

Welcome back Crusaders! Greetings from Upstate New York where we are currently a balmy -2 degrees with expected wind chills to hit all-time lows in the (negative) – 20's tomorrow. Needless to say, we are buried under snow that looks like it won't melt until November at which point winter can begin once again!

Last month I left off with the first part of my solo trip to Disney with my son Nick. We had somehow managed to survive our pirate adventures and were about to embark on the rest of our day. So welcome back as I continue to magically relive the memories from a truly great trip.

Nick and I continued our journey through the Magic Kingdom. As the day progressed, transfers onto rides became easier, and everything seemed to just flow without difficulty. The weather was beautiful, Nick was beyond happy and I was over the moon to be spending this time with him. We did his favorite rides, with Disney allowing him to stay on each ride for as many times as he wanted; to eliminate the need for me to keep transferring him and waiting again. It's A Small World became extremely small with an all-time record (for us) of circling around 9 times. (While this made Nick extremely happy, I do not recommend doing this without a break as the catchy theme song will remain stuck in your head for many, many months in multiple languages.) We rode The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh 6 times consecutively (which I loved because he didn't have to transfer out of his wheelchair and I happen to be a lifelong Pooh fan.) And a fairly new attraction (at least for our visit) was called Monsters, Inc. Laugh Floor. This was an interactive attraction in a theater like setting where you watched a screen with characters from the movie Monsters Inc. Featuring the great Sulley and Mike Wazowski, each show was adlibbed to joke around with the audience. One lucky (or unlucky, depending on your view) audience member was projected up onto the large screen and in good jest (Disney style) highlighted to be the brunt of all the jokes. The fun part of this attraction was that you could repeatedly sit through it (which we did 5 times before dinner and once after) and the jokes were never the same. It was always funny and always entertaining.

After our 5th time sitting through Monsters Inc., we headed towards the Crystal Palace to see if there was any remote possibility of getting a dinner reservation.

This is a fine dining restaurant complete with characters (Winnie the Pooh, Piglet, Tigger and Eeyore) which usually requires advanced reservations up to 6 months in advance, which of course I had not done. I approached the hostess station and explained that I did not have reservations but was wondering if there was any possible way we could sneak in a reservation for 2. It was early in the evening and I thought there might be a chance. She apologized and said that there was not. A little disappointed, I turned Nick's wheelchair around to leave when a manager approached me asking me if I had been taken care of. I explained that I had; however, I had not made reservations as this was a surprise 16th birthday trip for my son. He asked me to wait for a few moments and then he returned. He said he would be happy to accommodate us for dinner if we could wait for just 10 minutes while they prepared a table. And the magic just kept getting more magical. Precisely 10 minutes later he asked me to follow him. As we turned a corner in the restaurant there was a table "prepared" for Nick's birthday, complete with balloons, streamers and Mickey Mouse confetti strewn all over the table. It was difficult to hold back the tears as I realized just how perfect this trip truly was. We enjoyed an amazing dinner, we had all of the characters sign a birthday card for Nick and dance at our table and then one of the waitresses asked Nick who his favorite character was. His answer, of course, was Mickey. The poor waitress looked shattered as she tried explaining to Nick that Mickey wasn't at that restaurant that night. I reassured her we had been to the park many times and it was ok. As we were preparing to leave, a group of waitresses came around the corner to our table carrying a life sized stuffed Mickey. I thought this was so sweet that they went and got this to "show" Nick so he didn't miss out on his favorite character. Oh, but I was so wrong. Before I could say anything, they asked Nick if he would like to HAVE Mickey for his birthday present. (Believe me and forgive me if I sound ungrateful, because I was not...I was just surprised that they didn't bring a smaller, perhaps more easy to transport around birthday souvenir.) Nick immediately lit up and was laughing and waving his arms and legs out of sheer happiness. The mother at the table behind me started crying. The waitresses were crying and hugging me and I felt like crying because I couldn't really wrap my head around how I was supposed to push Nick in his wheelchair, keep track of his belongings bag that was strapped to the back of his chair and

somehow carry this life sized mouse around the park and back to the hotel by myself. But it was no doubt a magical moment. And just when I thought the magic couldn't possibly get any more magical, the manager stopped me on the way out to ask how everything was. I hugged him and choked back my tears, still hugging this life sized mouse and said "thank you". He said he had one more thing for Nick. He took out a large button that said Happy Birthday on the top and Walt Disney World on the bottom and a white space in the middle where he hand wrote in black sharpie marker Nick's 16th. We pinned this on his chest harness and there was no missing it (precisely Disney's point). What I didn't know then, but was educated by hotel staff later that night, was that the pin was a way of alerting all cast members in the park that we were celebrating something special. And from the moment we left the restaurant, I was completely baffled by what happened next. Anywhere we walked, cast members came up and wished Nick a Happy Birthday. Cast vendors gave Nick so many things, from trading pins to light up wands, all free. By this point it was getting late and I wanted to get Nick back to the hotel with this giant mouse. Nick didn't want to leave (why would he??) so we compromised and I allowed him to pick one more ride or attraction that he wanted to do and then we would leave. So, he picked Monsters Inc., again. I was pleased with his pick because it was relatively close to where we already were and I didn't have to fight with the mouse. By this point I had strapped the mouse onto Nicks lap, tilted his wheelchair back so I could see where I was going and made our way to the attraction. The same cast members greeted us, and I assumed we would be sitting in the same wheelchair seating as before. Nope. This time we were stopped at the attraction and asked to wait. They let us in first but sat us in a center location which was also a wheelchair location. After the rest of the people were let into the theater, I sat back to just relax for a few moments and absorb everything that had just happened in the past hour. The lights dimmed and the show started. I was half paying attention as I was beyond exhausted. Sulley and Mike came on the screen telling some new jokes and Nick was laughing with the mouse still strapped on his lap. And just as I felt my eyes fluttering shut, the character voices yelled out "We have a special guest in the house tonight folks" (at which point my eyes jolted open and I thought, oh no, please no.)...they continued "everybody on the count of 3, please extend a big

Happy 16th Birthday to Nick!!” (At which point the camera was on Nick and there he was, he and his life sized mouse, on the bigger than life screen for all to see.) Everyone in the theater yelled HAPPY BIRTHDAY NICK, which of course startled him. He was already flailing his arms and legs because he had seen himself on the screen. The startle response from the overwhelming wishes did him in. His wheelchair had already been tipped back at an angle so I could see to push it, so the flailing arms and startle response caused the wheelchair to tip completely over backwards so his feet were up in the air still wiggling away in laughter and I was ready to just cry. And the show didn’t stop. Sulley and Mike voiced over the screen “look at those happy birthday toes” as the camera was still rolling and all you could see on the screen were his feet (they were truly not helping the situation at this point.) People were immediately concerned but then realized he was fine and just laughing, so with the assistance of a few strong men we were able to get him upright again.

He laughed all the way back to the hotel. And everyone on the bus wished him a Happy Birthday which was a nice, quiet ending (or so I thought) to a perfect day. As we made our way through the hotel lobby, the cast members at the desk stopped us to ask how our day went. I recapped the highlights and they asked if we were going right to our room. I said we were stopping in the cafeteria to grab a drink and then heading straight to the room. It took less than 10 minutes to get from the cafeteria to the room. I noticed as I approached the room that all of the lights were on inside. As I opened the door, we found yet more Disney Magic. The bed was decorated with balloons and on the table were 2 cupcakes and a birthday card from the hotel staff. How they managed that in 10 minutes is still a mystery.

Nick was exhausted and more than happy to be in bed. I had the luxury of sleeping in the chair next to the bed because Nick’s new best friend, life sized Mickey, was next to him and there was no negotiating this with Nick. Fair enough. It was a magical, exhausting day from start to finish.

We spent the next day exploring Downtown Disney and enjoying some shopping before having an early dinner. We had one last evening dip in the pool before having to pack for our departure home the next day.

It was the best birthday ever and memories that I wouldn't trade for anything in the world. But our story doesn't end here. (Honestly, did you think it would???) Stay tuned until next month where I will share the adventures of trying to air travel with a life sized mouse.....(trust me you don't want to miss it!)

Until next month, think Spring, hug the ones you love, reach out and do something kind for someone randomly and know that the little things you perceive in life can truly be forever big things in someone else's life.

Live, laugh, love.

Julie