

## Visiting Italy with Dan

After Ruth and I came up with the idea of taking our grandsons on a trip after their high school graduations, we approached Dan (17) to see what he thought about the idea since he would be the first one to be invited. I mentioned to him that we were thinking of taking him to Florida, or Spain or the Panama Canal for his high school graduation present. He seemed very excited and said that would be great.

Ruth got caught up in the spirit of giving and said, "Where would you go if you had your choice of any place?" Without any hesitation, he said, "Italy." He had taken Latin for a number of years and started naming some places he would like to see. We said we would check it out. A short time later, after we had booked the trip and given it to Dan for Christmas (I'm no dummy, I'm getting two gifts out of this trip!), the other three boys asked if they would be doing this "graduation trip thing" too.

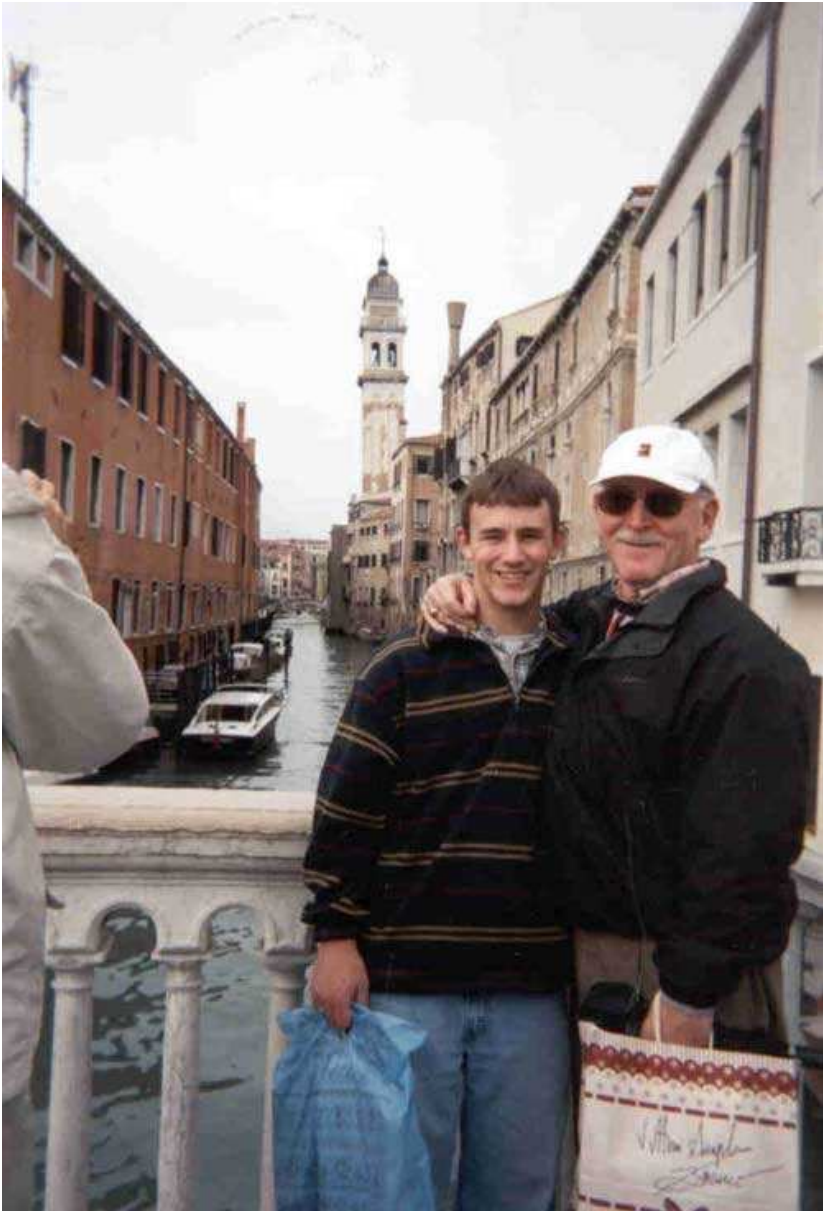
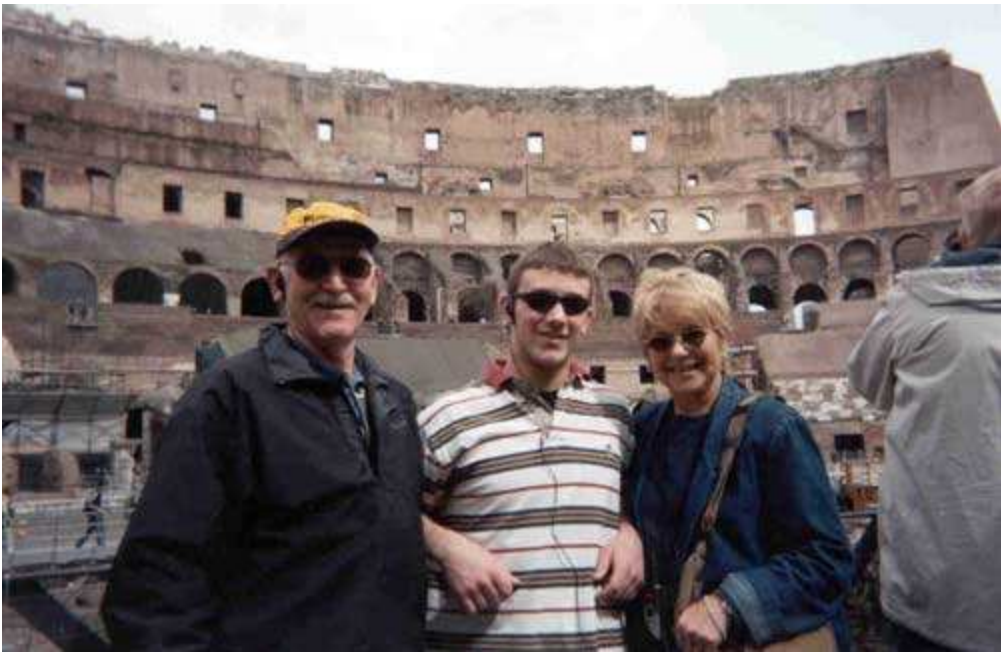
We said that that was our plan and they should be thinking about where they would like to go. We said that our only rule was that we had to agree to the trip and that we didn't want to go back to a place we had already visited. Andrew (15) said he would like to go to Spain, because he will have studied Spanish for five years before he graduates. Connor (10) said that he has lots of time before he graduates, and that he will research it and get back to us later. Austin (8) said that he wanted to go to West Virginia! (Austin probably said that because of the two wonderful mission trips we have

taken there with our three youngest grandsons during the past two summers.)

After some semi-thorough planning (Reading books, watching travel movies and talking to Carlyn and Ben Bassham (who lived in Florence for part of a year) and Tom Blosser (who visits Rome frequently to visit his daughter who lives there), we were almost ready to go. We selected March 24th as the starting date because that was to be Dan's spring vacation.

We purchased money belts, made sure our cash cards worked (Ruth and I are so old fashioned that we never use them... she had to look up her pin number and I had to get a new card since I couldn't find my old one!), made sure our passports were up-to-date, and we were ready for this special trip. (Note: Glenn got sick two days before we departed, but some antibiotics took care of that and he was ready to go the morning of the 24th.)









We got on a Northwest Orient flight in Cleveland, and after a short stop in Detroit, flew directly to Rome. The only bad part about the flight was that Glenn sat beside a husband (nearly 500 pounds) and wife (250 pounds) that made the trip pretty miserable. They did offer him M&Ms from one of the three bags they ate on the trip, but that did not make up for the semi-hourly trips they needed to make to relieve the cramping in their legs...waking him up each time they got up. The weather in Rome was in the 60s when we arrived at 9:30 am Sunday (nine-hour flight). Our tour guide, Richard, was there to greet us and took us in tow. Richard turned out to be a fantastic guide. He was born in Canada, educated in England and Italy and now resides in Paris. He has a semi-monthly radio show for NPR in Dallas about Europe and his voice was melodic and his vocabulary flowery. This wonderful trip was greatly enhanced by Richard's knowledge of Italy and his wonderful organizational skills.

After a short walking tour of a small section of the Ancient City, our group of 41 had dinner at the Pizza Navona. Richard said that this would be a light pizza dinner, but turned out to be a large dinner party with entertainment and all of the wine you could drink. Several people on the trip regretted their exuberance the next day, but Ruth and I didn't cross that boundary. The next morning, we had the only disappointment of our entire trip...the hotel forgot to give 3-4 couples their wakeup calls, and while the others woke up by themselves, we didn't and missed seeing the Sistine Chapel.

They came back for us at 9:00am, and we toured Vatican City, St. Peter's Basilica and Square, and the beautiful

colonnades by the Square. We spent the afternoon at the Coliseum and the Forum. Dan had studied these attractions and along with his grandparents, was very impressed. We learned that the marble on the Coliseum had been removed primarily because the bronze fasteners were needed to construct portions of St. Peters. Most of the marble was wasted. Later in the afternoon, we visited the Catacombs.

In the evening, we walked down the Spanish Steps and had dinner at Bel Cantos while being entertained by four opera singers. Several folks on the tour mentioned what a gentleman our Dan was, and these comments were probably more important to us than all of the wonderful things we had seen during the day.

On Tuesday, we headed for Florence (Firenze). The drive was very beautiful. Italian homes seem to have brick or stucco exteriors and tile roofs. In many cities, the color of the home bears a relationship to the family from whom you come. We saw homes in blue, gold, pink, yellow, white and green. We were constantly cautioned to watch for gypsies. We saw them on a regular basis, but never seemed to have trouble with them.

Richard would point at them, and they would scurry away from us when we all stared at them. In Florence the highlights were seeing David and visiting Santa Croce (1294) to see the tombs of Michelangelo, Galileo, Marconi, Rossini and Machiavelli. After this busy day we headed for the hills outside of Florence to a lovely dinner while being

entertained by a tenor. The night was spent in Montecatini at an elegant hotel.

The next day we could return to Florence for a free day or stay in Montecatini . Dan, and to a degree Ruth and I, were getting ready for a break, and so we spent the day in this beautiful hillside city. We shopped and had a leisurely lunch talking to Dan about his dreams and plans for the future. That evening we had another Tuscany banquet. During the first few days Dan, and we, made lots of new friends. Dan started palling around with a young man from Westwood, CA (OJ's hometown) and Ruth and I had dinner and lunch with a different couple each meal. Our group had people from AZ, CA, CO, FL, IA, LA, MD, NV, PA, SC, VA, TX, Canada, Australia and nine from OH. Everyone was quite compatible.

On to Venice. Before debarking on Venice, our launch stopped at the Island of Burano for us to have lunch and buy lace, masks and dolls. The afternoon was spent in Venice at the glass blowing factory and shopping. In the late afternoon, we took a gondola ride around the city and then rested a bit with a \$10 cup of cappuccino on St. Marks Square! We had a regular meal at our hotel before some sleep.

On Friday, we headed back to Rome. On the way, we stopped for lunch at Siena...a beautiful city with three cathedrals for their 60,000 residents. This is the location of the famous horse race around the square held on the 2nd of July each year. After lunch, we headed back to Rome and our final night in Italy.

We stayed at the Central Park Hotel, overlooking St. Peters, and after another fabulous banquet lasting three hours, during which we entertained by three musicians, we headed to Trevi Fountain to pitch a few "coins in the fountain." Legend has it that if you make a wish and your coin hits the fountain, you will return to Rome. Given that the fountain is about 50 yards long by 30 yards wide and impossible to miss, I guess our entire group will be going back some day.

Our stay was over and on Saturday, we made the nine-hour trip again (going west it is 9 hours 40 minutes).

We learned a lot about Italy, and had a wonderful time with lots of wonderful people. But more importantly, we had a wonderful time with Dan and realized each day how lucky we were to have such a fine young man as our very own grandson. He was always polite to us, acted like a gentleman, and made us so proud of him. All of the other travelers kept telling us how they hoped to take their grandchildren on trips someday... and Ruth and I just kept feeling grateful that we were doing it now.

They grow up so fast. They get so busy. We have to connect with each young person when the opportunity is there. We feel we did that on this trip. Dan told us every day that he loved us, and, how much this trip with us meant to him. This was an important trip for each of us. We didn't preach, he didn't draw away. We listened and he drew closer. Ruth is the master and I'm getting better. We learned that he will be just fine without us, but we know he will always take some of



this trip, and us, with him in his life. Trips like this need to be made...whether they are to Italy, or West Virginia.

April, 2001