

A GRANDDAUGHTER'S SPRING-BREAK VISIT

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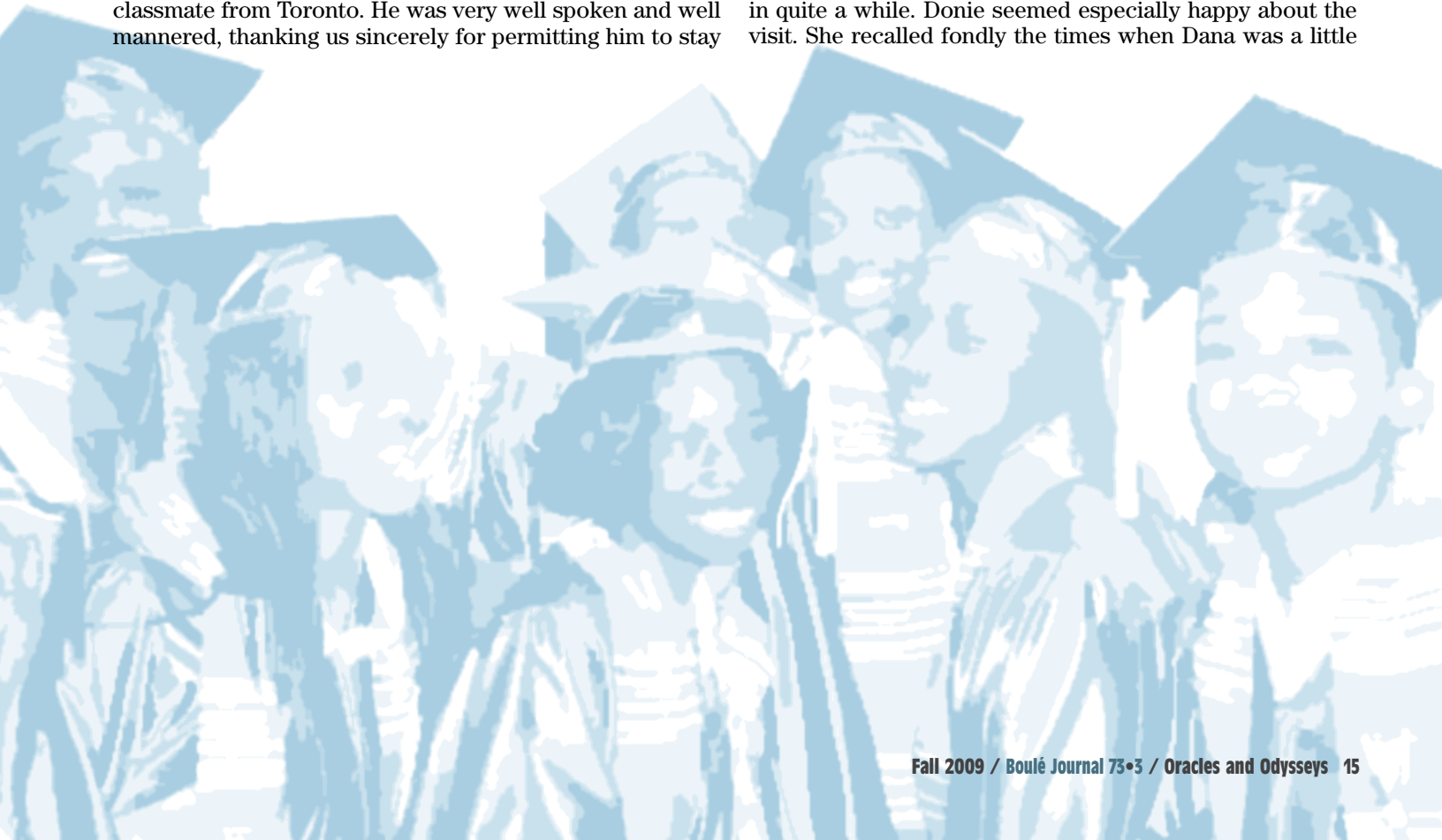
My first granddaughter, Dana, spent her spring-break weekend with my wife, Donie, and me from March 20 to 22. We were flattered and somewhat surprised when she called a few days earlier to say she wanted to spend some time with us. She alerted us that she would be driving down to Washington from her school in New Jersey and bringing a friend with her – a male friend! Dana is a delightful girl, 19 years old last November, in her second year at Princeton University, where her mother, Ivy, also finished college. Ivy and her husband – my youngest son, Fred – have lived in Connecticut since they both finished graduate school at Yale University in the 1970's. Fred received a doctorate in economics and Ivy a juris doctorate. Dana is studying architecture at Princeton and is doing quite well.

I was not at home when Dana and her friend arrived early Friday afternoon. Donie prepared a tuna casserole Friday morning, anticipating that they would be hungry when they got there. She was absolutely right. When I got home at about two o'clock that afternoon, the two young people were at the breakfast bar in our kitchen enjoying a generous helping of that casserole. Dana introduced her friend, a slender young man named Jeremy Russell, as a Princeton classmate from Toronto. He was very well spoken and well mannered, thanking us sincerely for permitting him to stay

in our home for the weekend. I was not surprised to find that Dana's friend was not black, but I was not sure what his racial background was. His facial features suggested to me that he was at least part Asian. He was fair skinned, and his speech pattern gave no clear indication of any particular ethnic or racial category. But he did not strike me as a typical American white person. I paid close attention to how he and Dana behaved toward each other, to see if I could detect whether they were simply just friends, as she had assured me when she called.

Dana announced that they wanted to do a great deal of sightseeing while in the area and asked us about the newest museums downtown. They planned to begin right away, even though it was already approaching three o'clock. We advised that they get ahead of the rush hour and take the Metro rather than trying to drive and find parking downtown. We told them about the renovated Museum of American History at Fourteenth and Constitution Avenue that had recently reopened and the Newseum, which had moved from northern Virginia to the area near Seventh and Pennsylvania. Shortly thereafter they took off to catch the Metro.

After they left, Donie and I had a chance to speak freely about our impressions of Jeremy and about Dana's visit. This was the first time she had visited us without her parents in quite a while. Donie seemed especially happy about the visit. She recalled fondly the times when Dana was a little



girl and how she enjoyed helping Donie in the kitchen. She could carry on the most interesting conversations, Donie said, while they were preparing meals. Fred and Ivy used to come to visit us around Easter time occasionally when their children were young. "Dana really liked helping me color Easter eggs," said Donie, who has done this faithfully every year since we have been married, whether or not there were kids around to enjoy them.

Donie and I both are pleased with how Dana has matured since she went away to college in the fall of 2007. She has lost some but not all of that little-girl look she had four years ago when she won the Miss Connecticut Teen competition. We were in Trumbull, Connecticut, for her high-school graduation in June 2007. She received recognition for her academic performance, so we figured she would do well at Princeton. She told me that she was the first person ever from her high school to be admitted to that university. Of course she was proud of the distinction. Since her early teens Dana has expressed the desire to become an architect and has shown talent for drawing and designing. In fact, she helped me perfect the freehand drawing of the Redeemer church logo that I entered in a contest for a logo design about two years ago. (By the way, my entry was chosen as the winner, and that logo is now being used on all church stationery and other documents.)

My fraternity meets on the third Friday night of each month, and as a former leader of the group, I am expected to attend. The meetings begin around seven in the evening and are held at the Howard University Law School, not far from where we live. I decided not to miss that dinner meeting, so I was not at home when Dana and Jeremy returned from their sightseeing excursion. When I did get home, around nine-thirty, Donie, Dana and Jeremy had finished dinner and were watching television in the family room. I should mention that my son Fred's family presents a challenge when it comes to preparing meals for them. Neither Dana, her brother, Warren Thomas, nor their father eats meat of any kind. They do eat fish, so at our annual Thanksgiving family gatherings we have to go beyond the traditional turkey. I was relieved to find that Jeremy has no such dietary restrictions and seemed to have a very good appetite as well.

Our conversation on Friday evening answered some of the questions I had about Jeremy and the kind of relationship he and Dana had. It turned out, as I suspected, that he was of mixed racial heritage. He grew up in Toronto, and his mother was Filipino and his father a mixture of white and Native American. He and Dana had taken classes together over the last year. I could tell that Dana was comfortable being here with him because she behaved as she always does when she visits us. She likes to be "in charge" when she is around her cousins and tends to set the agenda for the group. With Jeremy she was no different. She decided what time they should begin activities and the places they would visit. When the basketball game I had been watching ended and I decided to retire for the evening, Dana decided that before they, too, retired for the evening, they would watch a DVD she had brought with her. Maybe Jeremy was just being polite, being in Dana's grandparents' home for the first time, but I noticed that he seemed always to follow Dana's lead without any hesitation.

Donie was up bright and early on Saturday morning. When I got up about thirty minutes later, she had made coffee and begun preparing one of Dana's favorite breakfasts – pancakes and eggs with vegetarian link sausages and fresh strawberries. A few minutes later Dana came downstairs in a most cheery mood and greeted us warmly. Jeremy was still sound asleep in the downstairs guest bedroom. Saying she wanted to get an early start seeing the sights they had failed to cover on Friday, Dana marched right into Jeremy's room, woke him up and demanded that he wash up quickly, get dressed and come to breakfast. When Jeremy made his appearance at the breakfast bar a few minutes later, it was apparent that he needed to sleep a little longer. He seemed to recover quickly, however, when he saw the breakfast spread.

They discussed their plans for the day. Sightseeing would end by midafternoon so that they could return home and get some rest before driving over to Baltimore to attend a party being given that evening by the family of Warren Thomas's girlfriend, Sahar. Warren Thomas and Sahar met as students at Vassar College and had been seeing each other since 2003.

The schedule Dana had laid out for their weekend visit did not allow a whole lot of time for Donie and me to be with them, although the time we had together was most pleasant. Dana was unsuccessful in her several attempts to arrange to meet with her first cousins who live in the area – Samantha, Doriane, Ryan and Sydney.

We were delighted that our young guests decided to go to church with us on Sunday morning. Since they wanted to get back to Princeton before dark, they packed and loaded their things and followed us in their car across town to Redeemer Presbyterian Church. The subject of Reverend Powell's sermon that morning was "Will You Be My Friend?" and his theme was that loving and caring for one another is a choice that friends make of their own free will – unlike the relationships that exist because of family ties. It had been many years since some church members had seen granddaughter Dana. They all marveled at how much she had grown, and they seemed happy to see her and to meet her friend.

After a good lunch in the Jefferson P. Rogers Fellowship Hall we said our good-byes, and Dana and Jeremy were off to find their way to the Beltway and Interstate 95 North. Not once did I see them holding hands or otherwise showing signs of affection for each other. Yet they acted naturally in each other's presence. I concluded that they were merely good friends who enjoyed being together on spring break, away from the grind of college for a few days.

As I reflect on Dana's visit, I am reminded of how fortunate I am to have adult grandchildren who still wish to spend time with me. When they are very young, it is not unusual for grandchildren to love being with grandparents. They learn very early that they can get away with things that their parents would never permit. We spoil them with gifts and fun experiences that parents cannot or will not provide. But as grandchildren grow older, other interests take over and the patience required for interacting with elderly grandparents simply may not be there. Of my six grandchildren who have reached the age of maturity, however, all seem to enjoy coming to visit from time to time. Whatever the reason, I hope this always will be the case.