

# 2019 Christmas Blog

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## Good Grief... it's Friday, 12/13!

I'm not sure how this date crept up on me. I still have “thank you” notes that I've been meaning to send out for three months to people who attended my mom's funeral or donated to the Southeast Florida Alzheimer's Association. Now, I have final exams this coming week and am flying out on Friday for an overseas holiday trip with the kids and I haven't written a verbose Christmas letter yet. “Time is fleeting; madness takes its toll”....(yes, from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*)....



We welcomed 2019 in the Galapagos Islands, a day after Adrian proposed to Megan underwater, while we were scuba diving (There are a couple of video links on my Facebook® page). While this past year has been eventful and transformative for all of our family, it's been for the most part, “Adrian's Year.” In addition to his engagement, Adrian passed each of the four parts of the CPA exam on his first try. Also, while studying for the exams, he completed an online Master's degree program through Western Governors University. He began working for Ernst & Young in July and has been putting in some very long hours. Conservatively, he worked 60-80 hours per week during the “busy season.” He's in the tax department, and thus, has earned a bit of respite during the last couple of weeks. This will change after New Year's Day. He appears to be thriving at EY and seems to be enjoying “work life.” He's very well liked at the firm and has earned enough leave to be able to go on our family holiday trip this year,

much to my surprise. He and Megan are getting married on 02-02-2020. The date was picked for the obvious palindrome, so obviously, some of my “nerdy geekiness” has rubbed off, although Adrian is very social and outgoing in sharp contrast to me.

Megan also moved in earlier this year. She completed her clinical hours for certification as a licensed lactation consultant this year and sat for the certification exam in October. She is waiting for exam results, which may possibly arrive this upcoming week. She has had a lot of success working as a doula and nanny for several well-to-do and high-profile clients in OC and LA this year, on top of completing her clinical work. Adrian and Megan have had a great year and 2020 promises to be even better for them.

Ariel has also had an eventful year. She is still living up in the Silicon Valley with her boyfriend, Bill. She quit her job at Bright Horizons to join a childcare startup, called Tyncare, in San Francisco. While the pay isn’t great and she has to commute by train to San Francisco, it affords her some administrative experience; thus, she isn’t tied to the classroom all of the time. She questioned her decision to change jobs a month after leaving Bright Horizons, but after some recent personnel changes in the company, she’s been enjoying her job more. She is also completing her Master’s in Education at Humboldt State University and will be graduating this Spring after finishing up a couple of classes and her thesis. I’ll be flying up for her graduation ceremony in May. Bill’s company, Alation, seems to be doing very well and the company put up some of its employees at the Four Seasons in Miami Beach in early May and lavished them with helicopter rides, fancy dinners and luxury gifts. This afforded Ariel an opportunity to visit her grandmother a couple of months before she passed away.

## Travels

Our trip to the Galapagos was simply awesome in the traditional sense of the word (as opposed to the current colloquial overuse of the millennial generation). Our scuba dives there rank among the best, if not the absolute best that I have ever experienced. Bill and Megan had gotten certified shortly before our trip, so I’m afraid their expectations for future dives may be too high. Snorkeling was also fantastic, especially with sea lions on the beach that came up to us to check us out. We spent a few nights on each of the three major islands: San Cristobal, Santa Cruz and Isla Isabella. I particularly liked San Cristobal the best. Ariel and Bill flew back after 10 days, but I continued on with Adrian and Megan to Quito and to visit the equator. We then flew to La Paz, Bolivia and visited Copacabana on Lake Titicaca. On the way back, we had an overnight stopover in Mexico City and visited the Aztec ruins at Tenochtitlan.



During my Spring Break, I flew to Malta and Cyprus. Malta was my last country in Europe on my way to completing my “all the countries in the world” bucket list. I have now visited all 45 countries in Europe (based on UN designations). Cyprus was added because although technically not in Europe, it is part of the European Union, and also allowed me to check off having visited all 28 members of the EU. We spent a day in Paris and a night in Rome on the way to Malta, and the return back visiting key tourist sites in each, since Megan had never been.

The diving in the Galapagos reignited my interest in scuba diving; an activity that I engaged in profusely in my early and mid-20s, but in recent years, only participated when we happened to be in a location where diving was of some renown. We dove in Malta, but I was totally unimpressed, and despite a 7mm wetsuit, found the Mediterranean Sea utterly cold. I had been warned that March was still off-season in Malta, and most dive operations in the island didn't open until June, but we were there and I had the bug. In Cyprus, we dove the Zenobia Wreck, which most scuba publications rank among the top 10 wreck dives in the world. While the water temperature in Cyprus was supposed to be the same as Malta and California (18 C), it felt a lot more comfortable.

Ariel and Adrian were planning to attend their cousin Kasey's graduation from medical school in Omaha, Nebraska in mid-May, and we took the opportunity to make it an extended weekend road trip for them to complete visits to all 50 states. I had completed my goal of visiting all 50 states in 2009, shortly before my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. Road trips that covered New England states in 2010 and Southern Central states in 2011 left the kids at 47 states. We had discussed a weekend trip to cover the missing three, Missouri, Kansas and Iowa for years, and Kasey's graduation provided the perfect opportunity. We visited all three state capitals. I had hoped to tour some of the bridges of Madison County, Iowa (yes, from the movie), but we only visited one of the covered bridges due to the fact that we got a late start out of Omaha and a heavy rain downpour, which made driving miserable. We also visited the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. I had last done that 35 years ago during a road trip I had taken from Texas to Wyoming to Florida, during which I had resolved to visit all 50 states by age 30. That didn't happen; it took me 20 years longer, but both my kids met my original goal.

After the spring semester ended, we took a trip to visit several countries in southern Africa. Ariel and Michelle Rimlinger joined us on this trip. We flew into Johannesburg and I rented an SUV. We visited Kruger National Park. We also took a day trip to Mozambique (I hired a driver for this and left the rental in South Africa). Even so, we wasted almost two hours getting the Mozambique visa on arrival at the border. We visited Lesotho and Eswatini (formerly Swaziland); neither of which were very impressive. We flew from South Africa to Zambia and visited Victoria Falls from both Zambia and the Zimbabwe sides. I tried to convince myself that I'm still at least “young at heart” by jumping off a cliff and swinging over the Victoria Falls Bridge Gorge on a tethered harness. While being pulled up, I got one of my legs tangled in the ropes and lost a shoe as I worked to untangle myself. The next few hours were spent hopping on one foot and then walking with cheap green rubber flip flops I



purchased in town. This provided the kids with considerable amusement. In Zimbabwe, we also did a lion walk where we got to touch and walk next to lions. While the experience was rather unique, I was somewhat uncomfortable with the way I perceived how the lions were being treated to provide tourists with overpriced photo opportunities. From Zambia, we took a day trip to Botswana to visit Chobe National Park. We did both a river and jeep safari tour; both were great, but the river safari was outstanding. It was amazing how close we could get to the animals and still be relatively safe. When we left Botswana, the driver took us to the wrong border station (the Botswana-Zimbabwe border, instead of the Botswana-Zambia border), where our boat to cross the river was waiting. Our passports got stamped in and out at both borders, causing Megan's passport to have a stamp on every page. This caused a nightmare the next day when British Airways would not let Megan board the flight back to South Africa because the immigration authorities there require 2 blank visa pages on a passport for entry. I won't go through the frustrating and expensive rigmarole we went through to resolve the issue as it would take several more paragraphs. It's regrettable that we endured this aggravation at the end of an otherwise fantastic trip.



In July, we drove to Ventura and took a scuba diving trip to the Channel Islands, diving off of the Anacapa and Santa Cruz Islands. We also spent a day in Santa Cruz Island, where I was surprised to find the famed foxes were everywhere. The diving was okay, but really nothing spectacular, and very similar to sites in Laguna, Catalina and La Jolla. I was really disheartened to find a few weeks later that a boat on a similar trip had caught fire and over 30 divers, including two whole families, had perished. An "inside joke" among the kids, myself and friends that travel with us is "the Llorente curse," which has two distinct components: (1) After traveling thousands of miles to take a picture of an architectural landmark, it will invariably be undergoing renovations and be partially or fully obscured and (2) Shortly after we

return from a destination, it will be “in the news” with some negative or tragic event. This year, we visited the state capital building in Jefferson City, MO, which was undergoing renovations and then hit by a tornado two weeks later; we visited Notre Dame in Paris (obscured by scaffolding on one end) and then the fire happened a couple of months later; and lastly, the Santa Cruz Island dive boat tragedy. Being a lifelong skeptic, I don’t believe these are anything but coincidences, and given how much we travel, these may not even be statistical anomalies, but sometimes I just want to stand back and ask, “What is going on here?”

I was pleasantly surprised that both of the kids were able to swing getting time off of work for another international family holiday trip. Since both started new jobs this year, I had almost written off the possibility of such a trip earlier this year. To accomplish this, we had to give up Christmas at home, since it falls mid-week, and the only way they could get a two-week block of time off was by including the Christmas and New Year’s holidays. We are leaving on Friday for northern Vietnam and then South Korea. We will stop over a couple of times in China and visit Shenzhen, the Forbidden City and the Great Wall in Beijing, since Bill & Megan have never been.

I am taking “banked leave” in the Spring semester (January-May) and will not be teaching (banked leave is like a sabbatical, but I don’t have to research or write a paper because it’s essentially compensation for extra classes that I opted not to be paid for and essentially took comp time). I had hoped to do a mini-retirement and travel for two straight months during this period, but I still have the law practice, and even though I’ve dramatically reduced my case load, it’s difficult to be gone for more than 3 weeks at a time. The other thing I wanted to do is be able to take advantage of last minute travel deals, so I haven’t fully planned trips for this period, but so far, I’m taking a cruise to Argentina and Chile in Feb. with friends, Gloria Salzle and her daughter, Marcie. I’ve also signed up for Habitat for Humanity international projects in Macedonia (April) and the Dominican Republic in August. I’ll probably extend the Habitat trips by adding nearby destinations if the projects are a go.

My mom passed away on July 15<sup>th</sup>. While not totally unexpected, the timing caught me by surprise. Although she had been in a steady decline, I had really thought she would be around for Adrian’s wedding and possibly a year or two longer. She was 84. Her passing has left me with a confusing array of mixed feelings and emotions. A couple of weeks later, the mom of three close childhood friends also passed away. While I don’t think I’ve ever suffered from real depression, I get tearful pangs of what I call “melancholy nostalgia” at times, where I feel really down because things will never be the same again. I recall the first time I experienced this was on my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday, where I cried uncontrollably because I would never be a single digit age again. My mom was beside herself trying to console me and probably thought I was nuts. As I matured, these pangs became less frequent as new challenges and adventures always presented themselves and I didn’t have time to dwell in the past. Lately, I find myself in nostalgic moods, which start as happy, but fade to melancholy as I realize that “we may never pass this way again” (The Seals & Croft song is now playing in my head as I type this). Anyway, I nowadays distract myself from these moods by primarily playing with Albie or “Forges of Empires” on the computer.

2019 has hit me over the head with a giant hammer that reads “You are old, sucker, why don’t you just get used to it?” I turned 60 this year. In the ancient Chinese Zodiac, that means I’ve completed my journey through the 5 elements. Traditionally, it was rare for an elder to complete a 6<sup>th</sup> element (12 year) cycle, but fortunately, things are changing, and in any case, I’m not Chinese, nor much of an “elder” for that matter. During the in-service at Saddleback at the start of the Fall semester, faculty are awarded a pin commemorating 5-year anniversaries. The numbers were fairly large for the 5-10-15 and even 20-year anniversaries; a lot smaller for the 25 and 30-year anniversaries, and then there was me, the only member celebrating a 35-year anniversary. Surprisingly, there was also a guy celebrating his 40-year anniversary, but he was from our sister campus, Irvine Valley. Next June will be my 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the same house. For someone who was so mobile in my early 20s, I’m somewhat bewildered that I’ve been in the same place for so long. I fell in love with Orange County, and even though I’ve lost the text and can’t recall all the content, I remember my letter in 1984 included a short poem (*yes, I used to write poetry in my youth and was not ashamed to let other people see it..*). In any case, I remember referring to where I was living (Dana Point at the time) as “nirvana” and ending the poem with the somewhat prophetic line: “This California sojourn may never end.”



Orange County has lost its luster though. It is crowded now and the cost of living is very high, so after retirement, I may set up home base somewhere else. High on my list is the Olympia, Washington area, but there are still a lot of factors that could ultimately affect my decision. I’m in a position where I expect to be able to retire at age 62 (provided the State remains solvent); thus, I could have as little as a year left teaching at Saddleback after I return in June. However, I’m resolved to retire when offered a “golden parachute.” Unfortunately, the college doesn’t have a good system in place to encourage early retirement; they kind of do it haphazardly every four or five years. They offered one last year, so they may not offer one again until 2022 or 2023. I have a lot of things to consider, but I’m pretty certain I won’t be around to collect a 40-year pin. I’m sure that my experiences traveling on my own and with Habitat this Spring and Summer will influence me one way or the other.



Finally, a few words about our English Cream Golden Retriever, Albie... Generally, she's utterly nice and Adrian has done a great job of training her. For the most part, she obeys commands and you just can't feel sad or blue when she comes up to you with a toy to play fetch or tug-of-war. The only thing we haven't been able to do is stop her from chewing up stuff. We've gone through 9 Samsung remotes, two expensive pairs of sunglasses, countless hair brushes and toothbrushes (her current favorites) and numerous other items in the last year... oh, and paper, lots of paper, too. We are currently spraying stuff with a bitter chew spray we bought on Amazon that smells a lot like lemongrass, but it hasn't been very successful so far. Anyway, it's hard to stay mad at her, so I'll end this letter with a picture of Albie. Feel free to say "ooh... ahhh."



Pat yourselves on the back if you got this far, and once again, our best wishes for a wonderful Christmas and truly awesome New Year!!!

Love,

Alex J. Llorente