

*"I have always depended on the kindness of strangers."*  
– Tennessee Williams (1911-1983)

Despite what we believed when we were kids, the holidays can be a time of major stress. As adults, we're faced by too many competing demands — work, long lines at the mall, cooking, cleaning, decorating and visits with family and friends.

We need a vacation after our holiday vacation.

But, something happened this month that brought the meaning of the holiday season into sharp focus for me, and I'd like to share it with you.

You may have read in the paper or seen on TV the story about the Hall family – a mom, a dad and their five kids – who piled into their Ford Excursion on December 11 and began driving south from Covington, Ga., for a holiday cruise on *Voyager of the Seas*.

The seven-day cruise was a special trip organized by Bonnie Hall, the family matriarch, who bought 30 tickets for her children, grandchildren and other close relatives to come together in remembrance of Bonnie's husband, who succumbed to cancer a year ago. Bonnie's fond memories of her last trip with her spouse on *Voyager* prompted her to celebrate his life in a setting they both loved.

Many members of the Hall clan had flown from Atlanta to begin their cruise, but Bonnie's son, Mark, decided to make the 680-mile drive to Miami. Shortly after entering Broward County on eastbound I-75, tragedy struck. Investigators aren't sure what caused Mark to lose control of the Explorer, but the vehicle rolled over several times before coming to a shuddering stop on the shoulder of the opposite side of the highway. This branch of the Hall family never made it to their cruise.

Mark's wife, Nancy, and their four boys, ages 7, 9, 12 and 16, suffered minor injuries in the accident, but the Halls' only daughter, Maison, a chatty blond-haired and blue-eyed first-grader, was pronounced dead on the scene. Mark, who suffered massive head trauma, is on life support at Broward General Medical Center. All seven Halls were wearing their seat belts, so this terrible accident could have been much worse.

Earlier this week, Lynn Martenstein, our vice president of corporate communications, and I visited the Halls in the hospital. Despite the raw emotional pain of losing six-year-old Maison and the uncertain fate of Mark, the Halls displayed a strength and generosity of spirit I've rarely seen. Bonnie, Nancy and Nancy's mother, Pat, seemed touched by our presence and went out of their way to welcome us and thank us for the gifts and prayers we brought. The boys also expressed their thanks, and I suggested to seven-year-old Case that he could help steer the ship the next time the family took a cruise. We, as a company, have offered assistance to the Halls in the coming weeks and months, and Bonnie and her sister will be joining my family for Christmas dinner.

The courage and strength displayed by the Hall family that afternoon redefined the way I look at the holiday season. In our day-to-day lives, we sometimes forget how truly blessed we are and how, in just a moment, our lives can change forever.

Take a good look around you. Now's the time to rediscover something wonderful about yourself, your life and the people who fill it and make it special. It's the time to

understand that you have a lot. Despite everything, you are alive and have a life filled with people who love you. That's what really matters, not the gifts or the food or the glitz.

You have my best wishes for a safe and peaceful holiday season. Let's make the most of this opportunity to relax and to share our good fortune with family and friends.

No lunch question this week.

Jack