

Dear Friends,

Merry Christmas. How the days pass. It seems like just one year ago, I was sending you the 2003 Christmas State of Disunion at the Guarendi's.

Our family has much for which to be grateful. In just one year alone, Mary (age nine) has matured at least a full three months, with Sammy (age twelve) a close second at one and a half months. And that's without medication. Jon, age fourteen, has changed the most. Close to forty percent of the time, he now lifts the lid, aims true, flushes, and shuts the light. Next year Randi is planning to start our "Washing Little Hands" program.

The kids are growing and scattering in all directions with their activities. Last month, in just four days time, we had three parole officer appointments overlap, two rescheduled psychiatric evaluations, and a missed preschool encounter group session for Liz. To top it off, Randi had to drop out of her anger management support group because it meets on Wednesday night, the same night that Peter (age 7) began his small barnyard animal torturers rehab program. Honestly, I don't know how some families keep it all straight.

Andrew, 17, has begun college. He wants to be an engineer. And he is really ready to tackle his studies. Just last week he asked his advisor, "Do those trains really move as fast as it looks like at those crossings?" He's always been our over-achiever.

Hannah, 16, is also taking college courses, with plans to enroll in ROTC, but that is tentative. She says it all depends upon how fast she can rise to General. I told her, "Be patient. Most kids take at least until their Junior year." But that's Hannah. Always anxious to set a new course.

Sarah and Joanna are fourteen, and haven't spoken to me since Thanksgiving, and all because of a little misunderstanding. Like I'm the only father who's ever said, "Pull my finger" to his daughters during the talent finals of their Junior Miss Etiquette Competition. I told Sarah, "The boys double dog dared me to do it". Besides, it was such a great ice breaker on my first date with Randi. Amazing how much kids have changed in only 20 years.

Samuel (A.K.A. Sam the Mule) is twelve now, and doesn't go out much with Mom and Dad anymore. He wants to, but we insist he stay home. We can no longer get kid prices for him at the buffet. One by one, the older kids had to drop out of family meals, too.

And speaking of saving money, with five teenagers, and driving looming down the road, we contacted our insurance agent. We think we have the finances worked out. If Randi gets a real job, we arrange for a second and third mortgage on our home, sell my Mom's house and buy her a trailer, we can come up with most of the \$37,000 per quarter for five drivers under 25. The rest we can make up if we get a good price for Liz or James. Just kidding. We haven't even gotten any offers yet.

The little ones – James (9), Mary (8), Peter (7), and Liz (5) are doing well with their self-control development training. Last week, two corners in the kitchen went unoccupied for nearly five hours. It was during the 1 AM to 6 AM time slot, but I think the halfway couch program Randi invented to alleviate corner over-crowding also helped.

Lest you think I'm presenting only a biased, falsely glowing, All-American picture of our family life, let me finish with the one piece of sad news. Last February I had a bit of an emotional breakdown. My Doctors attributed it to work-related exhaustion. They speculated that I tried to rush back to a full-time work load (6 hours of radio, three hours of clients, and a half hour of household chores per week) too soon after my Thanksgiving to New Year's break. Even I have to admit, I did push pretty hard. By St. Valentine's day I was working full bore.

Part of my collapse, I believe, was due to lack of sleep. Most nights I try to be in bed by 9:00 PM, but Randi insists on running the vacuum, dishwasher, and washer/dryer full blast until well after Midnight. Many might think she's a saint, but they don't have to live with her lack of consideration for me or my stress level.

My New Year's resolution: To cease being an enabler. I will no longer tolerate Randi's rather self-centered, irresponsible, couch laden existence. For Christmas, I plan to present her with several gift certificates: Weight Watchers, Curves Fitness Center, Full-Face Female makeover, and, a brand new self-propelled lawn mower to replace the used reel mower I got her three years ago.

While Randi is a bit on the spoiled side, I guess I'm just a sucker for middle aged, unemployed home schooling women with ten kids.

Hope we haven't intimidated you with our achievements. Remember, we've worked our way up to this. It didn't all come overnight.

God bless and keep you all in the New Year.

The Guarendi's