

# Birthdays mark milestones, life lessons on the frozen lake

by Tom Coombe  
Echo editor

Watching kids grow up brings unmatched joy.

In roughly a decade-and-a-half of on-the-job training, much has been learned about being a parent, but with age comes this conclusion: the good far overwhelms any bad, and memorable moments often come with deeper significance.

The boys' birthdays just hammered that home.

January is always a special month in our house, with Jacob and Robert celebrating birthdays within two weeks of each other.

Jacob's is on the 11th and Robert's follows Jan. 24, and the years have generated Hallmark moments or perhaps more appropriately in today's world, events that pop up as Facebook memories.

One early memory is the time two-year-old Robert made chocolate ice cream streaks on my previously clean khaki pants. Another was the time Jacob's young buddies gathered at the Grand Ely Lodge and soaked it up in the pool.

There was a particularly memorable birthday party at the city's rec center building, with cameo appearances by some Ely Legion baseball stars, and more than a few family friends that seemed to coincide with the NFL playoffs, including a painful Vikings' NFC title game loss to the Saints. That was the year Brett Favre nearly took the Purple to the Super Bowl.

Another year, I surprised Hollee, and the boys, by sneaking home early from the national baseball coaches convention in Dallas to make an unexpected appearance at a birthday party at the GEL.

The boys are older now, 17 for Jacob on the 11th and 15 for Robert just last week. It seems almost unimaginable these are the same two tiny little guys that I remember.

With the passing years birthdays have become different, but not less important.

It was a somewhat typical and chaotic Christmas at our house, with plenty of presents for Macy and the boys capped by a surprise gift - a trip south for Hollee and the boys in early-March. Christmas Eve included more than a dozen of us as Hollee, her siblings and their families and her mom gathered per tradition.

As the New Year dawned, talk invariably

turned to the boys' birthday and one night Hollee gave me quite a surprise - that the boys wanted to go ice fishing for their birthdays and wanted me to go along.

For me, it was both heartwarming and a bit terrifying at the same time. The boys have introduced me to new things through the years but the thought of standing in the middle of a lake in the middle of winter sent shivers through my spine, and not just because of the cold.

But parenting means giving, not just of money and resources but of time and yes, things that make you uncomfortable.

The boys wanted to go ice fishing for their birthdays and I wasn't about to say no. A couple of excursions were planned.

The first came on Jacob's birthday and led us, with six-year-old Macy in tow, to Shagawa Lake.

Those who know me know I would be of little help when it came to anything fishing or even set-up related, but the boys made up for it.

I watched, increasingly impressed and proud, as Jacob pulled a seemingly never-ending array of ice fishing gear and equipment from the sled he pulled on to the lake, not far from Lady Bug Lodge.

The sled soon emptied and would be used for a different purpose, with Robert pulling an excited Macy around the lake, while Jake set up the fish house, used the auger to drill holes and within minutes had lines in the water. There were even a couple of lawn chairs for Hollee and I to use.

Not long after, I was holding a rod and photos were taken and sent to disbelieving friends and acquaintances. It took 50 years, but I finally tried out one of the Ely area's favorite winter activities.

That trip proved to be a quick one despite mild conditions. A first-grader's patience only goes so far.

But I was impressed and the boys seemed satisfied.

The second ice fishing expedition coincided with Robert's birthday and was a more serious affair.

Burntside was the destination, Macy stayed at home with grandma and again Hollee and I were merely spectators as an operation unfolded around us.

This time, not far from Burntside Lodge we arrived to find a virtual city of fish

houses on the lake. Hollee's brother Dale was there along with Malloory, while brother-in-law Chad had a setup from heaven, a heated camper complete with a bed. Chad, Heidi, their son Austin and his girlfriend Shaylee all seemed like pro's. This was not their first rodeo.

Hollee and I walked outside and an initial thought was to turn around and go back to the car. The wind was howling and no amount of winter gear would make standing outside worthwhile.

Not to worry, as again within minutes the boys had the fish house set up, and this time they even brought along a propane heater.

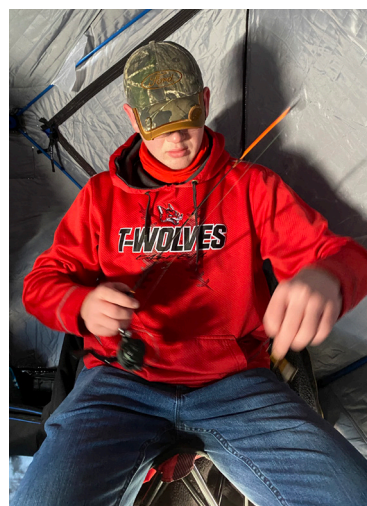
The boys may as well have been fishing guides as again they did everything but catch a fish for me and their mom.

This trip lasted longer than the first on Jacob's birthday and didn't produce much success, at least when it came to pulling up a trout or walleye. That's what we were fishing for, right?

But success on this day wasn't about to be measured by a trophy fish or one to take home for dinner.

Instead it came with watching these two young men, who a moment ago seemed like little boys, in what amounted to a role reversal of sorts.

As parents, we nurture our kids, support them, help them grow and guide them as they move forward with their own lives.



Along the way, I'd like to think I've introduced the boys to a few things, from a love of baseball to every so often a word of wisdom. Robert knows now to "always bargain" with a ticket scalper and Jacob has become a forever fan of the state's townball tournament and ballparks around the state.

We've had trips to the Cities and beyond as well as nights at home with school work. And they've learned to enjoy a nice hotel and a fancy dinner or two.

But on the lake, the teacher became the student and the parent became reliant on the child as the boys were clearly in their element - sharing their joy, interest and excitement with a new audience. Any fear of the ice and a frozen lake evaporated as I knew I was safe and in good hands. With experts so it seemed.

It wasn't supposed to turn out that way, but those boys gave me a present on their birthday. One to cherish and remember.

Thank you, and happy birthday Jake and Robo.

## 'Where's my Echo?': Mail delivery delays continue across the country

by Quinn Klinefelter  
MPR News 101.7 FM

You've got mail. Somewhere. Probably. The U.S. Postal Service is still digging out from under an avalanche of mail sent during the recent holiday season.

But for much of the past year the postal system has been strained by the impact of COVID-19 on its workflow and workforce.

In addition, operational changes ostensibly designed to stop the system from hemorrhaging money helped create a backlog of mail.

And the head of the postal service pledges that more changes in the name of cost savings are coming soon.

Online shopping has skyrocketed during the pandemic as many customers sheltered at home.

Both the postal service and those who depend on timely mail deliveries are still coping with the result.

In cities like St. Louis, postal workers are putting in 12-hour days and pulling extra shifts to make a dent in mountains of letters and parcels.

In Baltimore utility customers are receiving bills in the mail that are already past due.

And outside the main post office in Detroit, Lucy Johnson says lost letters that should have arrived at their destination long ago are putting her house at risk.

"I got a bill back, my mortgage payment, and it said it was late last month," Johnson says. "I know I mailed it 10 days in advance and they still charged me a late charge. Seems like the bills come on time but when you mail them out they don't get there on time. What's going on?"

The U.S. Postal Service has an answer at the very top of its official tracking page.

A disclaimer there notes the system is "experiencing unprecedented volume increases and limited employee availability due to the impacts of COVID-19."

That combination is making it tough on those at the other end of the mailbox.

About 20 miles east of Detroit, near the Shelby Township Post Office, American Postal Workers Union official Jennifer Kowalczyk says letter carriers and mail clerks have never seen anything like the current deluge.

"They just feel like there's no end in sight. Because usually [around] Christmas there's a month or two that it's hectic, it's crazy, you're working 12 hours a day. But this has been going on since the middle of March. So you're going on almost a year. And these people are exhausted," she says.

Union officials estimate as many as 14,500 postal employees are under currently quarantine.

"So any given day we're six to 12 carriers short out of 60 routes. So there is days that it just can't get done," Kowalczyk says.

The U.S. Postal Service is still struggling to deal with mail sent during the recent holiday season.

Groups representing some of the nation's largest bulk mailers say certain major pro-

cessing hubs were so overwhelmed late last year that they were "embargoed," and refused to accept any mail for a time as they attempted to clear the bottleneck of letters and packages.

Delivery trucks reportedly waited hours and sometimes even days before they could drop off mail at facilities in regions like Metro Detroit and Philadelphia, portions of New Jersey and some southern states, areas hit hard and early by COVID-19.

Art Sackler, who heads the Coalition for a 21st Century Postal Service, which represents some of the nation's largest companies that rely on mail delivery, says the slowdowns pose a real threat to small businesses already on the edge financially.

"Small-town newspapers that depend on the postal service to arrive on Saturdays, so that people have the ads that they can use on Saturday when they go for their shopping. They couldn't even drop 'em off [at some post offices]," Sackler says.

The postal service itself has long been losing money, as customers increasingly turned to relying on emails and e-commerce.

When Postmaster General Louis DeJoy took over last summer, he vowed to make the service more efficient and cost-effective.

But in a recent video to postal employees, DeJoy intimated his previous changes, as well as new initiatives to streamline the service, are coming in 2021.

He said, "As we begin the new year I want us to set a new tone. We will soon begin a process to deliver a postal service of the future that will deliver affordable and dependable service to the American public in a self-sustaining business manner."

Back near the Shelby Township Post Office, union local president Roscoe Woods says DeJoy's procedural changes helped delay delivering letters already buried under so many packages, the facility there had to erect a tent to house the overflow.

And Woods says COVID-19 continues to ravage the postal workforce.

He says some older employees took early retirement to avoid close contact with others at postal facilities or along delivery routes, while workers with children were forced to stay home as schools remained closed to in-person learning.

Woods claims efforts to modernize operations in the future can only go so far.

"However automated it may be, however streamlined you can make it, it still requires people to move the mail," Woods says. "It still requires bodies sorting, 'cause not every address can be read by a computer, not every parcel can be sorted by a machine. They can try to cut bodies and service will suffer."

Union officials say the postal service is keeping on about 10,000 temporary workers until the end of the month to help clear the massive backlog of mail.

Unions say the postal service is also finalizing a deal to add almost 10,000 new jobs at processing plants.

But the postal services' total workforce is well over 600,000.

# School board on the move to city hall

## February meeting going to City Hall to accommodate a return to in-person sessions and allow for better technology capability

by Tom Coombe

Ely School Board members may be going off campus in a bid to resume in-person meetings.

The group informally agreed Monday to hold its Feb. 8 session at City Hall, in the council chambers.

"It gives us the opportunity to be in the same room and be more efficient," said board member Tom Omerza.

Since March, the board has held meetings remotely because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but several recent sessions have been hampered by sound and technology-related issues.

Several months ago, the board nixed an Omerza motion to return to full in-person gatherings, but four of six board members attended this week's study session while board members Tony Colarich and Rochelle Sjoberg and several meeting participants were connected via Zoom.

The move to City Hall, which has already been approved by the city council, provides the best of both worlds, according to superintendent Erik Erie.

Additional space would allow board members and meeting participants to be socially distant, while access to better technology in the council chambers will make it easier for those who choose to participate remotely.

"The advantages they have up there are that they are set up with technology and everybody has their own microphone," said Erie. "It's a nice set up, an option for us."

Erie said that the board's conference room at the high school "is not a terribly big room" and that "social distancing and technology become a bit problematic."

The problems were evident throughout the study session, when on several occasions remote participants weren't able to be heard by those in the conference room.

Similar problems have occurred at earlier board meetings, prompting school officials to look for a solution.

City council meetings have been held in-person since May, but the board has resisted that route, in part because of restrictions related to entering school buildings and a push to limit potential exposure to the virus.

The board has also discussed moving to a larger venue on the school campus, but that may not solve the technology issues.

"We could go to a different spot in our building such as the media center and we could set up seven tables, but

again we would be limited to one microphone," said Erie.

Erie instead suggested City Hall and that the district hire someone to aid "with the technology piece" so that those who wish to participate via Zoom may continue to do so.

Board members indicated they wanted to give it a try.

"Technology is great but it's not perfect," said board member Hollee Coombe. "It's a good idea to be in person as much as possible."

Board member Darren Visser added "with everything coming up with the building project and everything, I like the idea of fitting into an environment where we can be more face to face."

Sjoberg agreed and said "I'm definitely supportive" given the difficulties encountered during the study session.

The board meetings at City Hall would presumably be open to the public, given seating capacity in the council chambers. Currently, the public may only participate in school sessions via Zoom.

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