

## JENESSA AT THE FRANKLIN INSTITUTE

July 18, 2003

I thought that what I experienced yesterday was worth writing about.

Four nights ago Malva had told us by phone that Jenessa's three-day summer camp trip was leaving for Baltimore at 6:30 the following morning. She just found out they would be stopping in Philadelphia Thursday on the way back to visit the Franklin Institute Science Museum, but she had no idea what time they would get there, and it was already too late to find out.

José had a dental appointment on Thursday afternoon just eight blocks from the Franklin Institute, but with so little information we didn't see how we could connect with Jenessa. Whenever he goes to the dentist, I leave him at the Medical Towers, then find some place to park while I sit inside the car and read till it's time to go back for him. This Thursday I had my usual quota of newspapers and crossword puzzles along, but after dropping him off, I suddenly got an impulse to drive over to the Franklin Institute. With luck, I might happen to arrive at the same time as Jenessa's bus and maybe catch a glimpse of her. It was a long shot, but why not try? What did I have to lose?

As soon as I got there, I spotted over a dozen buses parked outside. I pulled over to a pretzel vendor, got out of my car, and asked if he happened to know whether a New York group had gone in.

"Yes, ten minutes ago," he nodded. "Four busloads from New York. They just went inside."

"Go on in," he suggested, "I'll watch your car for a minute."

I ran up the double flight of stone steps and into the entrance hall. There the attendant told me that Camp West Hills from New York had arrived ten minutes earlier, but all the kids had dispersed on various tours. The paging system was broken, and she had no way of finding out where anyone was.

I ran back to my car and thanked the pretzel vendor, who by now was talking to a man dressed as a clown (probably the Franklin Institute's official "welcomer").

"Yeah, there were 169 of them from New York just went inside," the clown called out.

As I drove off it suddenly occurred to me that, since I still had half an hour to spare before picking up José, I might try to find a parking spot and go inside the museum to look for her. Again, it was a long shot, but I

decided to take a chance. When a parking spot appeared two blocks away, I grabbed it, dropped money in the meter, and walked back to the museum.

There the first door on the side of the building door stood slightly ajar.

Good, I thought, this will save me time from walking another half block to the main entrance. Slipping inside, I found dozens of kids milling around. "Where in the building am I going to look for Jenessa?", I wondered. The place is huge (several stories high). I had no idea where to even start.

At the main desk I explained my predicament. The third guard I spoke to said he had just seen a big group go up to the atrium. "Why don't we start there", he suggested. Taking me to the elevator, he rode with me to the second floor. Here a couple hundred kids of all ages were milling around. I approached one group at random and amazingly, it turned out that they were from West Hill Camp in New York. Yes, they had just come up from Baltimore, they told me, but they didn't know any Jenessa Abrams.

Then one of them asked, "How old is she?"

"She'll be eleven next month," I answered.

"Oh, that must be the little kids" they replied, pointing up to the balcony overhead.

We called up to a little girl standing there at the railing, and when we mouthed the words "Jenessa Abrams" she nodded and disappeared.

The guard led me up a ramp to the balcony, and when we reached the top, lo and behold, out came Jenessa accompanied by her camp leader! It was nothing short of a miracle.

We had time only for a big hug and a quick hello. Then I had to leave to pick up José. But was it worth all the effort? You bet! The experience was one neither Jenessa nor I will ever forget.