

December 11th, 2009

Greetings and Happy Holidays!!! It's almost Christmas so it is time for me to send out my Christmas letter updating everybody on what has happened to me over the past year, and for those whom I haven't seen since I've been in God's Country(Philmont), what has happened over the past three to four months.

I began the year working towards my last semester as an undergraduate at Grand Valley State University(GVSU). During that time I was still very active in GVSU's Backpacking and Outdoors Club. Over spring break, I traveled to South Carolina with the club to hike the Foothills Trail. Unfortunately, our tentative week long trip was cut short to two days due to an unexpected winter storm which hit the east coast. The trip was not a complete loss. Over the two days that we were in South Carolina, we hiked over Sassafras Mountain, which is the highest mountain in South Carolina. Summiting that mountain brought me one more state closer in my quest to summit the highest point in every state in the U.S.

On April 25th, I participated in GVSU's commencement ceremony upon which I was conferred a Bachelor's of Science in Chemistry, with an Environmental Emphasis. Additionally, I earned a minor in Spanish. Over the past year I have also gotten into homebrewing my own beer. A hobby I picked up as a result of my chemistry degree. To commemorate my graduation from college I began brewing a "Graduation Brew" two months prior to my tentative graduation. The "Graduation Brew" was a Dortmunder(Pale Lager) and it turned out really well. Currently I'm brewing an American Brown Ale which will be ready just in time for my 25th Birthday on January 21st.

Following graduation, I had about a week off before I had to start driving to Philmont to begin my summer job as a Conservation Work Crew Member. Over the past four years at Philmont I had worked in the backcountry and I had my heart set on another position in the backcountry for 2009. However, I was informed in December that I would not be offered a position in the backcountry. As a result of that news I sought two other positions which I would consider doing. I had hoped to be either a Health Lodge Driver or Conservation Work Crew Member. I contacted the respective people responsible for hiring those positions and I was offered a position on a Work Crew by Mark Anderson. At the time I was disappointed to not have gotten a position in the backcountry, however, I am now a firm believer in the saying that "Everything happens for a reason." Every summer at Philmont has been better than the prior year and this past summer was no exception. I couldn't have had a better summer in the conservation department. I honestly don't think I will go back to back to the backcountry department, if I return to Philmont on staff, after this past summer.

I spent the summer as a member of Work Crew Kilo. Work Crew Kilo consisted of the following people:

Bejamin “Ketucky” Ballard (Foremen)

Recently Graduated with a Criminal Justice Degree
Kentucky

Myself

Josh Tracy

Freshmen in College
Sacramento, California

Carl Sanman

Sophomore in College in Ohio

Ryan Gaul

Maryland

For those of you who may not be familiar work crews hike around Philmont performing trail and campsite maintenance. I hiked around Philmont carrying a 60-80 pound pack(For one run it was 100lbs) full of tools, food, and personal gear for ten to eleven days at a time. The job was very physically demanding as you can imagine and it whipped me into really good shape.

Prior to spending the majority of my summer as a member of Work Crew Kilo I took part in Conservation A-Team Runs. I arrived at Philmont on May 6th, which is two weeks before Camp Directors arrive for their training and three weeks prior to when the majority of the summer staff arrives. The reason I arrived so early was because of the fact that I, again, was going to be taking part in A-Team runs. During the off-season(Fall, Winter, and Spring) trees get blown down all over the trails of Philmont. A-Teams are responsible for clearing the trails of those blow downs and checking the status of all the campsites. We went out on 2-3 three days runs, in groups of three or four, covering as much ground as possible with bow saws, loppers, chainsaws, and crosscut saws in tow. About a dozen people covered the entire hiking trail system of Philmont, 137,000 acres of land, in approximately two weeks. As a gift for all of our hard work we were given an A-Team fleece by the department.

Additionally, I made good use of the free time I had off from work. For one of my days off I, and three other conservation guys(Ryan and Josh from Work Crew Kilo and GIS Charlie), summited the highest mountain in Colorado(Mt. Elbert, 14,433 ft). Mt. Elbert was my first fourteenner as well. The following day we attended the Mile High Music Festival in Denver.

On another days off, I attempted the Ranger Marathon Challenge one more time. The Ranger Marathon is an endurance challenge is to hike from Dan Beard to Carson Meadows(Northermost to southermost camps on Philmont Property) in under 24 hours with 35lbs on your back. The hike covers approximately 40 miles of mountainous terrain. I successfully completed the Ranger Marathon in 14:38:59, a record for the summer the date that I completed it. I found out later that my time was beat during the following week. I did put a conservation twist on my Ranger Marathon attempt. I carried a Pick-Mattock the entire way,

which I'm sure nobody else did.

On August 25th, I left Philmont after having spent almost four months there. The longest amount of time I have spent in God's Country. I took my time driving home because I didn't have a college that I needed to get back to. I spent:

A day exploring Great Sand Dunes National Park in Colorado
Visited the New Belgium Brewery in Fort Collins, CO
Spent three days in Denver with my friend Pete
Saw Yonder Mountain String Band perform Live at Red Rocks Amphitheatre
Spent three days in Oklahoma with my friend Michael
A night in Kansas City
and

A night in Chicago with my grandmother before arriving home to Hudsonville on September 3rd exactly four months, to the date, from when I left Michigan.

I spent a few weeks unemployed before applying to Manpower(a hiring firm) who was able to get me a job at Amway in Ada. Since the beginning of October I have been work a first shift position in the Hometech department at Amway. The Hometech department is responsible for manufacturing Air and Water Purifiers and things of that nature. I plan on working there until I get things finalized with the Peace Corps. If I start service in the Peace Corps, I'll want to spend my free time doing fun things and not working. If I don't end up volunteering for the Peace Corps I'll be looking for a job that is in my field and uses my talents. For right now, my job at Amway has been perfect for my situation. This week, the week of December 6th, I will be faxing in the last paperwork I need to get to the Peace Corp's Office of Medical Services. After this week, I will be waiting for an invitation to join, which is the official offer to join and the final step of the application process. Having been in the application process for the past year I'm eager to receive that invitation.

In addition to working at Amway, I participated in some volunteer work trailbuilding for the Western Michigan Chapter of the North Country Trail Association(NCTA). I had been looking for opportunities to continue the work I did this summer back in Michigan and this came up thanks to an email from a local outdoors store. We completed a section of side-hill full bench trail outside Lowell, MI over an eight week period this Fall.

By far the biggest news in my life this year is the fact that I became an uncle to Elena Sandra Bryson at 1:37 p.m. EST on June 15th. She was 7 lbs. 3.3 oz. and 20 inches long. Photos of Elena can be seen at <http://gallery.me.com/brysonda>

For the latest on my life, you can visit <http://www.thelifeofbryson.com>, my personal website. I maintain a blog, which I update regularly, and I post the latest pictures of what I've been doing on there. I wish everybody the best in this coming year. Up to this point of my life I would consider 2009 to be one of the best years of my life. The current transitional state that I'm in has brought many joys to my life, some of which were unexpected. It has also brought me closer to some people. I look forward to what is looming around the corner for me on this

journey in which we are all a part of. Who knows what it will bring?

Happy Holidays,

Mark Bryson

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Soundtrack to listen to when reading this letter.

“Christmas in July”

(Written and performed by Michael Henneberry and Bryce Blakenship)

or

Any of the songs that were recorded at Crater Lake in 2008 (Available on the music page of my website, a shameless plug, I know)