

2020...year of the COVID. And here I am writing this Christmas letter. Wait a minute...do I even need to write a letter? I bet you could write it for me: "Well, we had all these plans and then COVID hit and then we stayed inside." But in truth, rather than going stir-crazy, dying of boredom, or finding the end of the internet, we found that the reduction in activities brought tremendous opportunities and a new appreciation of life. The word is *gratitude*. We spent more time playing at the park (we became known as the "boomerang family" due to our passion for the Aussie pastime). We worked puzzles and played a lot more board games, including favorites such as *7 Wonders*, *Pandemic* (great year for that one), *Azul*, and *Trekking the National Parks*. We brought out the pop star in each of us by singing karaoke. We confirmed that most of us will never become a pop star. And, of course, we watched plenty of the Holderness Family on YouTube. These activities allowed us to spend the kind of quality time that every family wishes they had but are usually too overscheduled to actually enjoy.

In the early days of quarantine, when the media fearmongering had us believing that the air around other humans was toxic and that you would collapse in a smoldering heap if you touched a crosswalk button without wearing nitrile gloves, we found that hiking at Paint Mines and Castlewood Canyon was an excellent way to get out. Speaking of getting out, if you don't like traffic (in other words, if you have a driver's license and a pulse), March and April were wonderful months! What could instill more gratitude in a soul than getting the road to yourself? Pole position at every light!

You're probably thinking that "no bowling" was the worst part of the initial quarantine. And you'd be close; John would rather be dragged over a cactus than go another 89-day period without bowling. But perhaps the most frustrating part was the children not being able to attend in-person school. Children *need* school. They don't just need the assignments and lectures; they need the social and emotional development that comes along with being around others. Instead, the quality of their education is greatly compromised by spending hours zoned out in front of a screen, a huge percentage of which is spent discussing whose microphone to mute. We are so grateful that we moved both girls to our neighborhood school this year, which was able to put in 58 days of in-person learning before going virtual after Thanksgiving. We can't imagine what a headache it would have been to continue to have them in different school districts (as they had been in the spring), with different in-person and virtual learning times, different software, different days off...aaaagh! Whew. Because of the potentially enormous mental and emotional health impacts of isolation (especially for our girls who feed on interaction with other human beings), and to support thousands of workers whose livelihoods have been thrashed by restrictions, we made the choice early on to provide as close to a normal existence as possible (while generally following social distancing guidelines, of course).

You know that magical feeling you get when you're in the right place at the right time? We visited the Grand Canyon a week after it reopened in June. Yes, picture it now...most of the country is still isolating themselves inside their homes, hardly any international visitors are arriving...some national parks probably haven't been this deserted in 50 years! The guidebooks said we'd be elbow-to-elbow with other visitors, but we basically had all the viewpoints to ourselves! Same with Meteor Crater and Petrified Forest National Park, which we included on that trip. Parking lots that were built for 70 cars had four or five.

Here's another thing we're grateful for: on that same trip, at about 10 PM in the middle of Utah, Jen spotted a black bear in our lane on I-70. How she shimmied our Ford Flex around it at 85 MPH, we'll never know (glitching à la Vanellope von Schweetz?), but we're alive to tell the story. John must not be nearly as good at driving, though. A few months later, he hit a deer on I-70 in broad daylight with 10 seconds' warning (as opposed to Jen's 0.5 seconds). Luckily, he had slowed down to about 20 mph at impact, so the deer and the Flex were both unharmed! Do you see why gratitude is our theme?

Oddly, with it being so close, this was the first year we've made Rocky Mountain National Park a backpacking destination. Needless to say, it was beautiful, despite getting stuck in a thunderstorm at 10,000 ft. On the way back, we stopped by Bandimere Speedway for their 4th of July Jet Car Nationals (or rather, "Freedom Rally," given the politically sensitive timing).

This summer, we cooled off at the new Jellystone Park in Larkspur, which is an excellent destination for families to get away without getting *too far* away, littered with activities including mini-golf, kids' programs, and a small water park with some fast slides. We also enjoyed another great family destination, the Flying W Ranch, which was destroyed in the Waldo Canyon Fire eight years ago. They reopened this year and the show (and food!) is as good as ever.

Occasional one-on-one time is a nice departure from the norm. While John and Aubrey melted in the 112° heat of St. George with his parents, Jen and Kaitlyn spent the weekend emulating boiled eggs in Steamboat Springs (they snuck in some hiking, tubing, and spa time, too). Later in the summer, we hosted Ashleigh and Ethan for a few days and spent a couple nights in Keystone playing *Werewolves* with Jen's mom and Steven's family.

Jen is still working part time as a Technical Manager at Artemis Vision in Denver. The once-a-week commute has been great this year! She still plays French horn in the Woodland Park Wind Symphony, although that's on hold because many members are legitimately in the COVID high-risk group. The band was able to practice together over the summer, temporarily reviving the uplifting allure of live music.

At the start of the year, there was boundless promise at John's work. A whole new production line of wire for the airplane industry was just starting up. But then Boeing had their issues with the 737 Max, which delayed the start of the new line. Then...you guessed it...COVID hit, and now nobody needs new airplanes. So the whole project was canceled. On top of that, the diamond wire business also shut down because the government lockdowns resulted in reduced demand, so you're probably reading this letter as John is completing his exit interview after eight wonderful years at DMT/IWT. Although it's an unfortunate end, he looks back on those years with happiness and gratitude for the excellent people, fascinating technical challenges, and career development.

Kaitlyn finished up 4th grade at School in the Woods and we have nothing but appreciation for how well that school is run and the focus on community that it instills. It's not just an academic adventure; it's a character-building experience. She also loves church choir and Girl Scouts. She even got to go to an overnight church camp! Another of her favorite activities is theater.

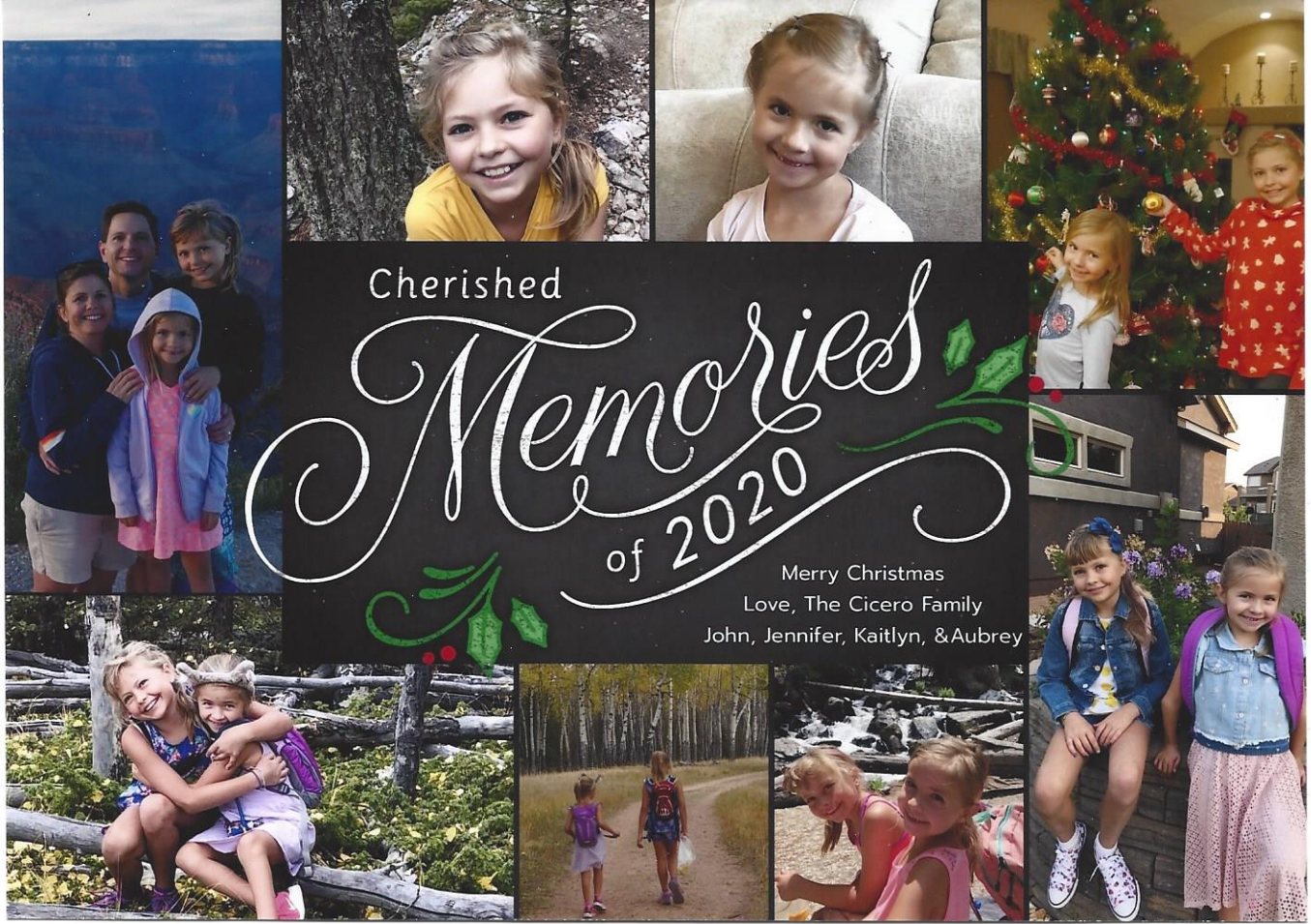
Aubrey is in 2nd grade and is just as social as ever, which of course makes the virtual learning quite the bummer. She did get to have her 7th birthday party the day before everything shut down in March. It's strange to look back on the video now and see a house full of people in close contact with no masks! She enjoys theater, church choir, and gymnastics. She has done over 5,000 somersaults in the house this year. Not kidding. She tracks them. We have no idea where she gets this nerdy behavior. Couldn't be her ultra-cool engineer parents. We're hip.

We didn't get to see some of our family and friends as much as normal. We miss you! It may not be the most pleasant year, but we hope that everyone can find some gratitude for all of the wonderful things that life has to offer. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

John, Jennifer, Kaitlyn, and Aubrey

"Give thanks in all circumstances" – 1 Thessalonians 5:18

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Cherished

Memories

of 2020

Merry Christmas
Love, The Cicero Family
John, Jennifer, Kaitlyn, & Aubrey