

December 2011,

Dear Family, Friends and Colleagues,

Hopefully our 15th holiday letter finds you and yours happy and healthy after such a disruptive year. For the Birol's, 2011 was less a series of adventures, and more the trials of Job. We withstood all the world could throw at us and look forward, faithful that with your good thoughts and divine providence, we will enjoy a better 2012.



Last January, Margo returned for her second semester at The Ellis School and caught up after enduring three months in the hospital battling her cystic fibrosis. Her improvement let us hold her 15th birthday party with her new Pittsburgh friends at Sandusky's Kalahari water park. While Joan balanced caring for Margo with her work in PNC Bank's Corporate Marketing department, Andy's transplanted business took root in Pittsburgh. By giving 25 speeches and appearing on NBC's Our Region's Business Show, he generated his best year since the recession by helping his first eight Western Pennsylvania clients grow their businesses. He has started a new initiative on the Marcellus Shale, an alliance with Constant Contact, and has landed ongoing columns with Pittsburgh's TEQ and SNC's Dynamic Business Magazines. He would especially like to thank his service providers -- Hank Walshak, Fred Dugach, Diane Gacom, Pease and Associates and Sue Navratil for their unfailing support of his business. In May, he graduated with his Leadership Pittsburgh class XXVII, presenting a concept called Social911 at graduation and made great friends along the way. Earlier in the program, he was thrilled to survive an adrenalin-charged, midnight-Saturday ride-along patrolling the city's most dangerous neighborhood with Officer Dave Rozak of the Pittsburgh Police Department. (and wrote about it here - ProfitableGrowth.com - "5 Business Lessons Learned on an Inner City Police Ride-Along")



As winter turned into spring, Margo's improved health and her perseverance empowered her to advance to 10th grade and let the Birol's take their next great world adventure.

Late in June, Margo, Joan and Andy threw caution to the wind and booked a 12-day Baltic Scandinavian cruise on Holland America's SS Eurodam for one of the most exciting trips they've taken. Sailing from Dover, England, after an overnight in London to catch up with Andy's high-school friend Cam Virrill, the roaming Birol's sailed to seven, new countries bringing the family total to 66. Starting first with Copenhagen and a beautiful canal cruise passing the Little Mermaid, the Birol's sailed east, to Warnemuende, Germany, where we took the "Molli" steam railway to the Kempinski Grand Hotel, host to the 2007 G8 summit. Heading up the Baltic Sea, our cruise docked in idyllic Tallinn, Estonia and St. Petersburg, Russia. Tallinn is a wonderful city enjoying its newfound independence after centuries of subjugation. Sailing into St. Petersburg brought us back to reality. After Russian bureaucracy bumbled our city excursion we were rewarded with a special nighttime tour to The Hermitage museum featuring some quarter million works of art, proving the Russian Empire's talent for plundering the best of all of the civilizations it conquered.



Returning to our ship we ran into health problems with Margo. But thanks to an angel in the person of an OR nurse who happened to be vacationing on our cruise, we avoided a medical disaster, and Margo, Joan and Andy were able to continue up to the Baltic countries of Finland and Sweden. We particularly enjoyed visiting the icehouse and jet boating in Helsinki. Our excitement was matched only by our elevator trip up the outside of Sweden's glass geosphere. We thank our dear friend Tony Smith of Francis Travel in New Zealand for arranging this incredible trip.



By early summer, and back from the cruise, we thought we would settle into our new home in Pittsburgh and resume our cherished work-hard, travel-big lifestyle. Little could we guess what would hit us next!

A heavy rainstorm overwhelmed Pittsburgh's aging sewer system, flooding the basement of our rented townhouse filled with our possessions from downsizing our Cleveland home. Our landlord's response was to give us 12 hours to remove our belongings before power-cleaning/blowing the sewerage all over them, creating a total loss. That this happened while Margo was back in the hospital for most of the summer actually spared her from the resulting biohazard. We had barely rebounded from this crisis when a second flood repeated the same damage to our basement and wreaked havoc with us.

Concurrently, Andy's parents, Masti (96) and Jackie (81), living independently in Florida, fell ill, and Andy flew down to take care of them. He vividly remembers the moment in Mom's hospital room, when Margo texted pictures of displaced rats roaming around in our kitchen in Pittsburgh. At that, the Birol's were quickly out the door and into hotels for the next month until Margo's Internet and phone skills found them a great new place. As we evacuated, we downsized further and happily donated five rooms of furniture to local Pittsburgh charities. We give special thanks to Mimi Mendes of Aon Insurance. Her perseverance makes her the best insurance agent anyone could wish for! By summer's end we moved into a wonderful, downtown two-bedroom, city apartment in the heart of Pittsburgh's cultural district, and Margo returned in apparent good health to start 10th grade at the Ellis School.

In September, Margo actually started on the JV Soccer team and scored a goal while earning A's and B's along the way! But, the end of September brought us back to our knees. Margo's condition worsened. After she spent most of October through December in the hospital, we made the tough decision to withdraw her from The Ellis School so she could pursue a homebound or cyber-school education. With much pain, we accepted the fact that private schools are not obligated to provide a public school-mandated IEP (Independent Educational Program) that gives disabled students the chance to thrive. And finally topping off this unreal year, over Thanksgiving, Andy had surgery on his detached rotator cuff provoking as usual, an article about the experience ("*Get Your Loving at Home; He's No Hugger!*" on *ProfitableGrowth.com*) and challenging Joan to shuttle between her sick daughter in Children's Hospital and her better-than-expected patient/husband.



So please excuse the absence of Andy's handwritten notes this year. Margo, as seen in her hospital room, continues in good spirits, hosting the Stanley Cup champion Pittsburgh Penguins and winning an iPad 2 as the grand prizewinner at the hospital Christmas party. Our Christmas wish of having Margo home with us for the holidays came true as we wrote this note and shared the day with our friend Becky Morgan. Unfortunately, Masti Birol has been moved to a nursing home and struggles with wife Jackie at his side.

So, dear friends and family, reflecting positively on 2011, we have a streamlined life, live in a beautiful home in a terrific town and are pleased with the health care we need and the opportunities we have to enjoy life. We particularly want to thank the doctors, nurses, social workers and child-life specialists of Children's Hospital of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center for their ongoing care of Margo.

May you enjoy a safe and happy holiday season and a great 2012! Come visit us and take good care.

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