

## CHRISTMAS LETTER 2024

### Life at 3540

We (Frank, Cyndi, Mike, and Gerard) live in house number 3540, which we fondly refer to as “Thirty-five Forty.” And although Aunt Cathy lives in Warrington, PA - Jeff, Brittany, Sydney, and Claire live in Knoxville, TN - and Maggie, Devin, Liam, and Lorelei live in Marietta, GA – this is their home too (one bedroom is called “Maggie’s room”, another is called “Sydney’s room”). This year I thought, in the spirit of spreading Christmas cheer, I would share some idea of what life at 3540 is like. (I do realize that some might opt out of my snail village after reading this year’s Christmas letter – perhaps the Garvans are too eccentric?)

Laughing. There is a lot of laughing at 3540. From Frank’s biting Australian wit to Gerard’s whimsy to Mike’s unintended sweetness (e.g., “Mom – the UBER driver couldn’t read my mind!”), I would say that laughing is a defining feature of 3540. Frank discovered a long time ago (without reading popular books on the subject of productivity) that he can optimize his brain to work on math if he takes frequent TV (aka streaming on his computer) breaks as a form of restful recovery. Most of the shows he loves to watch are comedies: Francis the Talking Mule movies, Some Mothers Do Have ‘Em, Dad’s Army, and the most current – The Office. So, when Frank is home, the relative quiet is pierced with sounds of his loud laughter during the particularly hilarious bits of whatever he is watching.

Losing Things. There is a lot of losing things at 3540 which is connected to its overall vibe of situational comedy. Mike is on medication that increases his appetite – to counter this (and keep family peace) we routinely hide food – we even have a small refrigerator in Sydney’s bedroom to help! A part of our family lore is the story of when Devin first visited 3540 and discovered a banana under a couch cushion. When he announced the find, Frank matter-of-factly said – “I was wondering where that was.” As if hiding bananas in your living room furniture was completely normal (Devin *did* go on to marry Maggie but she gave him lots of data to make an informed choice).

Frank is notorious for losing things and finding them in bizarre places – a coffee pot put into the freezer, a package of salami put between a mattress and bedframe, and my personal favorite – important government documents put into a cereal box. Gerard seems to have inherited Frank’s penchant for losing things, yesterday he lost his wallet which Frank later found in our mailbox. Apparently, Gerard put it there when mailing a letter.

A regular feature at 3540 is Frank saying (with some emotion as he hates to lose things) – “I can’t find [INSERT THE LOSS HERE]!”, me counting silently to 10, then Frank saying, “**Oh, there it is!**”. Frank thus embodies the AA Milne observation that “*One of the advantages of being disorganized is that one is always having surprising discoveries.*” Surprising discoveries are a part of 3540.

Australia. Frank is Australian. Australia is part of 3540 and 3540 is part of Australia. We speak using lots of Australian words and phrases. We listen to ABC radio (Australian Broadcasting Company), Frank reads the Sydney Morning Herald, we watch rugby. We even do sweeps for the Melbourne Cup horse race (Frank randomly assigns horses). This year Devin’s horse won with Brittany’s in 2<sup>nd</sup> place and Lorelei’s in 3<sup>rd</sup>.

We have lots of Australian things: a huge wall map of Sydney above Frank’s desk, candlesticks from Tasmania above our fireplace, photos and paintings of Australian flowers and scenes such

as the Blue Mountains and the Opera House, a framed tea towel depicting a Waratah (the state flower of New South Wales) above Frank's dresser, the list goes on.

You can find many day-to-day Australian items at 3540. Examples include Weet-Bix made in Australia (we get it off of Amazon because apparently the taste is better than "Weet-a-Bix" made in Canada), Bundaberg ginger beer, Violet Crumble lollies (candy bars), and Tim Tam bikkies (cookies). Fortunately, we can obtain the ginger beer, candy, and cookies at our local grocery store and do not have to get them from the Fijian middleman on Amazon.

The pièce de resistance, however, is Frank's Australian DVDs. For some inexplicable reason, Frank decided to search for DVDs with ancient crime dramas from his childhood the last time we were in Australia (2022). We went to the Australian equivalent of Best Buy where Frank interrogated some poor salesperson – "Do you have *Matlock*? Do you have *Division 4*? Do you have *Homicide*?". These are shows from the 1960's and 1970's! And no surprise – the poor kid had no idea what Frank was talking about. But Frank, being the prolific researcher and problem solver that he is, found an obscure Australian purveyor of obscure Australian DVDs. And thus, the evening ends at 3540 with a viewing of ancient Australian crime dramas.

Pets. We have a lot of pets and visiting pets. Our pets include Willis (corgi) and Tonbei (miniature dachshund), Mandalorian (orange cat), Stuart who is Mike's tuxedo cat, and at least two visiting cats ("Bob" and an unnamed tabby). Then there is Winston, an African Spurred Tortoise who is an eating machine! We have had Winston for 18 months and he has quadrupled in size. Winston is expected to grow to 200 lbs and live over 50 years (Liam, age 7, has agreed to inherit him). The pets are part of the rhythm of 3540. Winston gets fresh veggies and water in the morning and is brought to a fenced-in garden during the day when it is warm outside. Mandalorian helps Cyndi with her work and occasionally puts in a zoom appearance. Stuart takes good care of Mike and is his constant companion. Mike takes exquisite care of Stuart and showers him with treats every day. There is the nightly dog walk and the Australian DVD watching in which the dogs participate while having their favorite DreamBones treat. It would be hard to imagine life at 3540 without its resident menagerie.

Christmas. The end of the semester, preparations for the grandchildren (travel, gifts, etc.). Such a lovely, hectic time steeped in evolving tradition. It is always a challenge for me to focus on Advent messages (hope, joy, peace, and love) and keep the consumerism to a minimum. And a challenge to slow down and enjoy favorite Christmasy activities (time with family and friends, music, plays, movies, baking, decorating, communicating)! But surely, allowing ourselves to notice and experience and appreciate the love and cheer which surrounds us, even in the midst of very hard things, is the true gift of Christmas.

**Wishing You All a Merry Christmas and a Bright, Happy, and Healthy New Year!**

*Cyndi and her fellow residents of 3540*

P.S. I asked Frank for his opinion of Christmas Letter 2024 and he said, "It's lovely, dear." I asked him if I should make any changes and he said, "the American spellings." LOL.

## HOPE

"You wonder what made Vaclav Havel hopeful in 1985 or 1986, when Czechoslovakia was still a Soviet satellite and he was still a jailbird playwright. Havel said then, The kind of hope I often think about (especially in situations that are particularly hopeless, such as prison) I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul; it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed."

— from "Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities" by Rebecca Solnit

## PEACE

"It isn't enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn't enough to believe in it. One must work at it."

— Eleanor Roosevelt

## JOY

"It's not enough to have lived. We should be determined to live for something. May I suggest that it be creating joy for others, sharing what we have for the betterment of personkind, bringing hope to the lost and love to the lonely."

—Dr. Leo Buscaglia (1924-1998)

## LOVE

"Sooner or later, we all discover that kindness is the only strength there is. I can remember listening to a kid at a probation camp read at Mass from 1 Corinthians 13. If you've been to as many weddings as I have, you go numb as you hear, "Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is blah, blah, blah." Your mind floats away. You start wondering if the Dodgers won last night and remind yourself to move your clothes from the washer to the dryer. But this kid started to read it like it mattered and it, as the homies would say, "woke my ass up proper." He looked out at everyone and proclaimed with astounding surety: "Love . . . never . . . fails."

And he sat down.

And I believed him.

Every day, you choose to believe this all over again and want only "to live as though the truth were true."

— Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion by Gregory Boyle



Mike and Jeff



Sydney (age 17). For Sydney, Christmas is about “All of Us Together.”



Claire (age 10). Christmas message is “Believe.”



Sydney and Claire at Disney



Brittany, Sydney and Claire



Jeff, Sydney, and Claire at Claire's Polar Express ballet recital



Gerard and Maggie at Disney





Liam (age 7) and Liam rock climbing. Christmas message is “Kindness”.



Lorelei Rose Justice is now 18 months old. She is professionally happy. Her Christmas message is “Happy.”



Maggie and Lorelei



Liam and Lorelei



Maggie, Devin, Lorelei, and Liam



Nephew David



Cathy

Cyndi and  
Cathy's Tour of  
Bucks County  
Bridges



Pine Valley Covered Bridge – built in 1842



Cyndi and Cathy

$$\omega(31^3 n + 19860) \equiv 0 \pmod{2^5}$$

$\pmod{31}$ .

91987379435199859678012 7120  
57 293 c99

THANK YOU

Frank



Mom, Sue Plastaras, (age 91)



3540 at Christmas with Pierre  
(reindeer)



Framed Waratah tea-towel





Mandalorian



Stuart



Bob



Willis



Tonbei



Winston