

“They call it Magic Kingdom for a reason.”

It was a type of anticipation that probably isn't normal for a grown man, but it happened every year. A flow of energy that literally pulled me through the dog days of our Michigan winters. I would write the words **SPRING BREAK** in thick black marker over the selected dates on my desk calendar. Seeing those words every morning provided a launching pad to get me through the day. I knew the trip would lead to thousands of dollars being spent. There is no exact price for “Magic”, so I felt that money was well spent.

For a stretch of about 13 years, I coached back-to-back sports at Marine City high school. A decision was made early in that span that our family would celebrate the end of the coaching cycle with a spring break vacation. Following the lead of some great friends and mentors (Mike and Karyn Alley) we decided to expose our kids to the Disney experience.

Countless times I would hear of coaches getting out of the profession to “spend more time with their family.” Many times, that statement simply means that the wife is unhappy with the coaches work life balance. I was blessed with an incredibly supportive wife matched with very patient children. I wanted these vacations to create powerful memories. I wanted experiences that would last a lifetime.

Disney immediately fascinated me, especially the business side of the parks. I was mesmerized with the flow of crowds through the park. How merchandise was conveniently located after every major ride. The smell of freshly popped popcorn as soon as you entered the park. The kids (Gunnar and Gabbi) fell in love with the whole environment as we settled into a routine that would maximize each day. Early entry into the parks, well thought out movement to gain quick access to popular rides, and critical breaks in the day to recharge at the resort pool.

Kathy and I enjoyed the area and attractions so much that we invested in real estate and built two separate houses in the Disney footprint. We placed the houses into a rental program to offset the costs. We love to vacation with my cousin Mark and his family, this provided the ideal accommodations for our

young families. We were always amazed after spending hundreds of dollars daily at the parks, that the kids seemed to enjoy the pool at the house as much as anything else they experienced at Disney.

Fast forward 20 plus years and it is bittersweet irony of the paths my family has taken. My daughter Gabbi and her husband Manny have just relocated to Clermont Florida. Manny has taken on an engineering job with Disney. They got engaged in front of a fountain near Italy in Epcot, on one of our adult family vacations. Gabbi is an occupational therapist, and her company has allowed her to transfer to a location in Florida. Their son Luca is seven months old and our first grandchild. His smile will melt any ice formation on the planet. His laugh will stop you in your tracks as the sound mimics the pure joy of innocence.

Kathy and I recently returned from a long weekend visit where we helped Gabbi set up in their new house. It's a beautiful location where the screened porch overlooks a pond and a fountain. Every night they can see the fireworks from Magic Kingdom. Gabbi confesses when she learned of this perk, her heart fluttered. When it came time to leave and head back to Michigan, I quickly realized that our family dynamic would be changing. I was flooded with emotions. I knew I would struggle to say things without getting choked up, so I wrote her a card sharing my pride of the path she has taken. I included a small necklace that appears to be the sun, it opens to show an inner piece that says, "you are my sunshine."

After an emotional goodbye, some time has come for me to reflect on everything that has transpired and again the emotion of pride bubbles to the surface. Was it our family vacations that led to Gabbi's love of Disney, and thus her relocation from Michigan to Florida... most likely yes. How can I as a person who followed his love of coaching, have anything but respect for Manny and Gabbi. They followed a love and a passion; they pursued a dream.

A new excitement has been planted and is starting to grow in this grandpa. I am semiretired and Kathy is just a few short years from her retirement. A vision of the possibility of being snowbirds and spending not just one week, but a couple months down in Florida. A colorful picture of Gunnar's family and Gabbi's family enjoying all the Disney parks. I can hear the grandchildren laughing in the pool of a rental vacation house. I can feel the

pride of a family dinner. A well timed “dad joke” and the picture is complete.

There is a cost associated with this dream. They say that if you throw something out into the atmosphere it has a greater chance of materializing so here it goes. The book, “A Run to the River” will become a best seller and be picked up to become a screen play. Sprinkle some “Disney Magic dust” on this and let it grow. Allow this dream to flourish in a kingdom where anything is possible. A Magic Kingdom!

