Season’s Greetings to all our family, friends and loved ones and welcome to the ~24th annual Little-Meyer Family Newsletter. It has been a tough year on many fronts. It began last January with the tragic murder on-campus of Bruce’s administrative assistant by her ex-husband; included the on-campus suicide of a colleague and the death of Bruce’s Mom in June. Her death was a surreal time, with a rapid (and ironic) diagnosis of stage IV cervical/uterine cancer after their return from a trip to Hawaii. She deteriorated rapidly over a few weeks and eventually went into pulmonary failure. She died just short of she and Dad’s 61st wedding anniversary. She lived a full life, growing up in Annapolis, attended Antioch College and always said that she had marched with Coretta Scott King. She taught kindergarten, raised three successful sons, obtained her Master’s degree, and had a successful practice in Marriage and Family therapy for over 25 years. James Gandolfini died the same day and so did Stephen Colbert’s mother (who gave a better tribute to Moms than I ever could – look it up on YouTube). Dad decided to leave San Antonio after 40 years and moved to Richmond to live with Brian, Sharla and their kids. She will be missed.

It is also hard not to mention the bombing at the Marathon in Boston. It was on Patriots day, Tax day, Israeli Independence day – and that week  was 18 years since the Oklahoma City bombing and 20 years since the Branch Dividian compound mess. A terrible tragedy as an act of random terrorism made sadder still because Patriots Day, with the early Red Sox game, the marathon and all its festival atmosphere and the late Bruins or Celtics game is such a celebration of life and spring in New England. The Marathon is a symbol of trust. In no other situation would you accept from the bare hands of a stranger a slice of an orange, loose M&Ms, gummy bears, strawberries, even cups of beer. We hope that the crowds for next year's marathon are larger than ever and we show our children that while there will always be scary people, that doesn't mean we have to be scared.

For our beloved Red Sox, it was a completely improbable season. A different dude with a different beard seemed to come through every time we needed it. Coming off a catastrophic 2012 season, where you just could not like anybody on the team except for the injured Big Papi and Pedroia, GM Ben Cherington shifted gears and emphasized chemistry over everything else. For the first four months, nobody expected them to win much of anything especially after all three closers got hurt for the season — we were just happy to have a likable Red Sox team again. Winning is always fun. But this team? This team was REALLY fun. They weren't the most talented 25 guys, but they had a way of lifting each other (and us) up and making each other better in ways that — for an individual sport disguised as a team sport, one in which you're on your own just about all the time — make absolutely no sense whatsoever. But then Koji Uehara turned into Dennis Eckersley circa 1989. The Tigers had us dead and then Big Papi hit that improbable grand slam (coming through in the clutch *again*) and The Ugly Beards ripped off eight wins in 11 games, more than enough for Boston's third World Series title in ten years (and in our lifetime). I guess Boston Strong really was enough.

So, lets get to family. Today, big families are like VCRs; they used to be everywhere, and now they are just weird. Admit it, whenever you see a VCR, you think, “Wow. Not even sure how those things work anymore.” Big families are even more rare in cities, where we live. When strangers find out we have six children, it usually makes even the toughest, most jaded Texan anxious. Based on some reactions to hearing that we have six children, it seems as though people think that we are ignorant of how to stop. People will say instructively, “six kids, that’s a lot – did you plan it?” More often people say, “I don’t know how you manage six kids. I have one kid, and I can barely handle it!” Well, guess what? One kid *is* a lot (especially when it is Zac). We didn’t suddenly become the parents of six children. That would be really overwhelming. Not that we have not felt occasionally overwhelmed. Thankfully, the pregnancies and babies came one by one, each with their unique hurdles and victories.

We travelled as usual this year including a Spring Break trip to Naples and Red Sox Spring Training as well as to Cape Cod (except Bekah) and spent a fantastic week with Rose and Ron and the annual trip to Wayne and Beverly’s for a spectacular Christmas week… which is a reminder that getting the entire family to leave the house to do anything at once is almost impossible. I’m sure there is some law of science to explain it: whereby if one body exerts force on six other bodies, no body goes anywhere. You can’t just say “We’re leaving in five minutes!” and expect anything to happen. You must be an active participant in herding them out the door. If there is electronic media device turned on anywhere in the vicinity, you must turn it off in order for your children’s brains to process that you are speaking to them. If you have a child in diapers, you must realize that they will poop at the precise moment you say, “Okay, we are all finally ready to go!” Plus it’s not just leaving; it’s leaving with stuff. Just to take a walk in the neighborhood, you have to pack diapers, wipes, juice boxes, and sunscreen.

Through a happy circumstance of fortune, Jolene returned to our home for 10 weeks in the fall and early winter! Just in time to potty-train Zac and get him adjusted to sleeping on his own. We owe such a huge debt to Jo as she has done so much for all of kids and us. She is quite amazing! As a result, in early December, Christie and Bruce got to go on vacation without any children! It was the first time in more than 10 years and occurred through the generosity of Jolene, Christie’s folks and Caite. We took a long postponed trip to Hawaii and had 6 glorious days of relaxation, with history lessons, hikes through the Waipo Valley, a kayak trip through the Kohala irrigation ditches (highly recommended), beach walks and (most importantly) fantastic food! Sunny 80 degree days and beautiful views, plus the time together to talk and relax was truly wonderful. The plane ride is long but completely worth it – cannot wait to get a chance to go back. Unfortunately for Jolene, Caite et all, it happened over the every-three-year ice-storm in Dallas that cancelled school, knocked out power to many and made outdoor conditions pretty treacherous. We are just glad that they were OK.

And now, on to the offspring: It has been a long haul in Cleveland for Alex, as Law School has turned out to be just as rigorous as you have may have heard. He had a great but long summer internship in the legal department at University Hospitals in Cleveland and now has a lot of experience in health care law. We are very proud that he had the highest grade in the class in “Admiralty Law” – just wish that there were some actual practical applications to a career. Combined with the lousy winter weather and distance from family, we are incredibly proud that he is on track to graduate in May. Now the really tough part: starting to look for a job in a very, very difficult market for lawyers (so if you know of anything in your neighborhood, he/we would definitely appreciate the referral). While he definitely has a lot more hair than Bruce, the forehead is definitely elongating, much to his dismay (his maternal grandfather doesn’t even have a grey hair much less any loss, so much for the mythology of inheritance). His Honda Pilot was among the three family cars that all died at once, so he proudly drives a Jeep – his sisters call it “the Lego car, perfect for a boy!” Complete with Red Sox gearshift knob, it suits him. He roughhouses with Zac, much to both of their delight. Where he winds up is mostly going to be based on where the job opportunity lies, so we shall see….

It has been an equally long year for Caite (or “T” as we now call her since Zac re-named her so), as Medical School (especially second year, with the huge volume of didactic material) has filled her time pretty completely. She and Mike are still happily together – both in Med School, just in two different states. Caite spent the (very short for her at 8 weeks) summer in the lab, working on her MD with distinction. She laments the fact that from now on, her “summers” are increasingly brief and that the working world has finally forced its way into her life. Despite the rigor, she is enjoying Med School, just getting serious about picking a specialty, with more things on the ‘no’ list than on the ‘yes’. We are trying to remain as neutral as we can, but clearly would be happy if she picked Ob-Gyn. She is now doing a lot more diagnosis of family illness and has the typical medical student responses whenever she gets any symptom – it is always the worst case scenario from the differential diagnosis list! Caite now understands the value of washing hands, but notes that little kids are walking petri dishes of viruses. Toddlers are a virus’s best friend. Viruses are usually spread by close contact and saliva. If you look up the definition of toddler, the first thing it should say is “close contact and saliva.”  Zac brings home viruses like he is collecting them for some future sweepstakes. The virus will go around the family, taking its sweet time. She, too, has a new vehicle (a Subaru Forrester, so she can manage whatever weather she encounters in residency, which looms). It has been a joy to see her grow so much and get to vicariously share in her Med School experiences; she comes over regularly for dinner, has a fairly regular Thursday lunch with Bruce in his office and is a huge part of Zac’s life (every time the door opens, Zac asks “T?” hoping she is arriving) along with providing Gillian with occasional tutoring in Chemistry. She still loves her boots (and on a bad day, the concomitant “retail therapy’), with a pretty extensive collection at this point……..

Rebekah is still doing great at GW (with a 3.9 GPA), and loves DC (she is the family expert on the Metro, Uber and car-sharing). She spent an amazing summer in London at LAMDA (London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts) studying a range of performance skills (and some Shakespeare) and was the dramaturge for a performance of *Pericles*. She, too is beloved by Zac, who calls her by her oldest nickname: “Boo”. She will graduate from GW on the exact same day Alex graduates from Law School so we are still figuring out how to manage that. She has molded herself into a genuine athlete and participates in all kinds of classes and competitions. Bekah is working on her personal trainer certification, but that is simply a sidelight. She is still weighing her options but is determined to embark on a career as an actor. Where she will be this time next year is undetermined as she has tryouts for a number of programs where she would get her MFA and a start on a career – perhaps we will see her at LAMDA or as a member of the National Players Company for Shakespeare.

Gillian is happy, petit (fully grown at 4’11 ½”) and is a sophomore at Hockaday (toughest High School we can imagine), working hard in AP Chemistry. Gillian spent the summer studying for her general Chemistry exam so that she could do AP Chemistry in the fall (or as she described it – one year of Chemistry in 6 weeks! – fortunately, she had Caite as a tutor) as well as performing in *Hamlet* at Camp Shakespeare. Gillian is far too busy with the JETS (junior engineering and technology) building robots, loves science (even though she is probably the best natural writer in the family) leading Caite and Bekah to call her "the better version of both of us!” And continuing a family tradition, Gillian does a great job with little preparation at regionals of the English Speaking Union Shakespeare contest. She should have won and gone to Lincoln Center in NYC – maybe next year. She would never describe herself as an athlete, but this year she did improve her one mile time by more than a minute. She still devours books and is most effective at exploring and using YouTube for work and fun and deeply covets a 3-D printer (for which she has a 1000 plans already). A lot of her free time is taken up by TACT (Teenage Communication Theatre) which is funded by Planned Parenthood and teaches life lessons and dealing with teen stressors (it is a pretty amazing program and we are very proud of her). She will get her driver’s license in the next couple of months but bemoans the lack of a car to fit her height…..

Nate is doing great, loves art and is making "A’s” in eighth grade at the Winston School. He still loves movies (especially the Hobbit and Lord of the Rings series). He is still a devoted game player in all forms of media) and is fairly addicted to diet Ginger Ale. He still loves to take things apart and has to be persuaded to clean up his room. The arrival of puberty has meant that he has to be reminded to shower and learn to use deodorant, but it has also meant that he has added at least 5 inches of height, eclipsing his mother and two of her sisters (much to his delight). This year, Nate had a very small, very private but successful Bar Mitzvah (per his wishes, including that no one sat on the first two rows in the small chapel – total attendance including the rabbi and cantor was 15). Nate again went to summer sleep-away camp outside of Toronto with its giant mosquitos and crummy food. He also spent a wonderful week fishing with his Grandfather in Kansas City (he loves fishing). He had a fabulous time when Jolene stayed with us and continues to speak with her every week….

Zac is a rowdy almost 4 year old with unbelievable energy who needs way too little sleep. He is in speech therapy and OT, but is very bright and engaged and (almost always) a genuine joy for all of us. Zac loves movies - they just have to be animated: Kung Fu Panda (especially the first one - Dad loves that one too because of “there is no secret ingredient”); all FOUR Ice Age movies (arghhhh); How to Tame Your Dragon; Toy Story I, II, III; anything Pixar (loves to watch the animated lamp smash down the ‘I’ in PIXAR at the beginning) and anything Dreamworks (loves to watch the boy fish from the moon in the beginning) – between all the kids, we are making Apple TV rich….. Zac loves to count… everything and will use any excuse to show you that he can get to 20! He also loves his “pie-pad” and is a wizard with apps, movies and tv shows – he certainly knows how to use an iPhone and has all of the family passwords memorized. Random cute behaviors include: Zac says “pize!” instead of surprise! And “Job” with thumbs up instead of ‘good job’. Zac says " tank you much". Rolls up only the left sleeve on his pajamas, shirts and sweaters. Zac gives “dinosaur hugs” with his elbows held tight to his side; he and Caite do faces: happy!, mad!, sad!, “prize!” (surprise). He does not pronounce “tickle” well and instead says “wiggle, wiggle, wiggle”. Zac sings to himself as he plays computer games on the iPhone or iPad, singing “Biko Biko Biko” (of course he has no idea who Biko was). One day, his teacher sent home pictures of all the pre-school kids jumping down a set of 6 stairs. We note that every other kid does one step or at most two and holds on to the railing, but Zac - does all 6 in a single jump. This is what we have to look forward to as he gets bigger – lots more ER visits! We want our children to be exposed to social, economic, and cultural diversity but it was a little weird out when Zac asked if the woman in a burka in the mall was a ninja.

Whoever came up with the term “terrible twos” must have felt very foolish after their kid turned three and a half or four. Four-year-olds are just rude. They are still supercute, but now they are supercute and they know it. They have gotten supersmart, and they are not afraid to show it. It’s like living with a child emperor. They act really entitled, bossy, and outspoken. They think the world revolves around them. Oddly, they love toilet paper. I mean, I love toilet paper, too— who doesn’t? Even the most devout conservationist can’t live without their toilet paper. “Reuse! Recycle! Wait…   What? We’re out of toilet paper? Chop down that tree and process it”. But Zac loves toilet paper for all the wrong reasons. He really has no idea what it is for or how to use it, but he is passionate about a nice, big, fresh roll of toilet paper. He loves to play with it, wear it, eat it (gross), and, especially, unroll it. Leave him alone in a bathroom for five seconds, and he will somehow unroll three hundred feet of toilet paper with supernatural speed. Then you walk in and bust him, and just smiles beatifically and cocks his head like, “What? This stuff is obviously for me, right? It’s right at my eye level, and it’s the most fun thing in the house.” All the geniuses at the Fisher-Price laboratories have yet to develop something as fun for a toddler as a ninety-nine-cent roll of toilet paper. Unfortunately for me, whenever this unrolling happens, it’s always the last roll in the house. Have you ever tried to reroll an entire family-size roll of toilet paper? I wind up just leaving it in a big, undulating pile next to the toilet.

He loves his preschool at the orthodox Jewish day school and has at least three girlfriends (Layla! Maggie! Rae! Daphna!). Speaking of preschool, since when did the most dangerous thing that a kid could bring to school become peanut butter sandwiches? During the first weeks of school there are infinite e-mail reminders instructing parents that children are forbidden to bring anything containing nuts into the school. I realize a nut allergy is no joke, but when I was growing up, I can’t think of one kid that had a nut allergy. Now they are more common than Velcro sneakers. I will also note that the preschool parent-teacher conference always feels like a game of “crazy or not crazy?” You either find out that your child is dismembering dolls or not. This is not to say you don’t learn insightful things about your child: “Your son likes to sing and loves the color green.” Or see their artwork: “This is what your son scribbled last week. And this is what he scribbled this week.” Of course, you want to hear your kid is doing well and getting along with the other children, but not that your child is smashing toys or purposely urinating in the Quiet Corner.

Zac has been potty-training (an extraordinarily over-rated skill at this age) - small children have limited awareness of if or when they need to use the bathroom. “Do you need to go to the bathroom? Do you think you may need to go to the bathroom? Why don’t you just try to go to the bathroom?” They never need to go to the bathroom until you get to the place without a bathroom. Because when a three-year-old tells you they have to use the bathroom, he does not mean in a couple of minutes. He means at that moment. Actually, before that moment they always tell you at the last possible moment. Typical conversation: Zac: “I pee in potty now.” Me: Now? Zac: “done, yeah!”. Then again, nothing in my life has ever been as important as flushing the toilet is to Isaac (he feels the same about pushing the elevator button). Plus, what is it about pants that so distress him? (aside from the complex task of pulling them down to pee?). He constantly pulls them off and wanders around in his underwear At least he has that in common with Nate, who delights in disrobing the moment he arrives home. Beyond that, Zac has now actually found that most amazing of body parts to a boy: his penis

Sleeping remains a challenge for him. Exactly one million years ago, there was a television show called The Waltons. Every episode of The Waltons would end with an exterior shot of the Waltons home at nighttime. The camera would hold on the house as the family said their round robin of goodnights as the light in the windows went out. Each person in the family would chime in. “Goodnight, Mama; goodnight, Daddy. Goodnight, Jim-Bob; goodnight, John-Boy.” This would go on for about a minute. It was adorable; it was sweet and probably the most unrealistic portrayal of bedtime for parents ever displayed in any art form. Of course bedtime is a misleading term. It should be categorized with the word ‘utopia’ as simply non-existent. ‘Bedtime’ gives the impression that your children will be in bed, going to sleep at a specific time. Any parent of a three-year-old will tell you this is not a plausible reality. Bedtime with young children is a nightly crisis.  Bedtime makes you realize how completely incapable you are of being in charge of another human being. Zac acts like he has never been to sleep before. “Bed? What’s that? No, not doing that.” Zac *never* wants to go to bed. There are two philosophies when it comes to getting young children to sleep. There is “sleep training” which basically involves putting your kids to bed and listening to them scream themselves to sleep (oops, I mean ‘learn to self-sooth’), or there is “attachment parenting” which essentially involves lying down with your kids, cuddling them, and then listening to them talk themselves to sleep. Zac sleeps perpendicular with his parents because he has not managed to figure out how to self-sooth without long blonde hair attached to a live human (yes we have tried giving him expensive hair extensions to hold). Christie has managed to sleep despite the distraction. A foot or head in the gut, face or small of the back usually serially awakens Bruce.

Eating with Zac is an adventure. First off, getting him to sit in a chair at the table is an accomplishment (pretty much stands up continuously). Once he is there, getting him to use utensils for food (he loves to use them as drumsticks or a projectiles) is a feat. Once eating is attempted, a full spoon will inevitably be empty by the time it reaches the mouth. He may start off with a fork, but predictably that fork is on the floor within five seconds of picking it up. Also, why can he not eat over the plate? It actually appears that he is attempting to NEVER eat over the plate. This is why there is no difference between a three-year-old eating a taco and throwing a taco on the floor. The amount of food on the floor under the table where a kid is eating could be the solution to local hunger (or in our case, dog hunger). And if there is ever a fork shortage, they could solve that crisis under that same table. The beverages, however, are normally knocked over on the table, where they can wreak the most havoc. A three-year-old spilling a drink at the dinner table is as reliable as the female lead falling down in a romantic comedy. Fortunately, he is about to turn four. To be fair, Zac does not usually spill his drink. He spills mine instead. Most of the time, you watch the spill happen, and you are powerless to stop it. Time always seems to move in slow motion as you sit paralyzed, watching the tiny hand or elbow clumsily knocking into the side of a cup. It feels like hours until you cry ‘Noooo!’ before the glass actually tips over, soaking everything in sight. With Zac (and Nate) it is easy to understand why pizza is the official food of early childhood. Kids love pizza. Pizza makes kids way happier than the Happy Meal, and it doesn’t even have to come with a toy. Pizza is fun. Pizza is a synonym for party. Pizza is easy. Kids don’t need utensils to eat a pizza. Hell, you don’t even need a plate. The crust is the built-in edible plate. Pizza makes you a hero in the eyes of Zac and Nate. “Mom-mom got pizza!” Pizza is easy to order and easy to clean up, but here’s the rub: pizza is horrible for you. As an adult, even the unhealthiest of us understand that we should eat pizza roughly once a year or we’ll look like someone who, well, looks like they eat pizza all the time (something that Bruce is fighting more and more of the time).

Christie is the official center and logistics genius of the family. Somehow she gets all of us to all the places and activities that are required, needed and desired. Beyond that, she has truly become a gourmet cook. We realized it fully when we all started comparing dishes in restaurants to the meals she cooks at home and noting that most of the time, her meals are better! She still looks 20 years younger than stated age and is a wizard at Pilates. She loves the fact that lifting and holding Zac has really toned her arms and shoulders. This year, she will finally return to driving her beloved truck-based vehicle in the Spring as the Enclave has just been “too small” for her satisfaction (probably the source of Gillian’s desire for a large tall vehicle). The house remains a continuous challenge for her with the occasional ghost pipe rattling, HVAC and plumbing tests as well as the new need to fix the pool deck and the leak in the pool – Ahhh the joys of homeownership!

Bruce is still working hard (probably too hard). Lots of successes with finances, culture change and growth of the practice and hospitals. Perhaps most gratifying is the scheduled opening of the new $800M University Hospital (on budget and ahead of schedule) in November of 2014. He has really loved having Caite around the office as it has helped remind him of why he is doing this work. As he is fond of saying: “Healing is an Art, Medicine is a Science, but Health Care is a Business”. Changes are rampant in medical care including far greater emphasis on transparency; patient safety, outcomes, and quality of care as well as the experience of care (patient satisfaction). The Affordable Care Act (“Obamacare”) adds complexity that will evolve significantly over the next five years (even though Texas is not taking advantage of the Medicaid expansion). He will mention that some absurdity continues: on October 1st, 2014, the federal government has mandated a change to the coding system for reimbursement for care provided called ICD-10 (current manual is ICD-9). The new manual has a 5-fold increase in the number of codes, which adds enormous complexity for absolutely no new value. For the degree of absurdity, just a few of my favorite codes are: Struck by turtle; Hurt at the Opera; Stabbed while crocheting; Walked into a lamppost; Submersion due to falling or jumping from burning water skis; and best of all: space travel-related injuries. There are more than *ten* codes for when a spacecraft plays a role in an injury.

It is clear that businesses and the country cannot afford the current escalating costs of health care, so all of us on the provider side need to figure out how to provide better and more uniform outcomes at a lower price point. Bruce is firmly convinced that over the next 3-5 years we will see businesses change how they view health care benefits from a “defined benefit” to a “defined contribution”, just like we saw this change in how retirement was paid for 10-15 years ago. He notes that we have now been continually in Dallas longer than any other place since he was a kid in Chicago. We have pretty much acknowledged that we no longer love the cold and have become adapted to the easier winter climate (yeah, we have weakened in our middle age).

Finally, a little philosophy. We have a great country, but the current political climate is putting us in jeopardy. America stood up for what was right. We fought for moral reasons; we compromised and passed laws, struck down laws for moral reasons. We waged wars on poverty, not poor people. We sacrificed, we cared about our neighbors, we put our money where our mouths were, and we were humble. We built great big things, made unbelievable technological advances, explored the universe, cured diseases, and we cultivated the world's greatest artists and the world's greatest economy. We reached for the stars, acted like adults. We aspired to intelligence; we didn't belittle it and it did not make us feel inferior. We invested in new discoveries, whether they were in technology, biomedical research or NASA. We didn't identify ourselves by who we voted for in the last election, and we didn't scare so easy. We were able to be all these things and do all these things because we were informed by great people with big ideas who cared more about the people than about their next election. Today, we lead the world in only three categories: number of incarcerated citizens per capita, number of adults who believe angels are real, and defense spending, where we spend more than the next twenty-six countries combined, twenty-five of whom are allies. None of this is the fault of a 20-something-year-old, but, nonetheless, our kids do inherit the partisan, polarized, fractionated, loud-mouth, uncensored twitterverse, terrified of anybody different mess that we are handing you…… my apologies.

Bruce, Christie, Alex, Caite, Bekah, Gillian, Nate and Isaac (Zac)

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Happy New Year to you all! Family is the greatest joy in life - We hope that you and yours are safe, healthy and content.