

## Of Peace and Laser Tag

February 19, 2003 – Last weekend, Don and I went to Spokane, Washington, to see Jesse, Don's nine-year-old son. We stayed in a hotel at the center of town, reading *The Three Musketeers* at night (not in French, but in a good translation) and having adventures during the day. We imagined ourselves to be Porthos, Athos and Aramis. "One for all, and all for one." Jesse is normally D'Artagnan, but absent Peter (my 19-year-old nephew who stays with us), he was a musketeer. We even had breakfast at a hotel whose painted ceilings and ornate furniture reminded us of the description of the Hotel de Treville in the book!

Spokane seemed to us to be empty. On Saturday morning downtown near the handsome new stores, no one was on the street at all. But all that empty space turned out to be good for something. We had been hearing from Jesse about a complex of old buildings which housed the two things he was most interested in, playing LaserQuest and climbing the Wild Walls. By the time we got there, his enthusiasm for climbing the sixty-foot perpendicular walls on a rope, with a belayer below, had been dampened by an experience of fear he had had there. Don was most anxious to counter this. The next-door LaserQuest games became part of the deal.

Wild Walls was a warehouse full of concrete walls at varying angles to the floor, studded with rocks and ceramic handholds and footholds. We chose the easiest ones to start with. The place provided a harness which you stepped into, climbing shoes, and bags of chalk, should you decide to do something more difficult. You could also go "bouldering" without a rope, climbing something where the ascent was less than 90 degrees from the floor, even parallel to it, falling back on big rubber airbags if you got tired. The place was well-run. Hordes of kids and other people had been up the walls.

Don was the first to clamber up the wall. He attached his harness with a figure-eight knot to a strong rope which went over a bar at the top of the wall, and then to a person on the ground, the belayer, through a grisgrig, which enabled the belayer to take up any slack that they felt. Don's belayer was Corey, a stocky 14-year-old with a mop of curly hair. Don quickly developed a love of being up on the wall and swinging back down! I went next, as Don had persuaded me I must be an example to Jess, climbing quickly, picking my way up on the easy handholds and footholds, my heart pounding near the top. I touched the bar to prove I had been there and then came down quickly.

Jess climbed quickly and then wanted to stop a little above where he had climbed the week before. He didn't want to let go enough to come down, however, clearly afraid to trust the belayer. Corey was patient. We all talked to him, and finally Don went up beside him and talked him down. "You have to get past 'no, I can't do this'," Don told him. It took a while, but Jesse did. They climbed up the wall the next day together also. It was still hard for Jesse to trust, but he went up higher and came down quicker. In the wild he is always scrabbling up rocks and over obstacles, trusting himself completely. Don always says he is both fearless and cautious.

Pretty much because it was fun and partly as a reward, we played laser tag next door. After paying for a 15-minute game, you got a code name and lined up to get your equipment. The marshal for the game, usually an enthusiastic teenager, explained the rules and helped everyone into their gear. The gear included a vest with sensors on it which fitted over your head, and a laser gun in a holster. He or she showed us how to enter our code name into the laser gun for scoring. Everyone had to shout the Code of Honor as the marshal let all the "animals" into the maze. The maze was a multi-level, dark, black-painted warehouse with a few dim lights, black lights and special effects made by smoke machines. The object was to shoot at each other's sensors and get points, being IN the computer game. If you hit someone, their gun was disabled for a few seconds.

Jesse, Don and I were a team, making our way through the maze. Don Rambo-ed ahead, and I tried to cover the rear, Emma Peel-style, and Jesse, with his inimitable sense of our brotherhood,

tried to keep us all together! "Dad, wait!" he would call, or "Connie, come on!" After bumbling through the space a couple of times, we learned to head toward the top and hide out, sniping at the people below. There were hordes of small boys, attacking in droves as they came through, and not a few grown-ups. Loud rock and roll played, which made me want to dance. Don got second place during one game, out of about 15 players and Jesse did well too. After barely understanding what to do the first time and coming in last, my scores did get better!

On our plane trip back to Oakland, we were reminded of the huge peace rallies going on all over the world that weekend. We would have liked to have helped swell the ranks and had been at the January march in San Francisco. This time we were working on the health of our family, broken as it is. The irony of our having fun shooting at human targets, with a little "friendly fire" aimed at each other, only hits me now. But peaceful people with strong ties to life do come from healthy families, and we relish any time we can spend having fun with Jesse.