

2020 Christmas Blog

ALEX, ARIEL, ADRIAN, MEGAN, BILL O., ALBIE, AZABU & SCHUBERT TOO!
("ALL THE CALIFORNIA LLORENTE GANG ")



Given a year that I am certain has been monumental to every person that reads this, I'm at a loss for words on how to begin this year's Christmas letter. I just hope this letter finds each of you well. I have not kept up with everyone the way I should have during the pandemic, to date, but I have not heard of any friends or family who have fallen ill to the virus. So for that, "knock on wood." I can boil 2020 down to two words: blasé and frustrating. However, especially for my children, 2020 has had some stellar moments.

We optimistically welcomed the 2020 New Year in Seoul, South Korea after spending Christmas week in North Vietnam. We stopped over in Shenzhen, China on December 29th and Beijing on January 3rd & 4th, right before returning to the U.S. At the time, there was no mention of COVID in China or in the U.S. I really like Vietnam; this was our second trip, but the first focused on the South. Hanoi and the North are much more interesting in every respect, except the cuisine (I don't eat fish or seafood). I want to make another trip to Vietnam with the kids, focusing on Hue and the central region, since this is where their maternal great-grandparents hailed from. I'll probably combine that with a trip to Laos after this COVID thing ends.



While we were in South Korea, it was amusing to listen to Adrian and Megan try to plan out their lives with endless conversations about when to get another puppy and when to have kids. Us older folk have learned that life is something that just happens despite the best of plans. In any case, apparently I wasn't very attentive while listening in to their conversations because about 10 days after we got back, I was totally surprised when they brought home another English Cream Golden Retriever, which they named "Azabu" (the name of a store they had seen in Seoul). They exclaimed that this was their "wedding puppy."

A couple of weeks later on the first global date palindrome in 909 years (02/02/2020), Adrian & Megan were married. I've been to very few weddings after I hit 35, and I'm obviously not impartial, but Megan's and Adrian's ceremony and reception were actually fun. We managed to skip all the financial and emotional angst that I mentally associated with weddings from watching TV "bridezilla" shows and listening to friends and clients lament on the pecuniary drain. I think practically everybody had a good time, with very few people regretting missing the Superbowl, which went on at the same time. My only sorrow was that my mom had not lived to see this day.





I took “banked leave” during the Spring Semester so that I could travel, and I had several trips planned for the Spring and Summer. The first was a South America cruise on NCL rounding Cape Horn with several coastal Patagonia ports of call. I flew to Buenos Aires three days before the cruise and then met up with long-time friends and neighbors, Gloria and Marcie, on our departure date, February 29th. COVID was just starting to become a concern and we were well on our way when the news about the spread of the virus on a Princess ship broke. It was interesting to see how the cruise line adapted to unfolding events on the fly. Even with the closing of the buffets and having our hands constantly drenched in alcohol gel sanitizer, the cruise still offered a good time. I particularly enjoyed our stop in the Falkland Islands.

We were already on the way to our disembarkation port when the worldwide cessation of cruises was announced on March 13th. We landed in San Antonio, Chile on the 14th and made our way to Santiago. Gloria and Marcie flew back that night, but I stayed on until late night on the 16th. I did have a sobering misadventure in Santiago, when in the span of 15 minutes, I managed to fend off four attempts, by what appeared to be a coordinated gang of three young men, to take my iPhone from me. I think it was the first time I had been in a physical altercation or landed a punch since I was 17. I returned to LAX on Air Canada via a connection in Toronto on March 17th. It was a bit nerve-racking in Toronto, since looking at the boards of flights to the US were almost all cancelled and the departure area for our flight was practically empty. An old lady from Santa Monica asked me if I thought we’d take off with so few passengers and I replied that I wasn’t sure, but maybe Air Canada needed to fly to LAX to bring back Canadian passengers and/or crew. I’ve been on a couple of relatively empty flights before, but this one was surreal.



While on the cruise, I had received emails from Habitat for Humanity informing me that the build in Macedonia I was set to participate in April had been cancelled. I had booked a trip from Skopje to Kazakhstan and several of the former Soviet Central Asia Republics to begin after the project, so I initially changed my flight to bypass Macedonia. However, within a week of my return, I was forced to postpone the whole trip when Turkish Airlines cancelled its outbound flights from LAX. In addition, most of my destination countries weren’t letting in citizens from the US, unless we went into an immediate 14-day quarantine upon arrival, as the COVID crisis worsened.

The college began to move all classes online; however, I wasn’t teaching in the Spring. Instead, I took a couple of online certification courses on “how to teach online” and prepared my online summer class. I spent my earned vacation leave working more in class prep than I’ve spent in the prior 10 years. Some of it was fun, since I generally enjoy tinkling with new software, but some of the experience was very frustrating. In any case, I taught a single condensed Financial Accounting class and it went very well. I covered basically everything I typically do in a live class on-campus and initially found the Zoom meetings were an adequate alternative to live interaction. During the Fall, I was back to a full schedule teaching a total of four classes, but three different courses. This was a bit overwhelming since I hadn’t had sufficient time to fully prepare the course content for the managerial accounting and especially the tax courses before the semester started. In addition, there were typically 2 or 3 students in each class and that fell behind or had constant technology issues in each and couldn’t meet exam and homework deadlines. I tried to be accommodating when students informed me of personal or family illness; however, by the second half of the semester, it felt like I was running an additional half a dozen classes, each on a different schedule. In addition, I could probably join Best Buy’s “Geek Squad” now, since a third of my time is spent troubleshooting student’s tech issues, as well as my own on occasion. We are teaching online again in the Spring, but it should be a lot easier because even though I’m teaching four sections, there are only two different courses, both of which I’ve now taught online before and have existing content.

With respect to the law office, I continue to wind down and primarily do transactional work for past clients. The COVID crisis has actually forced local courts to embrace the digital age. I hope some of the changes are here to stay. I’ve vented about the sheer stupidity of mandatory attorney court appearances for status conferences and other routine matters; however, this is of little consequence to me now, since I’m in semi-retirement mode.

I turn 62 next August and I had thought about retirement from the College at the end of this school year. If the District had offered a golden parachute, I would have probably taken it; however, they didn't. At this point, I'm planning to stay on for the 2021-22 school year and see what the world looks like at this time next year. In any case, I can't plan travel with everything in flux, and all the volunteer projects are currently suspended.

Ariel completed her Master's Degree program, and in May, we were supposed to go up to Eureka for Ariel's graduation from Humboldt State University. The live ceremony got cancelled, and instead, the school held a virtual ceremony. The novelty of virtual meetings began to rub off for me after this event.

Megan decided earlier in the Spring that she wanted to pursue a Nursing Degree and took online classes she needed to meet prerequisites. She was ultimately accepted into an accelerated program at Concordia University, which she began in the Fall and is expected to graduate in December 2021. She's supposed to begin hospital training rotations in a couple of weeks, but again due to COVID and the current hospital bed crisis in Southern California, that is apparently up in the air right now. Megan's sister had a baby ten days ago, which has made Megan very excited and has me a bit concerned. While on one hand, I'd be thrilled to be a granddad and start cruising toy stores again (not to mention the backlog of train sets and Lego kits I have to build), I would prefer that they were more settled. They are great kids and very mature for their age, but still prone to be impetuous (see ... the "wedding puppy" reference above).

Ariel and Bill had a whirlwind summer. They first adopted a deaf Chihuahua mix, which they named "Schubert." He's cute, especially when he stands on his hind legs and is not as "yelpy" as other Chihuahuas I'm acquainted with (yes, I'm talking about you, Chico & Zaco).

Next, Ariel & Bill bought a house in Hayward, across the bay from the Silicon Valley. It's an older house, similar to the one I grew up in, but nicely updated. The price was a bit shocking even for someone like me, who is used to California's high real estate prices. The Bay Area market is simply ridiculous, but they are happy and proud, and that's all you can really ask for.

Last, but definitely, not least, Bill proposed in July and Ariel accepted. I was going to say, "Soon, I'll have four kids in tow," but if you go through my trip photos, you'll note I've had four kids in tow for several years now. They would probably disagree with the "in tow" characterization and argue that without them, I wouldn't have anyone to ask: "Where's my wallet?" "Where's my camera?" "What did he/she say?" Anyway, Ariel and Bill are not going to plan their wedding until after the COVID thing is over, since they have no interest in a "virtual" wedding.



The rest of the year has more or less dragged on; we are all fortunate that we can work remotely. Adrian is still with Ernst and Young, but recently switched from tax to audit. Ariel is still with Tincare, but has handed them a 3-month notice and is planning to leave at the end of January. Bill is still at Alation and Megan works as a doula and is also going to nursing school now.

I spend my days with three screens in front of me...working, streaming television and playing "Forge of Empires," more often than not, all at the same time. I lament that I haven't made more productive use of my time. I feel I should have spent all this extra time at home exercising or reaching out to friends and family. Instead, I've been a Netflix and Prime Video glutton. Instead of the Habitat projects, most of my year was consumed in building a virtual city in an addictive game.

I've also been deeply concerned about the current political situation, but I historically refrain from discussing politics here. So, I'll end it now and wish you all a great holiday under the circumstances. Ariel & Bill are down for Christmas, but between their work schedules and the Covid lockdown here in California, we are staying pretty much close to home. Whether 2020 has been good, bad or mediocre for you, 2021 has simply got to be better. I hope to see you all on the other side of Covid thing next year.

Love,

Alex J. Llorente