

Our middle child is about to be forged by fire



TOM ARNEBERG

Community columnist

I've always loved being a dad. Parenting is fun and rewarding — Beth and I have even led classes on the topic and spoken at seminars.

But we did something today that was just about the hardest thing we've done as parents: We put our son on a plane with a one-way ticket.

Our lives will never be the same.

Jasper is not only a middle child; as the third of five he's the middle of the middle children. It was very painful saying goodbye to our oldest son Ben when he left for the Air Force Academy four years ago, and I'm sure we'll be especially sad when our last one leaves and makes us empty-nesters. But watching the middle-middle one go should be easy, right?

I guess it's distressing because of the distance and the permanence. Yes, we'll see him for school breaks here and there. But he'll be more of a visitor than a regular part of the family. That's very difficult to think about right now.

For his high school grad party the weekend before last, we had little "Jaspers-on-a-stick" planted in pots on various tables. We started that quirky tradition two years ago for Alison's party — we glue two photos together with a stick in between them, and cut the picture to match the outline of the person.

To make it work, you must make a print of the original photo along with its mirror image. It's a lot of work to go through my 150,000 digital photos to find the right ones, and then do the computer editing.

Without even being asked, Jasper dug up dozens of photos, learned the Gimp software and did all the editing work before I got home from work one day. That's just the kind of kid he is.

He not only learns things quickly, he is also patient to teach his classmates, siblings and even his parents. I will miss his quiet competence and gentle spirit.

Looking at those little Jaspers-on-a-stick brings back a lot of memories. There's the one from his first Boy Scout backpacking trip at 10 years old, where he was so skinny you could see every rib in his chest. Those 10 miles may have been tougher for him than his 170-mile Philmont Rayado trip seven years later.

In his marching band photo, you can see a mischievous look since he had moved to the tuba section because "those kids have more fun."

You can see the steely determination in his eyes in the cross-country version. That's a sport he didn't even start until his junior year, so he had to make up for lost time with sheer willpower.

The picture of Jasper as a young child reminds me of his slight speech impediments. A speech therapist predicted at the time that he would eventually grow out of it without any therapy. She was right, as evidenced by the powerful speech he gave to more than a thousand people at Chi-Hi's graduation.

One of my favorite Jaspers-on-a-stick is from the "Woody Classic," the season-ending team tennis tournament at Chi-Hi. Following the spirit of the informal back-to-the-'70s event, Jasper wore short shorts, long white tube socks, and a head band while holding onto a Jack Kramer wooden tennis racket.

He's not afraid to stand out from the crowd!

Jasper wielded wisely his power as captain of the cross country and tennis teams, as

senior patrol leader of our Boy Scout troop, and as de facto leader of many math and science teams.

He'll make an outstanding Air Force officer when gets out of college. And he certainly won't have any problem with the Cadet honor code: "We will not lie, cheat, steal, nor tolerate those who do." I can't even IMAGINE Jasper being dishonest about anything.

Some of his peers mock such virtue, but beware the words of C.S. Lewis: "We laugh at honor, and are shocked to find traitors in our midst."

I have never met a harder worker. Jasper is the first person I think of when I read Proverbs 22:29 — "Do you see a man diligent in his work? He shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before obscure men." I wonder what "kings" he will stand before someday.

He'll also be able to put his brain to good use. He never met a math or science contest he didn't like, so I know he'll enjoy the rigorous engineering curriculum at the Academy.

First, of course, he has to get through basic cadet training. And the opening day may be the hardest — as I'm writing this, the Air Force Academy is being evacuated due to the wildfires. Rumor has it their Class of 2016 motto will be "Forged by Fire."

We have no idea what will happen when he lands later today. But it's now out of our hands. Dear God, please watch over our beloved son, not only this week but for the next 11 years in the Air Force.

And thank you, Lord, for the 18 years you have allowed us with this remarkable young man. I am so proud to call him my son. (Now can you do something for my aching heart?)

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