

Dear Friends & Family,

Christmas 2002/January 2003

This past year has been a very long year. Last Christmas seems like ages ago. A friend remarked that when we do new things, time seems to go slower (as opposed to when we are doing the same things, time flies). This past year I guess we *have* done some new things. It's been scary yet exciting, as we trust the Lord to guide our steps when we can't see what's down the road.

The most important new thing has been that we are involved in a church plant in southeast DC with our former pastor, Dennis Edwards. Last November (in 2001) we left our church of nearly 20 years, Washington Community Fellowship; after Dennis resigned from WCF, we stuck around for nine months waiting for a miracle to happen, but we were too sad. After visiting a few churches within walking distance, we found refuge in a church that meets in one of the Union Station movie theaters. Eventually we started attending Dennis's Sunday night bible study, which was intended to develop a core group for the church plant. It was amusing to me that during this time of personal healing, we were doing twice as much "church" as we'd ever done before. During the course of the year, the bible study became Peace Fellowship Church; we now meet on Sunday mornings in the Edwards' living room, and Phil & I are part of the worship team. It is a delight to be playing with Dennis and his son Jason again.

We never imagined the day would come when we would not be at WCF and we would be DRIVING to church! (Of course, I never thought we'd have a dog either!) But we felt the Lord was calling us to support Dennis and be a part of this new thing. I'm learning to be more frugal with my "nevers" as we just don't know how the Lord might work.

In February Kim & Amy Johnson and their 3 girls lived with us for the month while waiting for their new house to be ready. It worked out incredibly well, and the adults were very grateful that the stomach bug that Phil and Erica (and Rushmore) got didn't go through the whole household!

In July we went on the longest trip we've ever taken – with the dog. In all probability we won't do that ever again! We started with a weekend at Aunt Clara & Uncle Paul's in Jefferson OH for the Lillie Family Round-up, where Rushmore, stressed out from a late-night drive (having spent 7 hours cramped in half the middle seat of the Outback) and from sleeping outside, bit and/or snapped at several family members. Our sincere apologies to Alex and Uncle Chuck in particular! Sunday night, now traveling in Lynne & Rod's much roomier conversion van, we set out on our 3-week adventure. We saw...

...Aunt Opal in Harrod, Ohio ...Ann Arbor, where Phil had a week of software training ...Amy's sister Sue in Fort Wayne IN ...Dona & Rob in Indianapolis, where we met to see Jordan play in a baseball tournament. Turns out the tourney was canceled due to bad weather and flooded fields; Jordan left the next morning with his team to return to Canada, and we had two days to hang out with Dona & Rob. (I think Scott Hoover is now the only one in our immediate families who hasn't met Rushmore.) ...Becca Shopp at the Starbucks she was training at in northern Indy

...Dave & Naomi Wenger & family at The Hermitage, Three Rivers MI, where we learned that Rushmore, when left unattended and alone in a strange place, can howl like a wolf. One morning as we sat at silent devotions down the road from the house, we heard several long and plaintive howls and realized, with mild embarrassment, that it was no stray coyote – it was our dog! ...John & Pam Hays & family in Chicago, where we saw Greta in her role of Samantha at the American Girl play and Caroline, Alex & Amanda in a community theater production of "Oliver!" After being pretty much ignored by John Mark & Emily at the Wengers (this picture shows the closest John Mark ever got to the dog, and only after much cajoling!), it was a great treat to see Rushmore's warm and excited reception by Caroline & Caleb & Pam Hays ...also in Chicago, TV Masih and his family ...Randy & Patsy, Nick & Joe Seitz in Niles MI ...Roger & Esther, Abby & Amanda Wenger in Shipshewana IN ...my Zerbe cousin Shirley Roeder and my Aunt Hope at Shirley's quilt shop in Lima



OH. Finally, back to Aunt Clara & Uncle Paul's to swap vehicles, then home to DC. Whew! With only a few dog-related injuries of which I will spare you the gory details.

In October, as you know, the metropolitan DC area was literally terrorized by an unknown sniper who we now know to be a man and a teenager. This was a VERY new experience, scarier in many ways than the anthrax threat last year. Most of us in America don't know what it is to be terrorized, to be on the receiving end of random violence that could strike anywhere, anytime. Those three weeks were quite frightening, and we wouldn't be honest if we didn't say that we were afraid too. What I learned from the experience was this: These are the times when we are to encourage each other to trust the Lord, to share the assurance God has for us – "Don't be afraid, I am with you always." We do trust our Almighty God, and that is, for us, a blessed assurance.

A closing thought for the year 2002: "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works ... encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." (Heb. 10:24) In this (now-past Christmas) season and this new year, we want to encourage you to love and good works, for "love covers a multitude of sins." We hope God is doing a new work in your lives. Blessings in 2003!

~Phil & Gail Wenger~
gailphil@wengerdc.com



A Boy and His Dog: The Real Story

It's not that I made the whole story up last year. It really was a miraculous thing and an Act of God that Phil and I came to have a dog named Rushmore. He is still the right kind of dog for Phil. And Phil did promise to vacuum every day, which of course DIDN'T HAPPEN. But this year I want to tell you the real story about Rushmore, which is basically about MY adjustment to having a dog. I am, after all, the dog's "primary caretaker" ...

We got Rushmore in May 2001. After a two-week honeymoon period, he started barking and hasn't stopped. It is a LOUD bark. It gets on my nerves. He barks when Phil puts on his shoes because he knows that means a walk. He barks when he thinks we should be giving him more attention, or more treats. He barks when he wants to go outside, and as far as I'm concerned, that's the only legitimate reason he has to be barking. Usually when he barks at me, I put him out back. If he's trying to communicate something else with his barking, I just don't know what that could be because I DON'T UNDERSTAND DOG!

The first couple of months I was, to be honest, a little ticked with God. He was supposed to change Phil's heart, not mine. I guess that's a question I would ask God if I ever get the chance – "Why ME?" There were at least a couple days that Phil came home to find me holed up in the kitchen, in tears. During the first four months (at least!) my internal battle with fear was constant. At some point I reached a crisis where I was ready to say it's not working for me, I can't be afraid in my own home, at which point it occurred to me to "take it to the Lord in prayer," and after that, things did seem to get better.

It was eight long months before Rushmore and I really bonded. It was last January, when Phil was in the thick of budget season and was staying at work till after 9:00 many nights. Especially in the evenings, the dog was so sad. He would sit at the front window, waiting and watching for Phil. It was pathetic. Finally I started walking him during the day, out of pity. It took a few times to get used to picking up the poop and not gagging. I NEVER thought I'd see the day. (This is why I am now hesitant to use the word NEVER!)

I don't really enjoy walking the dog. I have to avoid other dogs and people, and that's hard to do in the city. He is such a pretty and friendly looking dog that people often walk up to him wanting to pet him. Usually he snaps at them and it scares them and it scares me. I don't like being responsible for someone else's fear of dogs. Occasionally I walk him to meet Phil on his way home from work. I don't do it very often because every time I do, I am reminded of how stressful it is to walk such a neurotic and unpredictable dog.

On the plus side, Rushmore has been pretty good with company. His little doggy brain understands it as "more attention for ME!" He has done well with everyone who has stayed at our house this past year or come to visit. He loved it when Kim & Amy & the girls lived



with us in February. He loved the Hoovers (Dennis & Ruth), the Lyszyks, the Ottos, the Klassens, and my nieces, Brianna & Kathryn. Sometimes the love was reciprocal, sometimes not. (As I recall, Connie & Roman's daughter Olivia spent most of her time on the first floor sitting on the back of the couch out of his reach!)

Within the first week of his arrival, Rushmore earned the nickname Doofus and his "Indian" name, Always Underfoot, and he continues to live up to those names, as he continues to be constantly in the way, underfoot, and – literally not figuratively – in my face. He still doesn't quite understand "MOVE!" so you often have to just push him out of the way when you want to get past. I'm having difficulty teaching him that "go away," "get out of my face," "leave me alone" and "don't be rude" all require the action of going somewhere else. He just doesn't get it! He is often clingy and has no concept of personal space. I like him best when he is tired out and laying like a dead bear rug on the livingroom floor.

When we go on trips and can't take the dog with us, we've been fortunate to be able to leave him with John, Karen, Emma & David Thorp. They are like the babysitter who lets you do what you can't usually get away with (speaking as one who has done this). They let him upstairs, they let him on the couch and they let him sleep on their beds. And they take GREAT care of him. Rushmore loves going to the Thorps. He jumps right out of the car, runs happily to the door and jumps on whoever answers the door to give them kisses.

In October we did a carting workshop with the dog out in Virginia and purchased a wagon for Rushmore to pull. I wasn't willing to pay additional money for sled runners



because we don't get enough snow in DC, but the cart maker threw them in for free and we actually got to try them out in December with Angela Johnson in the wagon.

Phil does vacuum more these days. Sometime in the last couple months, the dog started shedding more than usual & Phil, bless his heart, started vacuuming more than just once a month. But there's dog hair everywhere. EVERYWHERE! I do let the dog give me kisses now, but only on the cheek. And I wipe off the slobber afterwards. You see, so many things I thought would NEVER happen! That's the real story behind "A Boy and His Dog."