

OUR MOST SPECIAL CHRISTMAS EVER

On Christmas Day 1994 I made the following list of our most memorable Christmases--and what made them so.

1967. Our first Christmas as a married couple. We have a 50-cent tree, but no money for ornaments. So we make our own: a star, a cat, a duck, and an angel pieced together from a plastic spoon and a tattered dishrag.

1969. We are in Texas, out of college and really "own our own" for the first time.

1970. Our first Christmas in Helena (Ark.) after taking a new job and leaving Texas.

1972. Our most difficult Christmas so far. I bring Mary home on Christmas morning to a house all prepared for a new baby, but there is no baby. We leave our newborn daughter, Jenny, in the hospital, suffering from seizures caused by extensive brain damage.

1973. Our first Christmas to have Jenny with us. We take her to Bearhouse Creek for the Christmas program, traveling in the wee hours of the morning.

1976. We are two again. Jenny has moved to the Conway Human Development Center. But we do try to have Christmas with her to the extent possible. She is still our baby.

1980. Our first Christmas with our new son, Barrett. He is so full of life and joy!

1982. Barrett loves everything about Christmas, especially climbing up into the loft (normally off limits) to help retrieve the tree and decorations.

1994. We don't put up our tree as usual, but Barrett still climbs to the loft. He wants to use it as a shooting range for his BB gun! Plus, he likes to dive off the ladder onto the bed. Jenny attends the Christmas program at church with us. After the holidays, she should be able to start coming home every week.

Were I to rewrite list today, I'd have to insert 1984.

Knowing that we exchanged small surprises in our Christmas stockings, Barrett found a secret time to slip something into each of ours.

Though barely able to write, he meticulously penned three little notes, each with a simple heart drawn in the center. To the left of each heart was the word "I," and to the right was a name. He was saying, "I love Dad" and "I love Mom" in the most intimate way he could.

But the most touching note was for Jenny. He didn't know how to spell her name--and didn't dare ask--so he wrote it as a four-year-old would say it: "Iny." Blind to all her physical afflictions and limitations, he loved Jenny with unashamed devotion.

A few pencil scratches put "I love Iny" onto paper--and into our hearts. It was our most special Christmas ever.