

On the eve of the Winter Solstice 2003, here's the latest from the Bruce Family.

Stephen is two meters tall and still growing. He will have to master stating his height in centimeters and his weight in kilos, because he is planning to take a year off between high school and college to live abroad as an exchange student. Most likely he'll learn to rattle off the phrase, "No, I don't play basketball," in French, because France and Belgium were his top two choices. But Finland, Russia and the Czech Republic were also in the top five. He can say that phrase in Russian, but Finnish is another story. He'll find out in January where he goes.

Stephen is also the only one in the family who traveled very far this past summer. He went to France with his French class for three weeks, the first week staying with a family in the south. His French puts the rest of us to shame, not least because he managed to take an oral French class at the university this fall. Speaking of higher education, he has two more applications to complete, and in the spring he'll learn whether he'll live in Minnesota, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, or Maine in the fall of 2005. So his senior year is packed, and he'd just as soon give it all up, read old dictionaries, and sleep late every day.

Also speaking of college, the child who abandoned the nest is now home for three blessed weeks. Emily ended up choosing Williams College in Western Massachusetts. Knowing it well ourselves, we didn't realize we'd have to constantly explain that it's not in Virginia, it's in the Purple Valley of the Northern Berkshires.

As far as I can tell, Williams's status as a pretty good Liberal Arts College has nothing to do with how much college students sleep (not at all), how much they party (rather a lot), how much they instant-message their friends (way too much.) I did learn to IM this year, so I could stay in touch with my daughter, but my experience pales in comparison to hers. Apparently, while "working" on her computer with her iPod headphones on (a gift from her indulgent Aunt Karen and Uncle Dave) she instant-messages her roommate to ask if it's time to go to dinner. You must understand that the roommate is at that moment sitting two feet away, in a room that is literally 8' by 10'. Chip knows all about this strange culture because he wrote about it, among other things, in his book that came out this year: *Literacy in the Information Age: Inquiries into Meaning Making with New Technologies*.

In truth, Emily seems to have settled in, has met all kinds of interesting kids from all over the country; her two room-mates in her suite are from California, and they seem to have a great time together. She seems to be learning as much from her peers as she is in the classroom. She continues to study voice, sings in the choir and in a smaller group called the Elizabethans, and tutors in an elementary school. It's way too early for the-girl-who-likes-everything to choose a major, but early bets are on History or English.

Chip works and travels for work. He managed to get to Denmark and Germany in November for some meetings, and very much enjoyed staying in Tübingen, whose university was founded in 1477, about three hundred years before Williams and four hundred before the University of Illinois. In the Saarland he visited one of his thesis advisors, someone he hadn't seen in 32 years. In late November he and I spent several days in New York so he could speak at the NY Reading Association meeting, and also to assess how appropriate the city would be for the Republican convention. (It was we who recommended the cruise ship.) On the web I found a great short-term apartment on Bleecker St (those my age out there can now sing along, and as Emily points out, even she knows and loves Simon and Garfunkel.) This was in

Greenwich Village, so we had many good walks all over, but especially in lower Manhattan. Ah, to live in a city where one can get outdoors.

I've filled too many hours this fall with a couple of classes on Teaching English as a Foreign Language and have decided that I'm too old to learn theoretical linguistics. But they were great fun, when I wasn't complaining about the workload. I intended to put this to good use next year when we're on sabbatical, but don't know if I'll want to be tied down to a job when I could go to a street market or read the newspaper at a café instead. I continue to be more involved than I should be with the kids' school, recently to the extent of writing a long grant proposal on their behalf. I also continue to work with CASA as an advocate for abused and neglected children, spending time in Juvenile Court and on the phone with various caseworkers. All learning experiences.

Chip wants to work on a book next year, needs a break, and needs to get far away from his great colleagues and exemplary students, as nice as they are. So we're going to settle in France for the year, with forays out to projects that interest him in Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Denmark, and/or perhaps Italy. The perfect living space has yet to be found and the list of short trips needs to be firmed up, but the adventure is a nice prospect. It will be different from our last odyssey with the kids. We're not allowed to see Stephen until January or so, even if we're living just down the continent, but Emily can come for her Winter Study month in January and do some kind of independent project there.

As I was about to conclude this, late breaking news arrived. I neglected to mention Connecticut as one of the states where Stephen might live in 2005 and the admissions office at Yale must have known, because he just logged in and found out that at least one college wants him. (This is how the modern college applicant learns about that critical decision, not waiting for the letter carrier.) If you have an opinion about the best pizza place in New Haven, let him know. But he really hasn't decided and will probably take a couple of second-looks in the spring.

We'll keep you posted, wherever next year finds all of us, if only via these annual letters.