

Birthday Parade

Birthdays around the Walton home consisted of three main elements -- four if the "birthday boy or girl" is out of town.

There is the birthday cake, expertly made and designed by Dolly... Elizabeth was known in her church and work circles as a person who made delicious, well-enjoyed and great to look at cakes and cupcakes. She knew what each child -- and her husband -- was allergic to or just did not like as a component in their cake. She made her own birthday cakes except for two times in her life: once, when her middle child baked her a cake for her 30th birthday; and a few years back when I had a local bakery to make a special cake for her with lots of flowers and designs; and then had her to come pick up her own cake when it was ready for "pick up".

There is the trip to the Chinese buffet. Originally, it was the all-you-can-eat place when Dolly was married and Ray and Elizabeth would take the two -- later three -- girls to enjoy a dinner away from the kitchen and the house. When that place went out of business, Elizabeth suggested other places to go to but by then Ray was no longer interested in "family dinners" any more. When I started to date her, we made a point of going to a Chinese place called "Golden Lion" on Sundays after church and including the youngest of her children with us eventually. Later, when birthdays came around, I suggested we go have Chinese together as a family to celebrate the occasion. The tradition stuck -- and when Charles and Dale came along, we included them in those occasions.

There is the birthday presents and gifts. When I was growing up, I received one or perhaps two gifts to celebrate my birth. It was different with Dolly's family, which emphasized smaller gifts with personal meaning throughout the year. A "mini Christmas" if one thinks in those terms. The current practice is that each child receives a large useful gift and several small "gag" or "play" gifts to remind them of things during the previous year with them. Dolly and I get a couple of "useful gifts", a card and normally a gift card to one of our favorite eateries or drinkeries -- along with a couple of gag or play gifts.

When I was deployed with the military, I would get mailed birthday cards from Dolly, and at least two of her kids in addition to cards from my own. I would also get photos of my cake with wording on the back or within the email like "yum yum, it was good!" or "your pieces

were eaten by the wildebeest in the neighborhood" or "no cake for you!" (a take off on a famous "Seinfeld" television episode). I would also get nice notes from all of Elizabeth's kids -- some which still adorn my office rooms to this very day.

It was in my office room downstairs -- for some reason Chip and Dale likes to use it as a "meeting room" or "Bat cave" for their ideas -- when they were talking with Summer and April, their two young friends from down the street. Summer was looking around the room, enjoying the museum feel of my work and writing area.

"I really love your dad's office space," Summer said, looking at the cabinet with all of the various Scouting books and manuals encased within.

"It smells like a cross between a library and a basement" she added before finding herself one of my directors' chairs and sat down in it.

"So guys, are you going to come to my birthday party this weekend?" April asked. "I'll be NINE. NINE YEARS OLD!!" She said as if it was a grand prize on a game show.

"Well, I'll be 11 in November. You gonna come to my birthday party?" Dale spoke up. He was looking through one of my Scouting Fieldbooks. He loves looking at the various color photos of various animals. "Hey Chip....look at this guy....didn't we see one of those go down that hole by the Wonn's home yesterday?"

Everyone got up and walked over to the seat where Dale was sitting and looked at the illustration of the skunk.

"Wouldn't want to be around HIM...I betcha he puts out a stink!!" Charles said. He then turned to the two girls and asked "I have an idea! Instead of a party -- since after all," Charles said, pausing for effect as he looked at the girl in the tunic and brown skirt, "she's going to be NINE!", he added, smiling, "How about if we throw a parade in April's honor?"

"What? I've never heard of that....and besides, *I* didn't have a parade when I turned nine...." Summer responded.

Dale, turning pages in the Fieldbook, simply said, "Before our time..." matter-of-factly.

"Come on...it'll be fun. A summer parade for no other reason except the observance of your birthday? That would be sooooo cool!! We could invite all of the kids in our block and then...."

I walked in the room at that point and looked at the four of them corralled on a corner.

"When did this become your hall of justice, gents? Ladies, does your parental units know that you are here in the basement with these two wackos?" I just had to giggle a little at the last comment.

"Dad!! We are NOT wackos!"

"Mr. Walton, yes, my mom knows that we're here to talk Charles and Dale into coming to April's birthday party..." Summer responded but was quickly interrupted by her younger sister.

"...and they want to throw ME a PARADE!! With a marching band and floats and cheerleaders and everything..." April said.

The rest of the group looked at April.

"And when does this extranzanga take place? Surely not today, for half the day has already been spent," I said, looking and finding my seat in front of my desk and flipping on the computer monitor.

"This weekend. That gives us four days to work on the details", explained Chip.

"Do you have a permit? In order to have a parade, you have to have permission from the City to do it. You can't just up and do it. Remember the last time you two 'up and did something' ", I said.

Dale closed the Fieldbook and looked at me. I knew what he was going to ask.

"Yes, you may hold onto the Fieldbook. I need it back though...in ONE PIECE...not with torn out pages. Maybe for your birthday, I'll buy you a Fieldbook of your own...."

"Thanks, Dad. But that's not...well...it was but...but it's not the question I was going to ask you. What if we had a parade just right down the street here...not downtown or anything like that to block the streets up or have them to turn the stop lights off or something...would we still need a permit?" Dale held the book in his hands as he asked me. The other three looked at me for an answer.

"I don't know. Let's call the city and find out. I'll talk, okay?" Everyone nodded up and down as I used my computer and keyboard to find the number for the city manager's office and placed the call on Skype.

"City of Shorewood, Laura speaking."

"Hey Laura. My name is Mike Walton, and I have my two sons and their friends on speakerphone with me. Say hello everyone."

There was an assortment of "Hellos" and "Hi Ma'ams" from the assembled.

"A strange question but here goes. My sons want to throw a brief parade in honor of one of his friend's birthday."

April blurted out, "My NINTH birthday, Ma'am!"

"Oh MY, congratulations young lady. But I've never heard of anyone having their own birthday parade. When do you want to do this?"

"They would like to do this this weekend. They want to do it up and down between Minnetonka Drive and Country Club Road along Yellowstone Trail."

"Well", Laura breathed outward, "this is a new one on me. I'll have to talk with the Public Safety people. Do you have any idea of the number of people involved?"

Silence overcame the room. Finally I spoke, "I think they are thinking that it'll be themselves and their friends. I don't see it being any more than 20 kids and their wagons and dolls and bears."

"What time will it be going on? Will there be music?" Laura asked, as I envisioned her going down a checklist.

"It will have to be close to the end of the day...I would say about 5pm or so because dinner time for my kids is normally between 6:30 and 7pm. What time do your folks have dinner, Summer?"

"Wow, you're going to really do this... about 7pm..." Summer slinked in the seat.

"What gave you the idea to do this, may I ask? I've never heard of this!" Laura asked.

Chip spoke up.

"Well, my mom reads a lot and she shares with us what she reads. About a month or so back she was talking about a girl somewhere...I think she was in Iowa or someplace...but anyway, she was turning 13 and her parents threw her own "coming out parade". You know what that means, right ma'am?"

The voice on the speaker said "Yes, I do..."

"So, when April invited us to her birthday party this weekend, I thought that since she has been in on a lot of things we do around here, that it just makes sense for me and my brother to do something special for her too. After all, you only turn nine ONCE...."

I looked at my stepson. He looked at me and asked "Did I say something wrong, Dad?"

"Nope. But what are you going to do for Summer when she turns 13?"

Dale chimed in "Send her to the Moon! Or someplace special like that...we'll figure it out!!" He held his hand into a fist and waited for his brother to fist-bump his fist back, which he did...and together they moved their hands back and said "Boom!"

"Oh...." Laura said, hearing the two boys do their "fist bump thing".

"Okay. Based on the information I have here, I don't see a problem with giving you, Mr. Walton, a permit on behalf of your sons --- what's their names..."

"Chip" said Chip.

"Dale" said Dale.

"Like the squirrels, huh....no, raccoons....no....I can't remember what they were in the cartoons..." Laura spoke out.

"You are looking for chipmunks. No these two are more like two curious young boys who just want to have fun...." I answered, adding, "when can I can stop by and sign for the parade permit?"

"Let me get the police and fire to approve it, and we'll stamp it. Tomorrow afternoon after 3pm?" Laura asked me.

"Sure. I'll be there. Thanks for your help and let me give my phone number since I'm calling you from my computer this afternoon..." I gave her my home and cellphone number and Dolly's name in case they need to contact me for some reason.

I hung up and looked at the four children.

"The rest is on you. Happy birthday early, April. Guys, I'm holding this to you....what you do for one of your friends you have to do for the other as well..."

"We will Dad, don't worry about that. April will have a great parade -- and Summer will have something even better than a parade when her turn comes along," Dale said.

"Go. I've got to write. Or read. Or watch CNN or something. Get!" My kids folded up the chairs and put them back in the corner; and after opening the pocket door, the four of them left the house through the downstairs door.

"Boys."

The parade Saturday evening featured exactly what April wanted: her friends pulling wagons or pushing baby carriages with their "babies" or "bears" or other assorted animals riding along the mile walk, with parents and older siblings holding "Happy Birthday" and "Nine is half of Eighteen" signs and walking with them or standing along the route. The signs were Dale's idea.

It was also Dale's idea to invite the Somali family and their friends to come over and join in. The Somali kids were being picked on toward the end of the school year, and Dale, being the quiet sensitive one, wanted to make sure that they knew that not everyone thought or felt the same way about them. Besides, their clothing was always so bright and so cool to even look at. Gene - his American name (his Somali name was hard to pronounce and Dale and another kid thought he looked like a "Gene" to them and after asking if it was okay, started calling him that) told his older sister's dance group and they all came. The dance group performed several times along the "parade route" at places where large purple hearts (April's favorite color) were chalked on the roadway.

As it was the summer, both the Minnetonka East and West Middle Schools cheerleading squads took advantage of the opportunity to try out new football cheers as they marched down the street behind band music. Charles tried to get an actual band but the best he could do was to get recordings from the Internet of bands performing marching songs which, when played in car CD players, was almost as loud and just as good for this parade. I have to admit I asked several of my Scouting friends with vehicles with loud CD players to serve as our "bands", with Scouts waving from the windows. They did a good job.

The Birthday girl rode with her sister the entire route, wearing an oversized gold tiara while waving from a rental car. When at the purple hearts, her mom stopped the car, allowing the birthday girl to get out of the rental Mercedes convertible and shake hands with people as if she was running for city Mayor. Her car's music was provided by Charles and Dale -- but it

was not their favorite, Steven Tyler and Aerosmith; instead it was a 60s classic called "Stormy" by a group called the "Classic IV".

The local bakery where I had Dolly's birthday cake made created two large sheet cakes and a smaller birthday cake with April's favorite butterflies -- Monarch -- adorning the top and sides of the cake. It was consumed by all at the end of the "parade route".

The evening ended with Charles, Dale, April and Summer cleaning the streets, assisted by some of the neighbors and both Walton and Kings families; and we all enjoyed Chinese food at the Big Bowl Chinese buffet in Minnetonka.

As I sat in the lounging chair in the living room after dinner; and after everyone else went to bed, I looked over at Dolly. She was sitting in the other lounging chair.

"You know. I laughed at first when I heard our sons and thought "another one of those ideas of theirs". But you know, I wouldn't mind putting on a parade for you when we turn 70...."

Dolly, several years older than me, smiled and said "you'd better start planning. I don't want no little girl's parade either -- and don't think about getting a boom box with a recording of a band. I want a REAL BAND. Got it?"

I smiled. I knew she wasn't serious. Or was she?