

2008: The year that was for Riemke and Maarten

A break-away year

This year marked Maarten's retirement from Shell after almost 33 years of service. A couple of years ago he was offered the choice to stay in his current retirement scheme or subscribe to a new schedule, which offers flexible retirement between the ages of 55 and 65 (with the tacit assumption of retirement at 65). Since he would have to work for another year in order to receive the same pension, that proposition was a "no-brainer".

We had a very nice retirement party, to which many former colleagues of Maarten came, some going back to Maarten's first job in The Hague in 1981 and to his position in Rotterdam in 1984. Naturally, we had to miss most of his colleagues and friends from Maarten's postings to Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Iran.

Following some reflection, Maarten established an environmental management consultancy (Frogs International – Environmental Management and Consultancy) in September. This was motivated in part by the fact that it turned out to be difficult to find a competent successor for him. Apparently, Maarten's experience of twenty years as an environmental management advisor for the exploration and production of oil and gas is hard to come by.

Maarten built a website for Frogs International (www.frogsinternational.com) and for ourselves (www.smies.org). He taught himself HTML to do this.

Family matters

Our daughter-in-law Carolyn, son Jurjen and grandson Hendrik came to visit us from Auburn, Washington State, USA the first two weeks of September.

Since their previous visit in 2006, Hendrik has developed from an adorable 6-months old baby into a cute two-and-a-half-year old toddler. We could hear him climbing the stairs as he would be counting aloud the number of steps he was taking.

During his stay, Hendrik was running on chocolate milk. We had bought this prior to his arrival on the assumption that he would like it. And so it turned out to be. Hendrik would swallow down a cup of chocolate milk and then would brace his fists (the signing language for "more") and ask for "more". Hendrik had picked up some signing language as part of speech classes his parents took him to, when they felt that he was perhaps a little slow in starting to speak.

While Hendrik is perhaps a little slow in speaking, he was making fast progress while he was here. And now back in the USA that development is continuing. Hendrik has a toy laptop computer, which features a large number of language and numbers exercises. Here in the Netherlands his parents also bought the Dutch version for him. Hendrik has meanwhile figured out how to work the Dutch computer and now, when he is handing magnetic letters from the fridge to Carolyn, he may call the letters in English or in Dutch with about equal probability.

There are plenty of pictures of Hendrik available on the web, see for instance a series of pictures that his parents made during their visit to the Netherlands: <http://flickr.com/photos/minsq/sets/72157607177981538/>. This includes a couple of photos made at the Smiesen reunion, which we organised on the occasion of Maarten's father's 90th birthday. All Maarten's brothers and their wives and offspring with their respective partners came to celebrate this special occasion.

Health news

Maarten continues to do well health-wise. He has now been free of malignant stemcells in his bone marrow for three years at the molecular level by the most sensitive analytical method, which measures the expression of the BCR-ABL cancer gene, which characterises chronic myeloid leukaemia. The sensitivity of this analysis is in the order of one in hundreds of thousands of cells. We and Maarten's haematologist are very happy with this.

This summer Maarten's haematologist asked if Maarten would be interested to take part in a follow-up study to the clinical trial that he took part in for a combination treatment with Glivec, the drug that Maarten continues to take, and cytarabine, a cytostatic drug that Maarten was treated with in 2004 and 2005 at Leiden University Medical Centre. The trial would randomise patients in molecular remission in two groups, of which one would stop taking Glivec. The idea was to find out if the treatment with Glivec had eliminated the last malignant stemcell.

We did not think that this would be a very good idea. Why change a winning horse ? Patient information provided by the American Leukemia and Lymphoma Society suggested that stopping taking Glivec would be an option after five years or more in molecular remission. And Glivec has just been on the market in the European Union for that time.

It turned out that Maarten is the only one of some ten patients, who took part in the clinical trial at Leiden University Medical Centre, who still is in molecular remission. This suggests that the number of patients that could be possibly included in the follow-up study would be pretty small in any case.

Our genuine Hanedoes

Our Hanedoes painting has now been restored and takes pride of place in our living room. We are really pleased how it has come out and are grateful to our neighbours, who helped us in purchasing the painting and in having it restored and reframed.

We still need to register the painting with the Dutch National Bureau for Art History and Documentation. This will help retracing the painting if it ever were to be stolen, knock-wood that it would not be ... But it also would help making the painting available on loan for possible Hanedoes exhibitions.

Finishing the job

In the first four months of this year Maarten went through a frenzy of tasks.

In January he ran his Impact Assessment course in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) and Seria (Brunei).

A number of times he also delivered the Introduction to the Environment and Introduction to Impact Assessment sessions at Shell's Health, Safety, Security and Environment Tools and Techniques Course.

In April he organised the annual face-to-face meeting of the Shell exploration and production environmental, social performance and sustainable development teams in Breda. This included an interesting excursion to the Delta coastal protection works in the south-western Netherlands, which brought Maarten back to his work experience at the Delta Institute for Hydrobiological Research (now the Centre for Estuarine and Marine Ecology) of the Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences in the late 1970s.

This was followed by a quick trip to Nice in southern France to attend the Society of Petroleum Engineering's bi-annual Health, Safety and Environment Conference, where Maarten contributed to a panel on sound and marine life.

Riemke joined him on Air France KLM frequent flyer points to be able to join in in Maarten's 60th birthday celebrations with a number of his Shell colleagues. She took the opportunity to visit several of Nice's museums and the ancient city centre. The savings on travel costs were quickly converted to purchases in the local shops.

Riemke's activities

Riemke has been pretty busy this year for the Dutch Society of University Women, where she is president of the The Hague chapter. She is a board member of the Leiden Alumni Society of Political Science and several volunteer organisations also took up time. Nearly every week she travelled north to visit her aunt and uncle in Leeuwarden and her parents in Heerenveen. Since his retirement Maarten has joined her on these trips. Finally, we try to visit Maarten's father in Amsterdam once a week.

Meanwhile, we are trying to adjust our new retired status in life, which turns out to be a bit more difficult than we thought ... But we shall sort this out as we are going along.

We wish you a Happy New Year.

The Hague, December 2008

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