

Guest Column: Life Its Own Self Confessions of a Meredith Momma

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The Great Chagrin Falls Dung Ball Championships: Part One of Two

The joy of sports seems innate. It requires no more than the urge to run around, the natural impulse to throw and kick, and, possibly, some sort of projectiles to focus the activity. (Boys especially seem to prefer the projectiles.) Creativity adds delight. Rules satisfy the human need for justice and prevent the sublimated warfare from becoming much more. These principles are, I believe, well illustrated in The Great Chagrin Falls Dung Ball Championships of my own childhood. And, as Dave Barry would say, I AM NOT MAKING THIS UP.

Those of us growing up on E55th and Fleet in Cleveland could anticipate a unique opportunity every summer. My father and some of his buddies down at the Serbo-Croatian Hall had bought an old dilapidated 25 acre farm about 30 miles from town, which they together repaired, painted, plumbed, wired and fenced as part of a grand design to be able to ride horses without having the money to afford them. They would take in boarders who did have horses, work out the profit margin and have steeds of their own in exchange for housing and caring for those of the better heeled. Later in life my father was himself able to buy the farm, but that is another story.

The opportunity it gave us came during about 10 days each July, when the 15 acres of alfalfa that would feed and bed the beasts needed to be cut, dried, baled and stashed in the lofts before it could go sour in the fields. Because the cost of buying hay and straw for a winter would have broken the whole deal, very much was at stake and time was of the essence. With but two small tractors, a baling machine and a hay wagon, the job was labor intensive. But free labor was, of course, the whole point of having children, so out we would go, conscripts all, determined to make the best of whatever opportunities presented themselves to us.

The farm itself was located on the border between the then two small villages of Solon and Chagrin Falls. The first was named for its founder, John Solon Bull, and bore witness to the classical education that the settlers of Connecticut's Western Reserve brought with them. The second was the best the surveyors could make of the indigenous name for the smallish river that ran through both villages before joining the mighty Cuyahoga to spawn huge river fires by the Cleveland steel mills. "Sha-kwin," the earliest maps said, so the map makers went with the closest English word they could find, noted that the river did in fact cascade at that point, and dubbed the town Chagrin Falls. Imagine our delight once we actually found out what the word "chagrin" meant. Hence the title of our annual championships.

The playing fields emerged from the group dynamics of horses and cattle. Each of the three stallions had his own small fenced compound, about the size of a basketball court, to keep the highly motivated equines from visiting their unwanted affections upon the poor mares, who had a much larger and safer pasture to themselves next to where the cows grazed. Bitter experience had taught my father that mere wood could not constrain a stallion driven to procreate, or prevent the manic critter from damaging itself, so he had added bovine voltage electrical wires to each rail of the fencing in the three paddocks. Our favorite of the three venues also housed the large pile of manure waiting to be spread on the fields after the hay was in.

Thus the field of play, an inadvertent preview of the setting for today's cage fights. But projectiles?

To this end we would rotate the stallions through the manure pile paddock 24 hours each day, and add to their ample deposits those gleaned from the stalls of the mares and from the considerably richer stuff left by the cows in the two or three shady places where they gathered to graze, ruminate, and defecate – three core activities that seem to define all cows everywhere. A week of systematic effort on our part would leave the chosen paddock rich in cow pies, named for their shape, and horse plops, an onomatopoeic word that well captured the sound of the fresh droppings hitting the ground four feet from their point of origin.

to be continued in our next issue on February 15



image via Janay Holley

Tell me about your cute little man!

"His real name is Dominique Antoine Ellis Jr., but we all call him Buddah, the nickname kind of just happened, and he answers to it so we were like, 'Hey this works.' My favorite thing to do with him is blow bubbles. He goes nuts over them and his whole face lights up and he likes to try and say bubbles so he'll go 'bubbas bubbas.' It's the sweetest thing. Besides that we just hang out like best buds all day, laughing at random stuff he does."

How old were you when you got pregnant? And what year at Meredith were you at that time?

"I was 19 when I got pregnant and a sophomore at MC."

How did having a baby affect your college career?

"It definitely put a stress on my grades because most days I didn't feel like going to class. I was still living on campus up until school let out, so I had to really focus and buckle down to finish strong. I ended up taking a semester off of school due to being put on bed rest for the last three months of my pregnancy."

What year are you now, and when do you plan on graduating?

"I am not class of 2013, but plan on graduating in May of 2013."

What steps did you take in order to ensure you would return to school after having him?

"I had to focus and really speak with my family and get motivation. I knew that I had to go back to school and that I wanted to graduate and prove people wrong."

How do the misconceptions stirred up by TV shows, like Teen Mom, make you feel?

"I can't stand the teen mom shows because those girls are ridiculous, I didn't move out of my parents' house or run and get married or any of that crap, My son's father lives in a different state, so I am technically a single mom and most of the financial woes are on me. My parents don't just keep my son; I have to ask them for a baby sitter when I want to go out. That show is just so ugh!"

Are you ever stereotyped as being a bad mother because of these bad examples in the media?

"I've never been told that I was a bad mother; I actually get commended a lot by women and my family because most people, and the girls, feel like they would never go back to school, and I'm here; I'm doing it for me and my sons benefit."

Does this affect you and your goals as a parent?

"I can admit that I want the whole marriage and family lifestyle and that's how I wanted my son to grow up but things happen and as long as he smiles all day every day and he wants for nothing then I feel like I'm doing a great job; everyone that comes in contact with my son will tell you that he is a happy child and is amazing."

What is your favorite thing about being a parent?

"My favorite thing is waking up and seeing my son every morning, and that smile he gives only me; my son has a smile that lights up a room and most importantly my life."

What is your number one goal in being a parent?

"My number one goal is to set a good example for my son so that he grows up knowing how to treat women, what a good example of a man is and for him to know that he can achieve whatever he wants out of life; I want my son to know that the sky is the limit and if he can make his dreams come true."