

A Christmas gift 15 years in the making



PATRICIA GALLAGHER

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This morning, my three kids – well, big kids, at 21, 19 and 16 – will stumble to the top of the staircase around 9, sit on the landing, and wait for the “all clear” to start Christmas morning.

They’ll pour coffees and grab cookies and rip open the gifts stuffed in their stockings and stacked around the tree.

When they are done, I’ll employ my best “mom acting surprised” voice and announce that they forgot one present tucked away in the corner.

They’ll open the bag marked “To F-A-B” – that’s Fran, AJ and Bea – make fun of my silly forgotten-gift routine, then move on to a debate about what movie to see this afternoon.

I won’t care (much) that they aren’t overcome with gratitude by the simple quilt in the bag. Because, really, it’s more for me, their dad, a special school and a special teacher than for them – at least for now.

They’ll likely cringe over their early efforts, printed in the top squares of the quilt: A simple handprint, a misshapen fish, a boy whose head is twice as big as his body, a Chiquita banana girl with the fruit about to slide off her hat.

They’ll get a kick out of their third-grade butterflies, fourth-grade ani-

mals (is that an aardvark or anteater?) and fifth-grade “people of the world” squares.

And they’re sure to malign their eighth-grade masterpieces: Final works meant to communicate something profound about their 13-year-oldselves will probably strike them as pretty, well, amateurish now.

But their dad and I might linger a moment longer and recall a shy, insecure Frances in that Chiquita girl; a funny, clever AJ in that aardvark/anteater; a follow-the-rules, get-the-A’s Beatrice in the flowers and fish and always-smiling faces.

The soccer ball will remind us of the hours and years spent cheering them on from the sidelines.

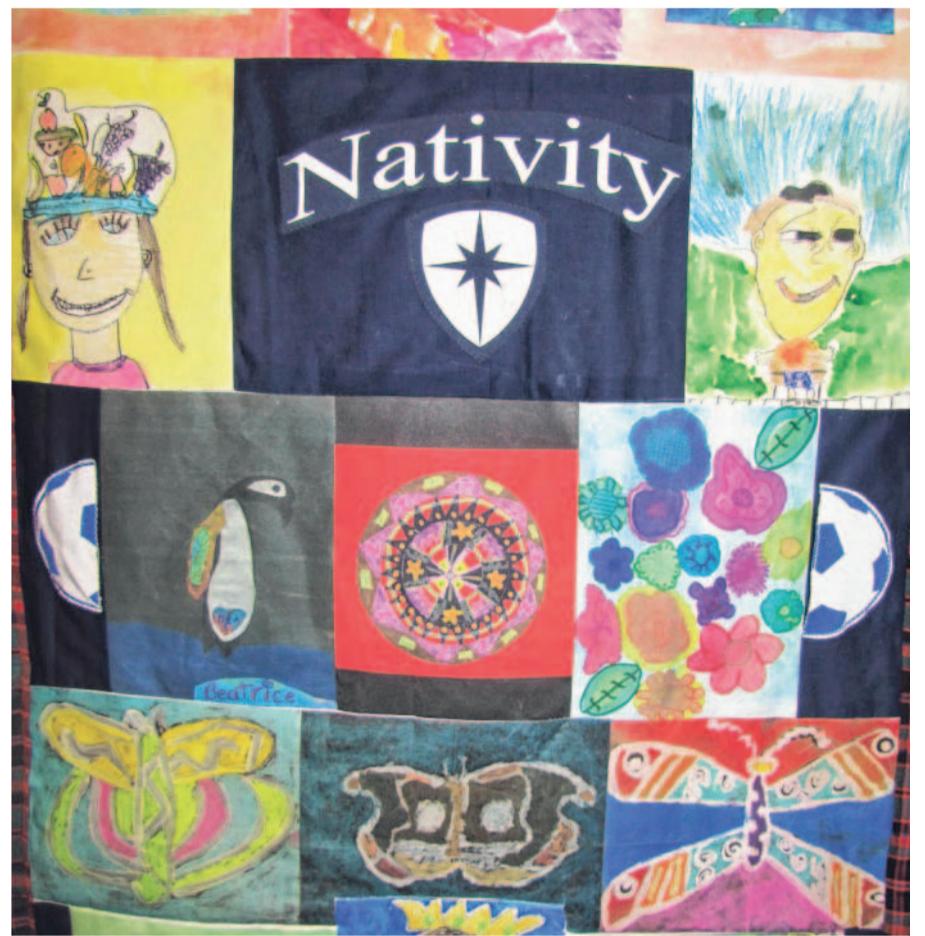
The plaid edging and navy-blue scraps will remind us of the uniforms that made dressing for school fuss-free.

The snippet from a “We Are Aware” T-shirt will harken to the pivotal year our oldest helped lead a Darfur support effort when fighting to regain her own health.

The square near the top – with the word “Nativity” and the cross-and-shield emblem – will trigger a flood of memories about the 27 collective years they spent in the loving care and tutelage of one of the best Catholic grade schools in Cincinnati.

And every square will remind us of the fabulous art teacher who helped them and all their classmates find their inner artist.

The Christmas Quilt has been 15 years in the making. Fran brought home the first picture of a handprint in about 1999 with a form to order any number of products depicting it. I chose the quilt square – that year and every subsequent year – for her and



PROVIDED

Writer Patricia Gallagher Newberry’s F-A-B quilt.

her siblings.

The youngest completed her nine-year Nativity run in 2012, adding the final square to the collection. This year, with two in college and No. 3 halfway through high school, I finally found time to assemble the pieces.

Once they open the F-A-B bag, F-A-B will ask if brunch is ready and leave the quilt on the couch. After Christmas, we’ll find a place to hang it. Later, it will find a home in some drawer, stored with other grade-school mementos.

At their ages, caught up in their

current-life dramas, grade school seems like ancient history, inconsequential, forgettable.

But some December in the future, I like to imagine that one of them will dig out the Christmas Quilt. They’ll recall a school called Nativity that taught them the value of hard work. They’ll remember an art teacher named Mindy who taught them the value of creativity. They’ll see the start of who they became in each of their squares.

I’m looking forward to a big “thank you” then.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

UC Medical Center delivers after accident

The phone call registered 9.9 on the Richter scale of our lives. On the Monday before Thanksgiving, my wife and I received news from Punta Arenas, Chile, that our 32-year-old writer-photographer son, Jim, had broken several vertebrae in his neck and spine while training with a traction kite in preparation for an expedition across Chile’s Patagonia. His legs were paralyzed. Vital signs were stable, but Jim’s hospital was inadequate for his level of trauma and injury. Time was critical.

As parents, we faced ugly, medical decisions for our son with lifelong consequences: compromised surgery in Punta Arenas; a 1,300-mile air evacuation flight to Santiago with the risk of irreparable upper body paralysis; or a 6,800-mile air evacuation flight to Cincinnati with more risk exposure. We needed unfailing medical advice fast.

Close friends connected us with Dr. Richard Curry, a University of Cincinnati Medical Center neuro-oncologist. He offered his “whatever-

it-takes” help, but he needed medical scans immediately. A hospital worker in Punta Arenas refused to turn over CDs of Jim’s MRI and CAT scans. Jim’s friends negotiated for them, gained access to high-speed Internet access at a nearby hotel, and transmitted the images to Cincinnati.

Dr. Curry forwarded the scans to other neurologists for their opinions, aggregated their views into a consensus, and advised us within hours: The proposed medical procedures in Punta Arenas were inconsistent with the injuries. Jim needed to be evacuated. Working with the U.S. embassy in Santiago, we halted all surgery in Chile and decided to evacuate him to Cincinnati and University Hospital.

Emergency room personnel were alerted for a 3 a.m. Sunday arrival, six days after the accident. Twenty-seven hours after arriving at University, Jim was prepared for major surgery. By noon his incision was being closed. By 5 p.m., Jim’s intensive care team was giving him an overdue shave, shampoo and spa treatment. Dr. Curry’s selfless, compassionate approach and cool head had delivered.

Though Jim’s story is amazing, even more amazing is that such medical emergencies are part of the daily work of the dedicated, compassionate

men and women of University of Cincinnati Medical Center, who rarely receive the public acknowledgment they deserve.

Jeffrey B. Harris, Amberley Village

Editor’s note: Jim Harris is now recovering at Drake Hospital, where he will begin physical therapy in 2015.

Christmas stories were a joy to read

“My cup runneth over” as I read The Enquirer on Monday morning. First the delightful story of the Cincinnati family whose ancestor wrote the music for “Away in a Manger,” a Christmas carol I’ve loved since my childhood in the 40s (“‘Away in a Manger’ has links close at hand”). Oh, to have been at that middle school Advent Mass at Summit Country Day School to hear it sung by this generation’s children of the family and their classmates.

Then, turning a few pages, I found the story of the Dattilo family’s nativity and little town of Bethlehem scene, which takes up an entire wall of their finished basement (“Green Twp. family’s nativity embraces true meaning of Christmas”). What a lovely and blessed tradition begun years ago with a wedding gift of Fontanini

statues of the holy family and the three kings.

These two families’ inspiring stories of the true meaning of Christmas were a joy to read.

Sally Sovilla, Anderson Township

Common sense safety tips for winter driving

It seems necessary to remind drivers of the simple rules for surviving winter driving.

1. Clear your vehicle’s windows. Being able to see other drivers and pedestrians is a must.

2. Turn on your headlights. In these low-visibility days, you need to be seen.

3. Use the turn signals. You’re not on a NASCAR track, so let your fellow commuters know your intention.

4. Leave a car length between you and the car in front of you. And no, that space isn’t an opportunity for you to cut in.

5. If you are a white-knuckle driver in winter weather, take the time to map out an alternate route and leave those directions in your vehicle. Freeways were built long after state routes, so there is always another way to get to your destination without driving the higher-speed freeways.

Sherie Kelly, Colerain Township