

My Food Chain Gang – Restored!

I have a wonderful tale to tell – a God story, and I love those.

A few weeks ago now, I met a friend for lunch at McD's. Later that evening, as my hubby inquired about my day and asked how my lunch was, I talked about how much I enjoyed hearing my friend's updates on her beloved cat, Mya. I even lamented, "I wish I could have a kitten." I seem to be an animal person you say (I AM) – so why don't I just get a kitten? Well, I'm allergic to cats, otherwise I would probably have a cat (or two or three or...). I actually had one for 10 years and loved her very much, but I was very allergic to her and that was tough for both of us. But anyway – back to this Friday night a few weeks ago – I'm wanting a cat. Saturday morning, the early risers in our family were alerted by an "alarming" sound in our backyard. They found 2 cats fighting on the fence, and across the yard, 3 baby bunnies crying out in alarm. Sammie was dispatched to alert me (still in bed, allowed to sleep-in, THANK YOU Hubby!), and in the now-calm backyard I found 3 exhausted baby bunnies resting while my kids were comforting one of the stray cats. The stray was a friendly fellow; he had black and white fur, green eyes, and a few extra toes. I couldn't believe the obliging attitude – pleasure even – that this cat was deriving from the attention my kids were doting upon it.

I couldn't resist petting this friendly kitty, and when I did, something strange happened. Well, actually, it was nothing at all that happened. No sniffles, no itches, no hives – no allergy symptoms. How could it be that I wasn't allergic to this cat? For the record, Hubby is also allergic to cats but didn't react to this one either. So anyway, we let the super friendly tuxedo cat in the house. He walked right in and

looked around, and it really did seem as if he had lived here for years – and he's been here ever since! Just fit right in with our entire family, and it's not an easy feat to forge a seamless transition from outdoor feral cat to indoor family cat, especially when the new family = 5 kids (3 girls ages 12, 8, 5 and 2 boys ages 3 and 8 mos.), a dog, a parrot, a rabbit, and 2 rats. But saying we've had a smooth transition would be an understatement!

What a gift he has been. A gift from God for our family... to bring us together as we welcome a new member for however long we're allowed to take care of him. A gift for us to cherish together while we play with him. A gift for me to help ease the mounting stress I've felt lately. Have you seen the medical research on how a purring cat relieves stress? It exists, trust me!

So to acknowledge this gift for us and to honor our God, "Mittens" became "Moses" – and it is cute when the kids rhyme about "Moses with the extra toe-ses". Moses seems very adept at using his paws, and he acts very cat-like around the house, which I love – just why I wanted to have a cat around. For now, we are enjoying Moses and his company. He gets along with all of our other pets and is wonderfully tolerant of the kids – he fits in our family like the missing piece of a puzzle; not that any of us realized there was a piece missing before Moses came. So could it be that "my food chain gang" has been restored?

Both an article I read and a devotional I heard recently happened to be about the same subject: knowing and having the faith and satisfaction that God sees you, even if you feel invisible to the world. God uses many aspects of His creation to bring people closer to having meaningful relationships with Him and to help us receive His messages, even animals. My family was getting burnt out from a busy schedule, and it really rejuvenated the kids' spirits to get to have this cat. And they aren't the only ones ☐

“...You are the God who sees me...” from Genesis 16:13



This is a picture of our oldest daughter holding the cat. No, my 12-year-old does not normally wear make-up; this was “spa night” ☐

God is so good!!

Harvey, You Were Awesome

I was thinking that I should get in one more blog post before the New Year. I was going to write a general update about my beautiful family, but before I got to writing it, I found myself thinking of Harvey.

Let's begin at December 26, 2011. My husband and the kids surprised me with a wonderful Christmas gift: they had **all** saved and planned for months to buy us a zoo membership. Our family loves zoos and has had a membership to the local zoo (whichever zoo happened to be local at the time) for as long as Hubby and I have been married. I remember that our most recent zoo membership expired on April 1st of last year – I remember this because I made sure to visit on April 1st for what would be our last visit to the zoo for many months. For budget reasons, it didn't make a lot of sense for us to renew

the membership because I was expecting our 5th child in October – what pregnant lady wants to take her 4 kids to the zoo in the summer? Not this one. So we let the membership lapse. I missed our visits to the zoo, but at the same time, plagued by pregnancy related nausea and fatigue, followed by post-cesarean surgery recovery and the joys (and trials) of caring for a new baby brother to 4 other kids, I didn't *really* miss our visits to the zoo...

But then my family surprised me with that membership. Now that I'm healed from the surgery. Now that the baby has stayed with the babysitter a few times and actually liked it. Now that I can take my home-schooled kids to the zoo any time I feel like taking a field trip!

This past week was a great one! Hubby was able to flex his work schedule to spend a lot of time with the family, and we all enjoyed the break, which included visiting the Toledo Zoo. In our travels to zoos over the years, we saw many amazing things and learned many amazing things. Among them: zoos are GREAT to visit in the winter! Many animals are so much more active in the cold weather, and there are many less people, allowing visiting families opportunities not normally offered (Example: my kids made bird feeders as a craft at the zoo and *loved* it!!).

Being winter, some of the exhibits were closed. Other animal environments were rearranged from the last time we had been there, so we couldn't quite keep tabs on our familiar favorites. We did notice that the Great Apes area was rearranged. There was a sign saying that the Great Apes area was going to be closed for the Lights Before Christmas event, but we saw the gorillas and orangutans, so we didn't think much of it. Until we didn't see Harvey the Chimp. When I got home, I looked in the Toledo Zoo's newsroom online and saw that Harvey had passed away in August. It was sad for me; Harvey's exhibit was one of my favorite stops at the zoo. He was an elderly chimp who loved little kids, and here is a

video I have of him playing with my kids. I can't be too sad though; Harvey died in his sleep, at the healthy chimp age of 52 – DOUBLE the average life expectancy of a chimp in captivity.

My other favorite exhibit at the zoo, the orangutan family, was also rearranged – during our visit we saw only the mom and daughter – what happened to Boomer (my favorite zoo animal until Harvey stole the title), the patriarch of the oranges? Such things are commonplace in zoos, and I'm thankful that I once again have a membership that gives me insight to studying the wonderful creatures inhabiting the zoo. As much as I mourn my old favorites, I will be looking forward to watching the new additions as well: baby Lucas the elephant, the new baby tigers soon to be exhibited, and the new addition soon to be announced to the public due any day! Yes, I have inside info! One thing I love doing while visiting the zoo is talking to the volunteers, and one was beside herself with the awesome news of an impending birth! So much so that she couldn't keep it to herself, even if she was supposed to! Would I do the same if I was a zoo volunteer? Dunno... but in the meantime, a HUGE THANK YOU GOES OUT TO HUBBY AND THE KIDS!!! I've already enjoyed my zoo membership more than you would have ever hoped for when you planned and saved!! LOVE YOU GUYS!!!

I wish everyone reading this a very happy and safe New Year!

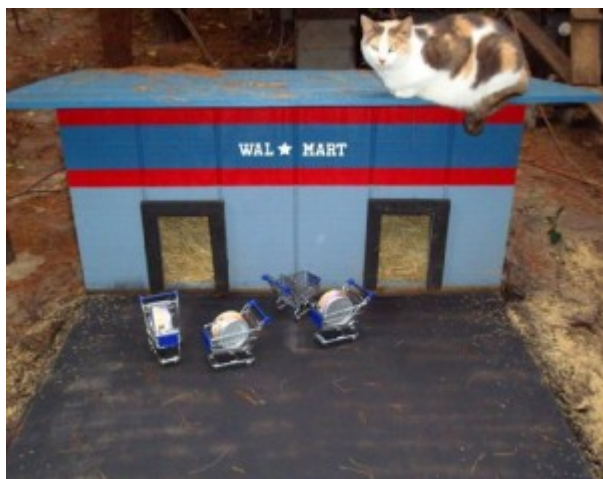
Here are tribute videos to Harvey the chimp – watch how he played with my kids! We will miss him!

If Cats Ran The World

Because my family and friends know that I'm an animal lover, they're always sending me emails with pictures and articles about cute animal-related topics. All of them are adorable, but this one stands out as something to share – a man built an entire feline-sized village for homeless cats! Kind of sounds like something I'd like to do with some extra free time, money, and if only I didn't have the darn cat allergy that's always getting in the way...

Below are some pictures of his creation. For the entire story, [click here](#). And to visit the cat village online, The Caboodle Ranch, [click here](#).





EVEN BETTER THAN I IMAGINED!!! (part 2)

(This is a continuation of my previous post of the same title which can be [found here](#) in case you missed it.)



(This is us with Jack Hanna! In case you don't know who he is, I included a brief description of him in my previous blog post about the show!)

Before we went into the theater to see Jack Hanna's live stage show, we were just standing there gawking at Jack Hanna signing autographs. Suddenly, a group of young people came up to him, and he was so thrilled to see them that he quickly

grabbed his cell phone and called his wife backstage, telling her that their 'special friends' would be coming backstage to see her. The friends are then ushered away, and Jack announced during the show that they are the [Von Trapp Children](#), a singing quartet of descendants from the family who inspired the infamous memoir, stage musical, and movie *The Sound of Music*. Apparently they had been in the Chicago area to tape an episode of Oprah (which will air on October 29), and they're family friends of Jack's and stopped by his show to surprise him.



(Me waiting patiently while Jack signs just one of my many books that I brought!!)

Back to the show... we are seated in the Paramount, and Jack Hanna comes out!! The show itself was a mix of live animals being brought out on the stage and video clips shown on a large screen, all narrated by Jack with his trademark anecdotes and sense of humor. In fact, at one point near the beginning of show, Jack Hanna began to tell a story, and all of a sudden he stops and looks off to the wings of the stage. "Do I have time to tell this story?" He asked (presumably the producer backstage), but then he didn't wait for an answer and replied to himself: "Of course I have time to tell it – it's my show!" It was not said in an arrogant fashion, but rather it seemed as if he were almost reminding himself that he is in charge. It was glimpses of genuineness like this that made his show so special. Jack Hanna is very real and down-to-earth (when it comes to being a celebrity anyway –

often he is dreaming about ways to help animals with his head on the clouds!), and these traits take precedent in his live appearances.

So the story he told was hilarious! It was about his appearance on "Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader", and... well, you can listen to it if you'd like:

So between video clips of a few animal causes that are near and dear to Jack Hanna's heart ([Rolling Dog Ranch](#) and Mountain Gorilla Conservation, among others), the following live animals were brought out on the stage for Jack to tell us about: a Red-Ruffed Lemur, blind Barn Owl, Flamingo, 2-Toed Sloth (did you know that there is a bed and breakfast in South America where you get to take care of a baby sloth in your room overnight? I just might get over this fear of flying thing quicker than I thought I would!!), 3-Banded Armadillo, Siberian Lynx, baby Coatamundi, baby Bennet's Wallaby (got to meet him earlier at the Jamboree Lunch), Grey fox, Fennec Fox (got to meet him at lunch also), Lesser Anteater, an albino Python, and the finale – a full grown Cheetah! Seeing the animals was great of course, and hearing live 'Jack facts' about them was even better. But I think my favorite part of the show was the end – we watched a blooper reel of Jack getting licked, bitten, squirted, tossed around, etc. by animals, and one clip was of Jack Hanna making an appearance on David Letterman's show in the '80s. Jack is showing Dave how to milk a goat, and as usual, Dave is cracking jokes. Jack Hanna (the live version) cuts in, saying, "I didn't even mean to do this!" and the video clip shows him accidentally squirting Letterman with a spray of milk from the goat's udder! There is only one more thing that can make watching Jack Hanna on Letterman even more entertaining, and that is watching Jack Hanna on Letterman WITH Jack Hanna while he narrates it!!

We laughed (plenty of laughs when Jack and animals are involved!), we cried (that video clip of the Rolling Dog ranch was so heartwarming – the ranch takes dogs who are seriously ill, and many of them have extreme physical ailments), and then it was time to go. But not before we got to hear Jack's bear spray story again, and he even called on one of his assistants to act it out. He told this story during his previous appearance on Letterman, and it was hilarious then as it was hearing it and seeing it live. Funny, that is, until

we found out during the live show what *really* happened during that previous Letterman appearance. Apparently it wasn't demonstration-style bear spray, but the real thing, and Jack got sprayed in the face, causing loss of vision for over 10 minutes and some minor facial burns. Jack warned us (and David Letterman!) that he is planning revenge for his next appearance on the show in December, so stay tuned!!!



A sloth relaxing at a sloth sanctuary in Costa Rica. While we were on the subject of sloths, this picture was too cute to pass up!!

EVEN BETTER THAN I IMAGINED!!!

We are back from Illinois; actually we got back a few days ago, but things here have been so non-stop that I'm not even unpacked from the weekend trip yet – working on that this week. But I had to take a break and write about the super fun Jack Hanna show that we were able to see while in Illinois – after all my anticipating, it was somehow **even better than I had imagined!!!**

We were the first ones to arrive at Aurora's Paramount Theater

(a lovely old-fashioned theater with beautiful architecture – in fact, it was chosen to be the setting for a few scenes of the Johnny Depp movie about the mobster John Dillinger called Public Enemies that was recently released), so we opted to stand in line rather than wait at the bar. This way, we were first upstairs for our “Jamboree Lunch” and got first pick of our seats. Seeing as how there were only two ways that Jack could get up to the second floor – stairs or elevator – we chose the table nearest both entrances. We went to go pick up our lunch – peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, cookies, fruit snacks, and chips situated in a safari hat – and came back to our table which had a bunch of little animal toys on it: lion rulers, a finger puppet zebra, coloring pages, and a parachuting tiger (oh how tempting it was to let him loose over the railing to sail down into the lobby... but Jack was due to arrive, so we were on our best behavior). Once we saw that all of the kids at the event were going to be seated elsewhere, I scooped up all of the jungle paraphernalia and put it in my purse. We put on our safari hats and ate our PB & J – did I mention that this event was designed for kids? Had we known before we got there, we would have brought our kids, but it wasn’t very well organized and so we didn’t really realize it until we got there – oh well. All was forgotten once Jack Hanna arrived!! If you don’t know who Jack Hanna is, here is a brief synopsis: Jack Hanna is an animal guy, and he was the director of the now world famous Columbus Zoo from 1978-1992. In that time, he put that zoo on the map; it went from being a place that even locals didn’t know existed to a world renowned animal facility, and attendance at the zoo increased by 400%! He now travels the world visiting endangered species, zoos, and making live show and tv show appearances (his monthly appearances on David Letterman’s show are always entertaining!!), all in the name of bringing awareness to wildlife conservation.

So anyway, at the Jungle Jamboree lunch, Jack goes from table to table (preceded by a woman carrying a baby wallaby in a

pouch and a man with a fox), and he comes to our table first!! He had limited time at each table of course, but he autographed a little picture of himself, and we did have time to tell him how we saw him at Sea World on our honeymoon in 1999. He asked if we liked animals, and my response went something like this: "Duh, huh huh huh". As much as I had been thinking about what to say to Jack, it happened to me again. When I finally met him, I was dumbfounded and couldn't think about the most important things to talk about in such a little time. No matter; we would be meeting him AGAIN later that same day!!

So after that, we went back downstairs to the merchandise table, and Hubby bought me Jack's new book (My Wild Life – it's kind of a re-write / update to my favorite book, Monkeys on the Interstate. But I didn't have this new book yet, and needless to say now that I have it, my reading of the Harry Potter series has taken a backseat!), and we waited for Jack to finish at the lunch tables upstairs. He came downstairs, there was just a few minutes wait, and then we met him AGAIN and he signed my new book, plus ALL of the books of his that I had brought along – and I had a huge purse full. We explained to him that he is our favorite celebrity ("Oh, I'm not a celebrity!" he said.), and the nice guy behind us took this picture (note that Hubby still has on his safari hat!):



Not sure what to do with ourselves after our autograph session, we were SO tempted to get back in line. After all,

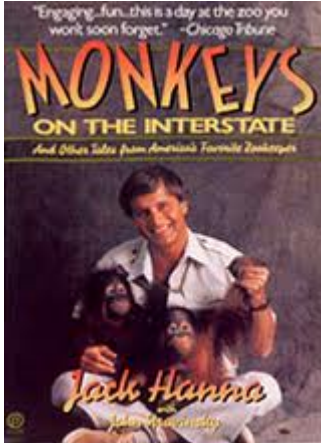
Jack Hanna, our favorite ~~celebrity~~ animal conservation personality was sitting within 10 feet of us! But we wanted to give other people a chance to meet him, and I'm glad we chose to just stand there and gawk at him from the sidelines for 25 minutes rather than getting back in line – turns out that some people didn't get a chance to get his autograph since he was whisked away to get ready for the stage show. It just wouldn't have been fair for us to be in the line twice. He announced later that people who didn't get a chance to get his autograph could just email his website and an autographed pic would be sent out. No offense, Jack, but that's just not the same as meeting you in person! I am SO thankful that we got to meet him, and he is even more humble and down-to-earth than he seems on tv!!

Well, this blog post got lengthy, and I haven't even talked about the stage show yet, so I think I will cut this into multiple posts as my little guy is finished with his 'quiet time'. Unfortunately for me (and my ever-growing list of housework), my 2-year-old has outgrown his naps so I don't have nearly as much free time during the day as I need to get everything done. So you'll have to wait until my next post (or two or three) to read about the actual Jack Hanna stage show (best show I've EVER seen!!!) and the other stuff we crammed into our jam-packed super-fun Illinois weekend. Until then...

Jack Hanna!!!

While my girls are counting down the days until they get to go to their Grandma's house, I am counting the days until I get to see a LIVE JACK HANNA SHOW!!! Don't get me wrong, I'm really excited to see family too, but I've been waiting to see

a live Jack Hanna show for over a decade!!!



I've had the show tickets in the car for about two weeks now, since I was so sure that I'd forget them. I've already packed my glasses too, so I can actually see Jack and the animals from my seat. And I've been "cramming" all week – trying to quickly re-read my favorite book, Jack Hanna's *Monkeys on the Interstate*. If all goes well, I should be finished with it by Saturday when I see Jack. Because we have tickets for a pre-show event called a Jamboree Lunch, I'm hoping for maybe an autograph or even an opportunity to chat with Mr. Hanna! I know it's a shot in the dark, but I've made a mental list of things I'd bring up just in case; many of them are from the *Monkeys* book. Even if I don't get an opportunity to talk to Mr. Hanna, I am ecstatic just to be able to see his show!!! I really enjoy his appearances on Letterman every month, and I'm beyond excited to see Mr. Hanna live!! Just in case, I'm bringing an array of my Hanna collection in case I get a chance to seek an autograph, but I'm not expecting it or anything – don't want to be disappointed. It would be nice, however, to replace our autographed Jack Hanna honeymoon memento. Now I have to tell that story...

When my husband and I took our honeymoon to Florida in 1999, we were driving from where we lived in Illinois to Florida (which is a very LONG drive... but for some reason, I cannot remember exactly what it was like to do that WITHOUT KIDS along...), and we were talking about all the things we would

do. One of the things that came up was celebrities we would like to run into, and Jack Hanna was the only one we both decided we would really care about running into. Once in Florida, we visited Sea World, and we were going to go into the underwater viewing area for the dolphins, but it was roped off – “TV show taping in progress”. Just before we turned away to head to something else, a worker lifted the ropes, so in we went, and the crew was packing up the cameras, and THERE WAS JACK HANNA!!! And we were all alone since the area had just been closed off – no mob of fans to compete with. Ok, so maybe Jack Hanna isn’t the type of celebrity to have fans mobbing him wherever he goes, but to me, he is an animal hero. His *Monkeys on the Interstate* book chronicles his creativity, his strength through adversity, and his triumphs (and failures!) he went through as he was building the once unheard of Columbus Zoo into the world famous, state-of-the-art zoo facility it is today – a fascinating read for anyone who loves animals, zoos, Jack Hanna, or who just likes funny stories!! Jack Hanna is a marketing and animal genius! But I digress – back to my story...

So we got to meet Jack Hanna, right there at Sea World. I was not expecting it, so I gassed up and let my husband do the talking, and Jack whipped out an 8×10 glossy picture and autographed it, putting our names on it and everything. Unfortunately, this picture was one of a few irreplaceable items that were entrusted to so-called “friends” during a move we had, never to be seen again... but that’s another story and nothing I want to dwell upon now.

So yeah, IF I actually get to talk to Jack again this time, I have my list of things I want to talk about... though it’s quite lengthy, and my brain will be swimming with basically EVERYTHING from the *Monkeys on the Interstate* book, as well as things I want to know about starting my own zoo – hey, that shouldn’t come as a big surprise to any of my readers, so lift your dropped jaw. Those of you who know me realize that I

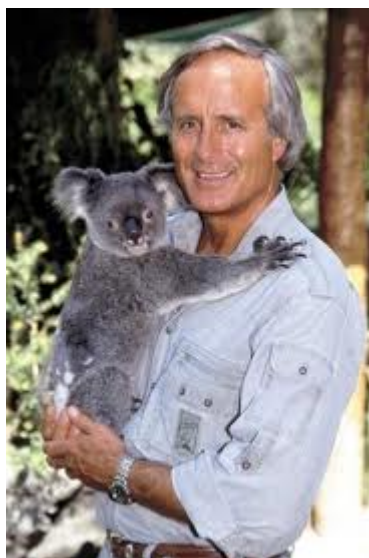
have a pretty good start on one already, don't you? ☐



This is Jack at one of his Letterman appearances. Each of his appearances on Letterman has moments of hilarity as Jack tries so hard to get in his animal facts while Letterman is busy making jokes and heckling him. After decades of monthly appearances, the two have built a relationship of sorts, and Jack now brings animals that sometimes shock, awe, and even scare Letterman!! Never a dull moment when Jack's around...

Been Waiting Over 7 Years For This!!!

I HAVE TICKETS TO SEE JACK HANNA!!!



I've been waiting MORE than 7 years for this! Mr. Hanna became a personal hero of mine and Hubby's around 1998, and as we were driving down to Florida from Illinois for our honeymoon in 1999, we speculated on how cool it would be to run into Jack Hanna since we were going to Sea World (where he would and still does often appear). And guess what happened? We ran into Jack Hanna at Sea World!!! We were going down to an underwater viewing area for one of the exhibits (don't even remember which one, don't care), and it was roped off with a sign, "tv show taping in progress". Just as we turned around, they took down the ropes, and so we went in, and there was Jack Hanna! And we were the only fans in there with him! I got tongue-tied, and I forgot every question I wanted to ask him, but luckily, Hubby was able to explain to him what big fans we were. Jack Hanna autographed a special picture for us, even writing our names on it, but I'm sad to say that this honeymoon treasure was one of a few coveted items that was put in a special box and left with so-called trusted friends during a move when it wouldn't fit into our car. Unfortunately, the "friends" never sent the box to us as they promised, and who knows what has happened to our Jack Hanna autograph or other treasures by now?

But that's not the point. I've been hoping to replace it and to see Mr. Hanna do a show, but he never has appearances close to my corner of Ohio. He came to Toledo once 7 years ago, but the ticket prices were kind of steep, especially since we

didn't know if our then 2-year-old would enjoy it, plus we had just moved to the state and didn't know any babysitters. I've regretted not going to Jack's Toledo show ever since, especially when he hasn't come close to the area. But about a month ago, I happened to check his website, and Jack was going to be less than 2 hours away from us AS WELL as appearing in the town where my parents live – TWO opportunities to see him! So anyway, long story short, we have tickets to see JACK HANNA in OCTOBER!!! I can't wait! This is going to make it so much easier for me to have to forget about the MLB post-season this year (my team is terrible this year and essentially eliminated themselves opening day).

Before the show, we are scheduled to attend a Jungle Jamboree with Jack Hanna also! Maybe I can find a way to get my honeymoon autographed picture replaced. Hubby actually tried once to get me one for a birthday, but there was miscommunication, and Jack Hanna signed it to my husband instead of to me. I actually thought that was pretty funny and classic Jack – totally something he would do as Jack tends to use his brain to store animal facts rather than organizational details. I think I'll bring my favorite book, Monkeys on the Interstate for him to autograph also; I just have to sneak backstage with all my things I want him to autograph somehow. And I'll have to read Monkeys on the Interstate again just so I can study up on it and write a list of questions down to ask Jack in case I get the chance again – I WILL NOT get tongue-tied this time!!! I'll have to take a break from reading the Harry Potter series, so now I definitely won't be finished in time to get to see part one of the last Harry Potter movie while it's in the theater – OH WELL! I'm going to see Jack Hanna live on stage!!!



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Zoo Snoozin' – Part 2 – And Then Some

Bright and early at 7am last Friday at the Toledo Zoo, we were gently awakened by one of our guides (or not-so-gently awakened at 5am by the screaming parrots if you were in the Michigan group sleeping in Nature's Neighborhood) after hitting the pillows at 1am just hours earlier. No problem, what better motivation could I have to get out of bed than already being IN the zoo? We got dressed and packed up our gear and headed to the Carnivore Cafe for a generous breakfast of bagels, cereal, yogurt, applesauce, juice, and coffee (thank goodness for that, and I chugged two cups for fuel). Oh yeah, if you're not a regular reader and happened upon

this post unintentionally, then you probably don't know that I'm talking about the Zoo Snooze my daughters and I went to last week – [see installment one here](#).

After breakfast, we headed over to the gorilla exhibit, but we got stopped halfway there because there was mis-communication – we were supposed to be at the primate exhibit instead. So we did an about-face, and headed over to the primates to watch them play with our tubes we had made the night before. THEN we headed over to the gorilla exhibit, and we had to take the long way since they were re-doing the sidewalk between the primate and gorilla exhibits. For those of you who aren't familiar with the Toledo Zoo, there is A LOT of walking. Not as much walking between exhibits as other zoos, such as Brookfield Zoo near Chicago, but still a lot of walking. As frequent visitors to the Toledo Zoo, we've found ways of cutting down the mileage, especially when pushing the double stroller. But on the second day of the Zoo Snooze, we were all over the place. And I loved it. It was a nice day. My kids were tired, but I was rarin' to go, so I didn't even mind any of the detours. So we watched the gorillas play and tussle over their enrichment treats, and we listened to the gorilla keeper tell us about their personalities. The gorilla troupe of Toledo holds a special place in my heart – their silverback (male gorilla leader) Kwisha, was born at Brookfield Zoo in 1988 – right about the time when I was a frequent visitor there as a child. I remember ogling the gorillas and especially the babies in the (then) new Tropic World exhibit, and it's quite probable that I admired Kwisha (who is the youngest and last son of Samson, a famous Brookfield silverback) way back when he was a gorilla tot.

After the gorillas, we had to walk across the zoo to the elephant exhibit (the long way, remember, because of the construction) to watch Louie play with our enrichment treats. Louie is the zoo's baby elephant – well, not so much anymore... he was celebrating his 7th birthday last week when

we were there. I have a video of Louie popping our treat bags into his mouth – whole thing, bag and all without even opening it – but I put that in my previous post, so refer to the link above if you'd like to see it. And then it was time for the Zoo Snooze to end, and the gates to open and let the real visitors come into the zoo.

So we hiked back to the car, and we got many a strange look from regular zoo-goers who were wondering why we were carrying sleeping bags and backpacks and pillows. We stashed our stuff and spent some time in the gift shop, which is not normally something I do on zoo trips, but it was a nice change of pace. Besides, I was missing my little ones so much, and I had that zoo membership card burning a hole in my pocket – I just had to buy them something. At this point, it was starting to get rather warm outside, and my kids were exhausted. The rest of the group was going quite well, but my kids kept asking if we had to go back into the zoo. Keep in mind that we come often, so they were old hats at the zoo who were extremely tired. I patiently explained that we were going to do whatever the people who we were riding with were going to do, and that was that. As it was though, everyone was exhausted and the people we rode with seemed to be asking us for permission to **not** go back into the zoo. FINE with us! I explained – not because I had had enough of the zoo – that would never happen, no matter how little sleep I'd had... but I wanted to be on their schedule, plus I had the potential for two very tired and crabby kids on my hands AND a trip to Illinois scheduled for the next day. We ended up staying on the side of the zoo where our car was parked (Toledo Zoo straddles the Anthony Wayne Trail – a major thoroughfare, and the zoo has a walkway above it. But it requires a lot of walking to get from side to side, and most of the exhibits are located on the opposite side of the parking lot), so stayed on the one side and still got to see the Polar Bears, Wolves (who were passed out because of the heat), giraffes, and zebras. And then it was time to go.

During the entire Zoo Snooze, I had planned on napping the whole way home, but I found myself having an intriguing conversation with our drivers instead. We arrived home about 5pm, and I unpacked and then I re-packed for the trip to Illinois the next day and made up some lost time with my little ones. By the end of the night, I was seeing things and not making much sense because I was so tired, but it was well worth it!

We awoke bright and early Saturday morning and left at 8am headed for Chicago, and wouldn't you know it – a traffic snarl. It was too early for the kids to nap, and they were awesome in the car – at least until we hit stop and go traffic just outside the Loop. An hour and 4 miles later (yes, you read that right – it took us an **hour** to go **four** miles!), we discovered the reason for our delay – a bridge had begun to crumble, so they had to close down 2 lanes to repair it, which left all the traffic to merge into ONE lane. Ah, Chicago traffic, don't you love it? NOT!!!

The kids were pretty great during all of this, as was I for running on fumes – I think I was still high off my Zoo Snooze. They did start to lose it a little, but luckily I had some powdered donuts packed, so between those and the Veggie Tales dvds I put into the car's player, we managed to not kill each other. We arrived at my mother-in-law's house 55 minutes late, even after Jill the GPS had predicted us getting there an hour early all morning. This would have been fine, except that my mother-in-law had previous plans, so we got to see her for a whopping 15-minute-hi-goodbye-here's-this-here's-that-I-love-you-hug-kiss-goodbye session while my husband's sister and brother-in-law managed to avoid us completely... long story, there's bad blood there, but I thought we were over it by now. Guess not. Whatever. We moved on to a local Chicago beef place (NOTE to non-Chicagoans – just because you call it Chicago Beef, **a French Dip IS NOT CHICAGO BEEF** no matter how hard you try!!) where we shared great food and even better

conversation with a friend from way back, Derek – SO glad he called us and that the traffic jam didn't ruin this part of our trip!

Our next stop was my Grandpa's nursing home, and that was awesome. It's pretty much on the way from my husband's family's house to my family's house, and I wouldn't dream of going to Illinois without seeing him, especially since my grandparents do not travel and have never been to our home in Ohio. Going to ~~Hellinois~~ Illinois is the only way I can see them and so every time I'm in the area, I make sure to stop by and let our kids have a visit with their great-grandparents. My little boy, who will be 2 in July, had a special buddy in my grandmother; it was really sweet, and I don't even know why. But we were there for over an hour, and the whole time, he kept saying "Grandma! Grandma!" making sure that she was doing everything right along side him. My grandpa made me a bet – will the Chicago Cubs (my team – he is a St. Louis Cardinals fan) or the Chicago Bears (a football team, also a favorite of his and my husband's, for that matter) win their respective championship first – World Series or Superbowl? Stay tuned to find out... ☐

Next it was on to my sister's house, where there was a birthday party for my nephews who both have April birthdays - they turned 2 and 7 this year. It was a great party; a wonderful chance to see family; immediate and also my sister's in-laws who are very nice and interesting people to chat with. My sister's nephew is my oldest daughter's age (10), and he has been interested in the weather since he was about 3 years old. His hero is Tom Skilling, a local Chicago WGN weatherman, one whom I've always liked also. Tom always teaches about the weather and its systems and patterns rather than just simply forecasting it. But anyway, my sister's nephew has his own weekly weather newsletter that he writes and send electronically himself, so I put myself on his mailing list. When I got the newsletter this week, I was

impressed – just as I was when talking to the little guy and being dwarfed by his weather knowledge. As is usual, my kids had such a wonderful time with their cousins that they hid when it was time to leave, and we had to dig them out, this time out from under my sister's bed. I'm done with being embarrassed about this; especially since my sister dug up some memories of us hiding from our parents while playing with our cousins! I don't remember this, but I'll take her word for it...

Anyway, time got away from us, and we left my sister's house at 9pm – which was 10pm Ohio time. Arrived home at 2:30 in the morning and had two crazy dogs and some kids to put to bed, and we begrudgingly gave up our church dreams for Sunday. But lo and behold, we were all up and ready for church on Sunday, so we went, and almost one busy week later, I'm still catching up on sleep as I write this, no surprise there. But thanks for reading my rambling, and may this Mother's Day find you blessed, happy, and healthy – hope you have a good one!!

Zoo Snoozin!

Last week I got an email from my friend Carol – she had planned a field trip to the zoo for a 'Zoo Snooze' and a few of her students backed out at the last minute. Since the trip was pre-paid, the spots were paid for, and Carol wanted to fill them – so she thought of me, her friend, the zoo lover, and I of course JUMPED at the opportunity!

I took my two oldest daughters since the age requirements for the trip excluded my 3-year-old Disney and of course my almost 2-year-old, who I wouldn't have wanted along anyway. Poor

Hubby had to stay home with the little ones, and how I missed him! (and the little ones) But other than that – Best. Zoo. Trip. EVER!!!

Because of legality reasons, my daughters and I were not allowed to ride the school bus with the rest of the group. So my friend Carol graciously arranged for us to ride with one of her student's parents who were chaperoning – they were the nicest people! They were actually going to take their pickup truck, but upon learning that they'd have 3 hitchhikers, they switched vehicles to their SUV without complaint – how accommodating! We followed the bus to the zoo, and we hiked across the zoo carting our sleeping bags, pillows and backpacks, and I was EXCITED beyond belief!! We set down our stuff in Nature's Neighborhood (where the birds were screaming) and walked over to the primate building where we got to watch the primates after zoo hours and listen to a zookeeper talk about her interactions with the primate families. We then went into the Museum of Science building (this is at the Toledo Zoo, don't know if I mentioned which zoo it was...) into a classroom in the basement to listen to a worker tell about 3 animals – a box turtle, a salamander, and a rat (my girls were more than happy to volunteer the info that they had FOUR pet rats at home!). After listening to facts about the animals, we got to touch them, and I had already promised myself I would touch it no matter what – not a big deal, I love animals, so I don't have a problem touching regardless of species... except for my fear of frogs, but had there been a frog, I was going to touch it! We switched classrooms and did the same thing with 3 more animals: a cockroach, an agama (type of lizard – cute!), and a fox snake. Because the group sizes for Zoo Snoozes are supposed to be 25-50 people, they had actually paired our group of 11 with a rather large school group from Northern Michigan. When we were in the classrooms doing the animal activities, they separated our groups, and I was so glad because it would have been difficult for our kids to see and touch the animals if we

were still combined with the huge Michigan group.

Next we went to the Carnivore Cafe (used to be an exhibit building that housed animals and they left some of the cages up for kids to eat in – they get a big kick out of this) for our snack of pizza, raisins, juice, and animal cookies.



the kids eating in an
animal cage at the
Carnivore Cafe

We then went for a night hike, and walking around the zoo in the dark under the full moon was amazing. We could hear the lions roaring, the snow leopards making cat noises, and when we walked past the cheetah exhibit, they were quite active. One sprayed a tree, and then he began stalking us, slowly walking toward us and then running at us and jumping on the fence! I didn't have my camera out when he jumped at the fence, but here he is stalking us – listen for the little cheetah "meow" at the end:

The zookeeper said that the cheetahs like to stalk toddlers who can barely walk, and they especially have fun with this during the zoo's Halloween celebration when parents bring their kids who dress up like cute and cuddly things – like little bunnies or other tasty cheetah snacks.

So we took a night hike to the aquarium, and it was neat to see the keepers turn on the lights for us. Even the fish were acting differently at night – some fish appeared that we don't normally see during the day when we come, and others were swimming in schools when they don't usually do that during the day.

After the night hike, we made enrichment treats for the animals – there were four to choose from: melon bombs for the elephants (you make holes in watermelons and stick carrot sticks in there), pumpkin cookies and paper towel tubes for the primates, and snack bags for the elephants. My oldest daughter made primate tubes, and Sammie and I made elephant snack bags – you put an apple, a pear, and a handful each of peanuts and popcorn in the bags and roll them shut and decorate them. We were incredibly surprised the next morning when we watched Louie the elephant (and it was his 7th birthday!) take our treat bags and pop the whole things into his mouth (bags and all!) without even opening them first! Here is a video of Louie eating our bags – too bad I couldn't get out from behind the girl with the ponytail:

After making the enrichments, we went back to a classroom and played an animal training games using a training clicker – I have to get myself one of those and follow the puppy around for a day or two to housebreak him! Wonder when I'll find the time for that? After the game, it was finally time for bed, and we got to choose if we wanted to separate from the Michigan group. We chose yes, leaving them to sleep with the screaming parrots – I get enough of that at home! And sure enough, they reported to us the next day that the birds were up and screaming at 5am. I would not have been too happy about that, especially since we didn't get to bed until 1am! So we took our stuff and slept in one of the classrooms in the basement of the Museum of Science which was pretty neat – it's a well-kept 1930's Works Progress Association building, and we got to wander the winding basement hallways back and forth to the bathroom. Never mind that the building is home to hundreds of frogs and toads – they were upstairs, and I didn't give them any thought.

I think I will end it here and save day 2 of the Zoo Snooze for another post – this turned out to be a rather long post, and even though it's difficult for me to understand, not everyone loves zoos as much as I do. I don't want to bore the heck out of anyone!

Just A Friendly Reminder

Take care of yourself this flu season!

