome the nature-loving Kevin. But the odd thing is when I saw the camper listed for sale on one of those RV sites Kevin frequents (once even getting childrearing advice on it from God knows who), I felt a little sad. I was still looking forward to the hotels in our future vacations, but suddenly I found myself sentimental about the times we'd spent in the camper. Funny how the possibility of having something taken away makes it more precious to you. But the camper? I had no idea those feelings could be inside me. Looking back on it, I realized we'd had some good times on those family vacations in the camper, despite the small bathroom, chemical toilet and foam mattresses. (Doesn't that description just make you want to pick up the phone and place a bid on it?)

It's still up for sale. But the camper is now called "the good ole camper." Who knew?

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Caboose baby just keeps pushing us on

I've written before about how the age gap between my oldest two sons, ages 17 and 14, and my youngest one, age 8, affects my life. It's an odd feeling sometimes to start all over with the youngest one and go through

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experiences with him just like we did with the first two. As Yogi Berra once said, "It's like déjà vu all over again." My oldest son, Billy, recently earned his Eagle Scout rank and my middle son, David is close to it, while my husband and I are just starting that same long journey with Jason, our 8-year-old.

The age gap also means that I'm considered an older mom with Jason, while I wasn't in that category with the first two. A mid-life mom, as they call it. Kids who are born a while after their siblings are often called "caboose babies." The last one, bringing up the rear, giving the illusion of straggling behind. This analogy is a sad one to me, as if the caboose is an afterthought, trying to keep up with the rest of the train.

Jason was no afterthought; he was what I knew was needed to complete our family, and though he sometimes tries my patience, he has been a delight to have for a son. I, too, was a caboose baby, since my brother and sisters are eight to 13 years older than me. My mother was 38 when she had me, but I was the only child actually planned, or at least that's what she tells me. "I knew I wanted another baby," my mother told me, and so they decided to have one more. I was born on Mother's Day, which I have to say was incredibly good timing on my part. But I was the youngest, the "baby" of the family, and perhaps that's why I wanted a caboose baby of my own. One to hold, to savor, knowing it's your last. And knowing from personal experience that yes,

time really does go by quickly and he'll be grown in no time.

This was very clear to me recently as I've accompanied Billy, a high school senior, on several college visits. Walking behind Billy in a tour group at Wake Forest University was a surreal experience. For a while I fooled myself into thinking we were touring the campus just like we would tour sites we'd visited in the past. But along the pathway, Billy got ahead of me and my eyes fixed on him, and it became real to me that this tour was no ordinary tour of an ordinary place: It was my son's tour of which places he wanted to live during the next part of his life. I watched my 6-foot 5-inch son as he lumbered down the steps to the library

and remembered the day we got his first library card when he was 5. I watched him and imagined him walking across the campus each morning, hurrying to class, while his brothers, his dad and I would wake up in a different place. How I wouldn't see him in the kitchen every morning before he headed out to school.

So sometimes it's a relief to know the other two are still at home, that Jason will be there for a rather long time, providing my husband and me with more baseball games to cheer at, more school performances to watch, more Scout ceremonies to attend.

Of course, the boys are at different places along the road to maturity, so the body

changes can sometimes be a source of insight. A few years ago, Billy — who was 15 — was lying on the couch asleep, his arm stretched out over his head. Jason, 6, surveyed his brother's exposed underarm hair and screwed up his face in disgust. I grinned and explained, "That's what happens when you get older."

He pursed his lips for a second and then showed disgust again. "The thought of that happening to me sickens me," he said.

Jason likes to still do things

with his brothers, but as Billy and David get older, the age gap is more pronounced. Going trick or treating on Halloween or to the state fair aren't family events like they used to be when the older boys were younger; now I take Jason and maybe one of his friends. As this trend continues, I'll miss having my boys together, and I know, as one caboose baby to another, that Jason will miss it too.

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In awe of pool people

I'm not really a "pool person." I enjoy the occasional dip in the pool, but for some people — the "pool people" — it is a way of life.

They've got it down pat — a precision exercise — while I struggle with the details. You know the people I'm talking about: the tanned teenage lifeguards who look

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like they could swim before they could walk, who peer through their sunglasses, keeping a watchful eye on the water from their chair — a veritable Bay-watch Jr.;

the kids who frequent the pool every day during the summer months, swimming laps, playing Marco Polo, or making acrobatic dives from the diving board, bonding with other "pool kids"; and of course, the "pool mom" who takes her young kids to the neighborhood pool, calmly rubs sunscreen on them without anyone fidgeting or getting any in their eyes, then pulls out a best-selling novel to read while the kids frolic, the organized cooler of healthy snacks waiting beside her. She has on a coordinating swimsuit and cover-up complete with a matching tote bag. Her hair never frizzes even after she hops in for a swim and it dries in the sun.

I am in awe of the "pool people." I enjoy taking my three boys, ages 11, 8 and 2, to our local swimming hole, but after a few hours, I'm ready to go home for a

shower, dry clothes, and air conditioning. It is not an everyday event, mainly due to our busy schedules and, of course, the fact that I am not a "pool person." My two oldest sons are in year-round school, so our "summer" is only four short weeks, and we have to fit in sports camps and vacation, too. So we're not regulars at the pool, except during the weeks of swim lessons, which gives me an incentive to go.

To the non-pool person like me, the whole experience can be more of a hassle than anything else. My 2-year-old is the main drawback to a stress-free day of poolside time for me. For a while, he would have to adjust to the water each time we went, meaning at least 30 minutes of screaming (him, not me, though I've been tempted). One time I applied sunscreen to him before we got to the pool and on the drive over, he rubbed some into his eyes, igniting an hour-long family saga. By the time he was OK and used to the water, we had to leave for my middle boy's hockey game.

Applying the sunscreen has become a bit easier since then, but it's still time consuming and difficult. I don't notice "pool people" ever struggling with dripping bottles of Coppertone, Banana Boat or Hawaiian Tropic; maybe they're born with it already on.

Then there's the thing with the hair. I've written in this column before about my lifelong battle with my curly, frizzy hair and how it affected my self-esteem when I was in junior high. I think that lack of self-esteem contributed to my demise as a "pool person." When I was growing up, my best friend, Tina, and I swam at Pullen Park — the old outdoor pool

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— quite a bit. Later, however, as I approached fifth grade and was more self-conscious about my looks, I became hesitant to go swimming because it would mess up my hair and, believe it or not, it would take a couple of hours to get it looking straight again. It just wasn't worth it. I envied my friends with straight hair who could go swimming and then be ready to go somewhere else afterwards, their hair perfectly shiny, smooth and in place. Going somewhere in public after a swim was not an option for me. I required seclusion. Honest. Look around your pool. I bet you'll be hard pressed to find a female life-

guard with thick, curly hair that frizzes. Unfortunately, there's a reason. Most "pool people" have straight hair, and only "pool people" become lifeguards.

But I digress. Let's get back to the "pool mom." The cooler of snacks she brought for her kids always contains some kind of fresh fruit like grapes or bananas and maybe some cheese cubes and juice. The "pool mom" is very organized, making time to pack nutritious snacks instead of doing like I do and having to scrounge around for coins in the bottom of my pocketbook so my kids can buy a hot dog.

Then there's the attire prob-

lem. The "pool mom" has the perfect swimsuit and seems very comfortable in it. Excuse me, but I find it difficult to relax poolside if every time I get up, the bottom part of my bathing suit rises up to where, as Andy Griffith might say, "it ought not should be risin'." Why can guys wear swimsuits that come down to their knees, while women always have to worry about how much of what is showing? Come on, ladies, you know you do. One-piece suits, bikinis, tankinis, whatever they call them, the bottom line is — they're basically underwear, folks. We wouldn't go to the mall like that, but just because somebody once said

it's OK to wear them around water, then we go along with it.

Add to all this, the fact that my family has problems swimming in chlorinated water because it bothers our eyes immensely, making them red and sore the rest of the day. Exactly what is chlorine anyway and is it totally safe? "Pool people" never wonder about that or don't have red eyes; it's like chlorine is as natural as oxygen to them.

I admire 'pool people'. My hat is off to them. But I felt I should speak up for the rest of us so that we won't feel so alone out there, so out of place by the pool. So take heart; autumn will be here soon.

Potty on demand not easy

The pressure's on. Only a month and a half to go before Jason, my toddler, must be completely potty trained. That's when he starts preschool at my church, where one of the rules is that children begin-

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ning the program for three-year-olds have to be out of diapers and pull-ups. Jason will not be three until August so that makes him younger than my other two boys were when they started the same preschool years ago. I barely remember potty training the other two and don't recall the "deadline" looming over us quite as threateningly.

If I stop and dwell on the possible repercussions, panic sets in. In order to attend the school two mornings a week, Jason has to be consistent with his, shall we say, bathroom habits — not just pretty good most of the time. Talk about incentive. Nothing like the threat of having two free mornings a week taken away to get a mother moving.

Suddenly, our house has become Potty Training Central with a single mission. Well, maybe two. Code name: Operation Flying Dry. This process is not merely an accomplishment; it is a lifestyle. It's a sad and telling statement that my self-worth right now comes from the toilet habits of a toddler.

Our surroundings have changed: There are boxes of flushable wipes, cushioned kid-sized seats that fit the toilet, a colorful potty chair that plays musical interludes

when success occurs, training videotapes that encourage toddlers with potty adventures of other kids that look like they were made in the 1970s, an assortment of children's books to read in the bathroom, and that most revered rite of potty training passage — the sticker chart.

Ours is posted right outside the downstairs bathroom, complete with Power Rangers, Buzz Lightyear and Dragon Tales stickers. The concept is simple — Jason gets to choose and put up a sticker every time he uses the potty. It was slow going at first because he adamantly fought having to stop playtime to go take care of business. Finally, I gave him a sticker for simply standing near the potty chair without screaming. This bit of reward psychology worked, and he began to use the small musical potty chair.

With my older two boys I could plan my schedule around potty training, making that my supreme purpose for living. But with Jason, just when we were making progress, we'd have to go to a baseball or basketball game or school event. We eventually saw progress, though.

There are people on talk shows who say things like, "Oh my little Johnny was trained at 13 months. It only took a day," or "My Sarah wanted to do it. She came to me and took me by my hand and led me to the bathroom." Comments like those are very discouraging to frustrated parents of normal toddlers. So are books entitled things like "Potty train while teaching your toddler Spanish at the Same Time" and "Dr. Phil's Positive Potty Training with a Smile." (His wife probably handled all that stuff with their kids.) I

+ SEE O'DONNELL, 3B

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can relate much better to books such as "Potty Training for Dummies and Parents who Have Lost All Possible Enthusiasm" or "Triathalons, Climbing Everest, Potty Training, and Other Life Challenges."

There's a Dr. Seuss book called, "Oh, the Places You'll Go." That title, I think, could have been inspired by potty training, because Jason has certainly elected to "go" in many different places. There was the time he yelled out, "Mommy, I'm going to the bathroom" when he was actually hiding between the wall and the couch. I had to lean over the back of the couch and pull him out by his arms before too much damage was done. There was also the time in the car when I was running late but had to pull over on the side of the road, grab our portable potty, get Jason out of his car seat, and position my bewildered child on it.

Jason is a lover of stating things in the present tense, even though the "action" is yet to happen. This habit does get a

quick reaction from me as I rush to scoop him up in my arms and carry him to the bathroom. Sometimes I don't even know where he is in the house at the time he calls out one of his alerts, a definite no-no in the potty training manual. Once I was upstairs folding laundry when I heard him say in an angelic voice "I'm pooping." Down the stairs I ran barefoot did a fast 180-degree turn around the banister, sprinted down the hallway, slid across the newly-waxed kitchen hardwood floors, and arrived out-of-breath to find it was a false alarm.

Someday surely this will be an Olympic event. Though it turned out to be an exercise in futility, the old saying "better safe than sorry" certainly applies to potty training. I've learned my lesson the hard way, making me wish I'd bought stock in Resolve carpet cleaner. The one time you chose to ignore him will be the time you live to regret.

My older boys, Billy, 12, and David, 9, call things we do together a "family activity"; potty training, strangely enough, falls into that category. Nothing else can reduce an

otherwise sane, educated family to stand around the toilet wildly cheering and applauding Jason's latest achievement with the enthusiasm of a Broadway ovation. When the blessed event happens when my older sons' friends are over, they stare at us open-mouthed, eyes frantically searching for the nearest escape route. Other family members can no longer answer nature's call without Jason applauding, telling us what a "good boy" we are.

Jason has now graduated to the big potty, more commonly known as the regular toilet. He gets up there himself and then asks me to leave. "I want you to go out," he tells me, his eyebrows furrowed, his tone firm. My toddler is growing up, beginning to value independence and privacy.

Of course now my husband

sees Jason's success and replies, "But he needs to stand up like a guy, not sit down."

My response is to say, "I got him to this point. Now it's your turn."

I remember my other boys taking target practice at Cheerios placed in the toilet bowl, turning it into a game. So far Jason doesn't seem interested. I'm not that keen on the idea either because I know that sitting down is a whole lot more accurate than standing up. Then there's the whole personal clean-up process for him to become proficient at before preschool. Potty Training 101 is not quite over yet.

Wish me luck. I'm going to need all I can get. Time is running out and so is my patience.

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Mother's influence is subtle

As the only female in a household of five, I often find myself lost in a world of sports, bathroom humor, and laundry.

It's a rewarding, yet challenging, experience to live with my husband, Kevin, and three sons, ages 9, 6, and 9 months.

ODD BITS

SHARON
O'DONNELL

There's a popular book that proclaims that men are

from Mars and women are from Venus; often, though, I don't think we're even in the same solar system.

The first point of difference, the experts say, is communication styles. Like most couples, I tend to want to open up and talk about things, while my husband keeps to himself.

Once while we were watching a news report in which an American man had met and was marrying a Russian woman who didn't speak much English, I turned to Kevin and asked, "How can he fall in love with someone he can't even communicate with?"

Kevin glanced over at me and blankly asked, "Huh?"

I shook my head in despair. "Never mind," I mumbled, realizing there's more to communication than simply speaking the same language.

The things men and women consider important differ, too. Recently, we were having several couples and their children over for dinner, and I told Kevin I'd need some help cleaning up. And clean up he did. He spent all morning cleaning up the garage for heaven's sake when our guests would never even set eyes on the inside of the garage. Must be a guy thing.

Common interests is another area where the Mars-Venus thing comes into play. Although I enjoy and understand most spectator sports, I also love to go to plays, book readings,

character-based movies, and other artsy kinds of things. Kevin, on the other hand, will find any excuse not to go or if he does go, he looks at his watch so many times it's embarrassing.

So in an effort to keep this anti-theatre male gene from continuing through the generations, I decided last month to take my two older boys to see the Broadway on Tour production of "Annie." Both of them have quick wits and have at one time or another entertained the idea of acting so I thought they might like to see other kids their age on stage in a major production.

I was a bit concerned, though, the night of the play when David, my 6-year-old, walked through the doors of the BTI Center's Memorial Auditorium and asked, "Where's the food?" Luckily, they did sell cookies and candy so David was happy.

Then Billy, 9, saw an ad for an upcoming production of "Annie Get Your Gun" and wanted to know why they couldn't think up other names for play titles besides Annie. Just like my practical, analytical husband. I stole some glances at them during the play and was relieved to see they seemed to be enjoying it. Of course, it's hard to teach an old dog new tricks so I wasn't surprised when at intermission Billy went to call his Dad to check the score of the hockey game.

Later as we drove home, I heard them singing in the back seat, their sweet voices struggling to hit the high notes of "Tomorrow", Annie's theme song.

A chill rushed down my spine as I realized the play had touched them. I smiled. My mission had been successful. Someday in the future their wives are going to thank me.

We have to dream it first

I remember where I was 15 years ago when I learned that Jim Valvano had finally lost his fight with cancer. I was on Interstate 40 in between Chapel Hill and Raleigh, coming back from UNC Children's Hospital after visiting my 9-year-old nephew Jacob who was waging his own fight against a rare leukemia. So when I heard on the radio the sad news about Valvano, I cried for him and for so many others who had to battle this horrendous disease.

THE HOME FRONT



SHARON O'DONNELL

As a lifelong N.C. State fan (despite graduating from UNC-Chapel Hill), I'd also been a Jimmy V fan — I loved his humor and his passion, two things I feel are so important in life. The 1983 championship that underdog N.C. State won has gone down as a classic game in the history of the NCAA tournament, as has the image of Jim Valvano running around the court after the last second victory looking for someone to hug.

He was such an inspiration to so many people when he stood at center court at N.C. State's Reynolds Coliseum in 1993, just a few months before his death, and spoke as part of the 10-year anniversary of that championship season. A touching part of this for me was when he hummed the Wolfpack fight song, encouraging the emotional fans filling the place to shout at the appropriate place in the song "Go State!" His famous words were first heard there — about not ever giving up and how cancer might take away his physical abilities but could never touch his mind, his heart or his soul. He expressed similar thoughts a month later when he accepted the Arthur Ashe Courage Award at ESPN's ESPY awards in March 1993, so frail he had to be helped to the podium. It was that night that he announced the establishment of the Jimmy V Foundation for Cancer Research, with the support of ESPN.

Since then, the V Foundation — headquartered in Cary — has raised more than \$70 million dollars to fund grants in medical research with \$13 million of that coming from the V Celebrity Golf Classic. The 15th annual tournament will be held on Sunday, Aug. 10 at the Pinehurst Resort and provides a way for each of us to get involved, from volunteering to donating to going to Pinehurst to watch the event itself. Major sponsors are GlaxoSmithKline, Leith BMW, Nortel, Gregory Poole, Blue Cross & Blue Shield, Executive Staffing Group and Kroger.

Beginning at 9:30 a.m., the celebrities will be playing on the Pinehurst Resort's courses Nos. 1, 2 and 4, and the public can move around all three courses to meet the stars. Trick shot artist Dennis Walters will also perform a golf demonstration show at 10 a.m. Classic tickets are only \$5 and are available at the gate, at ticketmaster.com or by calling 834-4000. For driving and parking directions or to volunteer, go to golfclassic.org.

Other events related to the Classic include a reverse raffle in Cary on Aug. 6 with a BMW as a grand prize and a Kroger shopping spree.

Jim Valvano's speeches are now legendary, as they should be. DVDs of his ESPY awards speech are available through the Jimmy V Foundation (jimmyv.org), and I bought three of them — one for each of my sons — because I felt it's important for them to hear the wise words of this successful sports figure as he puts life into perspective in such a beautiful way.

Something else that Jim Valvano said in his speeches sticks in my mind: he said that nothing can happen without first having a dream and that you have to have enthusiasm to keep that dream alive, in spite of problems and obstacles you might face. When my oldest son Billy was in first grade, he entered a county arts contest called Reflections, and the theme was, "It could happen." For his entry, Billy made the front page of a newspaper with the headline, "Cure for Cancer Finally Discovered!" Under the headline were pictures he drew of two things: children running out of the hospital because they were cured and fireworks at famous places like Big Ben, the pyramid, and the Empire State Building as the whole world celebrated. Thanks to the Jimmy V Foundation and Golf Classic, it really could happen. We have to dream it first.

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My English teacher Muriel Allison taught me that I had 'it'

THE
HOME
FRONT



SHARON
O'DONNELL

She showed her students that it was OK to show their feelings.

I was relaxing on my couch one day last week, perusing a copy of The News & Observer, enjoying some rare free time. When I turned to the obituary page, I saw her picture immediately. Right at the very top of the far left column; I couldn't miss it. I sat up straight, my hands clutching the paper, my heart jumping into my throat.

The photo was from a time in her life before I had known her —

maybe 30 years before I first stepped into her classroom. But her face was unmistakable — her kind eyes, her familiar, encouraging smile. The obituary gave her age as 77, about what I thought she would be by now, though I'll always imagine her the way she was in 1980 when she was my high school English teacher. The paper also said she died after an extended illness, and I felt terrible that I hadn't known she had been sick. Disbelief set in. My eyes darted above the picture to double-check the name: Muriel Waters Allison.

The newspaper collapsed in my

hands, and my tears came suddenly and unexpectedly, emptiness welling up within me. It hurt to know I would never hear her voice again, never be encouraged by her optimism or inspired by her impassioned ranting and raving. During my junior and senior years from 1978 to 1980, I was in Mrs. Allison's English class at Athens Drive High School in Raleigh, but I had kept in touch with her many years after that.

Genuinely excited

I had never had a teacher quite like Mrs. Allison. I could see in her

face and hear in her voice how genuinely excited she was about teaching. Suddenly English wasn't just grammar and literary terms, though she was the one who made it clear to me how to use semicolons and commas to avoid run-on sentences. English became so much more — philosophy, imagining, caring, believing and sharing. In her class, I discovered I could actually express emotions that others could only feel. It felt good when I began to see that I could touch my parents and my friends with my writing.

SEE O'DONNELL, 5B



Muriel Waters Allison

O'DONNELL

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The reason I began to feel things so deeply was because I could see that Mrs. Allison felt things deeply, too, and she wasn't afraid to show it. I didn't feel as vulnerable anymore because I knew she understood me, that it was OK and even good to express emotions and thoughts in words. She used her sensitivity to inspire me. Her enthusiasm was contagious. I always looked forward to sitting at my desk listening to one of Mrs. Allison's lectures about *Antigone* or "Death of a Salesman" — lectures she managed to turn into lessons about life — filled with her boundless wisdom and easy-going humor.

Sometimes my classmates and I would come into the room, ready to take notes about Joseph Conrad or metaphors and then we would quickly realize there had been a change in plans: Mrs. Allison wanted to talk about a current event or a past experience that was on her mind, and she would get on a roll, almost as if she were on stage doing a monologue. Sometimes she would walk out of her class and across the hall to the supply room to get a book or another item, continuing her impromptu lecture all the while. She would step back into the room, never missing a beat; her mind always went a million miles an hour in different directions, but she kept us on our toes. As she went on with her "lesson about life lecture," my classmates and I would glance at each other and smile, maybe shake our heads in awe, knowing how blessed we were to be sitting in Muriel Allison's classroom.

'This is it!'

There were many times something she would say would move me to grab my pencil and start scribbling in my English notebook. Class notes often had some of my own poetry written around the edges. It would feel so wonderful to capture something I was feeling at the moment and put it in writing. I had felt like that before but not

to the extent Mrs. Allison made me feel it.

One time during the first weeks of my junior year, Mrs. Allison put all other class activities on hold until someone in the class came up with a thesis sentence for an analytical paper we were all writing. She said someone would write a creative thesis sentence that would knock her socks off; but, until someone came up with it, nobody could write any further.

In the quiet of the room, students would walk over and show her their sentences. Mrs. Allison would read it and then shake her head "no". "That's good, but that just isn't 'it' yet," she said. I'll never forget my own slow walk up to her desk. I showed her my thesis sentence and prepared myself for constructive criticism. She read the sentence, let out a war whoop, grabbed the paper out of my hand, and literally danced across the room, waving the paper in the air like a flag. "This is it!" she yelled. "This is it!"

I had never known that "it" was somewhere inside of me waiting to get out. Mrs. Allison is the one who found "it" hiding behind my protective wall. With Mrs. Allison, I felt confident enough to take down my wall and let "it" out.

One more time

Another time that stands out in my mind was when Athens, a new high school at that time, had to be officially accredited. A committee of VIPs visited our school to sit in on some classes and to talk with students and teachers to see if Athens was worthy. The day before the committee's visit, I had to give a presentation in Mrs. Allison's class — an oral analysis of a Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poem — something about a daffodil, if I remember correctly. I gave about a 25-minute speech, aware that Mrs. Allison liked my presentation because she was nodding her head in approval as I spoke.

When I sat down, she told the class that the accreditation committee would be visiting our class the next day. Then she turned to me and announced, "Girl, you're going

to get up there and give that analysis again and act like it's the first time you ever gave it." She turned to the rest of the class. "And everybody else is going to sit here and listen and act like they never heard it before." So the next day, we reenacted it, and though I was nervous, things went well.

Personal attention

Muriel W. Allison taught English for a phenomenal 56 years — phenomenal not just because of the quantity but because of the quality. She was one of the first African-American teachers in Wake County's desegregated schools, having to prove herself to a lot of doubters. And prove herself she did, as she always earned a stellar reputation and teaching record wherever she taught, with her students routinely winning writing contests and scholarships. She had found "it" hiding somewhere in other students, too. In April 1982, she was named Tar Heel of the Week by The News & Observer. She also won a state humanities award and was featured on a WTVD-TV public affairs show.

When my classmates and I were applying to colleges in the fall of our senior year, Mrs. Allison helped each of us craft what she called a "personal essay" to submit with our application. This, she advised, would increase our chances of getting into the college of our choice by showing them we could write. With my barely passing algebra grade, I needed all the help I could get. My essay was entitled, "To Grow in Spring," comparing growing up and leaving the nest to springtime, which Mrs. Allison went absolutely nuts over, particularly a phrase I used I still remember today: "the nectar of my soul." I have a copy of it somewhere in a file cabinet in my office, and I still believe it's the reason I was admitted to UNC-Chapel Hill, where I later received my degree in journalism.

Not afraid

At the end of my senior year, our English class went to a dinner theater to see "Camelot" because we had studied King

Arthur and his round table. Mrs. Allison was sitting at the table beside mine. If I was particularly moved by a scene in the play, I would glance at her to see her reaction. The play was marvelous! The beautiful concept of Camelot came to life right before our eyes. In one of the final scenes of the play, King Arthur tells a young boy to never let Camelot die. He tells the young boy to say it loud, and the little boy shouts, "Camelot!" Then King Arthur passes "Camelot" to him, in hopes that the boy will keep it alive.

"Run, boy, run!," Arthur tells him. "Run and tell the story of Camelot and then all the generations after you will know that once there was a place called Camelot."

The scene is a spine-tingling, soul-bursting one for me. As the boy was yelling "Camelot!" and running off stage, I looked over at Mrs. Allison. She was sitting there with tears streaming down her face, with the palm of one hand pressed against her forehead. She kept shaking her head in disbelief and fidgeting in her chair. She couldn't sit still. I felt the same way. That scene inspired me so much that I wanted to jump up and make everyone in the world experience the same emotion I felt. I wanted to tell the world how I felt — to share it with the world and then surely there would be no more wars. I knew what Mrs. Allison was feeling. I looked again at the tears on her cheeks and her hand clinching a tissue, wiping her eyes.

That May night in the dinner theater was the time I was proudest to call her my teacher. She wasn't afraid to show her students how moved she was, to show us how touching art can be.

Higher and higher

Mrs. Allison signed my senior high yearbook by using a famous quote from poet Robert Browning: "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp — or what's a Heaven for."

This quote was definitely food for thought for an 18-year-old setting off on college adventures. I suppose people inter-

pret the quote in different ways, but to me then and to me now, it means this: while a person is on Earth, he should always strive, will always keep reaching, will always be yearning — and all that reaching is good for us and makes us better people. We strive to do something and we do it — or grasp it — and then we reach even higher. And higher. And higher. But our yearning will never really be fulfilled on Earth; that's what heaven is for. I've thought about that quote so many times over the years.

A 'dose' of wisdom

During college, sometimes when I would come home for the weekend, I would stop by Athens on a Friday after school to chat with Mrs. Allison, knowing she would understand my feelings, knowing I would come away refreshed and motivated. She never failed me. Sometimes we would talk for an hour or two, sitting there in her empty classroom when she could have already left for the day.

College was, at first, very disillusioning to me, and I needed a "dose" of Mrs. Allison's wisdom to get by. Once we went out to eat when I was brokenhearted over a romance break-up, and I spilled my heart out to her, even let her read an emotional letter he had written to me. She was such a good listener and knew about "people" in general so much that she was like my own personal psychologist.

I remember well the time she told me that when a person goes to college, he must have both feet planted firmly on the ground. "If one foot is on a banana peel," she said, "then the person will slip and fall. And I don't want to even talk about having both feet on a banana peel."

I saw her words firsthand as so many people in college cared more about getting drunk than achieving their dreams or keeping their integrity. I often silently wished that those students could spend 10 minutes in a Muriel Allison classroom because it would change their perspective.

Losing touch

As happens over time, I lost touch with Mrs. Allison, about the same time I started raising a family, which probably meant I was too busy. We used to send each other Christmas cards until about eight years ago. My last correspondence from her was in 1992, when she had sent a note to say the photo I had sent of my toddler was "beautiful!"

I hadn't been aware of any severe health problems. I thought she was still living in her home in Garner, enjoying her golden years, reading poetry, maybe going to a play every now and then that would touch her soul. "Call Mrs. Allison" was on my perpetual "to do" list.

Then came her obituary in the newspaper. A few memories in this column I jotted down about 10 years ago and sent to Mrs. Allison, but I wish I would have had the chance to tell her one more time how I felt about her. I hope she knows I hadn't forgotten her.

I'm glad Mrs. Allison found the elusive "it" inside of me. She made me realize that as long as I'm living, I can't settle for less than what I can dream. Along the way, maybe I can pass "it" along to someone else, just as King Arthur passed Camelot to the boy and Mrs. Allison passed "it" to me.

In Mrs. Allison's obituary, there was a list of survivors, including her beloved daughter and many friends. Her husband of many years died a while back. At the end of the list is printed "and ALL her students." She really did care about those she taught, about those she met along the way. I ache knowing she is no longer on this Earth.

When I sent flowers to her funeral, I paused, struggling to decide what to write on the small card. What few words could possibly describe the depth of my feelings about this person?

And then it came to me, and I wrote: "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp — or what's a Heaven for."

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