

Wednesday started at 6:00 am and we boarded the bus at 6:45 am. Our mission was to be some of the first people in line to experience the two new rides found in Pandora: The World of Avatar when the park opened. Pandora just opened to the public on May 27th and during the first week, there were reports of three-hour lines just to get into the new land... and that was just to get into Pandora... NOT to ride an attraction! I planned our strategy. We arrived at 7:15. Now I read on one Disney fan website that while the park opened at 8:00, Disney opened Pandora earlier than the published time. Sure enough, Disney opened the turnstiles at 7:30, and cast members slowly brought us (a few thousand people) into Pandora and guided us to the entrances of the rides. Our group wanted *Flight of Passage* (the bigger of the two) first. Ms. Selena was in deep thought about whether to ride or not. She usually relies on my judgment, but I never rode this thing before, but had seen reviews saying it was pretty gentle. She decided to ride it when the cast members seemed unconcerned about an 80-something woman in a wheelchair in the ride queue.

I want to stop the story for a moment to say something important. For about four years since Disney announced that this new land was coming, a lot of folks complained and griped, and questioned Disney's reasoning for investing approximately one billion dollars into this land called Pandora. While I was not opposed to it, I hoped that this area of the park would not be a flop or lacked interest for some groups. Half of our youth group had never seen the movie "Avatar", but all of them were very excited to see this new land and ride the attractions. The new area is a gardener's dream with floating mountains, waterfalls, lush foliage, plenty of bromeliads, orchids, birds of paradise, and some exotic varieties of plants that I have never seen before. Meanwhile, there are other Disney-created plants from James Cameron's imagination, too. At night, everything glows and lights up. Pictures do not do this area justice... you really have to see it. In conclusion, I think Disney made an excellent decision by building Pandora, and it is a perfect fit for Animal Kingdom.

The main event is the simulator ride where you ride a Banshee across the landscape of Pandora. Once again, you just have to experience it to believe how real it gets. Even the "Queen Bee" loved it. As soon as we were freed from the motorcycle-looking simulator seats and I was pushing Selena away in the wheelchair, she said, "Wow! That was just super! I'm so happy that I chose to ride that thing!" Thankfully, we were among the first to ride, because the wait exceeded 300 minutes later in the day. The second ride is a boat journey set at night through the bio-luminescent forest of Pandora. Now I'm sure that many of you who go to Disney understand what I mean when I mention those catchy Disney tunes that will stay with you most of the day once you hear them. (E.g. It's a Small World, Carousel of Progress, and Enchanted Tiki Room). Well, the new boat ride has one of those moments, too. You get to end of this beautiful ride and there is this 10-foot tall Nav'i prayer shaman, doing a chant to the god of Pandora, Eywa. Eywa is a pantheistic god, sort of like we think of "Mother Earth". This figure is really the most sophisticated Audio-Animatronic figure that Disney has created thus far. The shaman moves her hands in a very fluid, charismatic way. As you are about to disembark the boat, you go through a cave with a choir singing this chilling a capella chant to Eywa. It's quite compelling and enchanting. I emerged from the ride singing the chant, and **Mathew, Justin, and Chad** joined in. It was on... we would go back to the condo that night to research the chant to Eywa. However, it was funny for the rest of the trip, since one of us would spontaneously start singing the chant to Eywa and the rest would join in... much to the amusement of the whole group. After doing the rides of Pandora, we went to DinoLand and it started to rain. The roller coasters were wet, and **Anna Aime** slipped while trying to get into Primeval Whirl (a wild mouse coaster). The ride was shut down for two minutes while Anna got up. Meanwhile, the rain came down heavier and some of the group had to wait in the rain for the ride to start again. The rain kept the crowds sparse enough that our group could ride Expedition Everest and the Kali River Rapids a few times in a row.

Later in the evening, we went back to Pandora to do the boat ride again. Since we had to wait an hour, the girls (namely **Cle', Caroline, Anne Marie, Mary, Lexi, Blair, Brianna, and Denaë**) decided to play a game on their phones naming song titles. They amused us all, as well as other people in line. Our day ended with a meal at the new Pandora canteen, and hiking quickly across the park to see the new nighttime show, "Rivers of Light". We had mixed reviews of the show, because it lacked a central story line and seemed to be very abstract. We got back to the condos at 10:30 pm. In the men's quarters we went to bed singing Pandoran prayer chants that were stuck in our heads.

Thursday was the mid-point of our trip and served as laid back day. We slept until 8:00 am and boarded the bus at 9:15 for Blizzard Beach. Everyone enjoyed the slides and lazy river, and **Faith Farris** even sculpted a turtle in the sand. While our plans called for a trip to Typhoon Lagoon after lunch, we didn't go, due to technical problems that kept Typhoon Lagoon closed all day long, not to mention bad weather that moved in around noon. After eating lunch at Blizzard Beach (in the rain), we went back to the condos to clean up and take naps. We left at 5:00 pm to eat and shop at Disney Springs. It seemed that the evening passed quickly but everyone had some time to look around and shop before a

nice meal at Paradiso 37 and dessert sundaes at Ghirardelli chocolate, where we met up with **Penny, Morgan, and Jordan LeBlanc** (St. Stephen parishioners) who happened to be on vacation. Alas, it was roughly 10:30 after consuming our ice cream and it was time to head back to our condos. But first, the girls enjoyed dancing to the music provided by the DJ on stage. Even "laid-back day" was pretty exhausting. But it was a good day.

On Friday, we finally made it to Disney Hollywood Studios, where half of the park is under construction right now... they are building Toy Story Land for 2018 and Star Wars Land for 2019. We were easily able to fit in all the attractions at this park, including the stage shows. **Mathew Dunn** and **Justin Cornett** were delighted to see Fantasmic, the nighttime show, and thankfully, there was no rain all day long. The highlights of our day included sitting up close to the stage for **Beauty and the Beast**, riding Rock'N Roller Coaster twice, and seeing the new Pixar Music and Film show with a full orchestra on stage. **Anna Aime** was happy when we left Hollywood Studios because we stopped at the discount Disney Mart on US 192 and had some late night shopping time. She went crazy in that store! Meanwhile, Mathew and Justin, still fresh from their high of seeing Fantasmic, decided to buy these tall, royal blue sorcerer hats, which guided us on Saturday at the Magic Kingdom.

On Saturday, the group was in rare form, because the mission was to tackle the three big mountains of the Magic Kingdom and do all the attractions we missed from the first day of the trip. Around 1:30, while riding the Jungle Cruise, the sky opened and it started to pour down rain. **That didn't stop us!** Off we went to Big Thunder Mountain and we rode it twice in the pouring down rain—hey, no line! Why not? We had ponchos! We finished our plans around 4:00 pm and caught the Festival of Fantasy parade once in Liberty Square and yet again near the beginning of Main Street where the parade ended. That was cool to see it twice in a row... a feat that I did once before with my mother, who loves the Disney parades.

We caught a bus to Disney Springs to break off into smaller groups for dinner and last minute shopping. Mathew, Justin, and I decided to do a food pilgrimage which originally involved three courses and three restaurants, but we were full after eating egg rolls at Morimoto Asia, and trying all kinds of good dishes at Chef Art Smith's Homecoming Restaurant. There was no room for Sprinkles cupcakes. Others from our group decided to eat at Wolfgang Puck Express, Wetzel's Pretzels, or simply to get some form of coffee from Starbucks. I located **Ms. Selena, Sandra Matherne, Faith Farris and Tyler Schillings** near the pretzel shop with the wheelchair full of Disney bags. The "Queen Bee" had been busy shopping. It was quite funny to put her in the chair and load her up with the bags on top. We received some interesting looks from people as we made the long walk to the bus stop at 8 pm. Everyone returned to the condos for showers and packing up.

On Sunday morning, we woke up between 5:00 and 6:00 am (depending on who you were and what condo you were in). We had the bus packed for 6:45 am and off we went to the Basilica of Mary, Queen of the Universe for early morning Mass. The basilica was built in the late 1990's and is quite beautiful. I would highly recommend it to any visitor to Orlando if you are looking for a place to attend Mass. We enjoyed complimentary doughnuts after Mass, and went shopping in the 7,000 square foot gift shop. We even managed to get a picture with Pope Francis! The ride home was pleasant due to Mathew "hamming it up" with the teens in the back of the bus, and the pastor's decision that we would have one more grand meal before getting home. So we stopped in Biloxi for a great buffet dinner which everyone really enjoyed.

While I thanked our chaperones earlier in this article, Ms. Selena and I want to thank **all of the adult team** who patiently worked fundraisers, helped with the milk pie sale, and did lots of behind-the-scenes work to make our youth group trip(s) possible. Every two years, we seek to make Disney a more affordable possibility for our teens. Since we now have our own bus, that saved us \$7,300 alone. We can now bring our youth on another trip during the years that we don't go to Disney. So in 2018, the youth group will be traveling to Eureka Springs, Arkansas to see the Passion Play and go to Silver Dollar City, among other attractions. Thanks to all parishioners who support our youth and their fundraising efforts.

On another subject, please note that my mother experienced a total, right shoulder replacement on Monday, June 12th. I may be in and out of our parishes over the next few weeks during her recovery, since she can't drive for six weeks. I will also begin the July 4th fundraiser. I am happy to announce that while our prices were already low, compared to the competition, we are expanding our product line from 150 items to 175 items and will have even LOWER prices this season. So fans of the BOOM will be very happy!! You will be seeing a price sheet soon in the bulletin. Wishing you a grace-filled week, Fr. Jason