

the Famlet monthly

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Dear Family,

Earlier this month my brother-in-law, Rick Kent, met the president of the United States in the Oval Office and was photographed with him there. The details are on something called the “Facebook,” whatever that is.

I have to admit that’s pretty cool. But chances are Rick has never met Ryan Murphy, a man I hold in somewhat higher regard than President Obama (not that that’s saying much).

I first met Ryan Murphy nearly 24 years ago when he was “Elder Murphy,” and, like me, a missionary in the France Paris Mission. I arrived in the mission in August 1991 after nine weeks of having established myself as the preeminent go-to piano guy for just about any meeting, large or small, at the Missionary Training Center. I had gotten it to where other missionaries would introduce me by saying, “This is Elder Willis; he’s a really good piano player,” and I enjoyed this.

When I got to France, people routinely responded to this introduction by asking me, “Are you as good as Elder Murphy?” Elder Murphy had been out about a year longer than me, but I had not yet met him, and so I answered this question the way you might expect a 19-year-old kid from New Jersey to: “Well, I don’t know Elder Murphy, but probably.”

It wasn’t long before I met Elder Murphy and heard him play, and, as you might expect, he was approximately five million times better than me. Our paths crossed several times in France and once or twice at BYU, where he was earning degrees in piano and organ performance and choral conducting. The most memorable of these meetings came when I ran into him in a practice room on campus in the Harris Fine Arts Center. I asked him how his studies were going, and he shook his head and told me, “I feel like I am the worst piano player at this school.” It was an interesting lesson in perspective for me.

Things seem to have worked out okay for him. He subsequently earned a doctorate in choral conducting from Boston University and is now the associate music director of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. I can only expect the gap between our keyboarding skills has widened considerably.

I mention this story now because our paths crossed again Thursday night at the Music Center at Strathmore in Bethesda, Maryland, shortly before the Tabernacle Choir’s performance there as part of its summer “Atlantic Coast Tour.” We chatted briefly and it got me to thinking about the dichotomy between my enjoyment of running into people from long ago and my utter lack of desire to attend high school reunions. I have never been to one. This year is my 25th and, no, I’m not going.

The concert was both predictably and surprisingly fabulous. Strathmore has great acoustics and was well suited to the choir’s unique sound. The program requested no applause between numbers during the first half, which facilitated interesting segues from one piece to the next and allowed the audience to hear the closing notes bounce around the room—something you typically don’t hear because it gets buried under applause. The settings and arrangements were stirring and further bolstered my long-held view that the three words you most want to see

next to any piece of choral music are “arr. Mack Wilberg.” He’s a genius. He also had the choir doing some cool visual things, reminiscent of his time as director of the BYU Men’s Chorus. It was not really my intent to spend this entire letter talking about the concert, but I’m really glad I went. Crystal was at Young Women camp (more on that later, probably) and so I took my mother. (I’m such a nice boy.) She enjoyed being mistaken for my wife on more than one occasion.

The concert, which ran 110 minutes with intermission, was considerably shorter than the girls’ voice recital earlier in the month. Crystal, Lucy, Sophie, and Grace all take voice lessons from a nice woman who lives in the same Stonegate neighborhood as my parents and three of my brothers and their families. Her annual June recital is a simultaneous bit of loveliness and torture. The singing is mostly good, but there are things about the production that drive me nuts, and, like a lot of things in life, it’s just too darn long for my disposition. The students who were singing completely filled the last three *middle* pews (you know, the long ones) of the Olney chapel, and many of them *sang more than one song*. The recital began at 4:30, and, as an accompanist, I was required to attend an annoying pre-recital meeting at 3:30. Stupidly, I had made an appointment to call a new stake Relief Society counselor at 7:00, thinking that would give me enough time. It wasn’t even close. I left early, right after Crystal’s performance, and was still 15 minutes late for the appointment. I still have no idea what time the thing actually ended. Grace sang “Do You Want to Build a Snowman” from *Frozen*, Sophie sang “Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again” from *The Phantom of the Opera*, and Crystal sang “The Age of Not Believing” from *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*. Lucy sat this one out, which is fine, since the program was long enough. They all sang very nicely, including Sophie, even though she had a cold. Other students sang more technical pieces, which usually sounded good and occasionally didn’t. Certainly no one appeared rushed.

And then the following Friday, I got to do it all over again with Sophie’s and Grace’s *piano* recital. Tons of kids, each of whom played *two pieces*, some quite long, some pretty good, most not, and I have no idea how previous generations of parents survived these things without smartphones.

Somewhere in the middle of all this was Sophie’s middle school orchestra and chorus concert, which I’m pretty sure went less than an hour. Hal-le-freakin-lu-iah. In addition to playing her cello in the orchestra and singing with the “regular” chorus, Sophie sang a solo with the school’s a cappella club. I think she did a nice job, but I’m obviously biased and [you can judge for yourself](#).

I am writing all this on a rainy Saturday afternoon awaiting the return of Crystal, Lucy, and Sophie from our stake’s annual Young Women camp. This year for the first time they ventured out to Pocomoke River State Park on Maryland’s Eastern Shore. It seemed like a nice enough place and everyone looked happy when I visited Wednesday night. Crystal, who has been going to YW camp for years, was asked to run things this year in the absence of the usual camp leaders—one of whom is about to have a baby and another who just did. Meanwhile, Hannah, Grace and I have been eating take-out and holding down the fort. We hope your fort is secure.

Love, Us.





Missionaries singing as part of a city music festival at [Place des Vosges](#), Paris, France, June 1992.

I am holding the green folder. Ryan Murphy is the third guy on my left.



Music Center at Strathmore, Bethesda, Maryland, June 2015.

(Ryan Murphy is wearing a tie. I'm the other guy.)



Sophie solos with her middle school chorus singing "Homeward Bound" (Click the picture for video.)



Lucy wearing a corset over her Hufflepuff shirt.
Long story—something to do with Crystal's sister's steampunk-themed wedding next month and Crystal's spending lots of time (with Lucy) at the home of a costume designer in our ward.



Grace showing off her medal and certificate from NASA.
I forget what for, some sort of experiment relating to clouds and weather, or something.