

ALEX LLORENTES' 2016 CHRISTMAS BLOG

Dear Friends and Family:

2016 may ultimately go down as a transcendent year in history (albeit not favorably from my perspective). However, for me personally, little has changed; I could probably get away with resubmitting last year's blog and just mark "ditto". Since, I recall making a similar remark last year, it is evident that I am somewhat in a rut. I've begun my Christmas letter with comments about my mom's condition during the last two years, so I'll skip that until the end this year to start on a more upbeat note.

The kids and I, accompanied by Ariel's boyfriend, Bill, and Adrian's girlfriend, Megan, commenced 2016 by departing on New Year's Eve for a trip to Cambodia/Vietnam and Taiwan. We had a great trip, although all of us got sick at one point or another. I think Ariel had some flu symptoms before we departed and throughout the trip one or more of us was sick on any given day. I had laryngitis for two days and could hardly talk, but we didn't let a microscopic virus slow us down. We visited Phnom Penh and one of the most poignant and sobering memorials I've ever seen: a Buddhist stupa filled with to the ceiling with thousands of skulls on all four sides of the tower at one of the killing fields from the Cambodian Genocide. We flew to Siam Reap and visited Angkor Wat, Angkor Thom and Ta Prohm, before flying back to Phnom Pehn in a single day. We then took a bus to Ho Chi Minh (Saigon), Vietnam. The trip was over 7 hours, and honestly not as interesting as I had expected. In Saigon, we met up with Don Hilscher, who has retired there and looking for love and savoring the fact that you can live like a king in Vietnam for a dime. Don and I worked at the Internal Revenue Service in Tampa 36 years ago, a few years later he moved to California and we were business partners in a couple of restaurants and mailbox rental/photo labs. He met my former mother-in-law in 1989 and they were together until she passed away in 2013. We met Don for dinner twice during our stay while he was in route to dinner dates with "young honeys". We took a couple of day trips outside Saigon, including an interesting day at the Mekong Delta. Since the prices were such a bargain, I availed myself to a full spa treatment at the hotel, which I had never done before, it included a steam bath, a body scrub, facial mask, a full body massage, a hot rock treatment. I was caught off guard by the offer for a "happy ending".

During Spring break we took a short trip to Northern California, we met Ariel & Bill in Sacramento and drove up to Redding, Mount Shasta, Weed, California and Klamath Falls, Oregon, before reaching our main destination, Lassen National Park. Unfortunately, the road through the park was closed due to snow. In fact, at the visitor center the snow was over the roof. The guide mentioned that the only possible trail was some sulfur pools less than a mile away, but it would be difficult to walk there without snow shoes. Nevertheless, we set out on the trail, I walked less than a hundred yards before I realized that I wasn't going to make it since every other step my leg would sink past my knee into the snow, and it was an ordeal getting out. Bill, Ariel, Megan and Adrian, went ahead and reached the pools, returning 2.5 hours later. Ariel, especially, was not a happy camper and made her displeasure verbally known. On the way back, we visited Folsom State Prison and briefly stopped at the State Capitol Building.

Adrian graduated from Saddleback at the end of spring semester and transferred to Cal State- Fullerton. The retirement of one of my beers left me as the most senior member of the faculty in terms of years at the college, not age. After Adrian's commencement, we flew to Dublin where we met up with Mike and Gloria Salzle. I had rented a minivan and we circumvented Ireland, with brief stays and stops, in Waterford, Cork, Blarney Castle, the ring of Kerry, Cliffs of Moher, ferry to Inisheer (Aran Islands), Galway, Londonderry, Giant's Causeway, Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge, Belfast and back to Dublin from where we flew to Glasgow, Scotland for a road trip through Great Britain with stops in Scotland, Wales and England, completing a visit to all four home nations of the United Kingdom in one trip. Most notably, we visited Beatles sites in Liverpool, Stonehenge, museums Oxford University, Isaac Newton's home, Edinburgh Castle and St. Andrews, Scotland.

In August, we drove up north again, and met Ariel in Stockton, then proceeded north to visit the Empire Mine and Nevada City, before drifting down the American River in an inflatable raft I had purchased from one of Adrian's friends. The following week we went to Laughlin, NV and did a shorter drifting trip on the Colorado River with Alain and Rachel Vo while Alain's kids were visiting from France. Finally, on Thanksgiving weekend, Bill and Ariel came down and we visited the Salton Sea and spent a couple hours on "off-road ATVs" out in the desert.

I am taking my mom to visit Cuba in a couple of weeks. Adrian and Megan will also be coming. My goal is primarily to take lots of pictures, because my mom spends a lot of time looking at photo galleries I play for her on TV. When she notices that I visited Cuba, she chides me for not having taken her. While I know she won't remember the trip at all after we return, I think she will immensely enjoy photos of her visit every day she is reminded of the trip.

The situation with my mom hasn't changed much. Her short-term memory has remained the same; she simply can't remember anything 15 minutes after the fact. Physically, she is becoming more lethargic and she needs to be reminded to shower, brush her hair, ect. I've had to procure more caregiver assistance in the last year and fortunately Margarita has been willing to stay with my Mom overnight so I can take occasional weekends off and a couple of vacations. My mom was supposed to stay with her cousin, Carmita, in Miami for 10 days while we traveled to Ireland last summer but things went awry. I flew her down to Florida, but within a day, she got it into her head that she needed to go "home" because her parents were all alone and she had left my Dad in the bath. My mom thought she had driven to her cousin's house from our old house in SW Miami, but that her car had been stolen while she was there. We tried to divert her attention, which often works, but she was inconsolable. She also got it in her head that the reason I wasn't taking her "home" was that I had conspired with my estranged brother, Carlos, to put my father in a nursing home, and that I didn't want her to know. She became very agitated and started pleading with Carmita and myself to tell her where my father was. She insisted I call my other brother, Oscar, because he would tell her the truth.

Oscar, drove down to Miami and we took her to lunch and then to our childhood home so she could see that our family no longer lived there. We also went to the cemetery where my Dad and grandparents are buried and took pictures by the gravesites. She had an emotional breakdown, then calmed down, but I decided leaving her in Florida for 10 days in that state would not be fair to either my cousins or my mom, so I purchased a last minute plane ticket and flew her back to California with me. Since, I was set to leave for Ireland and Scotland the next day next, I arranged with Margarita to stay with her 24 hours a day for a couple of days, and then Oscar and Gerard flew to California and cared for her for in my house for most of the duration of our trip.

It took almost a month before my mom got over alternating delusions that my dad was alive or had just died. We visited her neurologist after I returned. He advised me against taking my mom out of her environment since people with severe short-term memory loss form acute frames or reference and that anytime my mom's reference points change, she feels anxious. I informed him that I was thinking of taking my mom to visit Cuba in a few months, and he thought it would be alright as long as I travel with her. He also referred me with an Alzheimer's advocate and family counselor who came to the house and provided us with information regarding long-term care and support groups for families caring for Alzheimer's patients. To date, I have not availed to these resources, but may do so in the next few months.

Within a month after we returned from Ireland my mom's delusions regarding my dad and her parents abated. Ignorance is truly bliss, and my mom is now generally in a jovial mood. I think I have a harder time coping with my mom's disease because from my perspective I am more acutely aware of how dramatically her capacity has diminished. Also, the fact that Alzheimer's is generally believed to have a substantial genetic element frightens me. Anytime I experience a routine memory lapse like forgetting an appointment, I can't help asking myself if these are early symptoms. I've read copious volumes about Alzheimer's in the last couple of years, but in summary, much of the information is contradictory which I find very frustrating. The one redeeming element of this devastating disease is that my mom genuinely gets to enjoy the same event over and over. It's amusing to watch her laugh at same commercial on Spanish television several times a day for weeks on end.

I can vent *ad nauseum* about all the weird stuff my mom has done in the last year for another 100 pages, but I've bored and depressed my audience enough. I've said it before, it's like having a two year old at home again. I mean this literally, since I'm now buying diapers. The most frustrating difference is that a two year old will ultimately learn and mind you.

Several friends and family have suggested that it might be time to consider institutionalization, but I'm still not there yet:

First, there is the whole Cuban cultural thing. Cuban sons are instilled with considerable parental guilt growing up, and we simply don't put our moms in nursing homes when they get old and become super annoying. To be honest, my mom was super annoying

when she was younger and didn't have Alzheimer's, so the transition isn't all that dramatic.

Secondly, it doesn't make economic sense. I have a huge house and can provide my mom with her own private room and bath, as well as a caregiver to look after her individually for far less than the cost of what I deem to be an acceptable facility. There are some nice facilities in Laguna Hills, but they range from \$3,950 to \$5,800 a month, and though pretty nice, would nevertheless present a far inferior arrangement than what my mom has right now.

Finally, I firmly believe she needs to be near someone she recognizes at all times. While I don't really know what goes on in her head, I've observed that she apparently goes through several "memory wipes" during the day. I get the impression her memory is wiped clean every few hours, then she looks around confused, sees the caregiver (who was one of our kid's nannies 15-20 years ago), my son or me, and she concludes that she's in California visiting for a few weeks. This is what she used to do several times a year prior to the onset of Alzheimer's. If she finds herself alone or with people she doesn't recognize, my mom quickly becomes paranoid and delusional.

Eventually, I might have to place her in a home, but again, I'm not there yet.

I took banked leave during the Spring semester (January-May 2015), so I didn't begin teaching until June. My plan had been to take advantage of last minute travel deals during that time, but like the "best laid plans of mice and men," they went awry. Three factors conspired against me: (1) my Mom's condition; (2) a court case that I had anticipated would settle in January, was not settled until June; and (3) a slab water leak, which ultimately promulgated the unexpected expense of repiping the whole house in April.

A planned trip to Cuba at the end of May had to be postponed until July because I had a difficult time getting the requisite visa to allow me to travel under a US Passport. While my kids got their visas in 24 hours, mine was a more complicated process because I was born there. We did finally get to go for a week at the end of July. We had a great time and it was a fabulous, unique destination. The facts that it is my birthplace, it had been 50 years since I had left, and that I had many interesting relatives there made it a very special and emotional trip. Ariel, Adrian and I were accompanied by Bill (Ariel's boyfriend), Oscar and Gerard.

I am currently planning to visit Cuba again in May 2016 and concentrate on locations further afield from Havana. Hopefully, I will get some scuba diving in, as well.

We took a few short road trips throughout the year: (1) Redwoods National Park in February, during which my mom locked herself in a bathroom at the Crescent City Lighthouse Park; (2) Las Vegas with my mom, Adrian and Megan in May; (3) Las Vegas and the Valley of Fire, again with my mom, Ariel, Bill, Adrian and Megan, in September; and (4) Las Vegas, yet again, en route to the Grand Canyon for Thanksgiving. Ariel flew me to San Francisco as a birthday gift in September and she and Bill took me to a concert

by an Australian Pink Floyd cover band which was “awesome,” as Bill would say.

Keeping with the family heritage travel theme, we are going to Vietnam on New Year’s Day (my ex-wife was Vietnamese, so Ariel and Adrian are ½ Vietnamese). Megan and Bill will be traveling with us and we will be spending a couple of days in Cambodia and Taiwan, as well.

Ariel left Yelp! She took a job at a cosmetics distributor startup in San Francisco. She is also teaching swim on the weekends and dogsitting with the time she has left over. I think in her first two years out of school, she has had as many different jobs as I’ve had in my entire life, but to be fair, most of my changes were in the early years. On the other hand, she and Bill have been dating for over a year-and-a-half now.

Adrian and Megan have also been dating for the same amount of time. He’s attending Saddleback College and now planning to major in accounting. He’s doing very well. After a rocky start with Calculus, he pulled 100% on the final and got an “A” in the class and a 4.0 GPA for the semester. He’s planning to transfer to a local Cal State University to complete his undergraduate degree, since he’s planning to pursue a post-graduate degree and wants to stretch out his college fund.

Once again, it is sincere hope and desire that you have a fantastic holiday, and my best wishes for the coming New Year. Since I opened with song lyrics, I’ll close the same way, with words from one of my favorite Pink Floyd compositions:

*"Every year is getting shorter, never seem to find the time.
Plans that either come to naught or half a page of scribbled lines
Hanging on in quiet desperation is the English way
The time is gone, the song is over
Thought I'd something more to say."*