



The Dickinsons on the brink of college (clockwise from top left): Sam, 16, Will, 18, Duo and Liz.

BY DUO DICKINSON

It's All About the Bumper Sticker

Confronting college, a parent ponders the real meaning of The Quest

The first week of April brought joy and sorrow to millions of American teenagers. It was college admissions week, when envelopes and Web sites gave a thumbs up (admittance), down (rejection) or a kiss from your sister (wait-listed).

This culminated years of freakish focus and fearful ambition. Little did we baby-boomers know that when we gave birth to these little blobs of flesh almost two decades ago, they would yet again be the focus of our own joy and pain. Birth came only after a nine-month period of angst-filled anticipation, made all the worse by our instant-gratification impatience — itself conditioned by being reared in front of a TV set. Pregnancy forced us to put on hold our whining sense of entitlement with extreme preparatory measures. *What To Expect When You're Expecting* became our bible, and dozens of collateral classes, videos, magazines and baby groups ensued. Little did we know there would be a parallel experience 18 years later.

We did vaulting somersaults to figure out what day care, preschool, kindergarten and, if we could afford it, private schooling our spawn would have. We then proceeded to micromanage every aspect of their education — teacher selection, activities and, of course sports. Not only did we attend the often

excruciatingly boring games and activities, but many practices as well, and focused on making sure our precious bundles of genetic legacy participated at the “highest level.” In creating our little Frankenstein monsters of the nature/nurture toxic soup our progeny invariably became, we set ourselves up for the ultimate practical joke for those who live vicariously through our young — the college application process.

This year saw the largest herd of hominids ever to throw their hats into the ring for college consideration. The “elite” schools had the lowest level of acceptance in history — seven percent — with thousands of flawless candidates (perfect SATs, across-the-board honors course A's) getting rejected.

Those rejection odds breed fear, fear breeds panic, and panic creates zillions of coping mechanisms — tutoring, personal counseling, Internet programs, published guides, seminars, SAT prep courses — all attempting to provide psychological succor and strategic insight to those trying to make a system based on merit comport to a system that responds to desire and desperation.

The computer age has spawned the “common ap,” which allows anyone to apply to just about any college on the

computer. This made everything much easier to edit, file, etc. It also brought costs down to the point that college application costs — in very stark contrast to the cost of attending college — really have not gone up in the last 30 years. Moreover, creating the essays for college applications can be done literally by typing and pressing a button versus by typing, re-typing and typing again to edit and fine-tune various essays for each individual college. Submission simply means pressing the “send” button as opposed to making sure the postage was correct, the envelope was postmarked by the appropriate date, and it was sent to the right address.

When desirable things become easier and cheaper, more of them happen. In the world of college admissions, this means that as the number of applications increased, the number of spots for applicants did not increase sufficiently to meet them. So given the law of supply and demand — the relatively slow increase in supply and the exponential increase in demand due to technological improvements, as well as the huge demographic bulge of baby-boomers having babies, created a perfect storm of extreme need with commensurately less opportunity to meet that need.

As a generation, we boomers have succumbed to the illusion that we can control outcomes by sheer force of will. This faith in focus is utterly delusional when it comes to arenas that are completely market-driven. As any first-year economics student will tell you, increased demand means decreased control of supply. Without control over supply, there is inevitably less choice.

To compensate, we have succumbed to our natural predilection to “game the system” when confronting the daunting numbers of so many competing boomerlets. We so desperately want to ensure the continuation of our world domination by getting our offspring into the “best” school. After all, they did make the “best” travel soccer team, didn’t they?

When you bought all the right toys to hang over your child’s cradle to maximize his simultaneous potential to be a rocket scientist, world-class composer and visual artist (not to mention President of the United States), it was impossible to believe that some institution that you think is “the best” would not have a similar view of your child as the

potential savior of all mankind (or at least a pretty decent political science major).

This gigantic fool’s errand is aided and abetted by the College Application Industrial Complex, in which consultants, books, blogs, articles and “programs” and any number of mutually reinforcing purveyors of unmerited hope and rumor seduce all of our usually more rational left lobes by promising yet another notch on the belt we call our “life résumé”. It’s so much easier to communicate the superiority of our parenting skills by a school’s brand name recognition versus the content of the character of our kids’ souls. College



admissions has become an end unto itself — the most visible proof that we “did it right” and had the brains and cash to get what we wanted. Oh, yeah — and it’s for our kids, after all.

We’ve grown up in a world where whatever costs more is deemed to be better, where whatever brand name is better known accrues infinite satisfaction by its attainment, and where the American dream is less about doing the right thing than about owning the right stuff. That’s why boomer parents so desperately want to “own” our children’s education. But we can never “own” something that will be completely subsumed and translated, absorbed and then reflected by our children — something we set into motion, but that is now beyond our control.

The anecdotes are endless. The double Harvard legacy child who got a C in his sophomore year and ends up being wait-listed to death at the parents’ alma mater. The double-800 SAT student who limited his choices to four institutions only to be rejected by all of them because his local public high school did not have an honors program that enabled him to stand out in contrast to his competitors.

There are, of course, also the other anecdotes — the child who is initially rejected at an Ivy League school but is accepted once a wing is donated, or the elite college administrator with guaranteed admission of his kid into that school whose child subsequently rejects that admission (and free tuition) for a similarly wonderful institution where full freight is imposed.

The stories all accrue to one basic truth: that life simply does not offer any of us complete control over any aspect of our lives, and much less the lives of our children.

As we have aged, we boomers have asserted as much control as we can over our decaying bodies, we have attained considerable autonomy over the way we earn money and live our lives, and many of us have settled into a life partnering with someone we’ve committed the rest of our lives to. Many of the great questions of our lives have been answered. Our last ability to remotely control the vestiges of our DNA destined to outlive our corporeal presence has a sense of desperation and humorlessness that creates anxiety to the point of despair. But it’s over for this year, anyway.

Oh yeah — my kid got into Indiana University’s Jacobs School of Music with a merit scholarship. Yours? ❖