

Room for One More

A Family Memoir
by Ken & Mary Hood

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Introduction

The stories that follow are transcriptions of audio recordings. Therefore, they may not read as smoothly as if they were written rather than spoken.

You can listen to each story as you read by scanning the QR code at the top of the story. The code links to the original audio recording in archive.org

So, remember as you read, that these stories were recorded not "written."

There is natural rambling as the storyteller recalls things. Imagine you are sitting on a porch listening to them tell you their stories over a cup of coffee.

While we have smoothed out hinderances to reading and corrected grammar and self-interruptions wherever they distract from the story, we have taken great care to not change details or facts. We have also kept the speaker's tone and unique wording as much as possible. Our goal in transcription is authenticity.

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Ken's Family Tree



Kenneth Turner "Ted" Hood
b. 16 Aug 1915
d. 20 Feb 1978



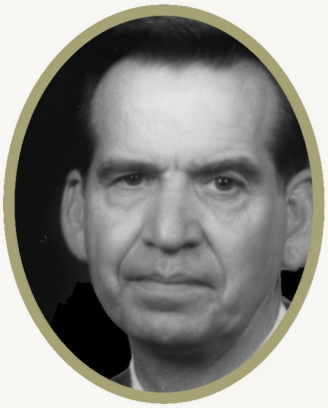
Alice Mildred "Midge" Golden
b. 25 Sep1913
d. 07 Feb 2007



John R. "Jack" Levitt
b. 02 May 1900
d. 22 Jun 1944



Josephine Berniece Berndt
b. 01 Feb 1905
d. 24 Mar 1986



Garald Kent Hood
b. 18 Mar 1937
d.7 Dec 2022



Marjorie Mae Levitt
b. 25 Feb 1940
d. 20 Mar 2023



Kenneth Clayton Hood
b. 8 Apr1958

Three Generations

Mary's Family Tree



Mary Patricia Larson
b.05 Jul 1958



Leonard Leroy Larson
b. 03 Sep 1931
d. 20 Nov 2010



Patricia Helen Halling
b. 08 Aug 1929
d. 18 May 2024



Karl Gunnar Larson
b. 18 Jun 1898
d. 12 Nov 1944



Alethea Kingswood
b. 18 Feb 1907
d. 07 Jan 1992



Henry Waldemar "Henny" Halling
b. 21 Sep 1907
d. 04 Jan 1993



Helen Francis Hemmerling
b. 06 Jul 1912
d. 21 Apr 1989

Three Generations

OUR FAMILY

Children of Ken & Mary Hood



Jennifer Lin Hood

b. 26 Nov 1980 in SC



Jessica Marie Hood

b. 07 Aug 1982 in SC



Emily Jo Hood

b. 30 May 1984 in SC



Kasey Marie Hood

(b. Kenneth Clayton Jr)
b. 06 Oct 1987 in MN



Melissa Joy Hood

b. 15 Oct 1989 in MN



Amanda Ruth Hood

b. 05 Apr 1992 in MN



Catherine Grace Hood

b. 17 Jun 1994 in MN



Jeremy Matthew Catalano

b. 28 Jun 1994 in MN



Laurie Marie Plunkett

b. 09 Jun 1982 in MN

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Part I
Two Roads Became One



Toby & Ollie

Told by Mary



We had lots of wild pets when I was a little kid. My parents said we had allergies. Who knows? But the first thing I remember is having garter snakes—a whole big tub of them.

After the garter snakes, I wanted a dog. But for my birthday when I turned five, I got a little green turtle from the pet store. We named him Greenie, and he had a glass bowl. He went round and round, and then he died, and I got a new Greenie. His proper name was Greenie Two, but I probably just called him Greenie for short. I don't remember what happened to Greenie Two.

At some point around the age of five, my dad came home with this tortoise. I don't think they're native to Illinois. I don't know. I didn't know anyone else who had a tortoise, and we'd never seen one, but it was cool.

We said, "Dad, where'd you get that?"

He said, "Well, I bought it off some kid who was walking down the

road, and I gave him five bucks for it. I thought you guys would like a tortoise."

We were like, "Oh, that's cool."

We took it to the pet store in town, and they said they thought it was a boy. We named him Toby.

When we had show and tell at school—I remember kindergarten show and tell, so I had to be five—I brought Toby in a box. Toby was fine in boxes, and all the kids got to see him and pet him.

Then I remember my brother was playing with some kind of Play-Doh or something, and he had a little knife. He was cutting the Play-Doh, and he decided to see if Toby could bleed or not, I guess. I don't know. I wasn't in the room.

Next thing you know, he's cutting poor Toby, and Toby did bleed a little tortoise blood. My brother got caught, and he was in trouble, and Toby survived. He was a little kid. He just didn't know any better.

But Toby had a boring life. Toby lived in our basement in the winter and would hibernate in a cardboard box. Once in a while we'd bring down some lettuce, but if Toby was hibernating, he didn't always eat.

In the summer, Toby had more fun because he went out in the back-yard. My dad had a tractor tire back there, and it would have rainwater in the side of the tire and grass or weeds in the middle. Toby would go round and round and round in there. That was kind of boring.

But when we wanted to play with Toby, we'd take him out in the front yard, and he would eat the little purple flowers. They were called phlox, and before they opened, they looked like an ice cream cone.

We'd give those to Toby, and he would open his mouth, and you'd see his little pink tongue come out, and he'd bite those. He seemed happy.

Our yard had clovers, the little white clovers growing in the yard. We'd bring those for Toby, and he would eat those up, or he'd walk around until he found more. He liked to eat plantain, that little green flat thing that people sometimes cook with. He didn't really eat the grass.

One time, Toby disappeared out of our front yard because we forgot he was out there or something. We found out that he went across the street to the neighbor's yard. That was a little scary, like, "Oops, what happened to Toby?" Somehow we figured out he was across the street.

I remember bringing Toby to school for show and tell in kindergarten, and I remember bringing him to science class in seventh grade. I think there were two science classes, but for some reason, not just my science class but the other science class got to see Toby.

There was a girl there who had been born in Peru, and she got all excited because she said, "Oh, this is something we have in Peru." I didn't know that, but she thought that was really neat.

Then we got older, and we didn't pay much attention to Toby. One year my mom went down in the basement to do the laundry, and there were two or three eggs in Toby's box.

We were like, "What? Where did these eggs come from?"

So we figured out that Toby was a girl, and Toby was mature enough to lay some eggs. They were not fertile, and they did not hatch, but we learned something about Toby that year.

When my sister was in high school, she took art classes, and they had this red clay. They could sculpt what they wanted with it. She sculpted

an identical image of Toby the tortoise. If it wasn't for the color and the shiny glaze, you would have thought for sure that was Toby. It was so accurate.

Eventually, I grew up and moved away, and my mom got tired of taking care of Toby. She decided she was going to take Toby on a road trip on a bus to California.

She put Toby in a box with her luggage and went all the way to California to visit her sister Mary. At the time, Mary lived in Torrance, and they had a fenced-in backyard. Either they had a tortoise or their next-door neighbors had a tortoise, but it was a much bigger tortoise. That tortoise's name was Mooneyham or something like that—Monahan, Mooneyham. It was a funny name.

So Toby got to live in a new home in California.

That was the end of the Toby story. I don't know if Toby's still alive in California. I don't know what happened to Toby, but maybe some of my cousins do.



I still always wanted a dog, and I never got the dog. Eventually, I kind of lost interest because I was a teenager and didn't ask for a dog anymore.

But when I was fifteen, my dad came home with this giant Old English sheepdog. He was very large, larger than normal sheepdogs, and he was kind of crazy. He was two years old, and none of us were happy about Ollie.

His real name was Oliver Bentley. Maybe Oliver Bentley Jr., but for sure Oliver Bentley. We called him Ollie, and he would bark at us like

crazy and jump on us. He was very big, and he kind of scared me when he did that.

So here's this big dog, and my dad said we had to walk him. When we didn't walk the dog, he'd lie out in the mud right in front of our house. It was kind of a garden area, but if the plants weren't growing, it got muddy.

Ollie was a character. If we wanted to go outside, we'd hold up the leash or say, "Walk, Ollie," or "Leash," and he'd just start jumping on us. It was kind of crazy. It took me a while, but I finally learned how to settle him down so I could actually get the leash on him.

I'd take him on walks because I liked the attention. People would always wave or yell, "Hey, look at that cool dog!" It was a thing for attention.

He liked to go out in the snow, and he loved to ride in my dad's big Chevy van. He'd sit on the front seat, and my dad would clip his hair up in a ponytail so he could see. Otherwise, his eyes were covered by his long hair. He loved to ride in that van.

Ollie knew the sound of my dad's van. He knew it. When the van was two blocks away, he'd just start barking and going crazy.

My brother Paul had this thing where he liked to pick up Ollie and hold him, and the dog covered his whole face. You couldn't even see my brother.

The dog would sit in the living room with his rear on the couch and all four paws on the floor. He was so big. George and Paul would get him to jump up on the bunk beds in their room.

"Come on, Ollie, come on, Ollie."

I don't know how he did it, but somehow they got him to jump on the top bunk bed. I don't really know how. He was a crazy dog.

If they were outside cleaning the snow off the car, they'd get him to jump on the back of the car. He could jump pretty good because he had long legs.

My dad would buy him these leg bones from a cow, and the dog would go insane if he had the leg bone anywhere in the house. When we wanted to tease the dog, we'd say, "Bone, Ollie, bone," and he'd get mad at us because he thought we were going to touch his bone. If we touched his bone, we were in trouble, because he would actually bite somebody who touched it.

He'd get these snarls in his hair, and my dad would clip him every summer. Later on, when I was gone, my brother tried combing out the snarls, and he got bit really bad by Ollie because it hurt Ollie.

My dad used to get him clipped and take him out and give him a bath in the driveway in a kiddie pool. Then he would have no hair.

Another thing about that dog was, if he got wet, he'd come in the house and shake.

We'd be like, "No, Ollie, don't shake."

He'd be real still, and then all of a sudden he'd just shake, and that water would go everywhere.

He was a messy dog because stuff would stick to his backside. He ate this nasty, runny food, and that was really gross. That was the gross part of the story. I won't go into detail, but it didn't really help us have a clean house when the dog was dirty.

Eventually, he got tumors or cancer or something. I think my dad tried operating on him. I don't remember. My dad would do anything like that.

But the dog just got sick and died, and my dad was really sad. He took him out in the forest preserve and buried him in the woods somewhere.

That was the last I remember about Ollie.



Growing Up on Scott Street

Told by Mary



I'm from the Chicago area. I was born in a hospital in Chicago on July 5, 1958, and my family lived in Des Plaines, Illinois. My dad was a home builder, and he was in the process of building a house in Des Plaines. When I came home from the hospital, I came to our new house at 2303 Scott Street. That's the only place I lived growing up.

There was my mom, Pat, my dad, Leonard, and my older sister, Julie, who was four and a half years older than me. Then I had two younger brothers. Paul was only fourteen months younger than me, so he would have been in all my early memories. George was about seventeen months younger than Paul. We were real close in age, but my sister had been like an only child for a while.

We lived in a nice middle-class neighborhood with lots of other children. It was during the baby boom years. I remember playing with Timmy Czarkowski, who lived just kitty-corner from us across the street. He was in between my age and my brother's age.

The three of us would play house in his backyard. He had a little shed or playhouse attached to his house, and I was mama, he was daddy, and

Paul would be the baby. His mom was from England. Her name was Marcia, and she was friends with my mom. I loved listening to her English accent. His dad was Polish, and Timmy had an older brother and sister, Chris and Janina.

He was like my first boyfriend. My dad put a swing set in our backyard, and we would play on that swing set for hours.

When I was five, I went off to kindergarten at Maple School, a public school. I had to walk there. It was about three and a half blocks. I was friends with a girl across the street on the other side, but I can't think of her name right now. I think we would walk to school together. There were also Marcy and Annie, though we were not always close or friends.

I remember being friends with Tina, too. Her grandma, Annie Zabados, and my grandma were really good friends. I would go over there and play with Tina, but she didn't actually live there. She was visiting her grandma.

After I went off to kindergarten, my brother Paul and my boyfriend Timmy became best friends. They just wanted to do little boy stuff together, and I was no longer in the in crowd with them. They were in the same grade and started kindergarten a year later. But I did play with my brothers a lot.

Our yard was a little rough because it was new construction, and my dad worked full time, so he didn't always fix up our house. The front lawn, which we called the parkway, had a lot of weeds in it. We didn't have a proper garage. We had this pressed-board stuff—I don't know what you call it now. It was ugly.

But we did have a nice patio off our kitchen door. Our backyard was small because we were on a corner lot. That's where the swing set was. I

remember scaffolding being up there, and we used to play and climb on that. I had a little pool out on the patio, and I loved the pool.

I have some really early memories of going to Rand Park Pool. My mom took us every day, and she loved water. Some of my earliest memories are in that pool. I certainly learned to love water at a really young age.

Looking at pictures, I see myself in a stroller. My dad also had a bike that he built a carrier on the front of, attached to the handlebars. I remember being ridden around in it as a little girl. Probably he rode all of us around in it, but I'm not sure.

My dad had this big, old—I guess you'd call it a panel truck. We could hear it coming down the road for years because it was a loud truck. It said "L. L. Larson" on it. I don't remember what else it said. I think he made the letters out of tape, but I could be wrong.

In our bathroom, he never put up the towel holders. He just put in some big nails and attached big, thick black wire, curved it, and hung it on the nails. That's where we hung our towels.

We had two pink sinks, a pink toilet, and a pink bathtub, which at the time I thought was cool. But I hated the wallpaper in the bathtub area because it looked like a gray rock wall. It was really ugly. I remember taking baths with my two brothers, though. That I do remember. We had a mirror on the back of the door, and that mirror is still up on the back of the door.



When I was seven, my dad bought a brand-new piano, and my sister and I took lessons. We had Mrs. Gomez. She was a third-grade teacher, and she was old and very strict. I was kind of afraid of her.

But once, for my birthday, she gave me a little necklace. It was a green stone, a ball about half an inch around, hanging on a fine chain. I'm not sure what the stone was.

She had one of those anniversary clocks that would go round and around. I would sit and wait for my siblings during their lessons, and I'd stare at that clock going around and around. I wasn't a very good piano student, but I did take lessons for many years. Many years.

In first grade, I took the bus over to the Catholic school. My sister started at the junior high that year, so I went to school by myself.

We were Catholic, and I have pictures of my First Communion. I took that very seriously. I remember some of the girls in my class laughing because they thought things about it were funny, but to me that was wrong. You don't laugh about taking Communion. I always tried to be good.

I did get teased in first grade. There were these twins who didn't like my hair and didn't like my clothes. I had a hand-me-down uniform. Some of the girls from big families had hand-me-downs, too. The other girls had newer-style uniforms that looked real spiffy. The older ones were maroon, and the newer ones were a little more purplish, so they were prettier.

I didn't have new socks. I always had hand-me-downs, so my mom would take elastic from my dad's underwear, cut it, and make a garter to hold up my socks. Then we'd fold the sock over the underwear elastic so you couldn't see it.

I had a buddy they used to tease, too. His name was Brian Berger, and they'd call us Grandma and Grandpa and chase us around. At least I had a buddy.

Janet Teevens was my friend. She lived one block over, so we could cut through our neighbor's yard to get back and forth. Her house was directly on the other side of the block. She went to school with me.

I was a little intimidated by my first-grade teacher. I had learned to write my name in cursive because I had an older sister, and I learned some things from being around her. I remember bringing my handwriting to the teacher, and she said, "Oh, you're not supposed to learn cursive until third grade." She didn't compliment me on my really good handwriting, and that discouraged me.

I remember struggling in math. One time, I couldn't seem to focus on the math facts. I don't know if it was multiplication or addition now, but I told the teacher I was sick so I could go home because I didn't want to finish the math quiz.

I did really good in school other than that, though handwriting and P.E. weren't my best subjects. Catholic school was strict and rigorous.

I didn't care for my second-grade teacher either. She caught me looking at her desk or touching something on her desk once and chewed me out. I was shy, and I didn't like to be scolded. It really upset me.

I didn't have a nun until third grade, when I had Sister Erin. She was a young nun. It was something like her first year teaching, and she had a modern habit. She didn't have the old kind that covered all their hair and was really long. Her habit was shorter, and you could see her hair.

Velcro was brand new then, and she would take off the Velcro belt at her waist. We'd be astonished. She'd just rip off that belt and put it back on to show us.

That year, we had to do an oral report. I pretty much copied mine out

of the encyclopedia we had at home because I didn't know any better. I did a report about Eskimos, and I remember talking about how they ate blubber or something. I didn't like that. I wore a parka while I gave the report, though I don't know if it was mine or my sister's. I just remember being so humiliated to get up there and give that report.

That same year, I was messing with my hair, trying to curl my bangs with a comb. My bangs were very unruly. I ended up wrapping the hair all the way around the comb, and then it was stuck. I couldn't get it out.

My mom came to rescue me, but she couldn't get it out either, so she cut the comb out of my hair. I had these little short, half-inch bangs. I was so humiliated. I didn't want to go to school. She wrote a note to Sister Erin telling her I was not happy that day because I'd had to have my bangs cut short.

School was bittersweet. I loved school. I loved learning. I did really good in spelling because I used to help my sister practice her spelling words when I was in kindergarten and first grade.

My dad taught me to read when I was four years old, so that was a happy memory. We had the Dick and Jane books, and I remember him teaching me. I went to kindergarten already reading, and I was pretty proud of that.

He also taught me how to tie my shoes. He said my mother couldn't teach me because she was left-handed. But then I found out as an adult that I really was supposed to be left-handed, and my dad switched me as a very young child. I didn't have any memory of that. He taught me to tie my shoes like a right-handed person does.

Back in kindergarten, we sat on little rugs on the floor. I remember when they said the president had been shot, and it turned out he died

from the injuries—President Kennedy. I remember going home, and we were all in shock.

We watched it on our old black-and-white console TV. It was like a tall wooden box with the screen on top. I think the speakers were on the bottom. If something really important was on, we would turn it so it faced into the kitchen, where we ate.

I remember watching all the news about President Kennedy's death. My parents had voted for him, and they admired him. It was a very sad time. That was a very early memory I had of things that happened in the world while I was growing up.



I went to Catholic school through fourth grade. That year, I was in a split class, half fifth grade and half fourth. I was kind of proud of that because the kids in fourth grade were a little more advanced, I guess. I don't know.

I had a nun that year, too, Sister Mary. She was a little scary, but she knew my grandma because my grandma cooked for the nuns and priests as a job. So she was pretty nice to me.

I had pneumonia that year. I'd also had pneumonia when I was about five and had to be hospitalized.

When I was in the hospital at five, my dad surprised me. He came in with something behind his coat, and I said, "What is in your coat, Dad?"

It was this big box, and there was a dolly in there. It was Chatty Baby. I had already gotten Chatty Cathy for Christmas. You'd pull her string, and she'd say, "My name is Chatty Cathy." She had curls and freckles.

Chatty Baby had short blonde hair and cute little red tights with velvet slippers built into the ends. When he pulled her string, she said, "My name is Chatty Baby." I just loved my dolls.

I also had a little lamb in the hospital. It was a children's hospital, and this boy came in from somewhere down the hall and took off with my little lamb. When my dad came, he said, "What's the matter?"

I said, "The little boy took my lamb."

He went and found that little boy with the lamb and got it back for me.

My dad was always good when I was sick. I got sick a lot. I had bronchial issues and frequent bronchitis. I never had a cold. I always got bronchitis. My brother Paul had the same issues.

We'd be sick and home from school for weeks at a time, and it just drove my mother to distraction. It was very hard for her to have sick kids all the time.

When I was coughing so bad I couldn't sleep, my dad would rub me down with Mentholatum and bundle me up. We had a wooden rocking chair, and he'd bring that into my room. He'd run the vaporizer full steam, and he would rock me.

He probably sang to me. I don't remember, but he would rock me, and it always helped me relax. My mom just didn't have the patience. She was taking care of us kids all day, and she'd be exhausted by the end of the day. My dad had a soft spot for sickly people. I think he had been a sick child, and that was a good memory.

So I had pneumonia when I was five and again when I was nine. The second time, I missed learning long division at school. When I came

back, I was so behind, and I never did get good at long division. Somehow I made it through that class.

There was a boy who sat behind me named Ted. He teased me about my hair because I had frizzy curls. He'd call me Fuzzy Wuzzy.

I used to bite my nails. When I decided I didn't want to bite them anymore, I started chewing on my pencils. Those are some memories of fourth grade. I also remember having a crush on one of the fifth-grade boys.

Every year we had Mardi Gras at our school. Some of it was fun. Some of it, I don't know. I had a boyfriend from first grade, and I remember ditching him one year because I just didn't want to go with him to Mardi Gras.

We had séances in the doorway where you'd go into the church area. We used to hold them there during lunch. We also played all kinds of games. We didn't have playground equipment, but we had jump rope and different games like that.



The next year, my mom said we were going to public school. I was kind of nervous about that, but I could walk to Maple School. Some of the kids from my class also transferred.

I went to Maple School for fifth and sixth grade, and I made some new friends. Cindy Hinkle moved in across the street. I was already friends with Susie Lindeman, but she was two years behind me in school. Cindy was the same age as me. I don't think we were in the same class, but we were friends and hung out together.

She had a dog I really liked, and she ended up having a little baby brother, which was fun. We'd help take care of him.

At Maple School, I became friends with Byron Bright, Heather Johnstone, and Sharon Arthur. We had a good time. Those were good years for me, fifth and sixth grade.

We went on a class retreat where we got to stay overnight in dormitories and learn about nature. It was a campus thing. I don't remember all of it, but the whole class went, and we did rock-wall climbing and nature activities.

I was in swim lessons all the time. I was a really fast swimmer and a really fast runner. I loved swimming.

When they built the junior high, I think I was just finishing fifth grade. Then we could have swim lessons just down the street. We could ride our bikes to Iroquois Pool, which was at the junior high, but the pool was for summertime. They didn't use it during the school year.

I met some other kids who lived in other directions from us and didn't go to my school. I remember meeting Shawn Wright in swim lessons. She was Barb's cousin. When I started junior high, some of those same kids I'd met through swim lessons were in my class.

In the summers, we played a lot of games with the neighbor kids and went to arts and crafts at the park district. In the winter, we went ice skating at the park district and sledding. My dad would take us down to the Des Plaines River to skate.

We also skated on Lake Opeka, where my grandpa had his boat in the summers. We'd go fishing with Grandma and Grandpa. They were my mom's parents, and they lived just a few blocks from there.

We saw them every Sunday after church. We'd come to their house, and they'd have coffee cake. We read the funny pages from the Chicago Tribune. They always had pickles and olives, and I remember Grandma having circus peanuts, those orange, peanut-looking things that were candy.

If we went to the lake with Grandma and Grandpa, they'd buy us a ten-cent box of Cracker Jack at the little concession stand. I had some really good memories.

On the Fourth of July, my cousins would come, along with some of the aunts and uncles and great-aunts and great-uncles. Some of my mom's cousins were my age, and some would come from out of town.

We'd have a barbecue outside, grilling hamburgers and hot dogs. Then we'd load up the army blankets and lawn chairs and walk down to the fireworks at Lake Opeka.

We'd lay everything out on the hill, and all the kids would lie on the blankets with our cousins. Oh, we loved it. The Fourth of July was just the best day of the year.

My birthday was the next day, and my grandma's was the day after. My great-aunts who lived in Chicago would bring cake because it was their sister's birthday. But it was my birthday, too, so I got to join in the birthday celebrations.

I remember staying up so late. We'd drive home close to midnight, half asleep. I always loved the Fourth of July. I still remember that.



I started junior high at Iroquois, and that school had no windows. At Maple School, we'd have to stop for the airplanes flying over. The big

jets came over to land at O'Hare Airport, and they'd fly right over the school. Every couple of minutes, the teacher would have to stop talking until the plane went by.

Eventually, they did close Maple School. But Iroquois was built without windows, so that was different, being in a school without windows.

I was in 7D. A, B, C, and D had one set of teachers, and E, F, G, and H had another set. We didn't mix with the other group of kids and their teachers. We stayed on our side, with our teachers.

D was the top group. People who had the highest scores coming into junior high got put in D. We had gym with the B group, and our homeroom was a mixture of A, B, C, and D.

I had a group of kids I was close to in my class, but not all my friends were in my class. Some were in the other group, or they were in C instead of D. We still hung out after school or on the playground at lunchtime.

We loved our science teacher, Mr. Kessel, because he made learning fun. We did experiments and dissected a cow's eye and things like that. I remember bringing the cow's eye home after we dissected it.

They had sock hops. I never got asked to dance, but we did have dancing in school. Even back in grade school, we had to dance the polka. In junior high, we learned the waltz and different dances, and we had to dance with the boys in gym class. I could talk all day about that stuff.

We had home ec, too. I think seventh grade was cooking and eighth grade was sewing.

I joined the girls' choir, which was a separate choir you could join. I

had to audition, and they gave me a song I'd never heard, so I couldn't sing it. Anyway, I still made it into the choir.

It was fun because we could walk to school and stop on the way home to buy candy. I remember buying Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. I think they were fifteen cents when I was in junior high.

When I was younger, we bought penny candy up at the store. We got free bubble gum at Stan's Liquor, so of course we went in the liquor store every day. Stan was always real friendly to kids. We used to buy Freezy Pops there in the summer because they were only a few cents.

I remember walking up to the store and looking for pennies or bottles we could turn in to get pennies back and buy penny candy.

We spent a lot of time riding bikes, ice skating, and sledding in the winter. We played lots of card games in the summer. We watched TV, too. I remember watching Dark Shadows after school at my friend's house. It was a vampire drama, like a soap opera about vampires. My parents wouldn't have allowed it, but I watched it there and remember being terrified.



When I was five, I had chicken pox. I went over to the neighbors, and then they got chicken pox.

I remember having training wheels on my bike and going up and down the sidewalk. We had a nice flat street with sidewalks, and I could just ride and ride and ride without ever having to go out into the street.

My brother Paul was more athletic than me and braver, so he could ride a two-wheel bike before I could, even though he was younger. He

could ride a tricycle before I could, too. He even potty trained before I did. My mom said that was because I was coughing, and I would have an accident when I coughed. I don't know.

I did have poor health as a child. My brother did, too, and my mom was always worried. "Don't sit on the cement. Always wear your hat and gloves and your boots." She was always on us to keep warm and dry.

I remember having birthday parties when we were little, especially once I started school. My mom would let me invite some of the neighbor girls or kids from my class. Since my birthday was in the summer, we'd go out in the backyard and play.

My brothers had birthday parties, too, and we were all together for them. They were friend parties and sibling parties.

I'm thankful for those memories and that I have pictures to remember them, because not every kid gets a birthday party. That was fun for me. I like parties.



I must have been at least ten when my dad decided to enclose our back porch, make a breezeway, and build a two-car garage. That was a big project. He even built a fireplace out there, and we were all excited. This was going to be so cool.

I remember popping popcorn in the fireplace with one of those pots with a long handle. But it didn't last, and the breezeway eventually became a catch-all for junk.

My dad collected old newspapers because he was going to write a book,

and he had to have the newspapers so he could get all the information out of them. I have no idea what his book was going to be about.

One year, he let the grass grow for some reason. I don't know why. We were the laughingstock of the neighborhood because my dad was letting the grass grow. He never had a power mower. He always had a push mower.

He was eccentric. If I had the hiccups, he'd clap his big hand over my nose and mouth so I couldn't breathe. I was terrified and would frantically fight to get free. He thought that would cure my hiccups.

I remember him telling me to jump off the roof of the house and he would catch me. I don't remember jumping because I was too scared.

He didn't let me get glasses when I needed them in seventh grade. He said I had to practice staring at the horizon like the Native Americans did, and they didn't need glasses. We didn't even live where you could see the horizon. I spent two years having to sit in the front when we had a filmstrip or slides in class.

He definitely had strong opinions. We had to get A's in math. Math was everything. You had to be good at math or you couldn't get anywhere in life. I was not good at math, and he made us memorize our multiplication tables.

When I got a little older, around junior high, I had slumber parties for my birthday. I didn't like to bring kids home because our house was kind of messy, but once a year I had a party, and it was fun. We went to my friends' houses for their birthdays, too. I really enjoyed having slumber parties with my girlfriends.

My dad didn't always wear his clothes in the house. Sometimes he'd be

in a towel. He'd come to the door in his underwear or in a towel. He wore a Speedo out in the yard and wanted pictures of himself with a sledgehammer, playing the strong man. He was kind of odd.

He built houses in the suburbs. I didn't know until later that he actually specialized in custom trusses. I just knew him as a house builder, as a carpenter.

One summer, he and his friend, who was a plumber, built us a bicycle built for two out of old bikes. We never had new bikes. I didn't get a new bike until I was fifteen, and I saved up for it. My dad was always collecting old bikes, and that bicycle built for two was fun.

I remember roller skating, too. We had clamp-on metal skates that we used up and down the sidewalk. When we were little, before our house got cluttered, we roller-skated in the basement with indoor lace-up skates.

We got our roller skates and ice skates at the sporting goods store in town. We'd trade in our old ones and get another pair of used ones. We didn't usually buy new.

One year, though, my dad bought my brother and me brand-new snow skis. Our whole family went up to a ski place—I can't remember the name, but it began with a W. I remember skiing with our little boots and little red skis.

But my parents would fight all the way up, with all of us in the car together. That was not a fun memory. My parents didn't seem to get along very good while I was growing up, and that caused me a lot of anxiety.

As a child, I was afraid of things. I was afraid of the dark, of boogeymen and bad guys. I was kind of a fearful, sickly child.

Then one day I decided, this is dumb. I'm not going to open my eyes

and stare out into the dark anymore. I'm just going to close my eyes and go to sleep. But I was in about fifth grade by the time I decided I didn't have to be afraid of the dark anymore.

I loved listening to the radio. We always had one in our room and listened to all the Top 40 hits. Since I had an older sister, I got introduced to pop music at a younger age.

We loved the Beatles and the Monkees. We were really big fans of those, and we had the albums. My dad would buy albums that we'd play on the stereo, so that was fun. He liked music, too.

I liked school. I liked having friends. I liked my cousins and my grandparents.

Madrigal Singers



BACK LEFT TO RIGHT: Linda Boe, Steve Harmel, Sherry Gregg, Jerry Fournier, Brian Engquist, Darren Sedler, Paul Harper, Randy Reed, Ken Hood, Gary Johnson, Sue Ouimette, Kim Kyllo, Claudia Morris, Mary Shallman FRONT: Barb Speier, Sue Loomis, Sherry Ellis, Julie Oas, Mr. Gall, Julie England, Judy Lindberg



I Sang a Madrigal in Tights

Told by Ken



I decided to title this story “I Sang a Madrigal in Tights” so I could grab your attention. But actually, I want to rewind a little bit and tell you how I got to that.

Right before my senior year of high school started, something happened in my mind, and I remember it distinctly. I don’t remember where I was, but I remember making this big decision: this year, my final year of high school, I was going to do everything. I was going to become public. I was going to get involved in everything I could possibly get involved in. I was going to become a new person, re-identify myself.

I decided to come alive and come out of my dark shell.

I don’t know why it happened, but it probably had something to do with having had a very traumatic and unhappy first ten years of childhood, and then my parents were divorced. I discuss all of that in my memoir, but this is a book for stories.

We moved to Minnesota when I was entering fifth grade, and I attended Beacon Heights Elementary School, which was on Highway

55 in Plymouth. After that, we had junior high school, not middle school. Seventh, eighth, and ninth grade, I was in junior high, where I fought a lot—fistfights—and got in a lot of trouble.

I never smoked. I didn't do drugs. It wasn't that kind of trouble. I was just the kid with the chip on his shoulder all the time. I made friends easily, but I was already beginning this pattern of being very unpredictable and very moody.

I made some great friends in seventh grade, and I'll name them because they stayed my friends all the way through high school. These are not all my friends, but I want to acknowledge these special friends in what I would call my inner circle.

In seventh-grade Spanish class, there was Carol Opat, Val Brown, Barb Paulson [Keith], and me. There may have been a couple of others, and I feel bad I don't remember them because now they're missing out on being remembered for all time in my storybook. We were really close friends, and we stayed close for six years, all the way through our senior year.

We met in Spanish class, and we all took Spanish for the next six years—though I think Barb told me she didn't take Spanish her senior year. I've kept a friendship with her, and she'll be reading this story. Maybe I'm misremembering what she told me. Anyway, we tracked together as friends for six years.

I had one other good friend who needs to be in this story. Many decades later, while processing my life in 2011, I realized that nearly all my close friends were girls and women. I never really trusted men, and I'm sure that relates back to my early childhood.

My other close friend was Todd [McPherson].

Todd was my nearby neighbor. He became my friend in fifth grade, when we moved into the townhouses I grew up in, in Plymouth on 12th Avenue North. He lived in one of three houses on the street near the townhomes. Todd became my very best friend from fifth grade through my senior year, and then we lost touch for the rest of our lives, which is kind of sad.

At the time, it never dawned on me that almost all my close friends—the people I trusted—were girls. I had a few guy friends, but we were never really close. I'll call some out because I'm friends with them on Facebook right now, at 67 years old.

Dave Boline might have been my first sleepover in fifth or sixth grade. I think so, anyway. Andy McConnell, who I've stayed friends with on Facebook, became an airline pilot later. He's probably going to read this story. I'll tell him he's in it.

I was rather withdrawn and sullen and dark for years, through junior high and into high school. Outwardly, I would pretend to be talkative and the life of the party, and that's how friends would remember me, I'm sure. Andy and Dave remember me that way, and others.

But inside, I was deeply withdrawn. I have been an introvert my whole life, and I've realized that, though I'm very talkative and outgoing, that's all a facade.

Right before my senior year started, I wanted a life. I wanted to be everything kids dream about being in high school, and I was tired of being afraid to be that.



The year before, I had kind of practiced coming out of my shell and

being public. My mom, who had a beautiful alto voice and sang at Parkers Lake Baptist Church in Plymouth, Minnesota, had really pushed me into taking voice lessons with Camille Forness from church.

I always admired Camille. I had a secret crush on her daughter for a short time, and hopefully she'll never read this. If she does, she'll laugh because she never knew that.

Camille had the most beautiful voice. She and my mom used to sing duets, and they were part of a trio at church. They really were good. Camille was an amazing soprano.

My mom had discovered, singing next to me in church on Sundays, that I had developed a beautiful baritone voice. I had never realized I had a good voice. I didn't have an exceptional voice, but I had a good voice. I had no idea how to read music.

I don't remember how it happened, but Mom talked me into taking private voice lessons from Camille at her home. One thing turned into another, and Camille taught me to sight-read music.

I was stubborn and had never learned to play an instrument, though my mom had encouraged me to play guitar. I never really picked it up. Mom had tried to teach me to read music, and I never did that either.

Camille realized I was never going to break down and learn the actual musical notations—what's an A, what's an E, what's an F when I look at it on a sheet of music. But she got me most of the way there by teaching me, a cappella, to sing intervals and read where the notes were on the paper. When I saw a flat or a sharp, I could actually sing that note as a flat or a sharp.

I had what may not technically be called perfect pitch, which is kind of

its own thing, but I call it perfect pitch. This is why it drives me crazy sometimes to watch American Idol when I see people lose their pitch. Several of my kids have inherited that ability.

I sang on pitch perfectly all the time and never missed a note. I could do it a cappella if you gave me a single note to start on a sheet of music. I could sing the melody or the harmony. I could sing, as Camille called it, by intervals.

If you showed me a sheet of music today and pointed to a note, I couldn't tell you if it was an A or a C or an F. But I knew sharps and flats, and I learned to read time signatures. I could read music without actually knowing the notes. It's kind of hard to explain.

Anyway, Camille taught me to sing.

During my junior year, I sang a few times in front of the whole church, probably 150 people or more. I would sing solos occasionally. I think I might have sung a duet once or twice with my mom.

That was in the back of my mind. I had never been good at sports. I tried running track in eighth grade, and I really sucked at that. I think I ran the half mile, and the best I ever came in at a track meet was fourth. I wasn't the worst, but I never placed. Sports was not going to be my thing. I didn't love it and never have.

But music—I had music. I could sing, and I knew I could sing, and I felt pretty confident.

Senior year started, and I tried out for choir and got in. It was easy to get into regular choir. If you could carry a tune at all, you got in. Our high school, Wayzata Senior High School, had about 1,500 students in tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades. It was a large school, and I made

concert choir. There was a choir below that, but I was good enough to make concert choir, so I was pretty happy.

I started doing more things with my friends. I worked a part-time job on the weekends at Plymouth Cafe on Highway 55, in a shopping center that no longer exists. I was chief cook and bottle washer there in a little forty-seat cafe. But I started getting involved.

I don't remember the sequence of all these things, so I'll tell them as they come to mind.

A couple of weeks into concert choir, they had tryouts for madrigals. If you're a music person, you know madrigals as an elite group singing madrigal songs—English and Italian, and I think maybe French. I know we sang a lot of Italian madrigals and a lot of English madrigals.

For us, it was a group of sixteen elite singers. There were 1,500 kids in the high school, and only sixteen could join madrigals. There were multiple tryouts. I remember two or three auditions.

I think we sang eight parts. We didn't always sing eight-part harmonies, but we often did. There were bass and tenor and baritone and second tenor, alto and second alto, or whatever. I don't remember all the names anymore, but there would be two of us for each part.

That's a lot of pressure.

The final selection for madrigals was sight-reading a sheet of music that Mr. Gall knew none of us had ever seen. It was an ancient Italian madrigal or something, and it was complex. He would tell us which line to sing and give us a starting note. We had to sight-read several lines of music, maybe a whole sheet—I don't remember—a cappella.

Boy, that really cut through the clutter, and I survived it. I remember doing really well and surprising myself that I could sight-read that a cappella.

The way Mr. Gall ran madrigals, we sang a lot, maybe mostly, a cappella. We would have a pitch pipe for a starting note or notes, and we would all do the hum, hum, hum everybody does in an a cappella group, like a barbershop group. But there were sixteen of us.

And there we would go, singing really elite music.

We did some contemporary stuff. I think we even did a jazz piece, but probably two-thirds of our music was definitely not popular music. It was classical, more refined music. It was madrigal music, and we ended up performing all year.

It was a fantastic, close friendship group. We just became bonded. You can imagine how something like that was. Boy, I thought I was all that and a pack of gum. It was amazing.

I sang baritone. Not many years into my adult life, I could no longer hit the baritone notes, and later I became a bass. That's the funny thing about your voice as you age.

We did a lot of public performances outside the school. We might do one number in a choir concert at school, but we got called on to perform in all kinds of venues.

I remember singing in a VFW with Sue Loomis. We were singing a contemporary '70s love song to each other, each holding a microphone, [Touch Me In The Morning] with the other fourteen kids behind us doing background singing.

I could never have done that prior to my senior year. Talk about being

out of your comfort zone. One, she was just gorgeous, and two, she was so out of my league.

I went to high school in the Wayzata school district, probably the richest demographic for a school district in the entire state of Minnesota, just full of richy-rich people. And I lived in a townhome. Sue was multi-generationally cultured and moneyed, and a lovely person. Just a great person.

Here I was, this kid from a divorced home in an apartment, singing a love song to this beautiful, rich eighteen-year-old. I laugh now. It was like, wow, pinch me. I can't believe I'm here.

I never had a crush on Sue. I'm just saying that was a wild experience for me, to come out of my shell like that.

We seemed to sing at a lot of community get-togethers where there would be fifty, sixty, maybe upwards of a hundred people. We'd be called to be the entertainment, to sing and perform.

We often performed in madrigal outfits, and the school bought them because Wayzata had a lot of money. So I often dressed up in tights.

I have one particular memory of singing at a concert—it might also have been at a VFW—dressed like an Italian madrigal singer in tights, singing with this group. It just makes me laugh now.

Here was this sullen, deeply hurting inside, introverted kid from a broken home, a poor kid, singing old Italian madrigals in public with an elite singing group, dressed in tights.

My gosh, I just laugh thinking about the memory. It was amazing.



There were other things I did that year. I took French during my junior and senior years. We were on trimesters, and my senior year I took two trimesters, then chickened out. I didn't want to take the final, so I never took the third trimester. Altogether, I took one and two-thirds years of French.

I remember how to swear in French—a couple of words—and I can roughly not slaughter the pronunciation of simple French phrases. That's about all I remember from that.

I was in madrigals. I was in concert choir. Then a bunch of us guys, at the encouragement of Mr. Gall, our director, formed a Gregorian chant group. It was his idea. We were the geeky, really elite guy singers in concert choir, and now that I think of it, most, if not all, of us came from madrigals.

I think there were six or eight of us. We did several public performances, including performances in choir concerts. We would come out from the choir, get together, and sing in front of a huge number of people. It was a big high school.

Gregorian chant is Middle Ages chanting music from the church. You can look it up. It is stunningly eerie and beautiful all at the same time. It's a unique form of music. You have to have absolutely perfect pitch. It's never accompanied by an instrument. It's all a cappella.

Think Middle Ages barbershop choir, and that gets you close to what the experience emotionally is of singing in a Gregorian chant group.

That was a really weird and cool thing to do as a kid, and these were the things I had set out to do.

I don't want to forget where we practiced. We always and only rehearsed in a specific girls' bathroom. I think it was near the girls' locker room by the gym, though I don't think it was actually part of the locker room. Mr. Gall had discovered on his own that this particular bathroom had the best acoustics for singing Gregorian chant.

So that's where we practiced—in a girls' bathroom.

Oh my gosh, talk about a great memory.

I still find it funny, among all those madrigal people and Gregorian chant singers, and the concert choir at large, which was probably eighty of us or more, that I was the guy who didn't read music. I could read intervals, and I could sing a sheet of music if you gave me a starting note. But to this day, I've never learned to read music as some of my kids have.

They'll be reading this story and laughing because they know I can't read music.



Not long after that, they had tryouts for the annual high school musical. The performance was probably in late November, or maybe even early December. Every high school does a musical or a play. We did musicals. I think there was a play in the spring, but I was never part of that.

I was never actually a thespian, but I got to make thespian friends because I tried out for the musical. Why not? I'm a singing guy.

I tried out for Brigadoon, the old tried-and-true musical that many high schools have performed. If you're a grandchild or great-grandchild reading this, yes, Grandpa sang in Brigadoon.

Either my character's name was Archie or the son was Archie, but I got to be the father of the boy who ran away from Brigadoon.

It's a mystical village that appears for one day every hundred years in the mist of the highlands of Scotland, I think. A spell had been cast, and in that way they could live forever as their village. But if anybody left, the spell would be broken, and I guess they would all die. I don't remember the details.

My son ran away, and he died. I think he died accidentally while running away.

I had about fifty total lines, so I actually got to say some lines. I sang in the group parts, but I didn't have a solo.

There was a scene where I had to carry my son's dead body from offstage, across the stage, and lay him down so the whole village could grieve together.

Gosh, I wish I could remember the actor's name. He became a good friend, though not a close friend. He was a little smaller than me, and I think they cast it that way. By then I was about five foot eleven or six feet, and I think he was about five foot eight or five foot nine. He was smaller, but he wasn't tiny. He wasn't a little boy.

I had to carry this guy across the stage and lay him on the floor, and we all grieved together. That was my part in the story.

Here's what came out of that.



I had dated a girl once during my junior year, Cheryl Ricker. I almost

reconnected with her through a mutual friend a few years ago. Last I knew, she was still living in Plymouth, where we all grew up.

I had a crush on Cheryl, and she kind of had a crush on me. I think mutual friends told us about this. I had never dated. I'd had secret crushes that nobody ever knew about, like any boy at that age, but I had never asked a girl out.

Cheryl invited me over to her house for a Saturday lunch or something. It was her sneaky way to get on a date with me that wasn't a date, right?

We had lunch, watched a movie or something, and then swam in her in-ground pool. She wore a way-too-skimpy bikini, which was way out of my comfort zone. She was quite good-looking and beautiful, and I was horrified and embarrassed. I couldn't look at her. It was all that young, embarrassing, coming-of-age boyhood stuff.

I really liked her. I liked her as a person and as a friend. After she had me over, I asked her officially for a date. We went to a movie and maybe dinner afterward. I don't remember.

I remember we watched Elton John's "Pinball Wizard" movie. I don't know if that's what it was called, but it's the movie where Elton John sang "Pinball Wizard." That's what I remember about the date.

We didn't hold hands or anything. That would have been way too far out of my zone. We never kissed.

Going into my senior year, that was my whole history with girls. That was it.

Now we were in Brigadoon rehearsals. There were at least two months of rehearsals before the show, and they got lengthy—three nights a week on school nights, long rehearsals before showtime.

It was a big, official production. High schools do these things so well, and Wayzata was no exception. There was a pit orchestra, and it was truly a pit below the stage. The auditorium probably seated a thousand people.

In the orchestra was Carol Opat, one of my clique, my clan, our little group of friends. She played violin.

We had all been friends for years. This was going on our sixth year of friendship, tracking through Spanish class. These were the people I felt safe with. I felt safe with Carol. We would give each other elbows, rib each other, tease each other—just friends. I was like one of the girls.

Beth Collins was part of that group too. Beth, if you ever read this story, sorry I left you out. She knew Todd really well.

After rehearsals, a bunch of us would go out. We were all seventeen or eighteen, and a lot of us had cars. I had access to my mom's car, and eventually I got my own that year.

Rehearsal would end at nine-thirty or ten at night, I'm guessing. We were seniors. We could be out late. Our parents trusted us. We were at rehearsal.

Groups would go to various places afterward, and my hangout with my friends was Perkins. Three, four, five of us would leave after rehearsal, and Carol was often part of that group. We would hang out, drink coffee, and laugh for an hour or two, then go home.

We had a great time. We were seniors, all full of it, thinking we were all that and a pack of gum, feeling so adult, of course.

One time, four or five of us had agreed to meet, and then after rehearsal everybody bailed. Something had come up, or somebody's

mom wanted them home. It was just me and Carol left, maybe in the parking lot. I don't remember for sure.

We were good friends in the group, moderately close, but not best friends. My best friend was Todd. Carol and I looked at each other, and it was, "Well, screw 'em. We'll go out and have coffee."

We went to Perkins on Highway 55 and 494, which was still there the last time I was up in the Cities. We had the best time, just yapping our brains out for at least a couple of hours.

Actually, I wasn't drinking coffee yet. She was drinking coffee like a grown-up. I was drinking Coke, and maybe we had pie.

The next time everybody was going to leave rehearsal and go someplace, Carol and I decided to hang out together again. We weren't thinking of it romantically or as a date. We had been good friends for years. We'd had such a great time the last time, so why not?

I guess that was kind of a date that wasn't a date.

Maybe she felt feelings, but I didn't. I really didn't. I was just having a great time talking, just being me.

We did it again, and then again. Maybe by the fourth time we were dating, but never calling it dating. I was having this great time with a six-year friendship that was becoming a better friendship, and I was learning so much more about her.

You know how these things happen.

She didn't have a car, so I drove her home after this Perkins date, which I didn't think of as a date. We couldn't stop talking in the driveway. I think we'd done that before, just kept talking and talking, sitting

in the car. The lights were out in the house. Her mom was asleep. Maybe she had a dad in the family at the time; I don't remember.

Keep in mind, I'd had one date before this. I had never kissed a girl.

All of a sudden, she leaned across the front seat. There wasn't a center console like cars have today. It was one solid front seat. She leaned across, got right up in my face, looked me in the eye, and said, "I love you."

Then she kissed me.

This was not me. I had zero percent to do with starting this kiss.

I discovered what I had only intellectually known about real kissing. We'll leave it at that. I had watched TV and movies. But I had never actually kissed a girl.

Oh my gosh is all I've got to say.

It was beyond electrifying. Suddenly, instantly, I was a man who understood love and understood kissing. All of it I was unprepared for.

I had no romantic feelings for her before that. Obviously, it was different with her.

She kissed me, and it didn't just end. It went on for a bit. This wasn't a two-second kiss. It took me about one second to get into it, but now I was kissing back.

Then she pulled away.

She was a very dramatic person. She didn't even say a word. She grabbed the door, ran out of the car, ran to her front door, and didn't even look back.

I just sat there. I couldn't even start the car.

I was horrified, thrilled, exhilarated, terrified. I had a million emotions going at one time. Of course, I couldn't sleep that night. I'm sure I got some sleep, but I don't know when.

Now I was crazy mad in love, instantly, because I was seventeen and a half. She was seventeen, with a birthday coming in January. She'd had a boyfriend or two, and she knew about kissing and being in love. I knew none of that.

She was in love, and I caught up in about two seconds.

We dated intensely, passionately, for most of the year. We were pretty addicted to each other.

I was doing all these things I've talked about, and I got my first kiss, my first girlfriend, and my first time in love. I was on cloud nine. In early spring, I bought my own car.

My gosh, it was the most fantastic year. I felt like I was walking on air. Everything was coming up roses. We were dating probably four nights a week. We went places and did things. We were publicly a couple.

Then, right before graduation, maybe three or four weeks before, she dumped me without a word.

Not a single word.

She never told her friends why. Gail Haagensen was part of our intimate circle of good friends—Gail, if you're reading this, I'm sorry I left you out. I think Gail was Carol's very best friend, and even she couldn't get out of Carol why she had dumped me and would not say another word to me.

I didn't find out until two years later, when I bumped into Carol by accident in the summer before I married Mary. We had a sit-down, and she explained it to me.

She had done the same thing to her next boyfriend in college. She told me it was a horrible character flaw she had now learned from, after doing it to a second guy.

She had panicked. She was terrified we were going to get married. And the truth is, we probably would have gotten married that summer. That's how intense the romance was. She was terrified of it ruining her future, her career plans, and her college plans.

I look back now and realize, thank you, God, that she dumped me.

But if you've ever been through a breakup, you can imagine the suffering I had through the end of the school year and all that summer.

That summer, I had a rebound romance that lasted only for the summer. Then I went off to Bob Jones University for college and had two rebound girlfriends. All the while, I was casually friends in speech class with the girl who would later become my wife.

That's another story. I'll tell a story about Mary in speech class.

Mary, thankfully, was not a rebound. I had three rebounds before her. Carol finally got out of my system, and I wasn't rebounding anymore.

That was my exciting, came-out-of-my-shell, all-that-and-a-pack-of-gum senior year of high school. A thrilling year that ended in flames and devastation and emotional tragedy. I was probably like millions and millions of eighteen-year-olds with similar stories.

I wanted to share a story about singing in tights, and it turned into

this. I didn't expect it to turn into this longer version, but it was a pretty exciting year.



My mom was just the world's most fantastic mom.

That senior year, we had a sit-down conversation. She told me, "I cannot protect you anymore, and I'm not going to supervise the details of your life."

The rules were that I had to tell her when I was coming home, and then keep my word. I had to tell her where I was going to be, and keep my word about that too. Beyond that, she didn't want to know the details.

She would tell me, "Do not get a girl pregnant."

I will just say I never had sex before Mary. But my mom was a realist.

"Don't get a girl pregnant. Just don't," she said. "And do not drink. It destroyed my marriage. Do not drink."

On a Friday night, I could say, "Mom, I'll be home at three in the morning."

Sometimes it would be three in the morning. I would go out with friends, and we'd stay out that late, and Mom was okay with it.

But every single time I came home, whether it was eleven or three in the morning, she would be sleeping on the couch in her clothes. She would hear the door open, and she never failed to meet me at the door and get very close.

We never said the words, but it was so obvious. She was looking in my

eyes to see if I was high. All my friends smoked weed, and many of them did a lot worse drugs. I didn't.

She was looking at my eyeballs and smelling my breath. She wanted to make sure I wasn't high when I came home.

My mom really helped me grow up that senior year by giving me that kind of adult responsibility and trust. I never betrayed my mom's trust, ever, and I'm really proud of that.

I'm grateful she let me grow up in what I would call a practice year. I got to practice being an adult before I went off to college, with the full trust of my mother. I will forever be grateful for that.

If you've hung on this long, thanks for staying with the story of how I sang in tights, sang in a girls' bathroom with a Gregorian chant group, and had my first kiss and my first love.

It was fun telling those stories.



Finding My Way to Bible College

Told by Mary



I like to start with going off to high school when I was fourteen. I wasn't happy at home. Things were stressful, and I used to daydream about running away.

Sometime before I went to high school, my sister had attempted to run away, but she got caught. She was hanging out with some rough, wild kids. There was strife between my parents and my sister, mostly my dad and my sister. He was trying to tell her what to do with her life, and she wasn't having it. She eventually moved out and joined a cult in the city.

I remember my dad was in an accident. A bridge he was working on collapsed, and I thought he was going to die. But he broke his nose, had a concussion, and was in the hospital. He couldn't work afterward for some reason having to do with insurance. He ended up trying to sell houses on the side, which wasn't very successful.

He organized a party for my piano teacher, who was retiring from teaching school. That was a big deal because he had to get a lot of people involved. He also started a youth group. I was probably in

eighth grade, and it was for troubled kids. We had to go work at the youth center, whatever he called it, and serve popcorn and stuff.

The kids who attended were not friends of mine. They were the cool kids, and it was kind of awkward being there. But my dad thought our town needed a youth group. Some kids I went to school with still remember that, and they remember my dad fondly.

For us and my mom, it was an awkward time because it was his vision, his dream. We kind of felt like we weren't getting his attention. It was given to kids we weren't even friends with.

My sister had met this girl, I think through her cult. I'm not sure. She said her friend had a house fire and needed to live with us for a while, and my parents agreed. I used it as an opportunity to say, “Well, since we're going to be crowded here, can I go stay with Grandpa and Grandma while this girl's with us?”

I guess they realized I wasn't happy, so they decided that might be a good thing. Right after I started my freshman year, I got to move in with Grandma and Grandpa.

I got spoiled because I was like an only child. They kept a good eye on me, and I wasn't used to that much attention. We had a lot of long talks. I got to help in the kitchen and go to the lake all the time.

I'd been babysitting since I was eleven. I also did a job in a neighbor's garage where you stuffed envelopes. But when I was fourteen, my mom got me a job at the restaurant where she worked, Henrici’s in O'Hare Inn. I got to hang coats in the coat room, which was also where they had the switchboard operator at that time.

I'm thinking I made a dollar or a dollar fifty an hour. I can't remember.

I was underage, so I don't know how they cooked the books so I could get paid. I did that in the wintertime, but not in the summer because they didn't need a coat room then.

High school was okay. Maine West High School was a big school. I had a lot of friends I knew from my previous schools, and I met a lot of new kids because four different junior highs fed into it.

I remember taking biology, which was an advanced class, and Algebra 1, which was an advanced class. I took English and P.E., of course. It was a crowded, busy, big school. I don't remember too much academically that first year. Our homeroom was in a science classroom, so we had these lab tables instead of normal desks.

During that year, my mom had a back problem, and it turned out she needed surgery. She was in the hospital for a long time and was in traction. Grandma and Grandpa were really worried. They thought she was going to die, she was so ill from that operation. Eventually she recovered and was able to come home, but she had to learn to walk all over again.

I remember they asked me if I wanted to visit her in the hospital, and I said no. I was kind of a stinker back then. I hardly went home at all that whole time I was at Grandma and Grandpa's. I was just happy to be out of there.



I lived with Grandma and Grandpa for most of the year, and I was still there that summer.

They had sold off the back half of their property, and some new houses were built behind them. Their place was really close to my school, so I could walk back and forth. Some girls I'd known from grade school

were twins, and their parents bought one of the houses. I'd hang out with them, and we made a little clubhouse out of the garage next to my grandparents' house.

It actually had been a house. My great-uncle and his kids lived in it during World War II, but it was the size of a garage. Back then you couldn't get materials to build a house, but you could for a garage.

We'd hang out in there doing macramé and listening to country music, because that's what they liked. That summer we listened to a lot of country music.

I remember walking down to Lake Opeka every day. I had these little Dr. Scholl's slip-on shoes, and I'd kick up in the air, and the shoe would fly off and hit the street while I was walking. I went barefoot most of the time.

Grandpa had a light blue sailboat, an O'Day Day Sailer, and he taught me how to sail with him. Sometimes I'd ask to borrow a rowboat and row out to the mooring where his boat was. I'd bring my lunch and wash the boat because I just liked hanging out on the water. I always loved water.

I was always looking for boys to flirt with, too. Some boys from my school would hang around out at the lake sometimes.

We went to the Catholic Church on Saturday nights. That's when Grandma and Grandpa went, and I'd sit with them. On Sunday mornings, Grandpa liked to go sailing.

One time I was out there in my bikini, and he said, “Go in the water. Jump in the water.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, nobody can see you from here.”

So I jumped in and splashed around. It was deep. When they built the interstates, they dug a hole and made a lake. It was a man-made lake, and we were far enough out that they couldn't see me from the club-house. I was on the backside of the boat.

Then Grandpa said, “Okay, you ready to come in?”

Getting back into the sailboat was another thing. There was nothing to step up on. It was a sixteen-foot sailboat with a retractable keel, and he had to pull me into the boat.

“Oh, I'm not doing that again. That's too scary.”

I spent a lot of time at the lake. Sometimes I'd walk back and forth to Heather's house or Barb's house. I still saw them occasionally.

That summer I went to Minnesota with Grandma and Grandpa. I'd never been there, and they had their camper, so I got to go with them. But they always made me sleep in the backseat of the LeSabre. I didn't get to sleep in the camper with them, and I hated sleeping in the car. It was not comfortable.

This is a funny story. One time there were these young men going up the mountain with their cooler of beers. I saw them and thought, “Oh, I should go up the mountain and say hi to these young men with their cooler.”

I decided to climb straight up the front of the mountain instead of going the long way around. They were real surprised when they saw me.

“What are you doing here? Where'd you come from?”

They offered me a beer, and I had one with them. I was used to having

beer with Grandma and Grandpa because they always gave me a little pour—just a little pour—of whatever they were drinking, wine or beer. They always had some before lunch and before dinner, so I was used to having drinks with them. I didn't think anything of it. It was just our culture.

When I got back down, my grandma was furious that I'd taken off. She'd seen those men go up there, and they were adults. I was a kid, probably fifteen at that time. She was not happy. I was naive and didn't think much of it.

Toward the end of the summer, my cousin Ruth came. We were best buds, but we lived in different towns and only saw each other once or twice a year. I got to spend at least a whole week with her.

We went to Wisconsin with the camper and the LeSabre. We stayed at a campground somewhere in southwest Wisconsin. If I thought real hard, I could probably remember it.

There was a lake, and we met some boys from Rockford, Illinois. They were brothers, and we hung out with them. They were half drowning us in the water. They thought it was really funny to spin us around and practically drown us, but for fun.

Then we were sad because we didn't have the boys to hang out with anymore. I wrote letters to one of them a few times, and then I never heard back from him. Silly stuff.



My mom had to have a hysterectomy, and my grandma said Mom wanted me to come home and help around the house. She'd already had the back surgery the year before, and now she was having this surgery.

I did not want to go home. But I guess my fun time with Grandma and Grandpa was over, and I had to go. I wasn't happy. I was a selfish, spoiled kid at that point.

I went home and was miserable. I did the minimum I had to do just to get by.

That winter I went back to the restaurant. This time they'd remodeled, so I had a separate coat room all to myself. I didn't have the switchboard in there, and I kind of felt like I was a big deal. I got to dress up and go to work, and people gave me tips, though I wasn't supposed to keep them.

I was fifteen, and I got flirted with a lot. I liked it. I liked the attention.

Things at home were rough. School was okay. I remember taking sewing that year, and cooking—some nontraditional subjects. I did like that. I wasn't in math anymore because I only took that one year of algebra. I only took that one year of science, too.

I started getting more rebellious as the years went by. It had started in junior high, against my dad. I was bitter toward him because of the way he treated my sister. One time he took a belt to her when she was sixteen, and I ran out of the house. That made him mad.

I determined at that age I wasn't going to listen to my dad and be messed up like my sister was, because it didn't do her any good. My dad and I were not on good terms during those years. My parents weren't on good terms. My brothers just kept to themselves and did their own thing.

School and my job were good. They got me out of the house.

I'd been a Girl Scout all the way from Brownies, in second or third

grade, through ninth grade. On Halloween of my sophomore year, I called my friend Terri, whom I knew from Girl Scouts.

“Do you want to hang out?”

We were too old to go trick-or-treating. She said we could meet up, but we didn't have cars or drive. We were fifteen. I must have walked to her house. I don't remember.

I snuck two beers out of my dad's beers. My dad would give me a little beer when he finished a bottle, just a half inch at the bottom, and say, “If you drink this whole bottle, you'll get brain damage. So you can just have a little bit.”

I liked beer, and my brother liked beer, too. He used to get drunk at family parties and make me mad because he was real annoying when he was drunk. A lot of my cousins would drink at family parties, and nobody cared. Like I said, it was our culture. Nobody cared if kids had a little.

I remember going to parties at my cousins' when I was fourteen, and there was a lot of drinking going on. My cousins' weddings were always fun. At one wedding, I danced with a boy, and he kissed me when he left. I thought, “Oh, I'll never see you again.” And I never did.

That Halloween, Terri and I had two bottles of beer. That's all it was. We went walking around and ended up way over by my grandparents' neighborhood, about two miles from where I lived.

Some boys were out TPing houses. We didn't know them, but they went to our school. They were maybe a year older than me. Terri was a freshman, and I was a sophomore.

The boys started bugging us, following us around and talking to us. They were kind of jealous because we had beer and they didn't.

“Where'd you get the beer?”

“Oh, it was my dad's.”

They thought that was pretty cool. Then we went home. My brother eventually got blamed for stealing the beers, and I didn't fess up until many, many years later.

One day at school, I ran into one of those boys. He said hi, and I said, “Oh, hi.” The school was so big you could go months without seeing somebody.

He asked if I wanted a ride home, and I said sure. Then I didn't have to take the bus. I didn't know any boys who drove cars yet, and I think it was even a convertible. We were driving out of there, and I was waving to my friends as I left. He was a real cute boy.

He asked if he could take me out. The first time, he picked me up and we went to McDonald's. Then he wanted to walk around, and he had beer in the trunk of his car. I don't know where he got it. We walked and drank a beer or two—not very much—and he took me home. That was it. It was very tame.

We hung out for a few months. One time, for some reason, we didn't go to school. I don't remember whether it was a day off or a day when they had things we didn't have to sign in for. Maybe I didn't tell my parents it was a day off. I ended up at his house, which was real close to Grandma and Grandpa's. We listened to records, and then he drove me home.

Next thing I knew, he said he was going to call me, and he never called. The next time I saw him at school, he turned around and walked the other way.

So I guess I was dumped. I never knew why. My first boyfriend was a junior while I was a sophomore. He had a car, and we drank beers and listened to music, and that was it.

Later I dated a guy from my job. I had crushes on different guys at work, and I won't go into all the details, but one of them I did end up dating. His name was Chris. He was a couple of years older—I'm thinking he was about eighteen, but I don't know for sure. He was nice, and he had a car.

That went on for a few months. He took me to see The Exorcist. He thought it would scare me, but I laughed through the whole thing. It embarrassed him that I wasn't scared, because he had been when he saw it the first time.

Nothing really came of it. We just kind of drifted apart. I had different crushes and kissed a few boys along the way.



The next summer I turned sixteen. I got a job at Holiday Inn right on my birthday because you had to be sixteen to work there. I was a maid.

I'd been hanging out at the swimming pool with a little group of friends. The girls I knew from school; the boys, not so much. We had what I called a clique. The guys would dunk us and we'd scream, and afterward we'd hang out and ride bikes. It was kind of fun.

I was still going to the Catholic Church, but I'd been unhappy there. I went to catechism and didn't agree with some things I was hearing.

My sister was in a cult, though I didn't know it was a cult at the time. She lived in a girls' or women's home, and the men lived in a men's

home. She invited me to come out, and I remember going right around my sixteenth birthday. I may have spent the night. I don't remember.

The leader was teaching about Pharaoh, and God hardening his heart—stuff I knew nothing about. Nothing.

I remember praying, "God, do you want me to go to a different church? Where do you want me to go? Show me where you want me to go."

My sister had been inviting me to move in with her. I knew my parents weren't going to let me move to Chicago at sixteen and live with my sister in this church. I didn't even ask because I knew they'd say no. They weren't happy she was there, but they let me visit.

I was also in summer school that year, and I met this long-haired, skinny boy named Charlie. Later he went by Chuck, but he introduced himself as Charlie. He was dating my girlfriend Heather.

He came right out and asked me, "If you died tonight, do you know if you'd go to heaven?"

"What? I don't know."

"Well, are you saved?"

"Oh, yeah, I did that at vacation Bible school between eighth and ninth grade. I made a decision, raised my hand, and prayed a prayer."

He told me he went to Brentwood Baptist Church. "We have a youth group, and you should come."

"Oh, okay, that's cool. But I don't drive, and I work, and it's five miles from where I live."

I thought he was really nice. I'd run into him at school, and he'd always

invite me to the youth group or to church. He and Heather broke up. They didn't date very long.

At the time, I didn't think much about his invitations. I was hanging out with those kids from the pool and working at Holiday Inn. We drank some and probably smoked some pot. I'd done that the year before, too, waiting for the bus or going over to a house with kids I knew in my sophomore year.

We just hung out all summer because we were crazy wild kids. I remember one friend stealing his mom's car while she was at work. When we went to return it, somebody had taken the parking spot. She figured out he'd taken the car, and he was in big trouble.

One boy liked me, but when he went on vacation, I decided I liked another boy in our little group. That was Tim. I kind of started dating him. I considered him my boyfriend. I don't know if he did.

Once we started school, he didn't seem to want to make it public that we were an item. He wanted to get more physical than I was willing to. I liked him a lot, but I didn't think we were really in a committed relationship, and I didn't want to take the next step.

He dumped me shortly after we started our junior year. I was heartbroken, but at the same time, I knew it was the right thing.

I kept seeing Chuck around school, and then I saw him hanging out with Bob. I knew Bob from junior high. I'd actually had a crush on him then. I knew his sister, Kim, too.

I asked her, “Do you go to that same church?”

“Yeah. You should come.”

So I ended up going with Bob and Kim.

I think I was wearing a really short dress, or else it was really raggy jeans. I can't remember. I didn't have modest clothes back then and never really dressed modestly. I didn't think much of it.

These girls were dressed more modestly, and everybody was happy. Everybody was singing about Jesus, and I thought, "Whoa, this is not like my church. This is totally different."

I really liked it. Everybody was super nice, and I liked the youth pastor.

Then we had church, and Pastor Hines was preaching on the tabernacle. I had no idea what he was talking about. I didn't know about the tabernacle. That was in the Old Testament, and the only Bible I had was a little red New Testament I'd gotten from the Gideons. I didn't read it.

Afterward they sang a hymn called "Cleanse Me": "Search me, O God, know my heart today." It was taken from a psalm, I think Psalm 139, but I can't remember now.

I didn't know it, and I was sick. I had a bad cough and couldn't sing. But I looked in the hymnal and started praying the words.

It convicted me so much that I wasn't close to God at all. I was living for myself, a selfish person just living for pleasure. I prayed those words, not really understanding what I was praying, but I prayed them. I sincerely prayed them.

Afterward somebody asked if I was saved.

"Oh, yeah, I did that in vacation Bible school two years ago."

“Do you want to recommit your life?”

“Oh, yeah. I want to recommit my life to Christ.”

Next thing you know, I'm a Bible-toting Baptist girl, going to church three times a week. My parents were not happy, especially my mom and my grandma.

The youth group had a contest, and Chuck said, “Will you be on my team, since I invited you first?”

I said yes. We went on a ski trip or something because so many new kids had come to church.

That's when I learned about Bible college. Chuck was going to go. He graduated a year early, so he was finishing up and going. My friend Carol's sister was a student there, and when she came home at Christmas, she talked about the college. I started thinking about going, too.



None of the boys in my youth group were interested in me. The summer between my junior and senior years, I ended up dating a guy named Mike.

I didn't really want to go out with him. I kept saying no, no, no, and finally he wore me down. I met him while I was with my friends in the forest preserve. We were just hanging out, and he got my friend to give him my phone number.

He called, and we talked and talked and talked. Next thing you know, I agreed to go out with him.

I hadn't wanted to because I didn't think he had the same beliefs I did.

They liked to go drinking in the forest preserve, and we'd go out there and drink until we were totally drunk. I'd fall asleep in the backyard when I got home because I couldn't even make it into the house.

We were stupid kids who wanted to hang out in the woods and drink with our friends. There were parties and music and more drinking.

I got tired of it, and I got tired of him. I didn't feel like we were a good fit. I didn't have much respect for him. He was nice and treated me nicely, but I couldn't see it getting anywhere serious. I broke up with him. It was kind of ugly, but I broke up with him.

I'd been working at the hotel, but I hated working there. I stopped going, and they stopped scheduling me. I got a job at the restaurant again.

I was nervous about going back because there were temptations there. A lot of guys would ask me out, and I'd have crushes on some of the guys I worked with. I'd already gone out with a couple of the older guys there.

I prayed about it and went ahead, but I didn't really have peace about it.

We had a Christmas party for the employees up in the penthouse. I danced with this one fella, and I fell hard for him. I had a crush on him, and I knew I shouldn't be dating him, but I did.

We dated on and off during that school year. We'd break up and get back together.

He was Mexican, and I couldn't tell my family. My dad had said that if I ever dated a Black guy, he'd shoot us both. I knew he meant the same for Mexicans. My dad was racist.

It was a big secret. I didn't tell my family I was dating this guy. I did tell a couple of friends at church, and they weren't happy.

“Well, pray for me. I'm struggling.”

After work, a bunch of us would go out to the hotel and dance. We got off late, and it was a fun time. We'd dance and drink, even though I was seventeen and it wasn't legal for me to be drinking.

Chuck kept talking to me about Bible college.

“Oh, you would love it here. It's great. You should go, Mary.”

I knew I needed to go. I finally decided I would, but I was struggling. My boyfriend and I broke up again—or he broke up with me. We kind of broke up with each other.

I said I was going, and I started getting ready. I graduated and was accepted at Bob Jones in South Carolina. My friend Linda from church was going, and Bill was going. I think Bill and Linda were dating at that time. They were both from my youth group.

A week or two before I was supposed to leave, I ran into my ex-boyfriend. I wanted to be with him.

We didn't always communicate very well. My Spanish wasn't great, but it was okay. His English wasn't as good as my Spanish.

I knew God wanted me to go to Bible college and not marry him. My family probably wouldn't have anything to do with me if I married him. I pretty much told him, “No, I'm going to Bible college, and I can't marry you.”

I don't know if he understood. Probably not.

It was hard. I was really, really struggling.

I felt like I needed the discipline. I'd been out all night dancing and

drinking with friends from work, and I'd tell my parents whatever. I'd say I was spending the night at a friend's house. Sometimes I was, but we were having parties with guys from work.

One time my parents called the cops because I didn't come home in the morning when I said I would. That was kind of messy.

My parents really weren't able to handle me at that age. I'd turned eighteen that summer, and I knew I was headed down a bad path.

It was like a miracle. All of a sudden, next thing I knew, I was in the car and we were on our way to Bible college. I felt like I had no will in the matter, but God somehow made it happen. I was relieved.

I rode down in the back of Linda's parents' station wagon. We spent the night in Nashville, and I remember seeing Dolly Parton singing on television with Porter Wagner.

Then there I was in Bible college, and I was on top of the world.

“I can't believe I made it here. I'm so happy.”

I thought it was heaven on earth. I was very, very happy to be there. It was such a relief.

Ken remembers it, too. “When I first met you in speech class freshman year, you smiled all the time. I didn't have a crush on you at all, and we didn't date until the end of that year. But I don't think I ever saw you without the biggest smile in the world. You were so happy.”

I was. I was very happy to be there.







Red Fingernail Polish

Told by Ken



I met the girl with the red fingernail polish in speech class my freshman year at Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina. And I hated red fingernail polish.

I had traumatic memories—and I'm kidding when I say that—of family reunions growing up in Southern California, where all my great-uncles drank too much and got really loud. I was a little boy. To compound that, my great-aunts all wore bright red fingernail polish. I vividly remember that.

I only remember two or three get-togethers. My mom says we actually got together quite often as an extended family. My great-aunts, who were ancient, of course, to me, would always come running toward me, running and screaming, "Oh, little Kenny, little Kenny, little Kenny!" They had these long, very long, bright red fingernails. Then they would squeeze me to death, laughing, because it was funny as heck.

But there it is. To this day, I just don't like red fingernail polish on women. I was traumatized. I'm kidding. Anyway, I did have kind of a visceral feeling about red fingernail polish.

And this girl I met, who was also a freshman in our very small speech class of maybe a dozen eighteen-year-olds—that's what I first remember about her. Now, her memory is that she seldom wore red fingernail polish then, though she does now quite a bit. So we disagree on the memory, but that's what I remember.

I remember thinking, "Oh, she's okay-looking." Actually, she was quite attractive, but she had red fingernail polish. And the girls I had always been attracted to and had crushes on, including my first girlfriend from the previous story, all had dark or brunette hair. So I guess I had a preference: no bright red fingernail polish, and dark hair.

Well, the woman who would later become my wife, the person who would become my very heart and my very life and my very soul, had blonde hair—poofy, big, blonde, curly hair—was Swedish, and had bright red fingernail polish. Definitely not the person I would have imagined spending the next forty-nine years and five months of my life with.

As of the telling of this story in 2026, we met forty-nine years and five months ago. Who knew, as they say?

That's how Mary and I met, and we've been married for forty-seven years. Like I said, she's my very heart and my very soul. I don't want to get all mushy, so we'll just leave it at that.

She'll tell her version of the story in her book. She has not yet told her stories like I'm doing, but she will. And I can promise you her memory is more accurate than mine, so I'm sure there's a different telling of this story.

What we do agree on is that we all became very good friends in this small speech class. I wish I could remember the young teacher's name. She was a brand-new teacher, and there were maybe a dozen of us. We became very close because we gave public speeches to each other. It was

speech class, and that's what you do in speech class. You prepare a speech, then stand up in front of your classmates and give it.

It was life-changing for me. I was a ministerial student at the time. We called them "preacher boys," and we were required to take speech class because of that. I took some other preacher-type classes to practice preaching in public, but truthfully, I think I learned more about speaking in public there than I ever learned anywhere else in life.

I'm a very comfortable public speaker now. In spite of the fact that I'm an introvert, I'm very comfortable once I stand up and give a speech. I credit that to that class and that excellent teacher.

We all became good friends, and the year went by. We had class either two or three days a week. I forget if it was a two-credit or three-credit class, but I think it was three.

During that year, Mary and I kept what I would call a very casual, once-in-a-while-we-bumped-into-each-other-and-talked friendship, like we did with everybody in that class. There were maybe four thousand students on campus at the time, and it was four hundred acres, so you didn't see people all the time. It was not a small college. But we'd bump into each other, stand, and talk.

Nothing in my mind was crush-like or even remotely like, "Oh, I could fall for that girl." She was very attractive, but she just wasn't in that "I'm going to fall for this girl" category. You know how it is. And I'm pretty sure she felt the same way about me.



I had already had a rebound summer fling, which was essentially just a girl to make out with all summer. I broke that off when I became a

preacher boy at Bob Jones. I sent her a Dear John letter and apologized for being too physical and using her as a rebound romance.

As I remember, she sent me a pretty blistering letter. So, Dear John letters—you better expect to get a "Dear Dude, you're an idiot and I hate you" letter back in return. I got that.

Then I dated somebody a few months into the year. She was a senior and I was a freshman, and we really liked each other. It was more than casual, and we were kind of falling for each other. But she had red hair, and I had a thing about red hair and curly hair. Didn't like red hair or curly hair, and she had both.

I really liked her, and we got dating privileges at this strict Bible college based on the class of the girl. Senior girls got a lot more official dating time in—I swear to you and I kid you not—what was called the Dating Parlor.

It was the size of a football field, upstairs above the student commons and community building, where there was a café and a bookstore and all kinds of stuff. A football field full of furniture, and it was called the Dating Parlor, or the DP.

So I dated this redheaded senior—man, I cannot remember her name—and we really liked each other, but we both realized it wasn't going anywhere. I don't remember who broke it off because it was never serious. But I liked having extended dating hours, and she was my second rebound. I kind of got the rebound out of my system, I think, by then.

Later I dated Sherry. She had long, straight black hair and did not wear red fingernail polish. She was right in my category, and we actually fell in love. We were really falling for each other. We dated for maybe two

or three months, and it was quick because you're eighteen and you fall in love so quick at that age.

Then I had a dream.

This is a true story, and Mary laughs at this story, but I wouldn't be married to Mary now if I hadn't had a dream. Of course, at the time I attributed it to God. Though I'm a deep, devout, intimate follower of Jesus, I look back now and realize it was just my subconscious protecting me. But you may listen to it and say it was God. I don't know, and it doesn't matter.

Everything was going great. Me and Sherry were in love and talking about marriage. Two or three months into this relationship, the big M word had already come up. She was from Kansas. That's all I remember—a small town in Kansas.

I had this dream that turned into a nightmare, where I walked down the aisle with her. It was one of those vivid, videotape-type dreams that you just totally think is real. I was standing at the altar with her, and we were holding each other's hands just like in the movies. I said, "I do."

And I screamed inside my head.

In my dream, I didn't scream out loud. I screamed in my head, "No, no, no, no!" I couldn't stop screaming no. I was panicked and horrified.

I woke up in the middle of the night, probably four or five in the morning. I don't know if I was shaking, but it was a horrifying dream. I realized, "I can't marry this girl." And I don't even know why. I can't tell you why. I probably knew it then.

But I broke up with her that day. We went out for lunch, like we always did, and I broke up with her right over the lunch table. Oh my gosh, it

was traumatic. She cried and cried and cried, and I felt like crap. I felt so guilty.

I broke up with Sherry, and that was not fun.

So I have been dumped, and I have dumped. If this is my great-grandkids listening to this, there's part of Great-Grandpa's life story. If it hasn't happened to you, it's happened to a close friend. It's the universal human story: being dumped and dumping someone else. It's just life. I look back and laugh now, but it was deadly serious at the time.

That was my last girlfriend.



Meanwhile, I had known Mary, the girl with the red fingernail polish, all year. It was getting to be the end of the year, and I didn't have a girlfriend or anybody to go to a social function with.

Now, Bob Jones University was just rigidly fundamentalist. They had a "you cannot touch a member of the opposite sex" rule, except for the once-a-year dating event for the fraternities and sororities. So there were two chances to hold somebody's hand, because you were allowed to hold your girlfriend's hand on that official dating outing.

They weren't called fraternities and sororities, but that's what they were. They had the Greek-letter alphabet nonsense, just like fraternities and sororities, but they called them something else because, of course, fundamentalists can't be like the world and be worldly. I don't remember what they were called. Whoever's reading this story who went to Bob Jones knows.

You could take your girlfriend, or your date, and hold her hand only during hold-your-hand-type activities. It was very weird and strange.

Which is funny, because then they sent you off on Christmas break and summer break, and they would let a boyfriend and girlfriend get in a car alone. I swear to you this is true. With all the "you cannot touch a member of the opposite sex" rules, they let you get in a car on summer break with your girlfriend, alone, the two of you, and drive halfway across the United States.

Now, I don't know what they thought was going to happen. I'm glad you can hear the story while you're reading it, because it just makes me laugh still when I think about it.

There were actually a lot of unplanned pregnancies and kids getting expelled from school because of it. I don't know if they ever figured out, "Gee, we're so strict, maybe we should have a rule and not let boyfriends and girlfriends get in a car alone and drive to California for three days after they're let out of school."

But whatever. I digress. I'll get back to the story.

I had nobody to take to a dating event. Bob Jones believed in people dating and getting married. They pushed marriage. They were huge on that. They also pushed staying in school, so you couldn't get married until you were a junior. There were exceptions allowed, but essentially you had to be a junior, and I forget the exceptions.

They were so big on staying in school, even though they pushed relationships and marriages, that you had to go to premarital classes if you were a full-time dormitory student and were going to marry your girlfriend in your junior or senior year, or afterward. They required premarital counseling, first separately and then together, as I remember.

The girls' version of the counseling, Mary tells me, pushed the birth control pill—hugely pushed it. Which is funny, because so many very, very pro-life Christians, even during that time, believed birth control could cause accidental abortions. That's irrelevant to the story, but I find it ironic that, with the pro-life movement embedded at Bob Jones University, the counseling for fiancées was to go on the pill right away so they didn't get pregnant. They wanted them to graduate.

Anyway, I digress again.

Everybody dated all the time. It was kind of the societal expectation on that campus of four thousand kids that you went to functions with a girlfriend or boyfriend, even though you couldn't hold hands. I had nobody to take to a function, and I forget what it was, but Mary would remember in her story.

So I was looking around, thinking, "Well, who do I want to ask out?" I knew a lot of girls. I didn't have a crush on any of them, and I'd just broken up a month or so ago with Sherry. I couldn't go alone because that wasn't cool.

Then I thought of Mary. I don't know why I thought of her, and she'll probably remember better. She actually has a memory that I'll let her tell, where I think I accidentally asked her out. But that's a separate story.

They had a communication system that's going to make you laugh. This was 1976, '77, '78, in there. No cell phones. One public phone on each dormitory floor. No phones in anybody's rooms. Four thousand—two thousand men, two thousand women—kids, let's call them. We were just kids.

You were not allowed to call a girl across campus in the girls' dorms.

You couldn't call your girlfriend. You could call home. You could call your mom, but you couldn't call your girlfriend.

There was no cell phone. No email. We lived in the Stone Age.

So they had a system called the mail system. You handwrote letters to members of the opposite sex, and the men would pick these letters up on a mail run. It was a really tight, slick-operated system. They would go into all the men's dorms, pick up the letters, and put them in these long, maybe twelve-foot wooden boxes with cubbyholes for the different floors and dormitories of the girls.

Only the men did this. It was a guy's job. They ran mail both ways between five men's dorms and five women's dorms—I think there were five of each. It was complex, and they'd do that whole thing in about forty-five minutes because they would literally run. They didn't get paid for this. It was a prestige thing to do.

If you wanted to talk to your girlfriend at night, you didn't email her, text her, or call her. You wrote her a letter, a note. Boyfriends and girlfriends wrote a note every night. Even casual boy-and-girl relationships would write a note once or twice a week, even if they were just friends.

That's how we texted each other: handwritten notes and letters, some in envelopes, sometimes just postcards. We'd throw them in the bin as the guys ran down our hall. I would address mine to Mary at whatever dorm, room 302, and Mary would get it. Meanwhile, she'd send me back a letter.

That's how we communicated after we started dating. But I asked her out face-to-face.

Now I'm remembering this. I'm glad I'm remembering it so she doesn't

have to correct me in her version. I was so afraid she'd turn me down—not because I had a crush on her, but out of embarrassment. I was just afraid of being turned down. So I asked her face-to-face to this dating event coming up.

You have to understand, and we still laugh about this: that was never done.

If you wanted to date a girl, and she knew you liked her and was expecting to be asked out, you never did that in person. It was culturally taboo, an unwritten rule on our campus. You didn't do that. You sent her a note and asked her out, and then she would send you a note back. Never respond to it to your face. You had to wait until the next day when she sent you a note back and said yes, and then you could talk about the event you were going to.

I'm not kidding.

But I was afraid she'd turn me down, so I broke all the rules because I was a bad boy and a rules breaker. I think that's part of what eventually Mary grew to like about me. I think she always had a thing for bad boys, but that's my version of the story. She gets to tell it.

I asked her out face-to-face, and she was shocked because that didn't happen.

And she said yes.

Then we started doing the notes back and forth, but just platonically. We were just friends. There were a few notes about the event coming up and what she was going to wear, so I'd wear something that matched, I think, or whatever.

All I know is we went on this date. She wasn't dating at the time, and she'll tell her dating life story on her own if she wants to. I had just

broken up with somebody. She knew about that. That was all public. Everybody knew.

We were just going as friends.



We went to this thing and had a really good time. No chemistry on my end. As I remember she's told me over these years, none on her end either at the time. But we had a good time, so we set up a lunch date a day or two or three later.

We went to lunch together and had a really, really good time.

Then we went on a third date to a dating thing with a bunch of people. It might have been Bible conference, which they do in the spring. I don't remember. Everybody takes a date to all of that. It's like a non-stop dating event while you get preached at three times a day. They take a few days off and call it Bible conference. Couples sit together, listen to the preacher, then go hang out and sit on the lawn together and get snacks or whatever. That's as I remember it.

That third date—and she might say it was the second, but I think I'm remembering this correctly—I had this epiphany. I still had no crush on her, no physical attraction to her, no romantic feelings at all.

And I knew during the date, "This is the girl I'm going to marry."

I never even felt that with my first love in high school. She knew we were going to get married. I never knew that, but she knew it, which is why she dumped me.

With none of the rebounds had I ever thought I was going to marry, except with Sherry, and she did all the marriage talk.

I was nodding my head while she did the marriage talk, and, as I've told you, I had a nightmare about that.

But on this third date with Mary, I just calmly thought, "I think I'm going to marry her." And it felt very weird.

I went back to my dorm after the date. I had four other roommates. We were packed, five of us, into a small room with a triple bunk and a double bunk. I walked in, and two or three of my roommates were there.

I said calmly, "I think I have met my future wife."

They laughed me to scorn, because that's just something you laugh at and mock your roommate over.

But it turned out to be prophetic.

We did not stay in touch that summer. That was completely my fault. I think she dated another guy back in Chicago when she went home, kind of pissed off at me. We had no romantic feelings for each other, but we had dated several times. Then summer came, and I went off and lived my life in Plymouth, Minnesota, and did not contact her.

I think near the end of the summer I finally sent her a letter or called her. I don't remember which. I was like, "Hey, how's everything gone this summer?"

She tells me now she was really pissed off at me. Like, "What the heck? He leads me on and then goes silent." They call it ghosting now, right? She got ghosted for the summer.

I managed to fix that, because I was an idiot. We got back, I made it up to her, and we started dating heavily our sophomore year. Very heavily.

My memory could be wrong—it could have been the next summer—but I'm pretty sure we carpooled back with friends, because I lived in Minneapolis and she lived in Chicago. This is what the students did back then. They'd pile five or six people in a car to save gas and drive home during winter break and summer break.

We carpooled back with a bunch of people, and we were holding hands in the back seat. That was the first time I had held her hand, and it was electric for both of us. Not that we had never kissed or held hands with other people, but for us it was becoming electric because we fell in love pretty quickly.

I remember walking her to her door. I think she has told me she was thinking, "Is this idiot ever going to kiss me?" Maybe she'll tell me in her version of the story this didn't happen, but I remember her telling me that.

We were standing there lingering at her front door, and there were people in the car waiting on us. I finally got the courage, and I think I asked her, "Is it okay if I kiss you?" That's my memory of it. I'm laughing now.

I think she said, "Okay," and we kissed goodbye.

Yeah, it was a pretty good kiss. We were both experienced kissers, but it was pretty electric.

We dated heavily all through sophomore year. When we broke for the summer, we were passionately in love, so we were calling nonstop. I

drove to visit her in Chicago several times from Minneapolis for weekends when I wasn't working at my job.

I surprised her once at the Mexican restaurant where she was a waitress or hostess—I don't remember. I walked in on her totally unannounced, all the way from Minneapolis, and she was having a fight on the telephone with a Mexican busboy who was calling in sick.

Her Spanish was so fluent. We had both taken Spanish for years, but she had dated some Mexicans prior to meeting me. Her Spanish was fluent. She was having a fight in full-speed Spanish on the telephone as I walked into the restaurant.

It was pretty cool. It was kind of hot.

We planned for her to come out in August that summer after sophomore year. She stayed at my Aunt Bea's house, a mile from my house, and we dated basically nonstop. If we weren't asleep, we were together. We slept in different places, of course, but we were a mile away, and if we weren't asleep, we were together for, I don't know, three, four, five days. Passionately in love.

That's where I proposed.

We went for a midnight swim. The lake was right down the street from my aunt's house, and it had a floating swimming platform about a hundred yards out in this small lake. [Hidden Lake] We swam out. It was all very romantic, ten o'clock at night or whatever. I think there was even moonlight.

I had not planned it, but it was so romantic. We got back to my aunt's house, and I proposed. I don't remember if I got down on one knee.

She would remember all this better than me, but I think I said, "Will you be the mother of my children?"

It's that corny.



We were crazy mad in love. We went back to Bob Jones at the start of our junior year, and we had planned to get married the next summer.

Yeah, well, the best-laid plans of mice and men, as the saying goes.

We were just too hot for each other, and you couldn't touch. We had done a lot of touching, of course, in that week we were together before school started. Now you couldn't touch, couldn't hold hands, and we were crazy, passionate, hot for each other.

So we did what a lot of young couples do who very rigidly and religiously believe in no sex before marriage. And I still believe that. I do think that's the best way.

We did what Bob Jones University students do when they can't keep their hands off each other: we moved the marriage date up.

We got married December 22, 1978, during our junior year.

My mom planned the whole thing. We got married at Parker's Lake Baptist Church. My mom and her friends arranged it all, and we had a hundred people for the wedding.

Chuck Hervis, one of Mary's very closest friends from high school, who is now a successful full-time attorney in the Chicagoland area, walked her down the aisle because her dad could not be bothered to come to the wedding. These may be stories that never end up in her stories, but

you can read between the lines on all of that. Her dad could not be bothered to come. Chuck gave her away.

One of my best friends, Bill—oh my gosh, I can't remember your name, Bill [Lee]. Either my brother or Bill was my best man, but Bill was in the wedding party.

It was beautiful. We had a great time afterward. We did a cheap honeymoon at a hotel that night in the Twin Cities area. That was our honeymoon night. Then we headed back in a car to go to school full-time, because the semester wasn't over until mid- or late January, as I remember.

Boy, did we like showing off the fact that we could now, as a married couple, walk around campus in front of all our friends holding hands. I was terrible about that. I would flaunt it.

The chaperones were everywhere, like secret CIA chaperones. You never knew who they were. They were like dormitory mothers, grad students whose job was to be kind of a mom in a dormitory. And they were all freaking single, right?

They would glare at us when we were holding hands and start heading toward us. We would hold up our wedding rings, and then they'd get that disgusted look, like, "Fine, whatever, you can hold hands. You're married."

I'm not kidding. These are true stories.



That's the story of meeting and falling in love with my very heart and soul.

We just celebrated our forty-seventh anniversary. We have eight

beautiful children and twenty-two absolutely adorable grandchildren. We have been through thick and thin, and I would say, honestly, most of it thick and very difficult. We have been through hell and back together, over and over, many times in our lives.

And we are deeply, deeply attached to each other.

It's what Jesus and the Apostle Paul alluded to. Jesus quoted, "And they two shall become one flesh." I love that term, "one flesh," because that's not a physical thing. That's something deeply beyond any explanation of what a marriage can be and should be.

I have been blessed beyond words to have the most loyal, closest friend and wife that a person could ever have. I may be biased, but I think she is the greatest human being I've ever met. Of all human beings I have ever met, she's it.

She is truly the all that and a pack of gum.

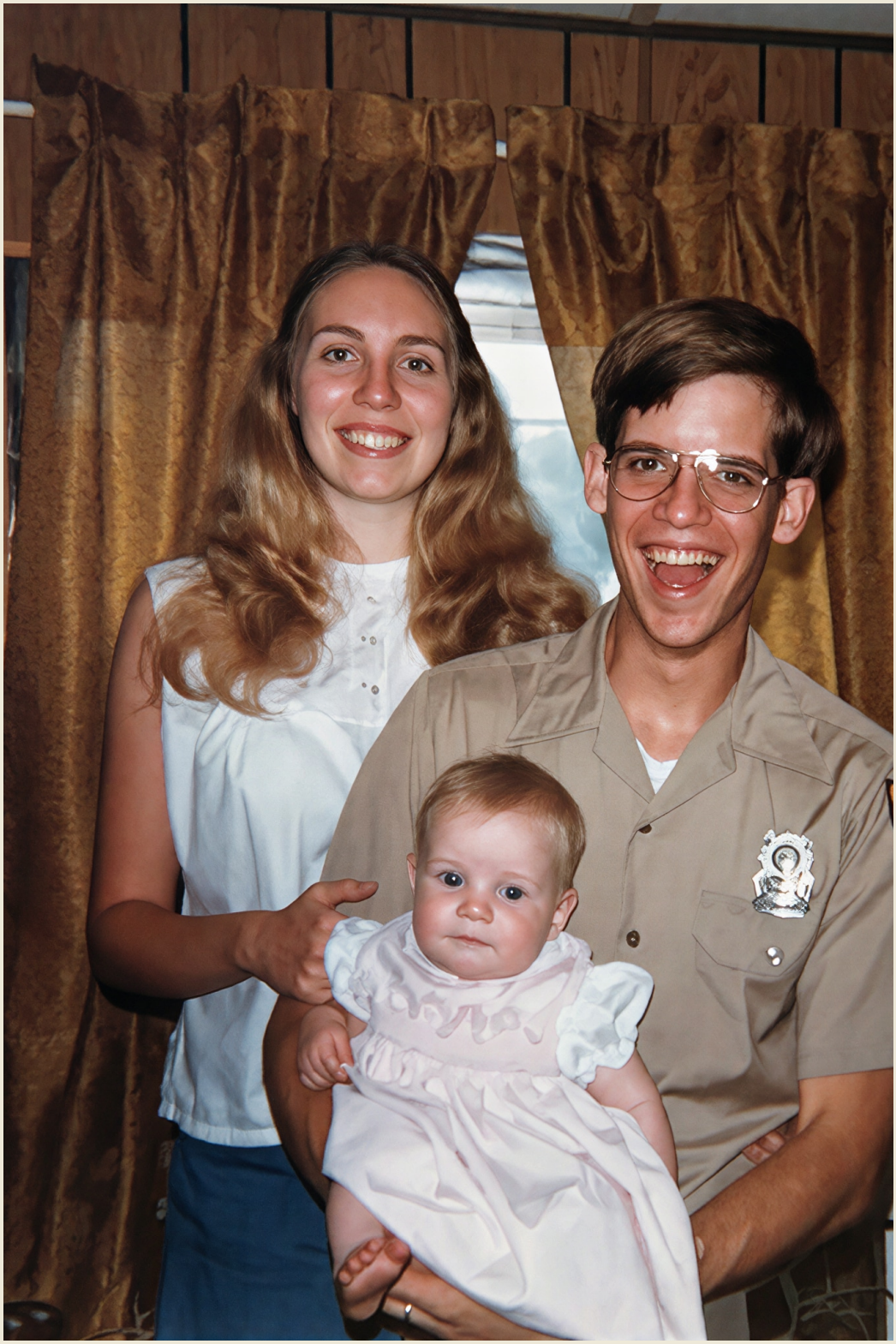
So that's my story of the girl with the red fingernail polish. I hope you enjoyed it.

The six conversations that follow began with our daughter Amanda. In December 2023, she sat us down in her office, turned on a recorder, and started asking questions — where we lived, what we did for work, how each of our kids came along, and what we remember about all of it. Those first three conversations carried us from our early years together through a growing family and the day we made room for one more.

Life got busy, and the questions stopped there for a while. But we wanted our children and grandchildren to have the whole story, not just the beginning. So in July 2026, we sat down together, just the two of us, and finished it ourselves. Now we have six conversations that cover most of our forty-seven years of married life, told the way we actually tell it: together, interrupting each other, filling in each other's memories, and occasionally disagreeing about the details.

— Ken & Mary

Part II
A Life Together



Making a Life Together



Ken, Mary & Amanda in conversation

AMANDA: This is Amanda Runia, and I'm here with Ken Hood Sr., my dad. I'm number six out of eight in the family. I chatted with some of my sisters about the gaps in the stories we know—the early Hood family years, I guess I would call it.

You and Mom were married in what year?

KEN: 1978. December 22nd, at Parkers Lake Baptist Church in Plymouth, Minnesota.

AMANDA: And then you drove back down to South Carolina.

KEN: Yes. Our wedding night was at a hotel in the Twin Cities. It was a Sheraton, and I think it had a Mexican motif. We had a Mexican dinner.

MARY: Tacos.

KEN: Tacos! See, she would remember that. Then we headed back for the long drive to Greenville, South Carolina.

MARY: It was a twenty-four-hour trip back then.

KEN: We made it kind of a party. We stopped along the way to have special meals and buy souvenirs. We stopped in Chicago. We lolly-gagged our way back down, actually.

AMANDA: Was the car you were driving the one in that engagement picture?

KEN: Yes, I'm sure it was. An olive-green Dodge Dart.

MARY: We got in on Christmas Day, and we didn't have a Christmas tree. We opened the presents from your grandma—Christmas stockings she had made us and little Christmas ornaments. We were sad that we didn't have a tree to put them on.

I said, "Where are we going to get a tree?"

And he said, "Nothing's open on Christmas Day."

So we just hung them up around the house.

AMANDA: The first place you lived when you were married was with the older lady?

KEN: Mrs. Wilson. Mrs. Wilson was an odd character.

AMANDA: And just for the record—that sounds so official—Mary Hood is our fact-checker.

KEN: Yes, she's our fact-checker.

I had looked around all over town for a place. We couldn't leave campus together to do it. We had to get special permission for Mary to come with me to put the final yes on a rental place, because we weren't allowed to be together alone off campus.

I finally found this very large master bedroom with a large walk-in shower. It was at the opposite end of the house from where you came in, but we had to share the kitchen and laundry room.

Mrs. Wilson was in her seventies, possibly her late seventies, and a full-blown racist. We didn't find out until much later that she kept a loaded gun in her chair. She was half deaf, and she wouldn't give us a key to the door.

AMANDA: And you guys were twenty?

KEN: Twenty. If we came in late from being out together, we had to beat on the door. She was always awake. It could be eleven o'clock at night, and she'd yell, "Who's there?"

MARY: "Is it a burglar?"

KEN: She really did. Honest, she did.

We only stayed with Mrs. Wilson for a couple of months, maybe. I don't remember how long. We couldn't take much more of her, so we moved into a trailer. But first, I want to tell this story about Mrs. Wilson.

I worked at a loading dock, and I had a Black friend who was a super good guy—a straight arrow. I became really good friends with him, and I asked him over for dinner one night. His girlfriend came too. We could share Mrs. Wilson's dining room, and I had told her a friend was coming. She didn't mind that until she saw he was Black.

You could see she was visibly freaked out. We had our dinner, and after he left, she chewed me out. She said something I will never forget.

"I don't know how you could have those people in here," she said. "My

pappy"—I'll never forget that it was "pappy"—"my pappy told me, 'You show me an honest nigger, I'll show you hair on the palm of my hand.'"

Sorry for the N-word, but that's what she said. It was my first encounter in life with this blatant, obscene racism that could come out of a human being's mouth. I was just horrified.

That helped push us into the trailer. I thought, "I can't live with a racist like this."

AMANDA: And somebody who has a gun, who's half deaf.

MARY: And won't give you a key.

KEN: Won't give us a key. So we moved.

We bought an almost-new mobile home, maybe four years old. It had three bedrooms and two bathrooms, but no central air. Eventually we bought a window air conditioner.

AMANDA: Was that Kampus Kourt, with a bunch of other Bob Jones graduate-type people?

KEN: Yes. It was already in place in Kampus Kourt, which I've heard is no longer in existence. It's been plowed under. [Actually, we just saw it on our trip to Florida in 2024. It's still there.]

There were two parts with different names, but it was all one thing. Calling the whole thing Kampus Kourt, I'd say there were roughly a hundred mobile homes. Ours was practically the newest—one of the nicer ones. It had a little patio. We were a little step above a lot of people in dingier mobile homes.

MARY: We had to go out and buy furniture to establish credit so we could get the loan for the trailer. We didn't have any credit.

We went to this cheap, crappy furniture store where they charged you way too much. We bought an ugly little loveseat with flowers on it and a really cheap dinette set.

KEN: Here are the rules of the interview. You can add stuff like that, that you know I'm not going to remember. But if I get a tiny detail wrong, let's just let it run, okay? Tiny. If I'm wrong on the years—

MARY: I don't think I can let it go.

AMANDA: You'll just have to roll with it. Now we're getting the real version.

MARY: And we bought a cheap, chumpy double bed.

KEN: Oh my gosh. We'll have to see if Mom's invited to the next interview.

MARY: That's my life too! We didn't have our own furniture when we lived at Mrs. Wilson's.

KEN: No, Mrs. Wilson provided all the furniture.

MARY: Remember that bed used to collapse?

KEN: Oh, yeah. It was a real rickety bed.

MARY: And sometimes she'd yell, "What's that noise? What's that noise?"

AMANDA: When you came back from your honeymoon and moved in with Mrs. Wilson, what jobs did you have?

KEN: Right before we got married, I had gotten a job at Pet Dairy. They were one of the major milk and dairy suppliers in the region. They had several huge plants, and I worked on the loading dock at one of them.

You know what a milk crate looks like? Those plastic crates held four gallons of milk, and we stacked them five high. That's twenty gallons of milk in a stack—a lot of weight.

The truck backed up to the loading dock, and they put a flat piece across the gap. The floor was corrugated steel, and they kept it wet. They were always hosing everything down.

If you were right-handed like me, you put your left hand on top of the fifth crate. You had a metal hook that grabbed the bottom one, and you used one of your feet—I used my right foot—to shoosh the milk stack from the loading dock into the truck.

If you weren't careful, or hadn't memorized every little chink in that imperfect floor, you would catch and spill them all and break half the milk. Only experience could keep you from doing that.

I had spilled some milk, and the supervisor called me into his little office right there on the dock, where he could see everything. The door closed, and I was scared I was going to get yelled at—which I did.

He got himself so worked up that he said a phrase I had to ask my friends to explain. I didn't dare ask him. He worked himself into a lather and said, "I was sixteen years old before I learned Yankee was one word."

Then he kicked me out of his office. That was the last thing he said.

I went out and asked one of the people on the dock, and they just

laughed. They said, "Because Yankee is never a single word down here. It's 'Damn Yankee.'"

MARY: Didn't you wear a white coat and white pants?

KEN: Yes, and white boots. You had to wear a uniform because you were dealing with milk, and everyone was stinking like sour milk. Milk would explode, and stacks would fall.

I got promoted from there to the inside machine—a huge circular machine that bottled the milk. I made about seventy-five cents an hour more. The machine would always jam up. It was never the operator's fault; it would just break, and they had mechanics to fix it. But it would explode milk. That's when I came home stinking of milk all the time, from my hair all the way down.

AMANDA: Was that the only place you were working when you got married?

KEN: I also worked at Sears, Roebuck, cleaning offices late at night. I was a janitor. Pet Dairy was second shift, so I cleaned either on the weekends or in the middle of the night. I don't remember exactly.

MARY: And we had a paper route.

KEN: We both did a paper route together on the weekends.

AMANDA: Right out of the gate, married.

KEN: Yes, right out of the gate.

AMANDA: What came next? Did you drop one of those jobs?

KEN: I think I ended up dropping one. It's hard to remember, forty-some years ago. But I do know that somewhere in here I was working so many hours that I essentially fell asleep at the wheel.

I was at a very familiar stop sign, half a mile from home. To cross it, you had to go across a busy four-lane boulevard with a forty-five-mile-an-hour speed limit. I stopped, but I either didn't look or looked and didn't see. I think I said at the time that I looked.

I pulled out in front of traffic and got broadsided by a vehicle doing forty-five or fifty miles an hour. It ruined the Dodge Dart. It was dusk, and I'm pretty sure they didn't have their lights on, but I got blamed. I got the ticket.

They towed my car away. I had to crawl out through the back passenger window because none of the doors would open.

AMANDA: But you were okay?

KEN: I was okay. I had my Pet Dairy work helmet on. I wasn't seat-belted, and I bounced all over the car. My head bounced all over, but I had that helmet on.

MARY: Before that happened, Jon had tried to hire you.

KEN: Before our marriage, I had worked a summer doing tree-stump removal—Action Stump Removal. You backed a big round grinding wheel up to a stump, and it took little half-inch cutting paths as it swooped back and forth. It went six or eight inches down and pulverized the stump into chips. Lots of chips.

I made a ton of money that summer. Jon LeVasseur, my church friend, was kind of a surrogate father to me when I was a teenager. He took me hunting for the first time on a church father-son hunting trip.

AMANDA: Was this in South Carolina?

KEN: No, Jon was in Minnesota. Before the accident, he had been

calling me in South Carolina, really pressuring me to come back and work for him. He offered me more money. I kept telling him no, and he wouldn't leave it alone. He called about once a month.

Then I wrecked the car. I had no money, and I had to walk about four miles to Pet Dairy.

AMANDA: How long had you been married?

KEN: It was the spring, or the beginning of that first summer. I had a full summer working for Jon.

I called him up, probably the next day, and said, "I wrecked my car. I'm broke. Is that job offer still on the table?"

He said yes. Then he said, "What do you need? Do you need a car?"

I said, "Yeah, I need a car."

"I'll wire you money for a car. How much do you think you need?"

I'm pretty sure I told him eight hundred dollars. We bought a nice Buick LeSabre. I nicknamed it the Land Yacht because it was so comfy and beautiful. It was like riding on pillows. The gas cost a fortune; it was during the gas embargo.

Anyway, I owed Jon. I was now an indentured servant because he had given me the money for the car.

MARY: And we were still paying lot rent on our trailer.

KEN: We asked our friend Keith Dunn if he wanted to spend the summer there. He got a couple of roommates, and they moved into our trailer and paid us rent while we went to Minnesota.

AMANDA: So you just took off for the summer.

KEN: We took off for the summer.

KEN: We stayed with Aunt Bea in Plymouth for a time. Then she sold her house or something. We also stayed with my mom, and later we rented an apartment on Medicine Lake.

MARY: We lived with your mom that summer. He would come home after dark, covered in mud, and fall over on the living room floor. I hardly ever saw him.

KEN: I was so tired. I worked from before sunrise to after sunset. I would turn the truck around and shine the headlights on the last stump so I could finish cutting it in the dark. Then I had another half hour or forty-five minutes of cleanup and end-of-the-day stuff.

I was making a buttload of money. On a typical week, unless it rained, I made a thousand dollars a week in 1979. That was huge money.

MARY: We were living in Grandma's basement, where the furnace room is. Remember the furnace room where [unclear] lived?

AMANDA: Wait—this was our house?

KEN: Yes. Mom was renting the whole house from Jon LeVasseur, and I worked for Jon LeVasseur. Matt and Laura were still living there too.

MARY: Your dad hadn't lived in that house growing up. His mother moved there after he went to college.

AMANDA: I knew Grandma had lived in our childhood house, but I didn't realize it was right away after you got married.

KEN: That's how I came to buy the house.

MARY: I got a summer job at Sambo's restaurant in Golden Valley, which later became Denny's. That was a horrible story. I was being harassed by a customer.

AMANDA: Meanwhile, Dad was working million-hour days stump grinding.

KEN: Making big money and saving for college. We couldn't get financial aid to Bob Jones, and we were planning to go back in the fall. I had only promised Jon the summer.

AMANDA: Would you have been going into your senior year?

KEN: Credit-wise, it would have been the tail end of my junior year. I hadn't completed enough coursework.

MARY: I had finished my three years, but he hadn't quite finished the third.

KEN: Near the end of the summer, Jon kept saying, "Why don't you take a year off school? Come make a lot of money. I have work."

He owned two or three businesses. He said, "I have work in the winter. I could keep you working for really good money."

He loved to throw money at problems. He was extremely generous, although he expected a lot for his money.

I decided to take him up on it and work at least until the snow flew, then go back to South Carolina. The money was too good to say no.

MARY: We were also trying to complete our summer Bible extension

requirements. He had to preach, and I had to teach a class. We were Bible students, but we were busy and weren't completing the requirements.

KEN: We wanted to move out of Mom's house, and the money was so good that we rented a really nice apartment on Medicine Lake.

MARY: While we were still paying for the lot in South Carolina.

KEN: But we had tenants. I thought we were doing well.

MARY: You told me I could quit my job because I was being harassed.

KEN: I was making more than enough money.

MARY: Around the end of that summer, we went to California. My freshman roommate, Ruth, was getting married.

KEN: My dad paid for us to fly out, and he loaned us a car for the whole week.

MARY: He had been going to give us a car that summer, and we didn't know it. Ken had already borrowed money to buy one.

KEN: Dad was going to give me one, but he hadn't told us.

AMANDA: Was he already married to Katie?

KEN: Yes. They married a year before we did. James was ten years old.

MARY: That was the trip when I met James. We stayed with Ken's grandma for part of the time. Grandpa and Katie had a built-in pool in their backyard, and Grandpa was so happy that I would swim in it.

KEN: For that whole week, we got to ride around in an almost brand-new Dodge Charger, which was so cool. They took us to Disneyland too.

Then we came back, and I went back to stump grinding.



KEN: It was around September. I was driving in rush-hour traffic on Minnetonka Boulevard with the stump-grinder truck. It was heaped with wood chips because we often charged extra to shovel them up. The chips weighed down the pickup, and behind it was a supersized stump grinder.

They came in different sizes. I had the big one, and you could make more money with it. That was one of the ways John had bribed me to come back.

Minnetonka Boulevard was a four-lane road, two lanes in each direction. There was a car accident in the opposing traffic, with two police cars working it. I took my eyes off the road to look.

MARY: One of the cops was actually towing a car. You were surprised to see that.

KEN: Then I looked back. I was doing the speed limit, but suddenly there was a whole line of stopped traffic. About five cars ahead, somebody was making an illegal left turn, and everybody had slammed on the brakes.

I only had the truck's brakes. It turned out John was required by law to have a second set of brakes on the stump grinder, and he didn't.

I went screaming into a fully restored 1965 Mustang. I crumpled it

between my truck and the car in front of it and put the young woman driving it in the hospital for three days. She did fully recover.

I got a careless-driving ticket. I went to court thinking I would plead guilty and pay a fine, but the judge said, "I don't want you to plead guilty. You can get ten days in jail for this, and it's a really bad mark on your record. Meet me in my chambers afterward."

This young prosecuting attorney wanted my head on a platter. He wanted me to serve jail time because the girl had gone to the hospital, and her parents were screaming for my head. Her dad had just bought that Mustang for her as a graduation present.

MARY: You would have done the same thing.

KEN: Yes.

The judge asked for the whole story and read the report in front of us. He said, "This just looks like a car accident. You were doing the speed limit—nobody's even disputing that. You were in a work vehicle. It's not your fault there weren't brakes on the heavy machinery behind it. You're an employee doing his job."

He tried to get the attorney to drop the charge, but the attorney said, "I'm not dropping the charge."

The judge said, "All right, Ken. If you plead guilty, I will give you a ten-day suspended sentence and a zero-dollar fine. Will you plead guilty?"

"Yes, I will plead guilty."

AMANDA: What is a suspended sentence?

KEN: You don't serve the time. Stay out of trouble for a year, and you don't have to serve your sentence.

The prosecutor left upset. As I was leaving, the judge said, "Hey, tell me about your time at Bob Jones University. I saw in the report that you were a student there. I saw that in the courtroom, and that's why I wanted to work out a deal."

I said, "What?"

He said, "My favorite nephew is a student at Bob Jones. Do you know him?"

He gave me his name, and I said, "No, sir, I don't."

"Oh, I love that place. Tell me about it. How do you like it?"

Because I had that connection to Bob Jones, he didn't want to see me get in trouble.

But I was in horrible, guilt-ridden despair because I had hurt this girl. It just about destroyed me.

Here's why: because of my religious upbringing, I was absolutely convinced that God always gets you if you disobey His will. Not His will in the Bible, but His will as in, He told you which job to take.

I was convinced God had not wanted me to take the stump-grinding job, and that I was lacking in faith by not going back to Bob Jones.

MARY: Because you had made a vow.

KEN: I had made a vow. Oh, my word. There's an Old Testament verse about making a vow, and I don't remember what it was.

AMANDA: You had made a vow that you would finish college?

KEN: Yes. I had been considering staying and working year-round for Jon and dropping out of college. Jon wanted me to take over the company someday.

Because that was in my brain, and then I had the accident, I believed I had broken my vow with God. This was God getting me and punishing me—and punishing some innocent girl.

MARY: We were in this very nice apartment with no furniture except a twin mattress on the floor. All our furniture was in South Carolina, and we didn't want to buy a bunch more.

AMANDA: What did you do?

KEN: I called my pastor, John Vaughn, at Faith Baptist Church in South Carolina. He hammered that breaking-a-vow thing on me.

"You have to get back to Greenville immediately. You have broken your vow, and God is holding you accountable. This is clearly from God that this happened."

MARY: Then you had to break your promise to Jon.

KEN: But that wasn't a vow to God. That was only a promise to Jon, and I had to scale them.

When I talk about the IFB world theologically and how it actually affects your life, this is what I mean. They took a verse out of context in the Old Testament and made me quit a job and move all the way back.

MARY: We got out of our lease. They found another tenant.

AMANDA: Did you make it back in time for the fall semester?

KEN: No. I missed the whole fall semester. We went back around October.

MARY: I was really bored, and I kept saying I wanted a baby.

AMANDA: Is that when you got pregnant?

KEN: She was born in November, so some nine months before that.

AMANDA: What job did you go back to when you returned to South Carolina?

KEN: Here's what I think happened. I think I went to work for Orkin Exterminating.



MARY: John Vaughn told you that Bob Keller was working at Orkin and they were looking for people.

KEN: Yes. That's where I connected with Bob Keller. He had been fired from his missionary job in Taiwan. He was maybe seven to ten years older than me, and he got me a job at Orkin.

I crawled under houses looking for termites. They issued lifetime warranties for something like a hundred dollars a year. I kept running across little old ladies who had paid for those warranties, and I'd find fresh termites—little crawly bugs eating the wood underneath their houses.

The lady would show me the warranty she was paying for every year, and I'd bring it back to Orkin and tell my boss, "We have to make this right."

He'd say, "We're in our busy time. You need to not worry about what I have to do. We'll get to it when we get to it."

I would call and follow up with the lady a month later. Once it was two months later, and nobody from Orkin had even called her. I kept bringing it up to my boss, and it became a fight.

Bob was seeing problems on his end too. He did roach-spraying jobs, and he thought they were crooks and thieves. That's what I thought about my division.

Bob quit like a normal person should quit, giving notice and everything. I didn't give notice.

I gathered all my uniforms and stormed into the office one morning. I marched into my boss's office and threw that armful of uniforms across his desk. Everything flew off it.

I called him a crook to his face. "You're a crook. You're a thief. You're a liar. And I quit."

Obviously, I wasn't going to get a job recommendation.

MARY: You also worked for Mack's Trusses somewhere in there.

KEN: I had a six-week stint building preformed roof trusses. I couldn't do the math, and you had to be really good at fractions.

It was my most shameful job—the only job I could never do. Fractions and geometry were the things I couldn't do in high school, and all these ex-cons who had never finished high school could do the math.

AMANDA: I remember hearing about that.

KEN: I don't know exactly where it fits in. I also tried going back to school. I took a few classes, but I really struggled.

AMANDA: Was Jennifer born yet?

KEN: Right in here, Mom was very pregnant, and we had no insurance. We didn't have a way to extend it then.

AMANDA: Mom had planned to give birth in a hospital, but when you lost the insurance, you switched to a home birth?

MARY: Yes.

KEN: What I know is that Bob and I both quit Orkin, we lost our health insurance, and Mom was pregnant. Then we started Bob and Ken's Cleaning Service.



KEN: We were in a horrible unemployment time. Unemployment was in double digits in South Carolina. You couldn't beg on your hands and knees for a job.

Pastor Vaughn preached a sermon in which he said, "I don't want any more of you young men coming in for counsel about how you can't get a job. I've got all of you in and out of my office, crying that you can't get a job."

It was a big, growing church. He said, "Pick up a broom, go down Main Street, and start sweeping the sidewalk. I'm serious. Go do that. Somebody will come out in less than two hours and ask, 'What are you doing?'

"You say, 'I'm looking for work. Since I can't find it, I'm going to work for free and clean these sidewalks.'"

MARY: Find a need. He also talked about dirty bathrooms.

KEN: A light bulb went off. That's how my businesses always start.

I took the idea to Bob, and he loved it. He was married with three kids, and he had some money in his pocket. We had none. We needed

cleaning supplies, brushes, business cards, uniforms, and a sign for the side of my truck.

We were going in fifty-fifty and needed a few hundred dollars each.

MARY: We sold the wedding rings and the shed.

KEN: We sold a bunch of stuff to get the money together. I also remember selling the axles out from under our mobile home, which was illegal because we still owed payments on it. If it was repossessed, they had to be able to move it.

MARY: We sold those later, after Jennifer was born. The first time we moved the trailer to Steve's lot, it still had wheels.

KEN: She may be right. Anyway, we sold things, got the money together, and started Bob and Ken's Cleaning Service.

Here's the best part of the story. We drove to every gas station we could find in Greenville and the surrounding area and knocked on the doors.

We had cards and uniforms. We looked spiffy. We said, "We'll clean your restrooms. Here's why you should have us do it: you'll get repeat business. You can pay us nothing, or pay us whatever it's worth to you."

AMANDA: That's funny, because you said that so many times when I was growing up. When I was babysitting or doing other jobs, you'd say, "Tell them, 'Pay me what it's worth.'"

KEN: It was the greatest business lesson I ever learned, and Pastor Vaughn taught me that.

About half the gas stations said, "Sure, fine. You mean if I don't like it, I don't have to pay for it?"

"Yeah."

We would hose it down and bleach it down, Bob in one restroom and me in the other. We would take an hour and make those places so clean you could eat off any surface. They were filthy before we started. It was amazing what we did.

This was around 1979 or 1980, and the least we ever got was twenty dollars, which was a lot of money then. Usually, we got forty or fifty dollars.

Then we had a hook. We said, "How would you like to keep this clean every week and never have to clean it again? We'll stock the toilet paper and paper towels too."

"How much would you charge?"

We came up with a weekly fee. We'd stop by Monday and Wednesday or Tuesday and Thursday, and we told them which days they had to have based on geography. We weren't going to drive sixty miles across town for one gas station.

We ended up with thirty-six gas stations on a regular cleaning route. I'll never forget that number. We did that really fast, in a couple of months.

MARY: When did you have to walk home because the truck broke down?

KEN: During that time. I was alone, cleaning a gas station late at night. I don't remember why I was alone, but the truck broke down, and I had to walk fifteen miles home in the middle of the night.

I was walking through the country, listening to feral dogs out in the woods, scared to death. I didn't get home until six o'clock in the morning. One of those deals.

This was my first entrepreneurial business. I had learned entrepreneurship from John LeVasseur, and now we had thirty-six customers. That's how I thought of it.

Then we started thinking about all the places that had janitors. What if they could outsource that work to us?

We looked in the want ads for people seeking janitors. At first, we were thinking one job at a time, just to get more work. Stripping and waxing floors was big. Everybody had linoleum or vinyl floors, and you had to strip off the old wax and rewax them.

We bought all the equipment: a big, heavy-duty industrial scrubber and everything else we needed. We were getting quite a bit of one-off work and making good money.

Then we saw an ad for a nursing home looking for a janitor. We thought, "How many nursing homes are in this town? They all need janitors. We could get those places on regular accounts and put a full-time person in each one."

We approached that first nursing home. After three interviews with the lady, we got the contract. She was super impressed. She had called our references—I don't know how many of those thirty-six gas stations she called, but she called them.

She said, "I called your references, and they love you. I'm going to take a chance and not hire a janitor. I'm going to hire you guys, and you worry about it."

We put somebody in, trained them for about a week, and supervised them. Meanwhile, we were still doing one-off jobs.

Then we thought, "This nursing-home thing is sweet."

We started calling nursing homes—we being me. I was the salesman.

AMANDA: Was Bob good at the work itself?

KEN: Bob was really good at the work. He had a good work ethic, and he was a smart business guy who knew numbers. But I was the salesman.

I'd call nursing homes and say, "We're a cleaning service with almost forty clients." I'd bring a huge list of references and say, "Please call them. If you like what you hear, can we have a follow-up visit?"

I'd get a second visit, then a third. We ended up with five nursing homes under contract and five full-time employees.

After that, through an ad in the paper, we got a huge truck stop on the major interstate. It had a little five-room hotel, a gift center, showers, bathrooms—all of that. It took a person and a half, so we put one and a half employees in there.

AMANDA: How many employees were you up to?

KEN: Just shy of ten. We had added one more thing: cleaning repossessed mobile homes inside and out.

That was a big industry. People would buy mobile homes, couldn't afford to keep them, and leave them trashed. The outside often had pine sap on it, so we used kerosene pressure washing to clean it. Inside, we stripped bad wallpaper and painted.

We got paid hundreds of dollars per mobile home. We had contracts with three different mobile-home companies, so we got calls all the time: "Hey, got another one for you. When can you get out here?"

Then Bob and I started having partnership fights. In my opinion, it had

become a little unfair. We split the company. I think he got the nursing homes and the truck stop. I got the gas stations, the one-off business, and the mobile homes.

Looking at the finances, I think it was a fair enough split. At the time, I remember thinking it wasn't fair to me. I didn't talk to him for six months, even though we went to church together.

Our friendship eventually renewed. I talked to Bob Keller on the phone probably two years ago. Last I knew, he was living in California. They were grandparents and all that.

About a month after splitting the partnership, we sold off the accounts and equipment. It just wasn't the same. You needed two partners. We didn't abandon anything or go bankrupt. We sold things off.

MARY: You did keep some cleaning work yourself. After Jennifer was born, we took her in the car and drove around.

KEN: That's right. I kept some gas stations on the side because I could still do them. That's why you were helping me. I hadn't completely closed that out.

KEN: I knew a man named Mike Sanders. He was a little older than me, less than ten years older. He had volunteered during the Vietnam War, when there was still a draft.

He was a helicopter gunship gunner. There would be four people in the helicopter: a pilot, copilot, and a gunner at each side door. He did that for a year in Vietnam.

Then he became a Christian, and I met him at Bob Jones while I was still trying to take a class here or there. We became very close friends, and our wives became friends too. I last spent time with him about ten or fifteen years ago. He lives in Kansas now. He's not on Facebook, but we follow his family there.

Mike was looking for work, and I was looking for work. One of us knew somebody who was cutting trees.

Through stump grinding, I had experience with chainsaws. Sometimes you had to cut a stump closer to ground level or cut up wood on the property. You got sucked into chainsaw work. But I had never dropped a whole tree or worked on a standing tree.

Mike and I went to work for this fellow. He had worked for a reputable large company and now had his own business. There was one other employee from our church, an experienced guy named Robin.

We went all over Greenville topping trees and cutting them down. I was learning. After about a month, I learned to use tree spikes on my ankles to climb, cut limbs, and rope them down.

It was scary. I was never okay with the heights. I had nightmares and panic attacks in the middle of the night the whole time I did that job. But the money, like the stump work, was phenomenal.

AMANDA: Would this have been late summer or early fall, before Jennifer was born?

KEN: Yes, in the good weather.

Early one morning, on the first tree of the first job, Robin was hurt. It's too hard to describe exactly how it happened, but a piece of tree

weighing many hundreds of pounds smashed him in the face while he was up in the air.

Because of the way the ropes were set up, he ended up swinging about ten feet off the ground. He was unconscious, with blood pouring from his face. Faces and heads bleed a lot. We thought he was dead.

It seemed to take forever to get him down. The woman whose house we were working at called 911 right away.

He was in the hospital for weeks. They had to wire his jaw, and he couldn't open it for about six weeks. He broke literally every bone in his face. He never looked quite right after that, and he quit cutting trees.

The boss became so guilt-ridden that it had happened under him. It wasn't that he had caused it, but he felt that sense of ownership: "I endangered an employee. I didn't triple-check something."

He had trusted an experienced man to do something, and this accident happened. It was a bit of a freak accident, but something that could have been prevented.

The whole company broke up.

MARY: I remember going over to that house afterward and finding Robin's wallet in the bloody leaves. They knew he had lost it.

KEN: It was traumatic for all of us. I literally watched that piece of tree hit him in the face.

Mike and I were without jobs again. We thought, "We've learned enough to do simple trees. Not trees hanging over houses, where it's hard and complicated. We can do trees standing out in the middle of a yard."

We could climb up, cut the top half so it fell where it belonged, then come down and cut the bottom. We would cherry-pick our jobs. We didn't have the experience to take a tree down in eight little pieces around somebody's house.

We drove around town looking for work. We weren't in the Yellow Pages. Nobody knew to call us. We didn't even have business cards.

Every single day, we found work. We'd find a house with a dead pine tree. Almost everything we did was dead pine. They called them jack pines. They would shoot up a hundred feet, then the suckers would die and look really ugly.

They were about as big around as my body—not big like an oak or elm—but they were high.

Mike and I took turns climbing. Every time it was my turn, I had to go fifty or sixty feet up to top the tree. There wasn't room to drop the whole length, so we cut it in half.

We did that for another month or two, and then I had to quit. I was having horrible nightmares about close calls I hadn't even had, and falling out of trees I'd never fallen out of.

I never got hurt doing that work, which was amazing. We met people who'd been in the industry for years, and they were missing fingers. It was a dangerous job.

I told Mike, "I'm having panic attacks in the middle of the night, waking up sweating. I can't do this anymore. I can't go up another tree."

So I quit.

KEN: Mike said, “Hey, I saw something in the paper. We need to consider this.”

“What did you see?”

“They’re opening a new prison about twenty miles outside of town. They’re going to need hundreds of corrections officers.”

It was a huge maximum-security prison called Perry Correctional Institution, which is still around. I was terrified.

We met several times as couples over dinner to talk about it. After Mike left the military, he had worked for the Kansas State Patrol. He had been on their tactical sniper team. I used to hunt with him, and that guy was an amazing eagle-eye shot.

He said, “Ah, it’s nothing. It’s safe. There’s a fence around it. Nobody’s going to hurt you. Where are they going to go if they hurt you?”

He convinced me to apply. We both went at the same time. They were looking for two or three hundred people, and gobs of people applied because work was scarce.

Before we heard whether we’d been approved, we were at Mike and Alice’s trailer. They lived in Campus Court with us. We were talking, and I said something like, “Well, if such and such happens, at least I’ll have a gun.”

He broke down laughing.

“You don’t carry a gun in prison.”

I stopped and said, “Oh, yeah, right. You’re real funny.”

“No, I’m being serious. Imagine you carry a gun. Five inmates could jump you, take it, and kill you. You don’t carry a gun.”

AMANDA: This overlaps with Jennifer’s birth, and I want to hear that story separately. You were talking about the prison job before she was born, but started right after?

KEN: Right after. I was probably still doing more than one job—some cleaning, maybe dropping a few trees, and the prison.

Mike and I both got hired by the South Carolina Department of Corrections. Perry was still being built, so we went through six weeks of training and then worked at other institutions while we waited for it to open.

One week was at the police academy, learning firearms. That was really cool.

AMANDA: Even though you weren’t going to carry a gun.

KEN: We carried one when transporting inmates, and I did a lot of that. The perimeter guards carried weapons too. There was an enclosed control tower in maximum security, and I carried a weapon when I worked in there, as a last ditch if somebody got through the control doors.

The department had a compensatory-time system. You didn’t get paid overtime. You accumulated comp time and took it off when they could afford to give you a day off.

They sent us around the state to cover for officers who needed to use their time. I worked at at least four separate prisons and the county jail. Mike and I got permission to travel together, so we were together through those four months before our prison opened.

MARY: During one of those assignments, you were going to be away, so I went to visit our mothers with the new baby. Jennifer was about three months old.

AMANDA: We'll come back to that story.

KEN: I worked on death row for two weeks. It was brutal and scary. I met mass murderers—real mass murderers who had been in the newspaper.

They had abolished the death penalty and later reinstated it. Some of the men had had their sentences commuted, and some had newer death sentences. They were still held in that section.

AMANDA: Did you have anything to do with executions or last meals?

KEN: Nobody was executed during the two weeks I was there.

Those inmates almost never got out of their cells. They had visits with attorneys or family, and three times a week they could have an hour in the courtyard to play basketball. That was about it.

They taught you fast: don't believe everything anybody says. Don't trust anybody. Don't get too close. On death row, they specifically taught us never to lean against the bars, especially not with your back to them.

Some of those men were going to be executed. You can't kill a man twice. They had nothing to lose by hurting you. When they let someone with an active death sentence out, even to go to the courtyard, there were always four guards.

AMANDA: Could you talk to them while they were in their cells?

KEN: We talked to them all the time. There was nothing else to do. As

long as you weren't right up against the bars, you stood there and chatted. They were human beings.

Some were amazing artists. They had little allowances and could buy art supplies. I bought cards from one death-row inmate.

AMANDA: Playing cards?

MARY: No, cards like a Mother's Day card, or something for Jennifer.

KEN: He was a stunning artist. Stunning. He made a little income that way.

MARY: Another one made things out of matches.

KEN: Yes, and he was really good. They had nothing but time. They had a library and could read books. No TVs or radios.

I met Pee Wee Gaskins. You can look him up. I knew him as a hitman who had killed many people, including a little girl and her mother.

He was one of two inmates who worked as what we called a "run-around." We needed inmates to deliver meals and supplies and move the phones around for phone privileges. He got to stay out all day, and they locked him up at night.

AMANDA: Did you follow him around?

KEN: No. It was a trusted position.

I really liked him. I bonded with him. He was friendly and short—about five foot two.

One day, right in front of me, Mike asked him, "If the money was good enough, would you take a contract out on me? Pretend we're out in the

world. You know me, we've had all these conversations, and we like each other."

He said, "Well, Officer Mike, if the money was right, I'd kill you."

Stone cold. He wasn't kidding. No conscience, no empathy. He'd kill you.

Later, after we were working at Perry, the news came out that Pee Wee had gotten a little transistor radio to another man on death row. What came out was that the family of that man's victim had paid Pee Wee to kill him.

The story was that he got four hundred dollars through people on the outside. He arranged to get a radio and plastic explosives, packed the radio with explosives, and got it to the man. When it went off, it killed him.

They convicted Pee Wee, sentenced him to death, and put him back on death row with an active sentence. I followed the case years later. He exhausted his appeals, and they executed him.

MARY: No more being a runner.

KEN: No more being a runner after that.



AMANDA: How long were you a prison guard altogether?

KEN: Fourteen months. For some reason, I remember that.

At Perry, they assigned me to maximum security. They didn't give you a choice. I called it "jail in prison." The inmates there were locked up twenty-three hours a day.

It was the first prison they built with automatic sliding doors operated remotely from the control room. The control center looked down three separate corridors, with one inmate per cell.

The women guards always worked the control room, and they were armed. They also passed out batons, mace, handcuffs—those kinds of things—when we needed them.

I worked second shift.

MARY: Except when you worked doubles.

KEN: Then I worked third shift too, and I did a lot of those. When I quit, they owed me about four weeks' pay. That's how much overtime I had on the books.

I looked so young. I was twenty-two, and half the inmates were my age or older. I grew a mustache because of it.

My name tag said "K. C. Hood." When I walked down the corridor to do my cell check at the beginning of second shift, they'd say, "Oh, KC and the Sunshine Band is coming to work now! It's KC's time!"

They gave me a hard time.

At the end of the shift, I had to do a final check and sign off that I had seen everybody alive. They'd lower the lights, and the lights in the cells were dim. The inmates knew what time it was.

I'd get halfway down, and somebody would call, "Good night, John-Boy."

Then somebody else would say, "Good night, Sue Ellen."

Everybody would do the good-night spiel from The Waltons. It made their day. KC and the Sunshine Band at the beginning, John-Boy at the end.

I had one close call with an inmate. He wouldn't go into his cell and dared me to put him in. It was shift change, and nobody in the control center was looking at me.

He threatened to hurt me. We were close to each other, and I had to stand up to him. I said, "If you take one step toward me, I'm going to bury you. I'm going to kill you."

Finally, he laughed and said, "All right, fine," and went back in.

AMANDA: A little game of chicken.

KEN: A little game of chicken. About peed my pants.

That was the only close call I had with an inmate. I learned to stand up to them. During those earlier assignments across the state, I met Christian inmates who taught me how to be a better guard. I learned more from them than I had in the six weeks of training. They were the good guys.

I quit after fourteen months because I saw such brutality and cruelty, and violations of inmates' constitutional protections. I couldn't take it.

There's a bonus story. I was threatened with death.

My good friend Norman Dukes—we called him Duke—and I were trying to get two guards in trouble because we knew they were selling dope in the prison. Marijuana, back then.

Norm was like a Boy Scout. He still is. We met there, became close friends, and we still stay in touch.

The authorities had asked us to help keep an eye on these men. It was

complicated, but we were part of trying to catch them, and they knew we were onto them. Everybody knew everything. It was stressful.

Then one of those guards threatened a female guard and called her a really nasty name. I physically got up in his face and threatened him if he ever called her that again.

MARY: And you called him a jackass.

KEN: Yes. He didn't take that well. Word went around that he was going to get me. My boss warned me: "They're out to get you. You need to watch your back."

We worked twenty miles outside of town, and I drove home on rural, two-lane roads around midnight or one in the morning.

You checked your work gun in and out. You didn't carry it home. I had guns of my own, but we weren't allowed to bring them into the parking lot.

One night, that guard and his friend chased me home, trying to run me off the road. They came right up on my bumper, then alongside me. We were doing something like a hundred miles an hour.

AMANDA: Right out of work?

KEN: Right out of work. Norm had helped me get away from them in the parking lot, but they came after me.

I had to ditch them. I turned my lights off and took side roads, trying to lose them.

The next shift, I put my .30-30 Winchester lever-action rifle under

blankets in the back seat of my car. I would have been fired if they'd found it, but I went to my supervisor because I knew he was on my side.

I said, "You need to tell them I'm packing heat. I have extra ammunition. If they try that again, I'm pulling over, and I will shoot them."

He passed on the message.

AMANDA: And they left you alone?

KEN: They left me alone after that. Eventually, both of them were arrested, and they served time.

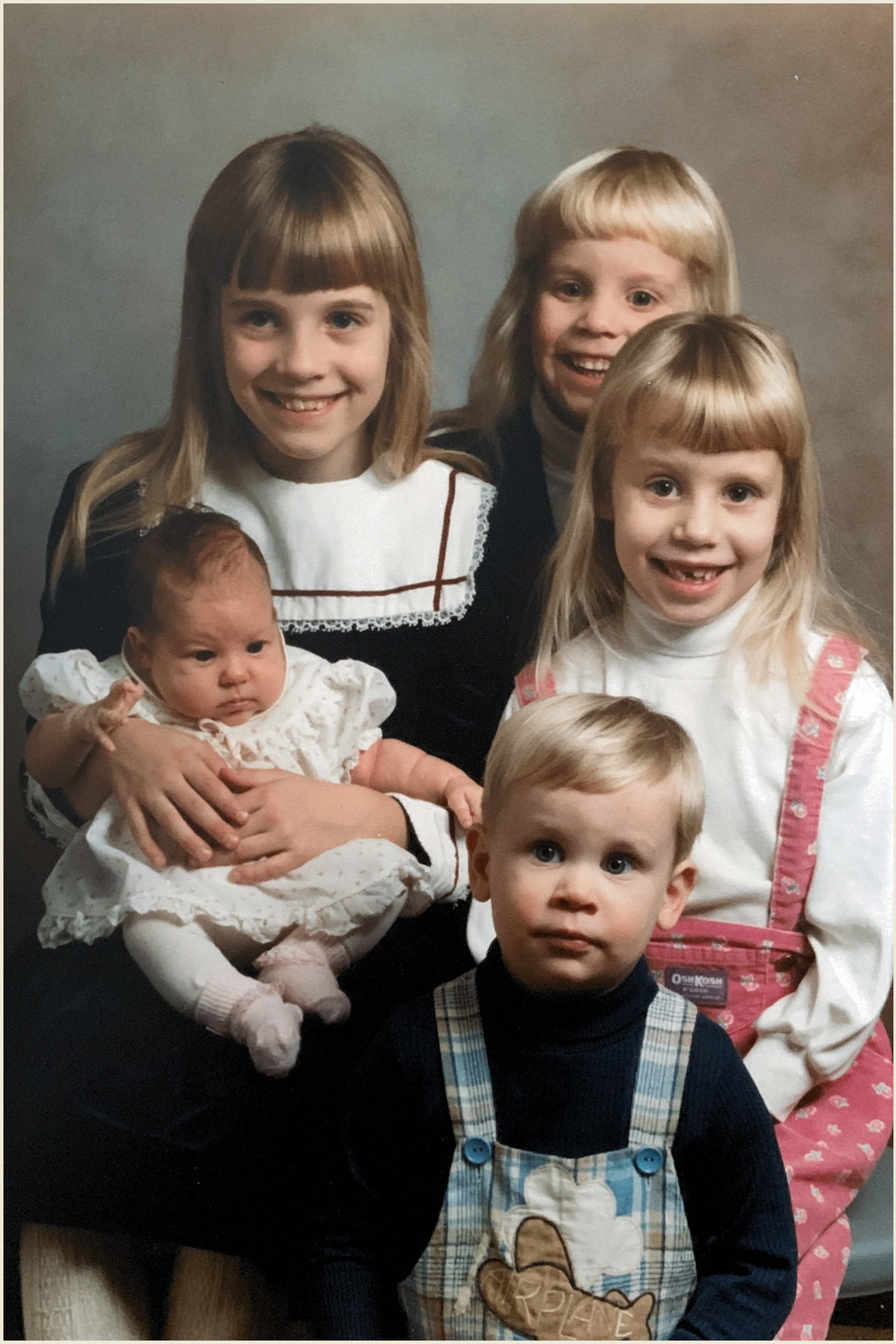
MARY: The night you had your rifle, you called me before you left. You said, "I'm leaving now. I don't know what's going to happen. If I'm not home by this time, call the police."

I was watching the clock and looking out at the driveway.

KEN: This is your dad, always looking for a fight. If I had just shut my mouth, I wouldn't have had to worry about two guys beating me up on the side of the road.

But there I was, driving with my lights off, ducking down side roads, trying to lose them.

It was pretty exciting.


OSHKOSH

Finding Our Way



Ken, Mary & Amanda in conversation

Amanda: This is Amanda Runia, here with Mary and Ken Hood for session two of the working title, "The Ken and Mary Hood Chronicles." We're sitting in my office in downtown Brookings, South Dakota, while Mom and Dad are here for a visit.

Last time, we talked about getting married and the years leading up to Jessica's birth. Before we dive into that, Mom has a bonus story. When does this take place?

Mary: Mid-1981, before Jessica was born. Dad was working at the prison, and somebody sold him a 1964 Chevy Malibu. I believe it was Steve, our landlord.

It was an old, run-down beater car, but he liked it. It wasn't a sports model. It was a four-door, not a two-door. His friend said, "You should rebuild a motor because you're smart. You can get out the manuals and do it yourself. You just take all the parts out, clean them, and take them to somebody."

What did they do—bore the engine?

KEN: They bore the cylinders and boil the engine out. Then you replace all the parts with new parts.

MARY: He bought a little kid's wading pool from Kmart and put all the engine parts in it so they wouldn't get lost. We didn't have a garage, just a dirt yard. We were living at a mobile home sales lot. When Jennifer was little, we had moved our trailer out there.

AMANDA: Why did you live there?

KEN: To save lot rent. We were security. Because somebody was living there, people weren't going to break into the trailers and the office.

MARY: He wanted those pieces to stay clean while he was putting them together like a jigsaw puzzle, so he couldn't keep the pool outside. He had it between our couch and loveseat, in the corner of our mobile home.

I remember one time Jennifer climbed up on the couch and flipped herself right into that swimming pool. Do you remember that? We were like, "Ah!"

AMANDA: With all those parts in it?

MARY: Yes, she flipped herself into it.

Eventually he put this car together, and lo and behold, it started. We were like, "Yay! It started!"

Somewhere along there, we took in a renter, our friend Allison. She was still going to school, I think, and working at a Joann fabric store. She needed a place to live, so we charged her real cheap. She had one

bedroom and was kind of our live-in babysitter. If we needed to leave Jennifer for a short time, Allison was there. She loved Jennifer.

Jennifer was very old for a baby. She was born old. She did things normal babies didn't do. She was very advanced.

Dad was getting interested in hiking in the mountains. One day he announced, "I want to go up to Asheville. They have a sporting goods store that sells topographical maps."

By then it was fall. Jennifer was just turning one, so it must have been November. He had finished the car, and Allison was still living with us. He worked second shift and got home about midnight, so he said, "We have to go after work. That way we can get an early start on the day."

Allison would be there all night with Jennifer. He said, "Pack a bag. We're going to get a hotel."

I was like, "Ooh, exciting!" We never did anything like that. We had a baby. We didn't do that kind of stuff.

We drove up to Asheville, about an hour's drive or something. It was after midnight, and we were driving up and down the strip, wondering where we were going to stay. Back then we didn't have cell phones, and we hadn't lined up reservations. We went from one hotel to the next, and they all said they were full.

I said, "What the heck? It's the middle of the week."

The person said, "It's leaf season."

"Leaf season?"

This was in the mountains of North Carolina, a gorgeous place to see

the leaves change colors. It hadn't even occurred to us. We lived in the foothills and didn't know it was a tourist thing to drive up to Asheville. It was a real pretty town.

We were stuck in our car. We turned around in a parking lot, and he said, "I think I see one more hotel up the road."

He made a turn right at the driveway, and flames came out of the car.

KEN: The battery shorted. I hadn't fastened it securely, so it slid. The post shorted against the frame of the car and welded the battery to the frame.

MARY: Flames shot up, and the car stopped. The good thing was, we weren't in the road. We were still in the parking lot. But he'd been driving that car for weeks.

KEN: It drove fine.

MARY: We thought it was all good. Then he was like, "Oh no."

We weren't going to walk down the street to another hotel. They probably wouldn't have had rooms anyway. So it was, "I guess we've just got to sleep in the car tonight."

It wasn't the romantic getaway we had planned. It was miserable. We weren't comfortable sleeping in the car, and we couldn't run it for heat.

KEN: It wasn't too cold.

MARY: Well, we were in the mountains.

AMANDA: Did you end up fixing the car?

MARY: In the morning, after not a very good night's sleep, we looked around and saw a doughnut shop right there.

He said, "The doughnut shop's open. We can get something to eat."

He asked them, "Do you know any place I can get my car looked at? The battery shorted, and I'm stuck here in the driveway."

They said, "There's a mechanic right next door. We don't know how soon they open, but maybe by eight o'clock somebody will be there."

KEN: I stayed in the car.

MARY: I think we both went. We told them our sad story, and they got us fixed right up. The guy walked down to our car, put in a new battery, and made sure it was secure this time.

KEN: I found the topographical maps later that day.

MARY: We got everything done early, so we drove up to the store in town. He parked out front, went in, and bought his maps. I thought the whole thing was crazy—going up there just to buy maps. It wasn't the kind of fun I was interested in.

Then we got back to the car, and we had a stupid parking ticket.

He said, "I didn't do anything wrong. Why do I have a ticket?"

It said right on the street sign, "No parking before 9 a.m." And it was about 8:55.

KEN: They gave me a ticket for five minutes.

MARY: Our clocks were so off because we'd been up most of the night and got up at the crack of dawn to get the car fixed. We didn't even realize it wasn't nine o'clock.

AMANDA: Did you go pay it right away?

KEN: No, I never paid the ticket.

MARY: You never paid the ticket? You ought to have gone and paid it. I don't remember that part.

KEN: They're still looking for me in North Carolina.

MARY: We were a little discouraged, and he had to work later that day. We had our maps, we were out all this money, and it was time to go home.

That was our Asheville trip.



AMANDA: Mom, tell us about Jessica's birth.

MARY: At the beginning of 1982, we decided we wanted to move back to Kampus Kourt. We'd lived there when Jennifer was born, then moved to Steve's mobile home lot. We got tired of living out there because we didn't have neighbors.

All of this was in our three-bedroom, two-bathroom mobile home. We had already sold the wheels off it because we were broke. People would call and say, "Want to sell your trailer wheels?" We did, so when we moved, we had to rent some wheels.

A lot was opening up at Kampus Kourt, but we had some trouble getting the mobile home set up. We needed an electrician or a plumber. I think we hired Dave Brown.

Some people who were missionaries had a camper trailer they weren't using, and they said we could spend a few days in it. We had little Jennifer, and I remember her walking out and falling right on the ground because she missed the step. She was an active toddler.

We were getting ready for a new baby. We hired our midwives and had the same doctor we'd had with Jennifer. My due date was August 7, but he said, "You probably won't have that baby until the fifteenth."

My dentist had said, "If you have your baby on your due date, you get a free dental visit."

When he asked when she was due, I said, "She's due the seventh, but they don't expect her until the fifteenth." So he wrote down the fifteenth.

I went into labor on August 7. Our doctor was on vacation. He'd told us he would be, because he didn't think I'd have the baby for another week.

Dad took Jennifer over to our neighbors. They were living in the same mobile home spot where we used to live. The husband worked at the prison, and Dad knew him from there.

He said, "My wife's in labor. Can you watch Jennifer?"

They said sure. We called the midwives, and one could come, but the other had to find overnight care for her kids. They remembered how long my labor had been with Jennifer.

Dad was running around getting the babysitter, and I was home alone. He wasn't far away, just the next block or so, but I didn't have anything ready. I was trying to make the bed because there was a protocol: gas in the car, an extra set of sheets on the bed.

When he got home, I said, "I'm having a lot of contractions, and they're really, really hurting."

He called the midwife again. She said, "Yes, we're on the way," but only the one was coming.

She showed up, and I was still wearing a cute little cotton maternity dress I'd sewn myself. She said, "You're in active labor."

She heated up some oil to help stretch the area so I wouldn't tear. I was having these hard, hard contractions, yelling that my back hurt, and Dad was pressing on my back. I was lying on my side, and she put the pan of oil on the bed.

All of a sudden I said, "What's wrong with my leg? It hurts!"

She looked down, and the pan was against the inside of my leg, burning it. I have a scar there from that pan.

AMANDA: What?

MARY: Yes. That was one of the things that happened.

Then I said, "I have to push."

She said, "No, you can't push." The second midwife hadn't even arrived. I was still in my dress, lying on my side because my back hurt.

She said the baby was kind of sunny-side up. "Don't push. You're not dilated enough. Blow."

So I was blowing and blowing, but that kid wasn't going to wait. She came out.

KEN: Before the other midwife showed up. My memory is that she was born less than fifteen minutes after the first midwife arrived. I was afraid I was going to have to deliver her.

MARY: He had just gotten home from taking Jennifer to the babysitter.

We also had company that day. Carol Lillibridge's dad was visiting

because they were going to move to town. He wasn't in the house at the time. I can't remember what time it was—afternoon or early evening. Maybe eight or nine at night. It was summer, so it was light out.

That baby came so fast. I was almost hysterical, saying, "I just had a baby. I can't believe I had a baby!"

They said, "Everything looks great."

The other midwife came in and said, "You had the baby already!"

They got everything cleaned up, Dad went to get Jennifer, our overnight guest came back, and I got up and made frozen pizzas for everybody.

KEN: True.

MARY: I kept saying, "I don't feel like I had a baby. Did I really have a baby?"

The labor was insane. I thought I was going to lose my mind because of the back labor. The contractions came so hard, but they came so fast, and she came out without any problems. She wasn't very big. She didn't have big shoulders or a big head.

AMANDA: Your overnight guest stayed that night?

MARY: Yes, in one of the back bedrooms. I think the baby slept with us. Maybe she had her own crib; I don't remember.

KEN: During those years in the mobile home, it was like living in a village. The homes were all close together and small inside. You all just lived together, basically.

MARY: Like a commune.

Then I got up in the night to nurse Jessica. No crying. Wouldn't nurse. Refused.

She was born with a blister on her thumb, and as soon as she came out, that thumb went right back into her mouth. We said, "Oh my goodness, she's been sucking her thumb."

So that was Jessica's birth. We had Jennifer, who was one and a half, and now we had Jessica.

AMANDA: What was Jessica like as a baby?

MARY: She just wanted to sleep and suck her thumb. She never had a night feeding—not one. During the day I had to set a timer because I was chasing a toddler around. I had to make sure I didn't go more than four hours without feeding her. She wouldn't cry to eat because she had her thumb, and her thumb was what she wanted.

She was small when she was born and stayed small. I think she was seven pounds, eight ounces—something like that.

Then she had this big old Jennifer toddler trying to run the world. Jennifer was naughty. She took the diaper cream and smeared it all over the baby's crib.

KEN: For so much of Jennifer's childhood, it seemed like eighty percent of her waking moments were, "What can I destroy?" It started getting better when she was older.

AMANDA: Meanwhile, Jessica would just chill. Was she a snuggler? Did she want Mom or Dad?

MARY: No, she was just chill. She'd nurse for five minutes and be done. But every time I fed her, she seemed to vomit up the whole amount.

Dad said, "No more. You may not feed that child in our bed." We kept getting puke in the bed.

I ended up with mastitis because she didn't want to eat. The neighbors brought us food because I was too sick to get out of bed. It was like having the flu. Somehow we got through it.

I tried bottles, too, but she wouldn't take them.



AMANDA: Next up is the armored car.

KEN: I worked for the South Carolina Department of Corrections for fourteen months. Three or four months were training, and most of the rest was in maximum security.

I got sick and tired of the demoralizing environment. I often said that a high percentage of the guards were as immoral as the inmates.

I talked about that at church. One of my church friends was a lieutenant at the local armored car company and had hiring authority. It was Anderson Armored Car, the largest armored car company in the state. He was in charge of the Greenville branch, where we lived.

His name was Garland Duval, and he should be memorialized forever. He was a new Christian who had come to faith late in life. He chain-smoked cigarettes and had trouble with his mouth, but he loved Jesus so much.

He offered me a job, and I took it. It was a way out of the prison, even though I took a pay cut of at least a dollar an hour.

We had a morning shift and an evening shift, with about three hours off in the middle of the day. It wasn't Mom's favorite job.

MARY: What can you do in that three-hour gap?

KEN: In the morning, we did the bank runs. We took money that had come from the Federal Reserve and delivered it all over northern South Carolina. We called them the Fed runs.

We had a drive-in vault, this massive thing. You'd have to have a heist TV show to rob it. We'd take out as much as a million dollars.

Other people did the run to Charlotte to pick up the money from the Federal Reserve. I never got to do that. They'd bring back five, six, seven million dollars to our vault.

Once, I slept on a million dollars just to say I'd done it. We were going out of town, and the first stop was about forty-five minutes away, so I took a nap on the money in the back of the truck.

We were fully armed all the time. We carried .38 revolvers. Some people bought their own semiautomatic handguns, but I used the revolver they gave me and carried extra ammunition. We had two shotguns and a high-powered semiautomatic rifle in the back of every truck.

Most armored car companies did things the opposite way from us. At our company, the people higher up the food chain were the drivers. I drove and got in and out of the truck. The person in back was almost always an older, retired police officer who sat there and covered me.

The truck was bulletproof, and there were holes to shoot through. He was protected while he watched me go in and out of the banks.

MARY: You were a hero to the bank tellers. They loved you. They made you birthday cakes and gave you free coffee.

KEN: You showed up with the money every morning. It was a welcome interruption to their day.

It was a fun job, except that you constantly thought, "I could be shot and killed." We were taught that if somebody was going to rob an armored car, they probably weren't going to say, "Stick 'em up." You had a gun, so they'd take you out first.

Your head was on a swivel. You were always thinking about that.

MARY: You had patent leather holsters and shiny shoes. You wore a cap.

KEN: I looked very distinguished. I had a tie, too.

AMANDA: Did you have a bulletproof vest?

KEN: No, they never gave us bulletproof vests.

The afternoon runs were much smaller. We picked up cash and checks from department stores, mostly grocery stores. A bag might have ten or twenty thousand dollars in it, and half of that was checks.

One day, I was coming out of a Piggly Wiggly, or one of those stores, on the worst side of Greenville. It was getting dark. You always thought about the danger when you went into that store.

Half a dozen neighborhood kids—tough guys, gang-like guys—formed a wall between me and the truck. I was carrying two bags of money.

The lead one said, "I think we'll take that money."

There were six of them and one of me. I said, "No, you're not."

Then they all took a step toward me.

AMANDA: What were you trained to do in that situation?

KEN: They didn't really train you for that. It was a terrible job in that respect. I had been told lethal force was excusable at any time.

MARY: I think they may have started out kidding—"We could take that money"—but they kept talking and escalating it. He had to consider it a real threat.

KEN: They kept saying, "We can take you. You can't get all of us with one gun."

I pulled my gun and aimed it at the guy with the mouth.

I said, "Yeah, but I can take you out. I can shoot you."

Then they laughed and ran.

AMANDA: Were they high schoolers?

KEN: They looked about sixteen to eighteen. I was scared to death.

I got back into the truck, and this is the truth before God: the old man who was supposed to be watching and guarding me was sound asleep in the back.

I had to tell him what happened. I was shaking. I shook all the way back. Almost peed my pants.

All I could think was, "I almost had to shoot somebody. I almost died."

MARY: Tell about the time the money spilled.

KEN: One more quick story.

We were going thirty or forty miles out of town and running late. There were two drivers in front and one man in back because we had over a million dollars.

The man in back hadn't secured the quarters properly. There was a hatch big enough to pass bags of coins through, and we had a box of quarters worth five hundred dollars.

We rounded a turn in downtown Spartanburg—I'm pretty sure that's where it was—and the box shifted, opened the latch, and hit the street. Quarters rolled everywhere.

People downtown were looking around like, "Oh my gosh, free money!"

We stopped immediately, jumped out, and grabbed shotguns. There were enough for everybody. We stood there yelling, "Get away from the money! Get away from the money!"

Finally, one of us put his shotgun back and started picking up every single quarter. It wasn't me. I think we made the man from the back do it because it was kind of his fault. He had an empty bag to put them in.

It took forever. The police got called, so we had half a dozen cops doing crowd control for five hundred dollars in quarters.

When we got to the bank, they ran the quarters through the counting machine. True story: every single quarter was accounted for.

We all got chewed out when we got back, threatened with our jobs. It was very bad.

MARY: Wasn't that the same place where those old ladies gave you that funny name?

KEN: I think so. They called me Barney Fife.

MARY: You were standing there with your hands on your hips.

KEN: One said, "Look, Melba, it's Barney Fife."

I was very skinny and had a little mustache.

MARY: He was kind of embarrassed.

AMANDA: How long did you work there? Was Jessica born while you were there?

KEN: Yes. I worked there about a year and a half. By the time Mary was pregnant with Emily, I'd moved on to insurance.

To this day, the armored car job was my favorite. The camaraderie between the drivers was amazing, and everybody loved to see you.

But I didn't make enough money. I was broke. They paid barely over minimum wage—maybe two dollars an hour more.

MARY: And it was hard to have a family life with that split shift.

AMANDA: Was it after Jessica was born that Grandma Hood and Aunt Laura moved down to South Carolina?

MARY: Probably another year. I think Jessica was already walking. She was so tiny they said she looked like a Biafran refugee.

AMANDA: Jessica was born at the beginning of August, and Emily came twenty-one months later, in May. So those months were a blur of Dad

working the split shift, Mom home with a crazy toddler and a chill baby, and then another pregnancy.

KEN: I started at Carolina Life and Health before Emily was born, too.

MARY: Another thing Jennifer did while I was nursing was turn on the stove. The knobs were on the front of our avocado-green stove. She turned all the burners on full blast and melted my big white Tupperware bowl.

AMANDA: Tell us about Emily's birth.

MARY: Now it was 1984. We were still in Kampus Kourt.

Before I got pregnant, we'd talked about health insurance because Dad had started selling it. We hadn't decided whether to have another baby, so we decided not to get maternity coverage. That cost more.

Here he was selling insurance, and then I ended up pregnant.

By then, everything had changed with home births. People in the community had had bad experiences and needed to be rushed to the hospital. Somebody almost died, and somebody was suing our doctor.

He did checkups and would attend births if the midwives needed him as backup. As I remember it, he was banned from attending home births because of a complaint. He had told those people they needed to go to the hospital, and they hadn't listened, but they sued him anyway. There was something wrong with their baby.

The state of South Carolina wasn't happy with all these lay midwives. In the Low Country, it had been accepted for the Black midwives to deliver Black babies, but in the city, I felt the doctors didn't like losing business to lay midwives.

It got political. They passed laws saying the midwives had to be certified, so they had to go back to school for all this scientific and medical book knowledge. I didn't think they needed all of that to deliver a baby, but they needed it for certification.

Our midwives said, "It isn't worth it to us. We're going to retire. Let somebody else who's more devoted do it."

The next midwife we heard about was fourteen miles away. After how fast Jessica came, we wondered whether we wanted someone that far away, somebody we didn't even know.

We had a family doctor who went to our church and was head of the deacon board. We saw him for checkups, and he also delivered babies. We decided to have him deliver at Barge Hospital, the Bob Jones University hospital. Anybody could use it.

We had no maternity coverage, so we'd have to pay out of pocket.

It was May, and the weather was warm. I had bronchitis and was miserable, about a week overdue. I had a three-year-old and a one-year-old, it was hot, I was really big with Emily, and I was sick and coughing.

I had already told the doctor what I wanted. I didn't want shaving or IVs. They said I would have to follow the hospital's protocol, and I said, "Okay, I understand."

On May 30, I went for my weekly checkup. They said I was getting close, but I wasn't in labor. They put me on antibiotics.

I asked, "It won't hurt the baby?"

They said it was fine because I was far enough along.

That evening, while we were getting the kids ready for bed, I started having contractions. Dad said, "We'd better go in and make sure, because you're overdue anyway."

Grandma and Laura watched the kids.

At the hospital, they said labor had started. They put an IV in the back of my hand in case my veins collapsed.

I asked, "Do I have to have an enema and all that shaving?"

They looked at my chart and said, "It says you don't need any of that. The doctor waived it because you've had babies before."

I was like, "Yeah!"

But then I lay in that room, having contractions, and every time they checked, things were moving slowly. Finally they said they were going to break my water.

I thought, "Good." That had moved things along with Jennifer. I hadn't needed it with Jessica.

They broke my water, and I asked, "Can I deliver in here?"

"No, no, no."

So in hard, active labor, I had to get on a gurney, go up in an elevator, and move onto a narrow delivery bed with stirrups.

I said, "I had my last baby lying on my side. I liked that."

"No, you have to lie flat on your back with your feet in the stirrups."

It was late. I'd had a long day, I was exhausted, and I was still sick. The contractions were coming hard.

The doctor said, "You have to push now."

I said, "I'm so tired."

"Come on, you can do it. You're strong. You're healthy. I have patients who would trade places with you."

I tried to push, and they laughed. The doctor laughed first, then Dad laughed. The doctor said, "You can do better. I have patients who would trade places with you in a heartbeat."

I thought, "I hate men doctors. I hate men." I was so angry.

Well, getting mad helped me push. Out came this whopper of a baby. She was a lot bigger than the others, about eight and a half pounds, born at a quarter to midnight.

I resolved that no man was going to deliver my baby again. I was so mad at both of them.

AMANDA: And no man did deliver your babies after that. What was Emily like as a baby?

MARY: She was perfect. But sometimes we didn't hear her crying because she was at the other end of the trailer and we had fans going in the summer. The kids would get up and say, "The baby cried all night."

I was also babysitting two neighbor kids, Keith and Lisa, for about fifteen dollars a week. Lisa was about eleven. She would come in, get the baby, and bring her to my bed after Dad went to work.

AMANDA: Right after the birth? So you got to recover a little.

MARY: Yes. While I took care of the baby, she fed breakfast to the other kids. I didn't even have to get out of bed. I would have paid her to come help me, but we were getting fifteen dollars a week. It was nuts.

Keith was a playmate for Jennifer. He was a year or two older and kept her occupied. She always liked being with older kids.

AMANDA: What did Jennifer think of the baby?

MARY: She didn't like the baby. One time Emily was on the floor, and Jennifer went and sat on her head. We caught her doing that. Jessica was a little jealous, too.

Those were crazy days.

The Lillibridge girls lived across the street. Carol would come over, and she and Lisa would fight over taking care of Jessica. Jessica was like a little doll, not even two yet, cute and interacting.

They took turns. If Lisa wasn't there, Carol would come. It was heaven to have my little mother's helpers. Sometimes I gave Carol a quarter. I just didn't have money.

AMANDA: Living in your little commune.

MARY: Yes. Dad was working for Dan Holmes then. I remember Dan and Terry coming over with gifts for the baby, cute little dresses. Laura and Mom were living in Greenville by then.

AMANDA: Shortly before Emily was born, you left the armored car job and started a new career.

KEN: Dan Holmes, who should be memorialized forever, was a member of Faith Baptist Church in Greenville, where Pastor Vaughn was the pastor.

Dan was on a mission to recruit young men and teach them a trade—what he was good at. Decades later, I would still say he was the most phenomenal salesperson and marketing person I have ever met. There's a slight difference between those two things, and he was phenomenal at both. Like Mozart on a piano.

Everything I learned about marketing, one-on-one sales, and closing a deal, I learned from Dan Holmes.

I left the armored car company and let him train me as an insurance agent. For at least the first three or four weeks, I went with him. He put me on a generous base salary, but he wouldn't let me sell or contact friends or leads. He wanted me to sit like a quiet little mouse in the corner and watch him sell.

That month is still stuck in my mind. He was absolutely phenomenal, and I learned to parrot him, to copy what he did.

MARY: You watched videos, too, and went to sales seminars like Zig Ziglar.

AMANDA: Were these in-person conversations or phone calls?

KEN: Both. Mostly, he booked appointments and went to people's houses. He would sit at their kitchen table, sell them a bunch of insurance, and walk out the door with them thinking he walked on water.

He taught me Tommy Tompkins's sales methods. Only salespeople would remember him. Zig Ziglar was huge. I practically had to memorize How to Win Friends and Influence People.

Every time I broke eye contact during an office conversation, Dan

made me put a nickel in a jar. I had to carry a pocketful of nickels. I watched that jar fill up and got tired of it. He trained me to look somebody in the eye when I talked to them.

MARY: Eventually he hired your mom to work in the office.

KEN: That's where she learned administrative and executive work. Dan's wife worked there, too.

Dan had a heart as big as Texas. He would skirt rules—we'll leave it at that. He played a little fudgy in the gray areas of life. But I saw his tax returns, and I saw him sell. He made big money selling.

There's a long story I don't want to get into, because it would take an hour on its own. Dan was friends with a senior vice president at an insurance company. That man left with senior vice presidents from other companies, and they formed their own company to sell cancer insurance.

Cancer insurance was already big. Aflac is a name people would still recognize. You got contracts with organizations, unions, and business associations, then sold to their members.

In South Carolina, we had a contract with the Gas Station Owners Association. They turned me completely loose on it, and I sold a bunch of cancer insurance.

Then they offered me two states for a buy-in. I got a bunch of credit cards, borrowed up to the hilt—tens of thousands of dollars—and bought the rights to Ohio and North Carolina. I could recruit agents to sell under me.

I drove to those states and rented meeting rooms at Holiday Inns. I did massive mailings, probably twenty thousand invitations between the

two states. A room would have fifty agents wondering, "What's this new product to sell?" I'd sign them up.

Of course, I had to buy the doughnuts and coffee.

AMANDA: These were existing insurance agents, and you were getting them set up to sell your cancer insurance?

KEN: Yes.

MARY: You bought a new car, too. A flashy car, a flashy ring, and a flashy watch.

KEN: I had to have the ring and watch.

MARY: It was a gold amethyst ring. Dave's father made it for him. It cost three hundred dollars. He bought a fancy gold watch, too.

AMANDA: How old were you?

KEN: Twenty-four or twenty-five. Emily had just been born.

I was on the road all the time. I said adios to Mom and lived on the road.

MARY: Three kids at home, still in the trailer. But Grandma and Laura were there to help.

KEN: The end of the story is complicated, but the simple version is that nobody in the field sold anything. The underwriters had priced the insurance too high. It was too expensive, and we didn't sell diddly.

The overrides I made didn't begin to cover my expenses. Everybody involved—a dozen or more people—went out of business on it. The whole thing crashed. It wasn't just me.

But I still owed all that money.

MARY: The phone was ringing off the hook. It got really stressful. That was his first depression that I remember.

KEN: My first significant suicidal depression. That was the biggie.

That's when Mrs. Day came into our lives. I still sometimes think that if there are angels who take human form, she's one of them.

MARY: Betty Day. We often called her B.D. We were selling our things, and she came and bought our Polaroid camera.

AMANDA: Was this when people were bringing Christmas presents for the girls?

KEN: Yes. People took huge pity on us. I got painting work, and we started doing odd jobs again.

Dan wanted me to stay in the business, but psychologically I had lost so much of myself that I couldn't sell my way out of a paper bag. I had to walk away.

When you can't function because you're suicidal, all you can see is this Mount Everest of debt and failure. Dan could bounce back. He was wired that way. I was different.

MARY: He'd had failures before. Dad lost all desire.

We had to sell our mobile home, which we were still making payments on. We sold it to friends who lived next door. They financed the purchase through a bank.

It was hard to visit my girlfriend afterward and see my furniture, my house, everything we had lived in.

AMANDA: Where did you live then?

KEN: Dave Spot was one of our friends in Kampus Kourt. It was such a tight-knit place, like a village.

He owned a shack that had been built around a little travel trailer over the years. He usually rented it, but it was empty. He let us live there for free for months.

MARY: He said we could stay as long as we needed.

AMANDA: Somewhere in there, Grandma and Laura moved back to Minnesota?

MARY: Yes.

AMANDA: Grandma was worried about you and talked to a pastor?

KEN: My former youth pastor, Ken Copley. By then he was senior pastor of Normandale Baptist Church.

He called and gave me the whole Bill Gothard Institute of Basic Life Principles argument: honor your mother. He said I was sinning if I didn't honor my mother and move home, because she was heartsick. She was always my mother, and I always had to do what she said unless she was asking me to sin.

AMANDA: You hadn't had stable work for a while.

KEN: Nothing stable, but I worked every day doing something. I painted for Bill and did odd jobs.

I want to go back to Mrs. Day.

She seemed ageless. She still seems ageless, like a person who has no

age. She never told us whether she was divorced or widowed. She was single, and we didn't know her backstory.

She had an accounting background, did accounting on the side, and worked as a court transcriptionist.

She helped me put my massive pile of bills in order by the size of each bill. Then she worked alongside me. Every day of the week, for weeks, she knocked on our door.

"What are we going to do today? Let's look at our bills."

She'd say, "Here's a bill for seven dollars. Do you have seven dollars? Let's pay that."

I was working again, doing odd jobs. Every time we paid even the tiniest bill, she had us celebrate. The psychology of paying off a bill was fantastic.

MARY: It was the Dave Ramsey snowball.

KEN: She also massaged my back while I lay on the floor. She was a professional masseuse and had worked for an evangelist husband-and-wife team, the Rices. I can't remember his first name. [John R Rice] She knew what she was doing.

She gave us homework. One assignment was to lay my hand on each child's head and pray for that child by name before bedtime. I had to read a page from a devotional book by Hannah Whitall Smith and read a psalm.

Every day she asked, "Did you do it? Did you pray for your kids?"

In the early days, I missed a lot. She would get tears in her eyes, which

made me feel like a jerk because I couldn't do these simple things she asked. She didn't chew me out. She just got tears in her eyes and didn't say anything.

That was pressure, so I started doing those things.

MARY: That first winter, he also worked a night security job. One woman he worked with was very sweet. She said, "My granddaughter has all these toys we're getting rid of. Would you like them for your kids?"

Right before Christmas, he came home with a giant box. We had no money for a tree and no money for presents.

Grandma and Laura had sent matching sweatsuits for the girls—pink, purple, and a dark pinkish red—and plastic instruments. We were thrilled. Then the whole box of toys came the night before Christmas.

The next-door neighbors said, "We went out and got little cedar trees. Would you like one?"

It was a skinny little tree, before skinny trees were in style. It fit in the corner of the living room, which was all the space we had.

Grandma had sent kits for painting wooden ornaments. They were too hard for the kids, so I painted them. I still have those ornaments.

We had a really good Christmas.



AMANDA: Dad, tell us about moving back to Minnesota.

KEN: I finally gave in to what I considered Ken Copley's spiritual blackmail—that God would honor me if we moved back to Minnesota.

We packed everything into an old station wagon, with mattresses tied on top. The load felt four feet tall. That may be too much, but that's how it felt. We had retread tires.

AMANDA: Everything you owned was in that station wagon?

KEN: Everything.

We headed for Minnesota and made it less than halfway before a rear tire blew. The car was so heavily loaded, and the heat and weight were too much for those retreads.

We were so broke that I don't even know how we found enough money for new rear tires, but we did. We made it to Minnesota.

In the summer of 1986, we moved into Mom's house in Plymouth—the house from my childhood. We lived in the unfinished, moldy basement.

MARY: There were mushrooms growing down there.

KEN: Mom lived upstairs, and I started looking for work like crazy.

Work was scarce. It wasn't like a time when everybody was hiring; it was the opposite. It took about a month and three interviews. They told me I was one of more than a hundred applicants they had considered, but I got hired for customer service at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota.

AMANDA: In Minneapolis?

KEN: Eagan, down by the river. It was a thirty-mile drive, and I didn't care.

We had six weeks of training. The work was inbound customer service calls, all about claims.

AMANDA: Was Laura living at home then?

MARY: I think she had gone to Owatonna, back to Pillsbury. I don't remember whether she was still in school or working.

Grandma was working full-time. She got a job as an administrative assistant at an Allstate agency. Because she'd worked for Dan Holmes, she had insurance-office experience.

KEN: Bob Burlett. That was her first Allstate job.

AMANDA: So Grandma wasn't home helping with the grandkids. She was still working.

MARY: Yes. And Dad was asked to lead singing at Normandale Baptist. We felt obliged to go there because Pastor Copley was mentoring him.

AMANDA: Was Grandma going there, too?

MARY: No, she was at Emmaus. She had also gone to Parkers Lake for years.

KEN: Let me finish the job part, and then Mom can fill in the family story.

I worked in customer service for a year and a half and got promoted once. Then a job opened in in-house sales. People would call and say, "I want to buy an insurance policy." We had competitors, so they needed actual salespeople to take those calls.

My background was perfect for it. I applied, went through another three interviews, and got hired into a department with six salespeople. We had a supervisor, a manager over him, and then a senior vice president.

I did that for another four or four and a half years. The pay was two-

thirds salary and one-third commission, with commissions paid quarterly. I loved that job.

However the math adds up, my total time at Blue Cross was six and a half years. I earned a pension that I still receive, a little over two hundred dollars a month. It isn't a 401(k); it's an actual pension.

That was my work during those years. When I left Blue Cross, a whole new part of my life opened up.

MARY: We started out living with Grandma in Plymouth. Then Cheryl and Byron Cox, who were assistant pastoring at our church, offered us space in their basement.

The church had two parsonages, one on either side of the church building. The Coxes weren't using the rooms in their lower level except to do laundry. Since we were working at church and had such a long drive, they said, "Why don't you live down there?"

I don't think they charged us. I think we lived there for free, though I don't remember for sure.

AMANDA: You had three kids. How many did they have?

MARY: I believe two girls. I can't swear to it, but Naomi and Kenneth were about the same age, so I think they only had the two then.

They didn't like Jennifer leaving toys in the yard. If she left them out, I had to be told about it. At one point we also had a crazy dog that ran away, but that's another story.

AMANDA: How long did you stay?

MARY: Five, six, seven months—somewhere in there.

Dad was already leading singing and counseling with Pastor Copley. He helped remodel offices and parts of the parsonages. Pastor Copley taught him things, and Dan Holmes had taught him remodeling skills, too.

He was always at church doing something, on top of his full-time job.

We still had the old station wagon, but it broke down. After that, people gave us about three cars.

Emily was still in a crib and was happy. The girls had friends to play with. But after a while, we felt living so close was affecting our friendship with the Coxes.

They came downstairs to do laundry. They were early risers, and we weren't.

There were a lot of rules in the Bill Gothard world for young parents: what kind of bread to eat, what kind of food, getting up early. We were trying to learn all of it.

AMANDA: Had that been around you at Bob Jones?

MARY: Not at Bob Jones, but we'd heard it at our Baptist church in South Carolina.

Pastor Copley was in a pilot program for the homeschool curriculum. It became a big part of the culture at Normandale. His family was one of the pilot families. Cheryl and Byron's kids were too young for school, but they were taking in some of those ideas.

AMANDA: Is this where the Wisdom Booklets come in?

MARY: Yes. We had books, went to seminars, and Dad led singing.

I liked Bloomington. There were a lot of garage sales. I could put the kids in the stroller and walk around.

But living so close to our friends was hurting the friendship. I asked Dad if we could look for somewhere else to live. In the meantime, we moved back into Grandma's basement.

By then I was pregnant with Kenneth. During the fall, we had decided to quit using birth control and trust God. Pastor Copley preached about that. He and his wife had had a reversal because they wanted more children after years of not having any. Other people were getting reversals, too.

We decided to stop birth control, and I got pregnant right away. I remember it was New Year's Eve, while we were still at the Coxes'.

We moved back to Grandma's sometime that spring. I remember sitting in her recliner, pregnant and miserable with allergies. It was hot, and I felt like I was dying from the allergies.

Grandma would come home tired from work. The house hadn't been remodeled yet, and we were living in a very small space. It was tight.

I asked again, "Could we please look for a place?"



MARY: Dad was working at Blue Cross, and financially we were making it because we lived with other people. He had a decent salary, and people gave us cars. But we still had all those bills hanging over us.

KEN: While we were at the Coxes', we had started a repayment plan with the creditors. They accepted thirty cents on the dollar, but we still had to pay it.

MARY: We'd been avoiding them and changing our phone number. We

knew we needed to pay them, but I also wanted a home of our own. We'd spent about a year living with other people.

One day I got out the newspaper and said, "Ken, I found a house in St. Louis Park. It's four hundred twenty-five dollars a month."

It said three bedrooms. The rent was way below market.

He said, "No way. They're not going to let us move in with four kids."

We had three and one on the way.

I said, "Can we at least go look?"

We met this nice Christian couple. We were surprised because we hardly knew any Christians outside our church. We told them we were expecting a baby and would really like a place of our own.

They said twenty or twenty-five people had already looked at it.

It wasn't a fancy house, just a two-story house in St. Louis Park. We said, "This would be perfect for us. We'd like it."

I think they called the next day and said, "We've decided to rent to you."

That was a miracle. God gave us a miracle. They could have picked anybody. The previous family was a mother, father, and one child, and they let us move in with our whole family.

KEN: The house stood in front of a big apartment complex. The city wouldn't let the owner sell it or bulldoze it, so he had to rent it. He kept the rent low so he could choose a good tenant.

MARY: Mr. Rubel owned it, and his mother lived in the apartments behind us.

We moved in during the summer, I believe. Kenneth wasn't born until October.

AMANDA: So this was 1987, about a year after you moved to Minnesota.

MARY: Yes. We were paying off creditors, making friends in the neighborhood, going to Normandale, and Dad was still at Blue Cross.

KEN: Our next-door neighbors were a lesbian couple—the first gay people I'd ever known.

AMANDA: Was Kenneth born in the hospital?

MARY: Yes. Dad had really good Blue Cross insurance, and we found out we could use midwives. I had said I wasn't having a man doctor deliver again after Emily's birth.

When they laughed at me in labor, I thought, "Midwives would not make a joke while I'm giving birth." I was so angry.

The hospital was still Catholic then. It was called St. Mary's. We didn't see nuns or anything. I went to a clinic in Minneapolis for my appointments with the midwives.

AMANDA: Did you know it was a boy?

MARY: No. We didn't have ultrasounds with our pregnancies then. We really wanted a boy, and I had a feeling it might be one, but we kept saying, "It's going to be another girl."

It was during the Twins playoffs. I think we borrowed a television at home, and we were excited about it.

KEN: There was a television in the birthing room. The game was on

while Kenneth was being born. Juan Berenguer was pitching relief, throwing what I remember as hundred-mile-an-hour pitches.

MARY: I don't think it was that fast.

KEN: He topped a hundred. Nobody could throw that fast back then. He was a big old guy.

MARY: We had the ideal situation: a hospital birth in a birthing room.

KEN: And a ball game.

MARY: It was like having our own bedroom, with a double bed. Grandma had the girls.

Kenneth was a little late. He weighed eight pounds, seven ounces, a little smaller than Emily. I had a tiny tear and got one stitch—the only stitch I ever had with any of my babies.

AMANDA: Better than the experience with the male doctors?

MARY: Oh yes. We really liked the midwives. They were nice, and insurance covered it.

By your fourth child, do you really want to deal with everything you have to prepare for a home birth? We didn't, though some of our church friends were still having babies at home.

He was the adored little baby boy. Oh my goodness. Our church gave us a baby shower, and so did the neighbors.

Jennifer was about seven. All three girls were old enough to mother him, and they started right away. He was our roly-poly Michelin man.

I had met a group of neighbor ladies. Some were Evangelical Free and

some were Lutheran. At the time, we were such independent fundamentalist Baptists that we hardly knew what to make of that. But they said they were Christians, they were nice, and they included me.

I babysat their kids, and every month we went out for somebody's birthday. The kids played up and down the street. It was really fun.



MARY: We had started homeschooling while we were living in Bloomington, and that was a big deal. Grandma was upset because she'd put money down for Jennifer to attend a Christian school.

Back in South Carolina, when Jennifer was four and turning five that fall, we'd put her in a Christian preschool. We thought she was smart enough for kindergarten, but they said she wasn't old enough yet.

They were strict. After a couple of weeks, she came home bouncing off the walls. It wasn't working, and we couldn't afford it anymore, so we took her out.

Then, during our first winter at the Coxes', Grandma put money down at another Christian school. Maybe it was Fourth Baptist, when it was still in Minneapolis. We hadn't even visited, but Grandma paid in advance because she wanted Jennifer in school. Jennifer was turning six and hadn't started.

Meanwhile, we were in this church where it was homeschool, homeschool, homeschool.

KEN: Tell Amanda what they called public schools.

MARY: "Satan school."

AMANDA: They just casually called it that?

MARY: Yes.

Before we moved into our own house, before Kenneth was born, we started homeschooling Jennifer.

AMANDA: Using the Wisdom Booklets?

MARY: No, we got Abeka workbooks.

KEN: Even then, I thought the Gothard people were a little nutso. I remember telling Mary that.

MARY: I asked whether he wanted to join their homeschool program, and he said, "No. We're going to do our own thing."

He wasn't a bandwagon person. He said, "I'm not jumping on just because all our friends are."

I think Jennifer skipped kindergarten and went straight into first grade because she was already six and smart.

Jessica didn't want to start school when she turned five, so we waited until she was six. I don't remember all the grades and dates exactly.

Then I had the baby, two little kids doing school, and Emily upstairs. I wouldn't hear a peep out of her.

One day I went up, and she had opened her toy lipstick and was drawing on the window screens in a house we didn't even own. Happy as a clam.

I said, "Emily, when I'm teaching, you have to behave. You can't do this."

She said, "I'm bored."

Finally I told Ken, "She's smart. I'm just going to teach her to read along with Jessica."

She was four. She picked up reading, math, everything, ahead of Jessica, which made Jessica feel bad. Jessica was a little behind academically, and Emily was advanced.

Now I was teaching three kids, had a baby, and was doing everything. What's the word you use for Catherine and her friends—crunchy? I went to the co-op, ground my own wheat, and made my own bread.

AMANDA: Meanwhile, Dad was working and volunteering at church.

KEN: For seven years, I worked only forty hours a week.

MARY: But he had a long commute.

MARY: We were at church Sunday morning, Sunday night, and every Wednesday night. That was our routine. Dad led singing. We were independent Baptists, in the homeschool world, all in.

AMANDA: Was it considered IBLP?

MARY: We didn't use that term, but yes. I wore dresses. The girls wore dresses. We had long hair. We were in that.

Then one day, on the way home from church, Dad had something to tell me.

KEN: My brain exploded in Sunday school. I couldn't wait to get home and tell her.

Keep in mind, nothing had ever been said about this before. I said, "We're going to buy the house my mom rents. We'll rent her some space in it until she finds another place. We're going to own that house."

It belonged to Jon LeVasseur, who had employed me doing tree-stump work when I was eighteen and nineteen. It was perfect, with that beautiful wooded lot. It's the Plymouth house all you kids remember as home.

We didn't have money, which was why we couldn't buy a house. But Jon had money. He was investing it.

I said, "Why don't I approach him about a contract for deed?"

And it worked.

MARY: We were expecting number five.

AMANDA: Melissa was born after you moved. This is the house at 12305 24th Avenue North in Plymouth?

KEN: Correct, on the corner. The lot was about a third of an acre.

AMANDA: It seemed so much bigger.

KEN: A chunk of what felt like our yard was county land or a city easement. Looking at it, it felt like half an acre.

Jon wanted a whole month to think about it. I never wavered. I knew he was going to say yes, and he did.

He took almost nothing for a down payment—two thousand dollars.

MARY: I don't remember where we got that. It was a lot of money for us.

KEN: Jon was a good man. He had liked me as an employee. He said, "I'm not doing you a favor. My money is sitting somewhere earning interest. I might as well earn it with you."

MARY: The price was about fifty-nine or sixty thousand dollars, as I remember.

AMANDA: Were the woods part of the property?

KEN: Yes, though some of what looked like our lot was the easement.

Years before, somebody had lived in a mobile home on the lower part where the woods were. The house itself had been a summer cottage. Mom had rented it for a long time.

Jon had lived there when his kids were born, too. By the time we bought it, it was an investment for him.

AMANDA: When you had lived there before, the basement was unfinished. Did you finish it after buying the house?

MARY: Yes. Grandma moved downstairs, and we took the upstairs.

Our church came to help. We moved the basement bedroom wall so Grandma could have a bigger living area and a smaller bedroom. The bedroom had been Laura's for years.

AMANDA: In my memory, that space later became two little bedrooms with a thin wall between them.

MARY: Before that, it was Grandma's living space, open into her kitchen area. She had her own entrance downstairs.

KEN: There had never been a kitchen or bathroom down there. We put all of that in.

I did almost all the work. John, Bob Moengen's son, was a plumber. He did some plumbing, especially the venting, because you have to get that right.

MARY: The church helped us move the bedroom wall. We wallpapered, put in a sink, and Grandma got a stove and refrigerator.

KEN: Originally, the house was a one-bedroom ranch.

AMANDA: Upstairs, you moved into the same bedroom you had when I was growing up?

MARY: Yes.

AMANDA: Where did the four children—and soon five—sleep?

MARY: In the dining room.

There were louvered accordion doors that went across the opening. They had mostly been left open before. We used those at first. Later we put up the thin wall you remember.

KEN: The dining room became the bedroom for all four. When Melissa was born, we had five children sleeping in the dining room.

Let that sink into the record.

AMANDA: Later, when you put the wall up again, it was me, Catherine, and Melissa. I remember the size because it was where the floor changed to carpet. You still had the shag carpet then.

MARY: That carpet had been there when Jon LeVasseur lived in the house.

AMANDA: You had the kitchen that was basically a hallway, the hallway to your bathroom and bedroom, then the living room and dining room. Where did you eat?

MARY: In the living room. We put a small table there, that narrow

table with the bench. When the kids were little, they could also sit at the counter or in a high chair in the kitchen.

AMANDA: There wasn't much room. It was a hallway of a kitchen.

MARY: We made it work.

KEN: We made it work.

MARY: Before any of that construction, we moved in as soon as Jon said we could. At first we were living with Grandma again, sharing one kitchen and one bathroom. She had to come upstairs for everything until the downstairs was finished.

AMANDA: Was the garage there? And the flat concrete roof over it, with the fence around it?

MARY: Yes. We put wading pools up there for the kids. Grandma had the garage.

We moved in May, and Melissa wasn't born until October, so we had that summer to work on the house. We were doing construction, and we had flooding in the basement, too.

AMANDA: So now you're in the Plymouth house, expecting Melissa. That's where we'll pick up the story.



Making Room for One More



Ken, Mary & Amanda in conversation

MARY: We were doing all these projects in the house. Grandma was living there with us, and we had flooding problems in the basement. We were told we needed drain tile and an egress window because the bedroom downstairs wasn't legal.

Now we were homeowners. People from our church came over and helped us. We dug out the egress window and put in drain tile on the east side of the house, where the front door was. We had to dig a trench along that entire side.

KEN: The house was twenty-four feet long, and I had to go an extra four feet out, so I dug a twenty-eight-foot trench that went down eight feet to put the drain tile in. We put four-by-fours along the side so I didn't have a cave-in and get killed.

MARY: The egress window was for Grandma's bedroom at the bottom of the stairs. It took a whole summer to dig that trench and put it in. Our church helped us with some of that work, while I was pregnant with Melissa.

KEN: I did most of the digging.

AMANDA: Was Grandma all the way moved into the basement, and was all this done by the time Melissa was born in October?

MARY: Yes, pretty much. We always had projects.

Then we made a little storage room in the back of the garage. The garage was really long, so she could still park in the front. I think we tried to have somebody sleep back there, but they didn't like it because there weren't any windows.

AMANDA: Is that the room you'd get to from the laundry room? That was originally part of the garage?

MARY: Yes.

AMANDA: Just to paint the picture, you'd go down the stairs in the house—we had indoor-outdoor carpet—and turn right into the laundry room, which also housed the water heater. If you curled farther back, I remember a storage room. I knew somebody had slept in it at one point, but you're telling me that room was originally part of the garage. Did it have a door from the utility room?

KEN: It wasn't connected originally. I took a sledgehammer and broke through.

The garage was exceptionally long. The house was a square at its footprint, not counting the garage: twenty-four by twenty-four. Since the garage was attached, it was twenty-four feet long too. You don't need twenty-four feet to park your car. I figured, "Let's steal six or seven of these feet." We put up studs and sheetrock to separate the garage from the room in back.

AMANDA: And you just sledgehammered it open.

KEN: Yes. Jon LeVasseur's dad had a business in that garage. He made some kind of wooden—I don't remember. He had a shop back there.

MARY: Later, of course, we made two new bedrooms in the garage. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

One of the very first things we did, while I think I was still pregnant, was buy pull-down stairs to get to the attic. Before that, there was just a square hole.

KEN: There was no flooring. Jon LeVasseur had blown rock wool up there. It was all insulation, so I took a bunch of it out.

MARY: We bought the stairs and put flooring down. We'd climb up on this folding ladder that we put in together. We did all this together. We went to Menards—we were always at Menards. When you own a home!

AMANDA: Did you build the ladder?

MARY: No, you buy one. It came in a box. You hammer it up, pull it down, and it was great.

We thought, "Oh, it would be so nice if we could make bedrooms up here." But we couldn't even stand up.

AMANDA: I'd go hang out up there sometimes, but it wasn't a livable space.

MARY: We went up with black trash bags. I think I was still pregnant with Melissa. At night, when the kids were sleeping, we'd shovel that rock wool insulation into the bags. It was nasty. We'd be hot, and it would stick to our bodies while we were trying to get it bagged up. We wanted to get it level so we could put particleboard down and store our bins.

Mice were getting into the things we stored in the garage. They'd chew right through our bins and boxes. We had all these kids—we were on our fifth—and the house was small. In the winter, we stored the summer clothes up there.

AMANDA: That continued right up until we moved.

MARY: That was our life. Dad was working—how many miles from work now?

KEN: Thirty. It was thirty miles easily.

MARY: In the winter it was a long drive, so he was gone a long day. I was homeschooling, expecting number five, and Grandma was living in our basement.

KEN: I was getting crap from my coworkers about overpopulating the planet.

MARY: Because we were on our fifth kid now.



MARY: We changed insurance that year and decided to go with a cheaper plan that said we had to deliver at North Memorial. They didn't have midwives there in 1989. We weren't very good at paying attention to that stuff, and we ended up without midwife coverage.

I was going to a GP. She wasn't an OB. Before we moved, I'd been spotting every morning, and they said I needed an ultrasound. I went into Methodist Hospital, and they said, "You have placenta previa. We've got to keep an eye on it."

That day, the spotting quit. That was the last time I had it, but they still started doing ultrasounds regularly.

When we moved to Plymouth, I started doctoring in Plymouth. That doctor was really nice, but she said, "You've got to deliver at North Memorial."

AMANDA: Did you start going to the doctor's office we went to my whole childhood?

MARY: No. This was an office in an old grocery store on the west side of Plymouth—a Country Market or something. North Memorial put a clinic out there, so we started going there.

Then the doctor said, "We might have to do a C-section because your baby's not growing enough."

I said, "I'm huge. I've had four other babies. This is the biggest I've ever been." I ended up gaining thirty pounds with that pregnancy.

AMANDA: Was Melissa the first kid you ever had ultrasounds with?

MARY: Right. Because of the placenta previa, they were doing routine ultrasounds. We knew she was a girl.

The doctor said, "Her legs measure according to date, but the rest of her is measuring behind. We're going to have to keep an eye on it, because if your placenta isn't nourishing the baby, we might have to deliver early."

I was thinking, "Why would you deliver early if she's small?" I was so anti-C-section, anti-intervention, anti-induction. I was still crunchy mama back then.

We were getting ready to have this baby at North Memorial, with no midwives. One night I was standing in the kitchen, talking with

Grandma and Dad, and all of a sudden—ah, I'm wet! It was about ten-thirty at night.

AMANDA: Were you early or late?

MARY: Early. About a week early.

Grandma was living with us, so Dad took me in. The doctor said, "Your water's broken, so you're going to have to come into the hospital." My own doctor wasn't there. She was on vacation or wasn't working.

KEN: It was the middle of October, '89.

MARY: We got there late at night, and there was another woman doctor. Oh my goodness. I had to have an internal monitor. I'd never had any of that. They wouldn't let me walk. I was used to being able to walk during labor, but there it was, "Get in bed." They hooked you up to a monitor, and you were stuck in that bed.

My contractions hadn't even started. Hadn't even started. But my water had broken, and back then that was the protocol.

I'd be lying there, and it was late. We were trying to rest, and all of a sudden the monitor would go off. I'd think, "What the heck?" and a nurse would come running.

MARY: She was really little and really cute. Jessica decided that was her baby.

AMANDA: How old was Jessica?

MARY: Probably seven or eight. She was always carrying Melissa around.

But Grandma wanted Melissa to be her baby. Grandma had her own kitchen by then, and she'd come upstairs after work. Every evening,

while I was trying to make dinner, she'd hear the baby fussing and come steal that little baby. She'd take her downstairs.

Later, she started giving her "little bites," she called them.

AMANDA: How old was Melissa?

MARY: Four months, or—I don't know. At one point Grandma started feeding her little bites because she wanted Melissa to like her. But from day one, she was stealing her and holding her and singing to her. That was her little baby. That's why they had this bond. It started when Melissa was a newborn.

Melissa was a good baby. I don't remember anything too traumatic. We were homeschooling, Dad was working at Blue Cross, and we were still at Normandale. Every time we had a baby, they'd have a baby shower and bring us meals.

I didn't really get out and join homeschool groups. We didn't join the ATIA groups. We were just surviving on our own. It was hard because I felt so alone in my homeschooling. I wanted his help, but he was gone long hours because his job was so far away.

Five kids. And we were involved at church. He was probably a deacon by then. We went to church three times a week—whenever we could. The kids were always sick.

AMANDA: Your oldest still wouldn't have been ten.

MARY: By then we had Laurie Plunkett. Jennifer adopted her.

AMANDA: There are two and a half years between Melissa being born and me being born. Dad was at Blue Cross Blue Shield that whole time. Somewhere when Melissa was younger, the older girls started making

neighborhood friends. That's when Laurie got introduced to our family, and the other kids on the dead-end street.



AMANDA: How old would Melissa have been when Justin came? Just for the timeline.

KEN: It was 1991.

AMANDA: So Melissa was about a year and a half.

MARY: I'd just found out I was pregnant, around the beginning of the year. January, I think.

AMANDA: With me?

MARY: No. That was my miscarriage.

We took a little trip to the Radisson. It was cold, and we wanted a little romantic weekend—just one night. I was sort of nursing Melissa, but she was about done. We left the kids with Grandma. That was nice. We could leave the kids with Grandma when we wanted to, and she was pretty good about it. I remember we went in the hot tub.

Then the Gulf War started. I don't remember the date on the calendar, but I remember we had the TV. We'd been debating having one. Dad said, "We should get a TV for homeschool purposes."

I said, "No, we don't need TV."

"Well, then we could watch videos." Bekka [homeschool curriculum] sent out videos, so we had this TV.

The Gulf War started, and they were bombing Kuwait and Iraq. We were watching it, and I said, "Oh, I don't feel good." I'd just found out I was pregnant. I went into the bathroom and thought, "I think I'm losing the baby."

We were so afraid they would do a D&C and I would have a mistaken abortion. Someone told us there was a Catholic doctor at the Catholic hospital who wouldn't do a D&C. He was an OB, and he said, "You go on bed rest, and we'll check."

So there I was on bed rest, with five kids. People were bringing us meals.

AMANDA: Justin wasn't at your house yet?

MARY: No. I ended up having a miscarriage, and somewhere in there we got Justin. I don't remember the details. My mom was worried about him, so we said, "We could take Justin."

AMANDA: You've mentioned that was a difficult emotional season for you. Melissa was a toddler. Dad, you might have been involved in politics at that point too.

KEN: I was heavily involved in Republican politics for a few years, running a campaign. That was part of why I wasn't home a lot.

AMANDA: How old was Justin when he came?

MARY: Seven.

AMANDA: How long did you have him? Was he still there when I was born?

MARY: Eight months, I remember. No, he wasn't there when you were born.

We felt like we knew what we were doing and could help him. He'd had some suicidal struggles, and he was behind in school.

AMANDA: For the record, Justin is Mom's sister Julie's second boy.

MARY: Yes. We convinced her we could help him. It was all unofficial. We were homeschooling him.

Emily must have been six. Jessica was struggling with math. Emily was struggling with behaviors; she was naughty at times. Jennifer was off doing her own thing. It was a difficult time, and Justin needed a lot of attention. He was always following Dad around.

AMANDA: He was the same age as Jessica. I didn't know much about this. We got Jeremy when he was five. Were there similarities in how they looked or acted?

MARY: No, very different. Justin was very needy and behind in school. We took him off the medications he was on. He stopped wetting the bed. He flourished.

But I was getting overwhelmed, and I didn't understand it.

KEN: My mom lived downstairs. I remember the weather being bad. Justin slept in the living room. We made a wooden box bed for him to sleep on, and our five kids were sleeping in the dining room.

My mom would come home from work in the afternoons with migraines. If you thumped around on the floor, you could hear it down below.

MARY: She'd holler up, "Stop that banging around up there!"

I was trying to make dinner. I was trying to homeschool. The kids were making noise, the weather was bad, and they couldn't play outside. I was losing it.

AMANDA: And you were early pregnant with me.

MARY: I didn't know I was pregnant.

I'd go in my room, shut the door, and just sob. Do you understand? Having been a mom of little kids—just sob. But he was at work. He'd come home, and he didn't know.

Finally, I told him, "I'm crying, and I don't know why. Obviously I'm depressed."

KEN: I remember coming home one of those days, and you were curled up in the fetal position on the bed.

AMANDA: Mom's shaking her head no.

KEN: I remember that.

MARY: Anyway, you decided, "That's it. Justin's got to go. It's too much. My mom's living here, you're homeschooling, and you took in your nephew. It's too much."

He made this decision like it was irreversible. I said, "No, no, no. We can't do that. He needs us. We cannot give him up."

But he called my mom and said, "Justin has to go back."

I found out that week I was pregnant. I said, "This is why I'm crying for no reason. It's my hormones. I'll be okay."

You said, "It's done. He has to go back."

AMANDA: Did you decide at that time that Grandma needed to move out too?

MARY: Yes. It was all kind of in the same time.

KEN: My temperament my whole life was "ready, shoot, aim." Ready, shoot, aim. Protector. Type A. My job was to make sure the whole world was rescued.

I never ruled by committee. I was a dictator. I just was. It should be on the tape. Not for anything for me, but for everybody else.

When I saw your mom struggling, I made that decision. I remember having the hard conversation with my mom: "You need to move out. You need to find another place."

MARY: We had to make room for another baby.

KEN: Right. We had a baby coming. We were maxed out.

Those were the decisions I made, and you live with those decisions. To this day—I'm sixty-five years old—you don't think I think about Justin all the time, living on the street as a drug addict?

MARY: He had to move into a group home when we sent him back. Not right away, but pretty soon.

KEN: We've heard rumors and hints that he may have been molested there. To this day, he's struggled with drugs and homelessness.

MARY: He lives with his dad.

KEN: But he's often been homeless. He hasn't always lived with his dad. He's been out on the street.

You think, "Man, what if we'd just kept him and raised him?"

You make decisions in life, and you hope they're the right ones. But you have to let them go. You have to say, "I did what I thought was right at the time."



AMANDA: Dad, I'm a baby now, and you're finishing up your time at Blue Cross Blue Shield.

KEN: Right. I was well loved at Blue Cross. I was in the marketing department, and part of my responsibility was to work with independent agencies that didn't want to sell individual health coverage. Leads would come to them, but they were larger agencies, and that business was too little for them. We each acted as a liaison with different agencies.

One of the people I worked with was Milt Edgren, the principal at Woodside Financial in Hopkins. He took me to lunch at least three times, trying to hire me to run his entire health insurance division. They did retirement planning, large-scale financial planning, and large life insurance policies. But they got asked for health insurance all the time, by small-business owners and people like that.

He wanted me to come on board and run that, so I finally took him up on the offer.

What I didn't know was that he wasn't the full owner or the only decision-maker. He owned more than fifty percent, but he had junior partners. I got in there, and they had never been behind this. From the get-go, they didn't like it.

AMANDA: But you'd quit Blue Cross Blue Shield.

KEN: I quit. The senior vice president of marketing begged me not to because they had a no-rehire policy, and they had never made an exception to it. Ever.

AMANDA: Overall, you'd enjoyed your time there?

KEN: Oh, I loved Blue Cross. I wanted to make more money, and I was already making good money.

The commute was part of it too. And I'd been turned down twice for a big promotion, which really upset me.

MARY: I remember you had issues with the performance reviews. They always had to give you negative things with the positive, even though you were killing it. They wanted you on and off the phone like that, and you were actually helping people. You got penalized.

KEN: Out of six people, I was always second or third in performance—never worse than third in all those years. I never sold the most policies, but I always sold either the second or third most.

AMANDA: You didn't always fit within their metrics and boxes.

KEN: Right, which I think affected my getting promoted.

MARY: You'd go to colleges and give seminars.

KEN: They'd send me on the road to sell student policies.

MARY: But you didn't make extra money for that, and it hurt your sales because you weren't there competing.

KEN: So I quit and went to work for Milt. I became so depressed. Mom brought up off tape that I was probably almost suicidally depressed. I was doing well, but I was so unwelcome. These men and women were older than me, and they emotionally fractured me.

I finally quit.

Through connections, I went to work for Bob and Dan at an Allstate Insurance Agency on Highway 7 in Minnetonka. I was a producer.

MARY: We also took a nighttime cleaning job, and later a paper route. We were like starvation, working for Bob and Dan.

KEN: I started doing extremely well selling auto and home insurance. They'd give me leads, and I'd develop my own. Pretty soon I hired my own telemarketer, my best friend's wife, Wendy. Her sister had experience too. They'd both telemarketed their way through college.

AMANDA: Was that how you met Ace?

KEN: No, I already knew Ace. He was our neighbor across the street. We met during that horrible October blizzard in '91.

I thought he was a total hippie freak. I didn't want to get to know him.

MARY: He was kind of weird. I liked Wendy.

KEN: We were out shoveling together and pushing cars out of the ditch. We became really, really good friends.

Later, when I was looking for a telemarketer, Ace said, "My wife telemarketed her way through school." I hired her first. Then she said, "You want my sister in here. She's better than me."

Her sister was Jill. She was a single mom, and she figured out how to make a better lead.

I was making good money selling from the leads they were getting me. But Jill said, "I'm really annoyed at how you're doing these leads. I think we should get more information."

She figured out how to get all the information—something like thirty-five questions—to make a lead. I started selling the excess leads to

insurance agents. I'd cherry-pick the very best ones for myself and sell the rest to Bob and Dan's friends.

Jill created this lead that nobody would have thought of.

The state director got wind of it and called me. She said, "I've got a bunch of money for a telemarketing project. I'd like you to run it."

"How much?"

"I'll pay all expenses. How much do you want to get paid to babysit it at night?"

It would be a nighttime gig, from about five to nine. I could keep doing my sales during the day. They had twenty phone lines in the state office.

She said, "Tell me how much you need to run the ads and hire the telemarketers. How much are you going to pay them? You'll need a supervisor on the floor. How much do they need to get paid? And how much do you need to get paid? Put the whole thing together, give me a proposal, and run it."

So I did. It ran for three months.

AMANDA: And that was all under Allstate?

KEN: Allstate paid for everything. It wasn't my business.

MARY: When Catherine was born, I was helping you at Bob Burlett's office. I was doing Excel spreadsheets, and I didn't even know what I was doing. They had just moved. I remember bringing Catherine into the office after she was born.

KEN: I was good at sales. I was making good money.

The telemarketing project went for three months, and I knew that was all it would be. I think my cut was $1,500 a month. They paid all the expenses, and I was there five nights a week, four weeks a month, for $1,500.

The leads were so popular that by the time it finished, we were calling for over a hundred insurance agents.

Stacey Powell—that was her name. I'm glad I remembered it. Stacey came to me and said, "Now all these agents want us to keep going. We're not going to keep it going, but you could sell to them. I've got twenty agents who want you to keep going right now."

That was the birth of my telemarketing business.



MARY: Before I got pregnant with you, Amanda, Dad had been recovering from surgery. I don't remember whether it was the cyst in his neck or the other surgery. Right after that, I ended up pregnant, and I was still homeschooling.

AMANDA: You were still at Blue Cross Blue Shield until after I was born.

MARY: Yes. Those years are kind of a blur.

I remember we had the boat that summer before you were born. It was your grandpa's sailboat.

KEN: A sixteen-foot day sailer.

AMANDA: The one there was a painting of?

KEN: Yes, but the painting got lost in one of our moves.

AMANDA: I was born in April, and you were still going to Normandale.

MARY: We went back to the midwives we'd had when I had Kenneth. By then the place had a different name—Fairview something—but it was still in downtown Minneapolis. We had different midwives, but they were from the same group, certified nurse-midwives.

AMANDA: Did you know I was a girl? Did you have ultrasounds with me?

MARY: No.

AMANDA: Was I late or early?

MARY: You were supposed to be born around the week your cousin Eric was born, about March twenty-fourth. I think he was born on your due date. They were still in Illinois, but you and Eric were really close in age.

You were late.

AMANDA: And I was over nine pounds?

MARY: Nine pounds, five ounces. You were a big baby. But the midwives kept saying, "You measure according to date."

I'd go down to Hopkins, where the midwives' clinic was, and drag all these little kids along. It was hard. Grandma had moved out, and the kids had moved downstairs. We were just surviving. Those years are kind of a blur.

AMANDA: Years later, when we were still in the Plymouth house, I was digging through the basement and found a time capsule in a plastic tube. You could put mementos in it, and the inside was wrapped in papers you were supposed to fill out about the baby.

I opened it, and all these baby shower cards came out. There was a little invitation or booklet from the shower Normandale had for you when you were pregnant with me. I knew, "Oh, this is my baby time tube."

MARY: Somebody thought we needed that.

AMANDA: But on the stack of papers, not even my name was filled out. I said, "Mom, what the heck?"

I remember you told me, "Well, you were a tax-season baby. We were busy." That was the line I got. I didn't know until years later what a blur that season of life had been.

But the one story that's always been told about baby Amanda is that you thought something was wrong with me.

MARY: Oh my gosh, yes.

I don't remember exactly when I went into labor.

AMANDA: I was born at about eight-thirty in the morning.

KEN: We woke up at three in the morning.

MARY: I remember thinking around three, "We'd better go to the hospital." Grandma must have come over. We went to the hospital in Minneapolis.

I don't remember which midwives we had with you, but they were nice. Everything was going as planned. They were saying, "Push, push, push," and then she said, "Wait. Cord. Cord."

AMANDA: It was around my neck?

MARY: Yes. It was stuck around your neck, and you had big shoulders. Your shoulders were a little stuck, so she had to cut the cord.

AMANDA: And my face was blue. Dad, did you see it?

KEN: Yes.

MARY: You had the biggest shoulders—you and Kenneth. Kenneth made me tear a little, but with you, your shoulders were stuck and the cord was around your neck.

Then, as you were being born, the water broke, and you gulped in the amniotic fluid.

KEN: All I know is, I'm watching it. You're blue. You're gagging. You don't look good. You look half dead. They're rushing you over to this little bassinet with very worried faces and getting oxygen on you.

MARY: I was so tired, I was just lying there. I didn't even think a thing.

AMANDA: By baby number six, would you consider this your first really traumatic birth for the baby? I know the first birth was traumatic for Mom.

KEN: Oh, yes. I'd seen every other birth, so I had a point of comparison. I thought, "Oh my God, my kid's going to die." I did. I thought you were going to.

MARY: You weren't crying. You'd inhaled amniotic fluid as you were coming through the birth canal. I was sure glad afterward that we'd had you in a hospital.

KEN: They were saying, "Get out the suction," and working on you. They were all worried.

MARY: I think you swallowed some meconium too. They didn't want to take time to explain anything.

Then we heard you cry, and we were like, "Oh."

KEN: But you were the only kid who lived in this slumberland for three months. We had other kids to compare you to, and you didn't engage with the world. I was sure you'd suffered brain damage.

MARY: You were happy. You slept, and you were smiley. Jessica decided you were her baby, and she carried you around.

AMANDA: You didn't talk to each other about being concerned?

KEN: I was concerned. I don't know if she was.

MARY: I was too busy to think about it.

KEN: Then it felt like one day you just snapped awake. You woke up and started engaging.

MARY: I used to take pictures of you lying on the bed. I remember you wearing yellow.

KEN: I don't know whether the birth delayed your deciding to engage with the world, but you obviously didn't suffer brain damage. You're a CPA!

MARY: It wasn't your typical personality. You were not a calm person later. Maybe it was just a blessing that you were a good baby.

AMANDA: By then the kids were downstairs because Grandma was out. Was I in the room with you? Was anybody still sleeping in the dining room?

MARY: Nobody was in the dining room anymore. We were using it now. The five older kids were downstairs.

We had a square playpen right in front of the fireplace, and that's where you slept. It wasn't the same one Melissa had; hers was smaller.

KEN: I used to sing to her. She was probably the one I sang to most. When I'd come downstairs to settle her at night, she responded to singing more than the other kids, so I sang more to her. Her pitch was just perfect, at a really young age. It was something.

AMANDA: That's special.

MARY: We had piano lessons. We had homeschool.

AMANDA: While I lived in the living room.

MARY: We had babies sleeping in the living room. We had various pools outside, and we'd walk down to the lake.

KEN: We were still living like third-world-nation people. We went to Mexico on a mission trip, and you'd go into these two-room houses with metal roofs, with six or seven people living in them. We didn't live much differently—all these people packed into a house with a twenty-four-by-twenty-four-foot footprint.



MARY: Somewhere in there, while we were working for Bob and Dan—Dan Smith and Bob Burlett—we really were starving. They'd give us little things: tickets to something, or they'd buy us food or take us out to eat. But we were broke.

KEN: I was feeding all these kids off a sales producer's job, and they were keeping half the commissions.

MARY: At one point, he was literally cold-calling out of the phone book. I remember that.

AMANDA: When did you find out you were pregnant with Catherine?

MARY: That fall, and she was born in June.

I had a miserable pregnancy. I was depressed and eating, eating, eating. I gained fifty pounds. I was old and tired—or I felt old and tired. I was about to turn thirty-five.

I found a midwife clinic that would take poor people because we didn't have the Blue Cross insurance anymore.

AMANDA: And you were still homeschooling everybody.

MARY: Yes.

AMANDA: Was she late or early?

MARY: Definitely late. Biggest baby. I don't remember her due date.

I was seeing midwives through the county. One woman had been a missionary midwife in Africa. She didn't go by dates. She'd say, "Moms know. Moms know."

At one point somebody told me, "The baby's probably about eight pounds."

I looked at them and said, "I've had an eight-pound baby. This is not an eight-pound baby." I was huge.

That midwife would say, "Moms know." She wasn't the only one we saw; we saw different midwives. But I remember thinking, "Yes, see? Moms know." You don't always measure right. None of mine measured right.

I think I went into labor in the middle of the night. Your grandma came over, and we drove downtown to Hennepin County to deliver. We'd never been there before. I don't remember what we had for insurance. We probably didn't have any.

AMANDA: You went into labor naturally?

MARY: Yes. She was born very early in the morning. I don't even remember the time—six or seven, something like that. It was my seventh kid.

The birth was very uneventful. The midwives weren't my regular ones; they were whoever was on call. I didn't have that nice older missionary lady, but they were nice.

I don't remember any trauma or anything being hard. It was a big old push, and here came this baby. They said, "Whoa. Look at the thighs on that kid. This one's a whopper."

Do you remember that, Dad?

KEN: Yes.

MARY: I thought, "It didn't feel that bad." It was very smooth. Your birth had been more traumatic, Amanda. Melissa's was more traumatic because the labor was so slow and poky after my water broke early. But this time I felt pretty good.

They said, "What does this kid weigh?" They put her on the scale.

"Ten pounds, seven and a half ounces."

We said, "What?"

Then they said, “We don’t even think we have pajamas that will fit this baby. We’re going to have to go to the toddler section and find an outfit.”

They kept saying, “Look at the thighs on this kid.” She didn’t have big shoulders or a big head, so it wasn’t a hard birth. Her thighs were her big, chunky area. You look at her now, and she doesn’t have big thighs, but she had a lot of fat on her then. She was a large baby.

Dad had to go home to help take care of the other kids. Grandma wasn’t living with us anymore.

He asked, “Do you want to pay for the TV?” TV was extra.

I said, “Nah, I don’t need a TV.”

Then sometime during the day, I decided I wanted it. He said, “Go ahead and tell them. We’ll pay the extra.”

I watched the whole O.J. Simpson chase.

AMANDA: The white Bronco on the California freeway. You flipped on the TV, and that was what was on?

MARY: That was what was on. I was in the hospital alone, glued to the TV.

AMANDA: I love having these historical moments.

MARY: I watched the whole thing, with them chasing the white Bronco.

AMANDA: That was June seventeenth, 1994.

MARY: I stayed as long as they let me stay. I had to come home to six kids, with the seventh baby.

Our church brought us meals. I remember that.

AMANDA: What was Catherine like as a baby?

MARY: We didn't have a bedroom for her. We were still in that little house.

AMANDA: But you kicked me down to the basement.

MARY: Oh, yes. You were a big kid. You were two, you had a mind of your own, and you couldn't be left alone because you were trouble.

Dad said, "Let's just let her sleep in our bed."

AMANDA: Catherine got to sleep in your bed?

MARY: That's what we decided. While I was in the hospital, he'd gone out and bought a bassinet. We'd never had one. He bought this crappy wicker bassinet for forty bucks. He bought a brand-new high chair too, though I don't remember whether that was then or later.

I said, "Why are you buying a bassinet for this ten-and-a-half-pound baby? Are we really going to need that?"

He said, "Because I feel like it. We need somewhere for this baby to sleep. We'll put it in the hallway."

But first she slept in bed with us. Catherine was a nuzzler. Nuzzle, nuzzle, nuzzle. I'd be trying to sleep, and she'd be nuzzling me all night long.

I'd say, "Ugh, push her over there." Nuzzle, nuzzle, nuzzle.

Finally I said, "I can't sleep with this baby."

He said, "Okay, we'll put her in the bassinet, crank up the music, and let her cry. She'll go to sleep eventually."

That's what we did. She slept in the hallway with the little musical mobile going around. That was her bedroom, in the hallway.

Of course, Jessica decided Catherine was her baby, so she took over. Pretty much through Catherine's whole childhood, I think she thought Jessica was her mom. I was there to feed her. I nursed her, and she was a fine nurser.

AMANDA: Shortly afterward, you started doing the paper route in the middle of the night, and Jessica gave her bottles.

MARY: Yes. Catherine would sleep through the night, but I had to change that so I could nurse her before we went out. Then I'd leave a bottle.

She was a very adaptable baby, but she was sober. Picture Amy—a sober little child. She was never left alone. Somebody was always holding her or carrying her around.

You, Amanda, were Miss Independent. Getting into trouble.

AMANDA: That was around the time I ate vitamins, called 911, and broke my collarbone.



MARY: That Christmas, we were doing the paper route. Catherine had a pretty red dress, and we were going to Aunt Laura's for Christmas Eve.

We had to prepare the papers the day before. The paper route was brutal at Christmas. I don't remember whether it was Christmas Eve or the day before, but I remember Dad saying, "You kids stay in the house. Do not go outside while we're working."

The older kids were in charge of the baby.

AMANDA: How old was Jennifer?

MARY: Fourteen. It was '94, so she'd just turned fourteen.

KEN: We were stuffing papers. In the afternoon, you'd pre-stuff the fat sections so they'd be ready when you picked up the rest around four in the morning.

MARY: We got home and heard, "Something's wrong with Amanda. She's crying. She got hurt."

We said, "What happened?"

"Well, we were sledding."

You'd been on a sled with Jerusha, and you went over a bump back in the woods. The kids had made a little trail themselves, and it wasn't smooth.

Mrs. Moengen would call us up crying if you kids went sledding out in the street.

AMANDA: I think I was sitting between Jerusha and Jessica.

MARY: You were about two and a half. You bounced up in the air, fell, and got hurt. You were not happy.

AMANDA: I didn't know that was on Christmas Eve.

MARY: We were going to Laura's townhouse that night. Grandma may have been living with her; I don't remember. We said, "We've got to find out whether she's okay."

Dad took you to urgent care. I don't think I went.

KEN: I took you. What I remember them saying was, "She's not crying. She's probably fine."

Days later, I took you back because you were crying. They X-rayed it. That sucker was broken. There was a gap between the bones—at least half an inch.

MARY: Because you were so upset, we let you have your present early.

AMANDA: My little angel.

MARY: An angel doll that played "This Little Light of Mine." There are pictures of it. You don't remember it yourself.

AMANDA: No, it's all from being told and seeing the pictures.

You couldn't put a cast on a broken collarbone. I was two and a half, and there are pictures of me on the couch. Your job was to keep me on the couch to heal.

I'll tell you, that collarbone didn't heal correctly. I can make it pop in and out.

MARY: The pictures are of you with that little angel doll and baby Catherine. I remember Catherine lying on the couch next to you, though maybe that was a separate time.

You were also trying to potty train. You'd pull yourself up onto the toilet with that broken collarbone, and I'd say, "No! You can't do that. You have a broken collarbone."

It was so hard. We tried tying a scarf into a sling. We tried a bandana. Nothing worked.

MARY: When Catherine was still in a stroller—she might have just turned one—school was going to start, and Dad said, "I need you to help me work in the business."

Jessica was going into sixth grade. Melissa was going into first. They said Emily had to go into fifth, even though she'd already done fifth grade. Jennifer was going into ninth.

We put the kids in school.

AMANDA: Was that the first time?

MARY: Yes. We did it twice, but that was the first time. Jennifer was in ninth grade, and the younger ones were at Birchview.

I remember visiting the school with Catherine in the stroller. Mr. Libby was the principal. Jessica was sobbing her eyes out. She didn't want to go.

We'd already started homeschooling that year, and then Dad said, "No, I need your help." By then, I think you were going to Iowa.

KEN: Yes.

MARY: Jennifer had a hard time in ninth grade. She got bullied and asked, "Can I homeschool?"

We said, "You still have to go for math and science, because Mom cannot do math and science." We did reading, literature, and social studies at home, and drove her back and forth for math and science.

She started making friends. She made friends with Michelle and

decided she liked school. But then she begged to homeschool again, so we did that for her tenth-grade year.

It wasn't good. I was traveling back and forth to Iowa with Dad, and we were leaving the kids home with Jennifer. She was fifteen by then. We weren't in church regularly.

AMANDA: I was doing preschool on our home computer with Freddy the Fish. I remember that.

KEN: In the middle of all this, I started a telemarketing company. There's a hard date on that: August 1995 was the beginning, and the ending was the last day of October 1998. Those were the telemarketing years of KCH Marketing.

After the business failed, we took in Jeremy.

MARY: By then we'd left Normandale. We followed the Hartzells to Parkers Lake and were there a couple of years. I was like a single mom at church. They all felt sorry for me, but we weren't going to join.

Then they said I couldn't work in Awanas anymore, and the Sunday school class had to be for members. Dad didn't like the preaching anymore, so we were kind of churchless.

We visited the Brethren church one summer, on a Sunday night. Dad said Jennifer could go swimming with the youth group. She was excited to meet new kids.

Not one kid talked to her. She was fifteen or sixteen—I don't remember the year exactly. Not one kid talked to her. I said, "That's it. We're not going back to this church."

One day we were walking down Medicine Lake Drive, and I said, "There's a new church they've built. We should go visit."

We started going to Fourth Baptist, and that's where we met the Bonnevilles.



AMANDA: How did Jeremy come to live with us?

MARY: Around Christmas, when Jeremy was four, my mom called me, all upset. She said, "I can't do this anymore. I'm about seventy years old. I've been raising two of Julie's kids. I can't raise another kid."

Jeremy was already in preschool and would be starting school in the fall. Mom kept saying, "I can't do this."

They were going to put him in foster care. His dad, Tony, had hit him when he was four, and Jeremy went to the hospital for observation. That night Tony was so upset that he set Julie's bed—a bunk bed—on fire. He went to jail.

Jeremy was fine after being observed at the hospital, but my mom said, "I can't do it anymore. You have to take Julie's kid."

KEN: As I remember it, there was a date on the calendar, before school started, when they were going to place Jeremy in foster care.

MARY: She said we had to take him by the time school started, around the end of August.

I'd met him only once, when he was three, at my aunt's funeral. He didn't know me. He didn't know any of us.

AMANDA: He would have needed to be five to start kindergarten.

MARY: He'd just turned five in June.

AMANDA: So it was 1999 when you actually got him.

MARY: Yes.

AMANDA: Did you go get him, or did they bring him up? I feel like I remember you showing up with him.

MARY: They brought him on a train.

It was very traumatic. They dropped him off and had to leave. The poor kid didn't know us, and it was very hard.

I was terrible. I thought I had to assert myself early with him, so I didn't handle things well.

AMANDA: Jeremy coming into our house is one of my clearest early childhood memories. I would have been seven.

Jeremy couldn't speak in full sentences. When he did speak, you couldn't understand him. He couldn't dress himself, and he was five years old. He wouldn't eat.

I became his interpreter. When he got upset, which was frequently, he'd melt into a puddle on the floor like he had no bones.

Dad, you were working for Dan and Tammy, I believe.

KEN: Yes.

MARY: We'd just gotten back from a Mexico trip. We had no real income. They paid him an hourly wage, but—

KEN: Let me throw this number in there. We took Jeremy in after my business failed, when on paper I was $400,000 in debt and had no regular job. That's how we took him in.

AMANDA: You took him right before the school year started, so he began kindergarten at Birchview with Catherine.

MARY: Yes. We thought he'd like kindergarten because he'd already done preschool. We didn't realize how far behind he was.

AMANDA: The special education team gathered around Jeremy and made all the difference in his life.

MARY: But it wasn't really until first grade that we started getting that help. It took us a whole year to come around because we didn't trust the system at first.

AMANDA: You were still brand-new to it. How long did it take to get official legal guardianship?

MARY: Months. His dad refused to let us adopt him. His mom would have let us, but his dad wouldn't. That's why we never adopted.

AMANDA: And you were trying to communicate with his dad while he was in jail.

MARY: Yes.

AMANDA: So now it's 1999, and Jeremy is part of the family. The telemarketing business had started, happened, and collapsed before he came.

KEN: '95 to '98.

AMANDA: That feels like a big chapter endpoint for our family. Now all eight kids had entered the family.

KEN: Now we had all eight kids. And by that time Laurie Plunkett, our neighbor down the street, had become part of the family and often spent the night at our house.

MARY: And Kate.

AMANDA: Was there an overlap when Jennifer still lived at home after Jeremy moved in?

MARY: A very short one. A few months. I think she moved out at the end of '99.

AMANDA: That's where we start stepping into the next chapter—being a family, and the kids growing up.



We Widen Our Hearts



Ken & Mary in conversation

KEN: Mary, why don't you backpedal to before Jeremy came to live with us? Tell us about the Mexico missions trip.

MARY: Our youth group at Fourth Baptist Church was planning to go to Mexico on a missionary trip. Emily was fifteen at the time, and she had signed up to go, but some of the chaperones fell through.

Ken was working for Dan and Tammy, and he wasn't working very much at the time. He may have been between jobs; I don't remember. The church approached us and said, "Would you two be willing to chaperone this trip along with other adults?"

We'd never been to Mexico, and we were interested in the Mexico mission, so that sounded kind of neat. But we said, "We can't afford any of the fees."

They said, "We'll cover all your fees, and we'll even give you a gift because you won't be working your job."

So we said, "Okay, but we've got to figure out what to do with the kids."

Jennifer had her own apartment by then, but she could help out. Ken's mom could help, too. Even though she was still working, she could spend the evenings there. Then we found out that Emily's friend Kate would come during the day and help with the kids. Jeremy Casper—Jer, Dan's best friend—had been working on rewiring our house.

We had a bunch of people. It was a good village to watch our kids while we went to Mexico.

We loaded up in these two big, oversized white vans and drove down to Mexico with all these teenagers. It was a pretty exciting trip, sleeping outdoors and camping along the way. The big thing was that we had to keep these kids alive and safe.

Some of them got hurt and had to be carried through the water to get into the boats that took us out to the islands. You couldn't get your feet in the water if you had cuts and things like that. We got stuck in the sand before we got to the islands, and the guys had to dig out the van tires.

We also got boarded by armed guards. We'd been told, "If that happens, they're looking for drugs. Do not say a word."

So we told the kids, "Do not say a word. No cracking jokes."

That was a very nervous episode because these boys wanted to crack jokes.

We survived that. It was, like I said, a very exciting time.

At the camp, we worked with a missionary named Jack Henderson. He was the one who got us to come down. We were helping build dormitory cabins for future campers—pouring foundations, putting down rebar, and mixing the cement by hand.

We were sleeping in tents, and we only had outhouses. While we were

there, we built a shower out of cinder blocks and used buckets of water to make a shower. We didn't have any running water.

The cooks Jack hired were Mexican nationals, and they were cooking out of a little camp trailer. It was very, very hot. They cooked everything from scratch and worked very hard. They had the cutest little girl, and we fell in love with her. I've got pictures of her.

The kids were mixing cement by hand and doing all this construction work. Being one of the older people there, I had to go sit in a shady spot. I was feeling very sick from the heat. But the kids worked really hard.

After the few days we had at the camp, we moved on to Laguna Madre, to these islands, and did vacation Bible schools there. The people on the islands lived very primitively. They didn't have electricity or running water at that time, but they were very gracious to us.

One thing we had to learn was that at the restaurant, right before you got to the islands, they had toilets, but you couldn't put any paper in them. Once we got away from the restaurants, there wasn't plumbing. There were a lot of outhouses, and they weren't like modern outhouses. We had to use bottled water to brush our teeth. There were a lot of little things we had to learn.

The guys were sleeping outside. Ken slept outside just about every night.

KEN: Those fishing villages were fifty miles from electricity. On the islands, they had solar panels to power a radio and a light bulb at night.

MARY: We were going around inviting everybody to come to the vacation Bible schools, working with some local pastors. I remember the girls loved the little kids and were always carrying them around. But

these little babies didn't have diapers. Sometimes they would pee on the kids while they were carrying them.

Like I said, these people had nothing. Their most expensive belonging was their boat, because they would fish all night in these big, long boats. They got married really young and had their families really young. They had hard lives, but they were very loving. They made us feel welcome and seemed to enjoy the Bible schools.

We had translators with us—kids who were Mexican nationals and bilingual—and that helped a lot. We got to practice our Spanish, too.

Our main job was keeping these kids healthy. Some did get sick and hurt, but that was something we worked hard at. We were exhausted when we got back, and on the last day, the ones who hadn't gotten sick got sick. It was a long trip back, but it was a rewarding trip.

That was our little Mexico trip.



KEN: By the fall of 1999, I had lost my telemarketing business almost a year before. Jeremy had come to live with us, and Jennifer had graduated from high school. I'd left my work with Dan and Tammy amicably, on good terms, and was doing freelance graphic design work.

We did the Mexico missions trip that summer. By the end of the year, I was running out of steam and money, and I needed a steady job.

In December, I went to work at Express Scripts in Plymouth, Minnesota, at an entry-level wage of $10.28 an hour. Shortly after I started, they moved the whole operation to Bloomington.

I got promoted several times and rapidly ended up as a supervisor over a team of twenty people. I think I was there for two and a half or three years, certainly not more than three. That'll be another story.

That fall, we were adapting to Jeremy, and Jeremy was adapting to us. We had a house full of kids. Jennifer had graduated, and somewhere around that time she moved out.

MARY: It got a little crowded after Jeremy came, so she decided to get an apartment. She was going to community college and dating Dan.



KEN: I want to talk about our precious daughter, Laurie. She was never legally adopted, but she was our adopted daughter. Laurie Plunkett was her birth name, I believe.

Laurie came into our lives before Jeremy, when she was eight years old. I'll never forget that. She lived about two blocks away, and I remember, early on in Laurie deciding to adopt us as a family, her standing in our yard, throwing rocks at passing cars and yelling, "Go back to Uglytown!"

I remember that: "Go back to Uglytown!"

I also remember that she was a very, very wounded and obviously abused child. She had an explosive temper and would frequently kick my shinbones. I often had literal black-and-blue marks on my shins from her kicking me so hard.

But we had to adopt her. There are no words to describe how precious she was to us immediately. She was such a beautiful, beautiful child, outwardly and inwardly. She was full of spunk, spitfire, and

determination, and full of life. She could curse like a lumberjack, even at eight years old.

Only over the years did we begin to understand how traumatic and awful her home life was. That's her story to tell. But it was terrible. We'll leave it at that. Beyond terrible.

So we took her into our hearts. She slept over many a night in our home with our girls. I don't know whether she doubled up in one of their beds or where she slept, but she had an open invitation. She never, ever had to ask permission to come over.

We were her home away from home. We were only two blocks away, and she could escape to our house. She did, frequently.

To this day, she calls us Mom and Dad. She's our kid, even though she's in her forties now. I think we would both do it all over again in a heartbeat—take her into our lives.

Later, her parents wouldn't help her get a driver's license, so I taught her to drive. I did all that stuff a dad does to help a kid get a license, and Mary took her to get it.

Laurie had also gotten kicked out of high school. For a whole year, Mary and I drove her a number of miles to a school in New Hope, a nonpublic school for troubled kids, so she could finish. It was a team effort. We drove her to school for a year so she could graduate from high school.

We were involved in her first icky romance and breakup, and that was pretty awful. We were there in the hospital when she gave birth to her child, and we became the official godparents.

We've been there for all the significant parts of her life. We're Mom and Dad, and that's how we feel about her.

Enough about Laurie, because I'm going to cry.



KEN: Christian—there's a new name.

We got a call from Jack Henderson, the missionary who had sponsored our missions trip to Mexico. Mary thinks it was in 2000, before Jennifer got married that December.

Jack was closely connected to a very wealthy family in northern Mexico. They had a son they were trying to give international exposure to. He'd already traveled to Europe and other places. After he left us, he ended up going to school somewhere in Canada.

They were grooming him for a life in political service—not to run for office, but to be part of the political machine in Mexico, that upper five percent of the country that runs everything. They were quite wealthy and intelligent.

Jack asked whether we would sponsor Christian for four months so he could attend community college and improve his English. He already spoke English, but it needed improvement. He was maybe in his early twenties.

MARY: He was already a lawyer.

KEN: He moved in with us because his parents wanted him to have an average American family experience while he studied English. We were thrilled to accept. We love Jack Henderson, and Christian moved in with us for four months.

Our kids fell madly in love with him. I don't think any of the girls had an actual crush on him, but maybe they did, because he was handsome as all get out. He had amazing, impeccable manners and demeanor, clearly born and raised in a cultured home of power and money.

Part of that culture, which was multigenerational, was to be exceptionally kind and gracious to those beneath him. Culturally, we were clearly beneath him, but part of how he was raised was never to flaunt that. Quite the opposite. He was our humble servant, gentle, and he taught our kids a lot of stuff.

I still think so fondly of those four months.



MARY: I want to talk about how we became close friends with the Bonnevilles.

We had started attending Fourth Baptist Church, and I went to prayer meeting one Wednesday night. A man sitting behind me introduced himself, and one of the first things he asked was how many kids I had.

"I have seven kids," I said.

"Oh, we have six kids, and we homeschool. We just live in [unclear], close to the church here, and we always want to get to know big families that homeschool. You have to meet my wife."

I said, "You have to meet my husband."

That was how we met.

The kids kind of matched up. Their oldest, Katie, had just turned fifteen, and she was close in age to Emily and Jessica. They kind of fought

over being her bestie. I think she started out being Jessica's best friend, and later she became Emily's best friend.

Kasey was friends with Brian for a while. They were close. Then Melissa and Sarah became besties. They were the same age, and they hung around forever and did a lot together. They were very different, but they loved each other so much. They had a close bond.

Amanda hooked up with Rachel, who was a year younger, and they had a blast. They did a lot of fun things together. They weren't in the same grade, but they were only about a year apart.

John was the same age as Catherine and Jeremy, who came to us later. Then they had Daniel, who was only two years old when we met them.

We enjoyed doing things with them. I remember going over there for the new millennium. She made Jell-O with the numbers for 2000 spelled out. We had funny hats and glasses and noisemakers. We hooped it up. We did all kinds of fun stuff.

When we lost our car during one of our bad times financially, they said, "You can have our old station wagon." They gave it to us. They were always helping us out, and we had a real strong bond.

Amanda would go on trips with the Bonnevilles. She went camping with them. Mark was our doctor when we needed doctoring if we didn't have insurance. I remember him stitching up Amanda's cut foot on his kitchen counter. When Jeremy had appendicitis, we went to Mark first, and he told us we should take him to the ER.

It was nice to have friends like that. No matter what was going on in our lives, they were there for us. They became more than friends. They were like our family.

We had a very strong bond, and we still do. That was the hardest part of leaving Plymouth in 2005. We were about two hours away from our dear friends, but we're still really close. A lot of the kids still keep in touch.

The Bonnevilles were a super important part of our lives.



KEN: During those years, we were still living in our house in Plymouth, and our family kept growing. We've talked about some of the people we love. Before we move on to another time frame, I want to talk about Fourth Baptist Church and Plymouth Bible Chapel.

Mary has helped me remember the dates. Here's the timeline as best I can get it.

We started going to Fourth Baptist Church in Plymouth in 1998, at the tail end of my business going under. I was desperate psychologically. I'd been completely absent from church for the three years I ran my telemarketing business. I was in crisis right before the business went under, and we started going back to church. That was where we went.

That was also where we met the Bonnevilles. We were at Fourth Baptist for roughly three years. Then we went to Plymouth Bible Chapel, around 2002, and stayed there for about three years, until we moved to southern Minnesota in 2005. That was when we sold the house in Plymouth where we'd lived for many, many years.

Fourth Baptist was a lifesaver for me. They were emotionally healthy, stable, solid.

Pastor McLaughlin was just a rock for me. He had a PhD. He was extremely brilliant, extremely humble, and a gifted speaker—not a

charismatic, pound-the-pulpit type of guy at all, but calm, educated, and emotionally stable.

Even though it was a huge church with many people, he took a special interest in me. I wouldn't say he took me under his wing, but he took an interest. Then he kind of assigned me to Pastor Whiteford.

Dave Whiteford met with me every week for at least a year during my recovery from the business failure in 1999, when I was trying to stay alive emotionally.

I want to say this: Dave Whiteford, Pastor McLaughlin, and Dan and Tammy Kilstadius were real anchors for me. I needed them. And oh my gosh, how could I forget the Bonnevilles? Yes, the Bonnevilles.

These were my anchors to get me through 1999 so I could get to December and get a stable job. It took a whole year just to begin to recover from that business failure.

I have nothing but thanks and praise for Fourth Baptist Church. But as we were there longer, into the second and third years, I began to see a lot of the—trying to say this nicely—inconsistencies within fundamentalism and within the historical, hundred-year-old rigid rules of Fourth Baptist.

Fourth Baptist belonged to a movement that still exists today, though it's small now, called Independent Fundamental Baptist, abbreviated IFB. As gracious and kind and healthy as they were for me, it eventually became time to move on.

We had visited Plymouth Bible Chapel once or twice. It's a Plymouth Brethren church, although they don't use the word "church." I think they would call it a Plymouth Brethren assembly. They like the word "assembly," and the buildings in the Brethren movement were called chapels.

We ended up moving from Fourth Baptist to Plymouth Bible Chapel amicably, with good blessings and grace.

Two of our daughters, Jennifer and Jessica, were married at Fourth Baptist. One may have been married there after we left. I think Pastor McLaughlin did both ceremonies.

We stayed at Plymouth Bible Chapel until we moved to southern Minnesota. It was another momentous healing time in my life and helped me continue to recover.

I want to give a special thanks here, in case any of his children or grandchildren happen to find this. One of the elders at Plymouth Bible Chapel was Jay Swisher, and his wife was Rosie.

Jay worked for Bethel Baptist Bible College at the time. He wasn't a teacher; he had some kind of staff position. He was an intellectual, a student of all things at all times. His personal library was huge. He wrote original music to the Psalms, and oh my gosh, his music was beautiful.

I gravitate to two types of people. I might as well throw this in here. I gravitate badly to bigger-than-life people who end up corrupting me. You can laugh, because I use that term to get a laugh. Not all the bigger-than-life people I've gravitated to have been bad for me, but many have been. I don't want to throw them under the bus and name them. Some have been healthy for me.

But I'm equally attracted to people at the extreme other end: deeply thoughtful, high-IQ men who are soft-spoken and say very few words. They're always careful with what they say. They know a lot, but they quietly know it, humbly.

Jay Swisher was one of several of those men in my life. John Hartzell, back when we were at Normandale, was another man with that type of temperament.

I want to thank Jay publicly in my memoir for being so healing to me.

That's really what I want to say about Plymouth Bible Chapel and Fourth Baptist. When we left Plymouth Bible Chapel, it was only to move. Our move to southern Minnesota will be a separate story.



A House Full of Kids



Ken & Mary in conversation

KEN: I want to talk about those years before we went to Plymouth Bible Chapel, when we were still at Fourth Baptist Church. I think I had just started at Express Scripts, but I'm not sure. Mary, tell us how and why we started that youth group in our living room. That's its own cool story.

MARY: I don't remember exactly when we started it, but Jennifer and Dan must have already been dating. The kids liked to invite their friends to church, but the kids who went to public school with our kids didn't really feel comfortable at our church or in the youth group. They didn't go to Christian school, and they felt like they weren't accepted by those kids, I guess.

Sometimes our kids would go over to Parker's Lake and do things with the youth group there. They would join in, but they couldn't get their friends from school interested.

So we came up with an idea: why don't we do something on our own, so our kids can invite their friends from school and the neighborhood?

We didn't really call it a youth group right away. It was Friday night something—Friday Night at the Hoods, or something. I don't remember.

Jessica was learning to play the guitar, and her friend Michelle also played. They said they would provide the music. Dan's friends came over, too. Some of them had tried our church, but they wouldn't keep going. I remember Jake, and I want to say Mike. Dave was the kid Jake would get in fights with. We had a motley group. Dave and Jake would get into bloody fights out in our front yard after youth group.

Jared was an occasional visitor. His family had moved to Madison, Wisconsin, by then, so he wasn't one of the regulars. Maybe he would come in the summer.

We had some girls coming, too—Michelle and some of Jessica's other friends. I think Laurie came, and maybe Katie Bonneville. Jessica's school friends would pop in and out.

We had a little sing time in our great room. Our living room and dining room were one great room with an open peak ceiling. It was all pine paneled, with that stone fireplace at the end.

The boys were kind of rough on our furniture. I remember we went out and bought this big, heavy-duty coffee table that we thought would be kid-proof, and it was. They had wrecked one of our chairs or something. I can't remember exactly.

We always started with some singing, and we'd print out little sheets with the words. I remember singing "Our God Is an Awesome God." That one was a little tricky to learn because it had a different beat to it. We worked on it until we all got it down, and it was kind of fun. The girls were really working on their guitar.

Our younger kids would all join in because we thought they should be part of it, too. We didn't want to exclude them. It was a pretty fun time, and we had pretty good attendance every week.

I think Ken started working out of town during part of that time, and it got to be too much for him. He asked our youth pastor at church if he would step in and give a message. Pastor Greg did that for a while.

It was a fun chapter. It was another way to keep our kids from dating and going off with boys. Our idea was to let the kids come to our house, and then we could have supervision.

KEN: How long did we have that group in the house?

MARY: Maybe a couple of years. It was at least a year. Emily probably remembers a little better than we do.

That's where Laurie and Jake fell in love, because of that group. They probably weren't in the same classes at school.

It was mostly Dan's friends and our girls' friends, and whoever else they could invite from school. Emily would invite everybody she knew. That doesn't mean they came on a regular basis, but she invited them.

Teen Time—that was what we called it. Our younger kids would all have a memory of it.

KEN: And when we say "our girls," we mean Emily, Jessica, and Jennifer—our three oldest girls. Even though Jennifer was dating Dan, or it was early in the Dan time, she was a big part of it.

MARY: Eventually Jen got married, so maybe she wasn't part of it anymore. I don't know. All I know is that was one thing we did.

KEN: Mary, talk to me about our neighbors that we liked so much—the Townsends, the Moengens, the Zaluskis, and the Sundays. We were pretty close to them.

MARY: When we moved into our house in Plymouth, it was 1989. We lived there for seventeen years. It was a lot and a half on the corner of 24th Avenue North and Magnolia.

We already kind of knew the Moengens because your mom knew them. We knew the Zaluskis through your mom, too, through politics or something.

Bob and Janice Moengen lived right next door, and they were like surrogate grandparents to our kids.

Your mom was living in our basement when we first moved there. We had renovated the basement into a kitchen and a living room, and there was already a bedroom down there. We all lived together from 1989 until right before Amanda was born in 1992. When we were having our sixth child, we decided we had too many people in the house, and your mom moved away.

For a couple of years, we were all crammed in that house together. We even had Justin during part of that time. It was a crazy time.

Your mom was the grandparent in residence, so she babysat our kids a lot. If they got crabby, they'd go downstairs and hang with Grandma, especially Melissa, who was Grandma's baby. Grandma would always come upstairs and steal the baby.

But we had an extra set of bonus grandparents in the Moengens. We

didn't let our kids trick-or-treat, and we didn't do Easter baskets, but Janice always had a supply of candy. She'd call the kids over and ask, "Can I give them some candy?" If they were out in the yard, she'd say, "You want to pick raspberries in the yard?"

The kids would ask, "Mom, can we go over and give a picture we colored to Mrs. Moengen?" They adored her. They'd go sit in her house and visit, and she'd always give them treats.

It was nice for us to have these people with a strong faith. If our kids had an emergency, they knew they could go to the Moengens. They could go to the Townsends, too, because Ron worked from home. He was an import mechanic.

KEN: Ron Townsend and his wife lived next door the other way. We had the Moengens on one side and the Townsends on the other. Kitty-corner from our lot were the Sundays.

MARY: The Sundays came over one day because they realized we were new people in the neighborhood, and they introduced themselves. They were music ministers in their church. They had a daughter and a son, and their daughter [Jerusha] hit it off with Jessica.

For many years, they were besties. Jessica was over at their house all the time. They were super nice people to know.

We would send our kids to ride their bikes in the dead end, where the Townsends lived, right next to the Sundays. If our kids fell down riding their bikes, Ron would help them up. If they needed it, he'd walk them home.

It was really comforting to know we had such helpful neighbors. As the kids got older, we could leave them home alone, and we'd say, "You go

over to Townsends if you need something, or you go over to Moengens."

We also had good neighbors across the street—Ace and Wendy, and another family before them. I'm still friends with the woman who lived there, but I can't remember her name right now.

We didn't always like everybody who lived there. We had some we had trouble with, but some were good. Down on the other block, we had a couple of families whose kids were friends with ours, or our kids would babysit their little ones. Even Jessica was a nanny for a couple of those kids.

The Moengens were special. They always encouraged us, especially Janice, in our faith. She'd encourage us to listen to Christian radio, and she'd make the nicest cards at Christmas. She put in beautiful words of encouragement.

One time Ken was gone, working late or something, and Emily went to help me with the recycling. She ended up putting her finger into a can that still had the lid partially on, and it got stuck. I could not get her finger out of there, and I was starting to get really worried.

Somebody said, "Let's call Bob Moengen."

We called Bob, and he came right over. He had a tool—I don't know what he had—but he got that finger out of that can so fast. They were always there if we needed them.

If the kids or I were out shoveling our driveway when Ken was gone, Ron Townsend would come over with his little Bobcat and plow it out. Ken would say, "I'm going to give him a six-pack of beer," because he didn't have to do that.

KEN: That was the unwritten, even unspoken, wink-and-a-nod rule in

our neighborhood. Ron Townsend absolutely loved to play in the snow with his little Bobcat tractor thing. He loved to plow everybody's driveway.

We all had the unspoken agreement—and Ron kind of liked the agreement—that we gave him six-packs of his favorite beer for doing it.

MARY: It was kind of a fun friendship bartering, whatever, because Ron would have done it without the beer. He really enjoyed doing that.

The kids grew up with some really good memories. We did have some people across the street who caused problems, and some people on the other side of the Townsends had a dog that attacked our dog. I'll tell that story separately. That was unfortunate, but for the most part, we had really nice neighbors.

I used to tell my kids, "Go in the neighborhood. Make friends. If you see somebody who's elderly and they need their sidewalk shoveled or their grass raked, you go help them." We had quite a few elderly people, too.

That stuck with them. They have memories of doing what Mom said—being friendly, making friends, looking out for the neighbors. It kind of stuck with them for life. Those were good lessons they learned, and we did enjoy living in that neighborhood.

KEN: Let's talk a little about what we all affectionately called "the woods," our side lot. The kids will probably have gray hair by the time they're listening to this. That lot changed and morphed over time.

MARY: When we first moved in, back in the late '80s, we had this dream to landscape our side lot. It went downhill from the house to

the next road. I guess that was Magnolia, but it curved around and became another street down there. It was a pretty steep hill.

We went up to Lino Lakes and bought ground cover. It was expensive. We spent a lot of money. Pachysandra was one of the things we put in, and we bought at least two or three different kinds. We already had snow-on-the-mountain growing in our yard.

We had all this grapevine growing on the trees, and we were always trying to pull it down. We had dreams of someday landscaping it beautifully. The first thing we did was try ground cover to see if it would help with the weeds.

Over the years, we kind of forgot about that dream. But the kids made forts, trails, and paths. They had little cities going down there. They loved those woods.

It was on that hill that Amanda broke her collarbone. I think we already told that story.

KEN: There were at least seven or eight fully mature, huge oak trees on that lot. A lot of big trees.

MARY: And there was that tree right on the property line between us and the Moengens that you decided to trim. You were just going to top it.

KEN: I wasn't going to tell this story here, but then you brought it up. We can't seem to agree whether it was a basswood or a cottonwood, but it was a huge, dying tree right on the property line between me and Bob.

I had been a tree cutter back in Greenville. I knew my way around a chainsaw, and I had actually climbed trees with spikes back there. I wasn't going to cut the whole tree down at first, but I ended up cutting it all down.

Jake helped me, and I had ropes. It wasn't that I didn't know what I was doing, but I wasn't experienced, either.

When I dropped the final huge, thirty-foot-tall trunk that was left, Bob Moingen was coming up his long driveway, home from work. As he pulled up, he watched that tree trunk fall and miss his garage by probably six inches or less.

I nicked the gutter of his garage, but not the garage itself. That's how close it was.

Boy, Bob absolutely loved me. He was a dad figure to me, and the Moengens were grandparents to our kids. That was the only time I saw him lose his—well, an unrepeatable word in a legacy story. But he lost his crap, right on me, right there, verbally.

He had just finished building that brand-new two-car garage less than a year before. He built it himself, and I almost took it out. He had his classic collector Cutlass in there, too. I almost wrecked his garage and his classic car inside it.

Bob, who had never lost his cool before or after, really lost his cool. But I deserved it. Boy, you want to talk about how you just get lucky sometimes.

Dropping big, fat, heavy trees next to your neighbor's property line when you're an amateur tree cutter—not a good idea, and I don't recommend it.



MARY: The house across the street when we moved in was a Pullman train car. That was kind of interesting.

We were told there was a train that used to run out from Minneapolis to the suburbs for the summer cottages. We were also told our home had been a summer cottage.

KEN: The whole neighborhood on the west side of Medicine Lake had originally been summer cottages. There were very few left like ours.

We were about three blocks from the lake. Those cottages were in these rolling hills, and that's why all the streets were narrow and winding.

MARY: Our neighbor actually lived in a Pullman train car. We found out later that he had left all the original stuff in there. He had electricity and plumbing, but he hadn't really fixed it up or modernized it. He kept the original fixtures, and it was pretty old and in pretty bad shape.

After he died, they hauled it off. They were going to restore it. Was it for the zoo or something? There was a story in the paper.

Then some contractor built a brand-new, beautiful home in that spot. But it was kind of interesting, living across the street from a train car.

KEN: Mary, talk about your grandpa's sailboat.

MARY: I inherited my grandpa's sailboat, and we had to go to Illinois to pick it up and drive it back on a trailer. It was an O'Day Day Sailer, about sixteen feet long, with a retractable keel.

I have very fond memories of boating with my grandpa as a kid on Lake Opeka in Des Plaines, Illinois.

We were kind of busy to be sailors, but we wanted a place to moor it. There was a family down closer to the lake that had a sailing school. I

can't remember their names. They used the same kind of boat, and they said they would be happy to moor ours if we would let them borrow it for sailing lessons.

I think Amanda was just a baby when we got it, or we were just having her. It was about the time we were having our sixth child, so we had our hands full.

They said we could have free lessons, too, and we took some. We had to take turns because one of us had to stay with the kids.

We didn't go out by ourselves very many times—two or three at the most. I remember one time it was kind of windy, and we got a little scared. I think Ken decided he didn't really want to be a sailor. He ended up trading the boat to Ace Eastman for some work he did in our house.

That made me really sad. Ace was happy to get the boat, and he painted it a midnight blue. It was pretty, but it wasn't my boat anymore.

I also had a painting of the boat with my grandparents in it. My aunt Mary had painted it, and it hung in my grandparents' living room for many years. I really treasured that painting.

At one point, we had ice dams at our house, and the roof leaked onto it. The water left white stripes down the surface of the painting. It got damaged, and eventually, somewhere in our many moves, it disappeared. I'm sad about that.



MARY: When the kids were younger, when we had the first three girls, we got a free rowboat and took them out on the lake.

KEN: I forgot about the free rowboat. Marnie, my old Sunday school teacher from fifth grade, when we first moved to Minnesota, let us moor it at Medicine Lake.

MARY: It leaked a little.

KEN: It did leak. We thought we were rich as could be, rowing around out on the lake with the little kids in their life jackets.

MARY: I don't even know if we were living in Plymouth then. We might have been living in St. Louis Park. We found it at the grocery store right in Plymouth, so we might have been living there. I don't know.

We had that little rowboat, and then you ended up selling it to a guy who lived on Medicine Lake for about twenty-five dollars.

We went to Medicine Lake frequently. Catherine tells a lovely story in her vlogs about how we used to go down to the lake and pack sandwiches.

When the kids were little, we'd walk down to the west side beach. They didn't really like walking those few blocks back after they were wet and soggy and drippy, and then got a little hot.

When they got older, we could ride bikes and go to the east beach. I would bring my floaty. Jennifer had a job at Tuesday Morning, and she bought me a red floaty with Dalmatians on it, from the movie.

I played lifeguard, and the kids would play in the water. We'd have sandwiches for lunch and graham crackers for snacks. We just enjoyed those beaches, the Medicine Lake East and West Beach.

We did that for years.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A Little Town That Welcomed Us



Ken & Mary in conversation

KEN: In 2005, we sold our house and home in Plymouth, Minnesota, and moved to Kiester in southern Minnesota. Mary, why don't you start with your version of how that all came about?

MARY: Property values went sky-high, whatever the economy was doing, and we were curious what our house was worth. Then we found out our neighbors had sold their house in one day. People were bidding on it, and they got a really good price.

When I told Ken, he said, "Wow, I wonder what we could get for our house."

So we talked about where we would move. We decided on southern Minnesota because houses were cheaper there, and it wasn't too far away from our family still in the Twin Cities.

When the kids were in school, we'd drive down and search for houses. We liked Albert Lea, but Ken wanted to pay cash, and we couldn't find anything big enough and in move-in condition for us and the five kids still at home. We even checked Austin and couldn't find anything there.

Then somebody suggested we look at a house in Kiester. The house we saw, we really liked. It was move-in ready, big enough, and in our price range.

KEN: Describe the house.

MARY: It was a three-bedroom ranch with a little yard, a little garage, and a basement. It was built in the early fifties. As soon as we saw it, we decided to buy it.

We paid $43,000, which was just about the amount of cash we had when we sold our house to a house flipper up in the cities.

We were kind of sweating it because it took a while to find it, and the kids' school was starting. We got them down there barely in time for the first day of school, I think.

I remember Ryan helping us move. I don't remember who else, but Kasey was a big help with a lot of physical stuff—big and strong, and a junior or senior in high school that year.

The kids weren't too excited about moving. They missed their friends and their school. But they went along with it. They didn't have a choice.

We had a dog, Casey, part Lab and part Rottweiler, and we put a kennel in the back for her.

My brother's wife, Donna, found out we were moving and how much we paid. They decided maybe they should look too. They lived in Grayslake, Illinois, and had a really nice house, but they didn't have a lot of money coming in.

Only a few months later, they bought a hobby farm in Wells and moved. Then we had my brother, my sister-in-law, and their two boys

in the same vicinity. It was about fifteen miles away, and the kids went to school together.

Their two boys were at Kiester Middle School with our youngest three kids. It was sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. That first year, Jeremy and Catherine were in sixth grade, along with their cousin Alec. Amanda was in eighth grade, and so was her cousin Eric.

Melissa and Kasey were at the high school in Wells, about fifteen miles away. Melissa was very unhappy. Very, very unhappy. Kasey was too.

KEN: Kasey was known as Kenneth Jr. at the time.

MARY: Kasey kind of just bore with it. Melissa complained a lot, so much that we said, "Well, maybe you could transfer to Maple Grove and go to school and live with Jessica and Ryan." That was a plan we had.



MARY: As soon as we moved in, we started meeting people. Ken had been talking with the city manager, asking questions about how we did this and how we did that. They got friendly with each other, and she was really helpful.

Her name was Kari Jacobson. She told us she had a little girl the same age as our little girl, and they would be in the same grade—Mariah and Catherine.

When we moved in, Kari brought Mariah over to meet Catherine. Mariah was shy about it, and Catherine was also very shy about it. Lo and behold, within a few months they were besties. They did everything together, and they're still good friends to this day.

We also met Sheila and her two daughters. Deanna was in the same class as Amanda, I believe. I'm not sure about that. There were some kids who lived across from us, Dalton and Dakota.

Through Kari, we met Dena and Doug Trytten. They lived two houses down, and we really enjoyed getting to know them.

The first few months and years were kind of hard. It was a little slow getting to know people. I tried joining different clubs, bowling, and getting involved in stuff at school.

We were looking for a church, and that was difficult. I think one of the first churches we tried was Crossroads, half an hour away. Ken said there was a mirror ball—I don't remember—but it was a little too much stimulation for somebody with migraines. He said, "No, I can't go there."

The first week of school, we found out that Kasey and Melissa had girls in their classes whose mother had gone to school with Ken in Plymouth. When they told their mom there was a boy and a girl from Plymouth in their classes, she got real excited. Our kid had the same name as Ken, and she remembered Ken was her friend.

Kasey was going by Kenneth Hood Jr at the time, and she said, "Oh, I know a Kenneth Hood from Plymouth."

We connected with her [Barb] and her husband, Art Keith, who was the pastor of the Methodist church. That was really cool. They lived in Wells, and we thought, "We're looking for a church. We're not Methodist, but we'll check out the Methodist church."

We went for a few months, and everybody there was really nice. But I was looking for something more along the lines of what I was used to

in Plymouth, our Plymouth Bible Chapel. There was nothing like that down there.

We decided to check out the E-Free Church in Blue Earth. It was small and met at the high school. We liked it, so we started attending and ended up going there for four years.



MARY: Our dog, Casey, was having some issues. We were afraid she was going to break out of her kennel and bite some kid. She would pull on the metal, and we were afraid she would actually get out.

She was having some joint issues, I think in her hip, so we took her to the vet. He said, "I think she's in a lot of pain." He didn't really recommend surgery at her age.

We talked about putting her down, and Melissa took that really hard. But they were very nice at the vet, and Melissa and Ken got to be with her.

About that same time, Ken found a stray cat in the street. It kept crying for scraps, eating trash, and hiding under our car. He felt sorry for it, so he started putting food out. Next thing you know, that cat wanted to be our cat.

Ken said, "I want this cat."

Catherine had been asking for a cat, so we said, "Okay, fine. But if we're going to have this cat, it's going to be an indoor cat, and we're going to take it to the vet first."

We took it to the vet, got it wormed, and brought it home. Now we had a cat.

Melissa picked the name Spooky because she said he had spooky eyes. He had funny ears too. We never did get the story about those ears—whether they had been clipped when he was young, because sometimes they clip feral cats' ears, or whether they had been damaged by frost. The vet told us he'd already been fixed.

Both ears were funny, not just one. But he was a beautiful tabby cat, really scrawny and skinny, very shy and afraid of everybody.

Melissa didn't want a cat at first because she was missing her dog. The other kids were happy to have him. But Melissa named him Spooky, and that soon became shortened to Pookie. Nobody ever called him Spooky. It was always Pookie.

We still had our cockatiel, Sweetie, when we moved in. Sweetie ended up in the bedroom with the girls.

Kasey—our child, who was a senior in high school—ended up in the basement until we found out, that first spring, that the basement flooded. We found out we had water issues right off.

The kids adjusted to going to smaller schools. Melissa struggled a lot, and Amanda struggled. Kids thought she was kind of different, but eventually she made her little group of friends, mostly kids who had been homeschooled previously, like Katie Lorenz.

Catherine made a little group of friends too. Jeremy struggled a little. He thought Alec would be his best friend, but Alec was befriended by all the cool kids in the school, and Jeremy was kind of left out. That was a little hard.

Kasey kept to herself and wasn't interested in making friends.



KEN: I was still running my web design and web hosting business. That's how we were able to move to Kiester. I could run that business from anywhere, doing websites and web hosting for insurance agents all over the country. It was all run from a phone and a computer.

After we moved, my friendship with Kari really increased, though we were all family friends. I had thought I would have an office at home permanently. I'd had an office in the Twin Cities and was tired of having an office. I wanted to work from home.

But I ended up—maybe at Kari's influence; I don't remember—getting an office on Main Street downtown.

Kiester was only eight blocks by eight blocks, but they had a Main Street and a new city building, a city center that was pretty nice. I moved into an office there, right next door to Rick Goemann, the local insurance agent and a part-time farmer.

Rick and I became really good, close friends, though we've drifted apart since we moved to Albert Lea. He lived on a farm outside of town. I laughingly call him Mr. Kiester, even though he didn't live within the city limits. His office was in Kiester, and it still is, in the old middle school building.

Our offices in the city center were near the old grocery store, which isn't a grocery store today. I also became good friends with Jeff Passer, who had the feed and seed and implement store about a hundred yards down the street.

Al Bauman and his wife, Hope, became our good friends. They eventually bought our house after we moved to Albert Lea.

For years, they were building a beautiful bed-and-breakfast right next to our house on Second Street. It seems like they were building it the whole time we lived there, though that's probably not true. They live in it now. It's beautiful.

Their bed-and-breakfast was between our house and Doug and Dena Trytten's home. Al and Hope were involved in the town politically too, though I don't remember all the titles or jobs they had over the years.

We were all good friends. We all knew each other.

We grew to be really loved and welcomed and wanted in Kiester. That is still one of my most emotional and fond memories: this little town where everybody went to kindergarten together and was related welcomed us in fully.

And I'm not kidding about everybody being related.

I didn't know it at the time, and I don't remember when I discovered it, but Dena Trytten's maiden name was Penny. Dena Penny. She had a gazillion brothers, and I won't even try to remember all their names. One of them was Tim Penny, the famous congressman who served six terms as southern Minnesota's congressman.

I had adored Tim Penny on cable news when I lived in the Twin Cities. I was a Republican at the time, and I always told my Republican friends, "Tim Penny is one of the two or three Democrats I not only can tolerate, but I actually like him."

He was interviewed all the time on cable news, like CNN. He just did good interviews.

So we moved to Kiester, and I found out our neighbor and becoming-

good-friend, Dena Trytten, was Tim Penny's sister. Several times, we sat around a bonfire with Tim Penny, having beers and telling stories.

Tim Penny, and that entire Penny family, are just true-blue, great American people and a great American family. I could write a whole book about my fond feelings toward them.

Dena and Tim's mom lived in Kiester. I got to know her so well, and she was beautiful. Two of their brothers, who were disabled, lived with her.

We were welcomed in largely because of Kari, Rick Goman, the Tryttens, Al and Hope, and Jeff. We were part of the town, and I have such fond, emotional memories of that.

They did talk me into running for school board once. That wasn't the most pleasant of things. Kari was on the school board, and I don't know if she did it, but somehow I got talked into running.

I got a lot of votes, but not enough to win, thankfully. Thank God.

And we had campfires. Mary, remember all those campfires? We had a fire pit in our backyard, Dena had one in hers, and Kari had one in hers. For years, we rotated whose house we were going to that week. I'll bet we had ten to twenty campfires every warm season, through the fall. At least ten, I bet.

MARY: If it was really still out, we could hear cows mooing in the pasture.

KEN: We were so close to the edge of town on Second Street. On a still night, two things stick in my memory: the stars and the cows mooing in the pasture at the edge of town.

There was just no noise in that little town at night. We could see the Milky Way so bright it would almost hurt your eyes. It was like the

pictures you see on National Geographic TV, and we saw that in our town. It was like zero light pollution.



MARY: This was a rural area, even though we lived in a town. Everything around it was farms, and there were a lot of things we didn't know about rural life.

When Melissa rode the bus to school, she said out loud, "Who's this John Deere guy I keep hearing about?"

The kids laughed and laughed. She never was able to live that down because she thought John Deere was a person and not a tractor brand.

Another thing was this squealing, screaming sound we would hear from a few blocks away. We were like, "What is that noise? It sounds like aliens have invaded the planet. What in the world is it?"

Somebody told us that was where they brought the pigs to sell. They were unloading them off a truck and hitting them with a stick so they'd go up the ramp. They would squeal and scream and make a ruckus, and you could smell it all the way to our back door.

Ooh. We were like, "Oh my goodness. We had no idea."

We learned about the crops they grew too—corn and beans.

KEN: Melissa got embarrassed asking who this John Deere guy was. I got embarrassed among some men friends. It might have been around Rick, and Rick was really gracious because it took me a while to learn things.

They just assumed I knew things, and we didn't know anything. We were city kids.

I think we'd been living there for months before somebody gently clued me in that when they kept talking about corn and beans, the beans were not green beans, and the corn was not sweet corn.

That was almost exclusively what they grew out there. In my mind, I heard "corn and beans," and I thought of sweet corn you eat with your dinner and green beans out of a can.

I might have gotten laughed at for that. I deserved the laugh.

So just for the record, in case our great-grandkids are reading this, those were soybeans. No, you don't eat them—well, maybe some people do, but basically soybeans go into everything and are used for everything around the world. They're not green beans in a can.

And the corn isn't sweet corn in a can or corn on the cob that you eat. It's used for biofuel, ethanol, and mostly feed for animals we eat, like cows and pigs. I don't know all the details. Some people raised small amounts of sweet corn for fun, but that wasn't the corn they were talking about.

MARY: Every September they held Farming of Yesteryear, and we kept hearing about it.

"Are you going to Farming of Yesteryear?"

We didn't know if we were going. We didn't really know what it was. It turned out to be a fun festival just outside of town where you learned about farming in the old days. It was very educational for us.

Hundreds of people came. We learned about tractor pulls and all kinds of stuff we'd never heard of, being city kids. That's still going on today.

KEN: The other big thing was Kiester Days, which they still do.

Hundreds of people come. Kiester's population was about five hundred, but it served a rural area of farm people. I would guess two thousand people, maybe that many, called Kiester town.

Which is funny, because everybody in Kiester would tell their neighbor, "I've got to run to town. Do you need anything?"

We lived in town, but what they meant was thirty miles away in Albert Lea. That was town. They didn't even mean Wells. If they were going to Wells, they said Wells.

MARY: There was always stuff going on, always fundraisers and activities. A lot of firemen's fundraisers.

KEN: We had a wonderful volunteer fire department and an ambulance in town. Literally right behind our house were the fire department and the paramedics.

MARY: We had a library and a medical clinic the whole time we lived there. We also had a movie theater.

KEN: It's still open and showing movies. It's on the historic registry.

MARY: If you ask our kids what their favorite thing about Kiester was, most of them will tell you it was the movie theater. We went every week. We'd just throw the kids a couple bucks, and out the door they went. It was really cheap.

KEN: And safe. We could let our little kids run all over Kiester on their bikes or walking because it was only eight blocks by eight blocks.

As Dena Trytten told me once, yes, we had bad people in town, but we didn't have gangs. All the bad people were people they'd gone to

kindergarten with, so they were kind of "our bad people," and everybody knew who they were.

She assured me the town was safe.

MARY: And if your kids were doing something wrong, you'd hear about it from one of the neighbors.

KEN: Oh my gosh, the neighbors would rat the kids out. Yes, they did.

It was like The Andy Griffith Show, Mayberry R.F.D. It really was. It wasn't perfect. We had our bad stories, which are not going to end up in this book.

So all my friends from Kiester reading this, you don't have to worry I'm going to tell any bad stories. Life is that way. There were sad and bad things that happened while we were there, but I choose not to remember or dwell on them.

MARY: Because the kids were in a smaller school, they could do more activities. At Wayzata, you either did band or choir, or you did a sport—one sport. In Kiester and Wells, you could join as many things as you wanted: band, choir, orchestra, softball, volleyball.

You might not have been very good, and they'd let you know, because sports were everything. But they did let you play.

The school had plays too. I remember Amanda and Jeremy getting roles, and Melissa played her flute in the orchestra. There were more opportunities for things like that. We just had to do a lot of driving back and forth.

Catherine did cross-country until her knee developed an issue. If they wanted to do something, there were activities to do. It wasn't boring.

KEN: I want to say one more time how warm and safe, overall, Kiester really was. It was some kind of stereotypical dream place to live. If you ever dreamed of living in a small town, it really was all that.

It may not have been perfect, but it really was all that, and I still miss it.



KEN: The driving, though—oh my gosh.

We didn't have a house payment. We paid cash because we sold our Plymouth house at the top, right before one of those housing bubbles burst. Whatever the time frame works out to be, I think the market crashed months after we sold in 2005.

We had a bunch of surprise equity, about $45,000. We moved to Kiester and paid $43,000 or $44,000 cash for a very cute, small but well-kept-up, totally rehabbed three-bedroom ranch with a basement, garage, and yard.

It's still stunning to me that you could do that.

But here's the deal: I may not have had a house payment, but every month I had a Dwayne's Felco gas station bill in my post office box.

We didn't get mail delivered to the house. It went to our post office box downtown. I'd go there at the first of the month, and the gas station bill would be sitting in my box.

Gas was expensive. I think it was about four dollars a gallon then, which was a lot of money. I'd have a $500 bill for gas.

We had the Astro Van most of those years, I think. We had a huge family, and that all-wheel-drive Astro Van ate gas.

We drove back and forth to Wells all the time because some of our kids were at the high school. We drove to Albert Lea I don't know how many times. For years, we went to church in Blue Earth, thirty miles in one direction. Later, we went to Crossroads in Albert Lea, in the other direction. Then there was banking and the Walmart trips.

Our gas bill was $500 a month. That was kind of an unofficial house payment in my mind.

We lived in Kiester until the last of the kids were out of school, until Catherine and Jeremy graduated.

For six months out of the year, maybe eight, the driving was fine. It just took time and cost gas. But four months out of the year, you felt like you lived on a deserted island in the middle of the ocean. Civilization was thirty miles away, and to get to the interstate, you first had to drive eight miles north on a two-lane state highway.

Because that road ran north and south, the storms blowing west to east would drift snow across it. Several days every winter, we were literally trapped in town until the roads got plowed. You could be trapped for up to two days.

It was kind of an island, and you started to feel that.

When the last of the kids graduated from Wells High School, we moved to Albert Lea. There were other reasons too. That's where we live today, telling our story.

What year did we move, Mary?

MARY: In 2012, because your mom wanted to live with us.

KEN: Mom wanted to live with us about the time the last of the kids

were graduating, and she didn't want to live in Kiester. I don't blame her. She was still driving, and she didn't want to drive thirty miles to Albert Lea.

We initially sold the house on a contract for deed. That fell through and didn't work out. It's a bad story we won't get into, and we don't want to talk about names.

The final sale, after we'd been in Albert Lea for a few years, was to Al Bauman. We just noticed he's put new siding on the house, and it's beautiful.



MARY: One story we forgot was Prairie River Camp.

We saw an advertisement for a breakfast in Bricelyn, the town six miles to the west. Our kids went to school with those kids, most of them. They were having a breakfast fundraiser for a Bible camp.

I said, "Oh, Bible camp. Maybe we can meet some people and find out where people go to church." We didn't really know anybody yet.

We went out there and met Jennifer Hitchcock, now Benson. She told us all about Prairie River Bible Camp. She was also working in the schools as a mentor with Youth for Christ.

We started getting interested in the camp and in Youth for Christ. We went to a fundraiser, met some other people, including the Lorenzes, and eventually met Renae Groskreutz, the camp director.

At one of the camp's open houses, we found out that if we helped do

some work, the kids could get a scholarship to go to camp. Catherine got involved with that right away.

Eventually Amanda became a camp intern. Her last year in high school was her sophomore year, and then she took her GED and went off to college. I don't remember whether she became an intern before she finished school or the first summer after. She could tell you.

She started working out there and got a good gig where she was kind of in charge, second in command under Renae. She wasn't a counselor. She was more of an intern.

You name it, she did it. She even picked up horse poop when they had horses pulling wagons. She did everything, learned a lot of good skills, and had a lot of fun.

Amanda was going off to Bible college, Maranatha, and then Catherine got involved at camp. Same thing—she became an intern. Even Jeremy became an intern the summer before his senior year.

They would stay out there. They loved being out of the house because they got to stay at camp, away from Mom and Dad. In the summer, they lived out there.

Kenneth [now Kasey] had graduated and gone to the U of M. Melissa had graduated and gone to Mankato. The other kids were going back and forth to camp, and we'd only see them once in a while during the summers.

It was a big part of our life, getting hooked into the camp scene at Prairie River Camp in Bryceland. They made a lot of friends, friends they still have.

Two of our kids, Emily and Catherine, actually had their weddings out there. We attended friends' weddings there too—at least one.

That was a good thing that came out of our Kiester years, getting involved with Prairie River Bible Camp.



KEN: Here's something about when we first moved to Kiester. City hall, where the town council and mayor met, was downtown on Main Street. But for years, including when we moved there, Kari's city manager's office was in the liquor store, which the city owned.

If you wanted to pay your water bill, you went into the liquor store on the main highway coming into town. That's where you did city business. Even if you were a teetotaler, you went into the liquor store all the time.

Kari commanded the ship from there. She was a brilliant city manager for many, many years. She was the bomb.

We hadn't been there many months, and I had my office downtown in the city center, when Mayor Oldfather cornered me on the sidewalk one day.

He had severe arthritis, but his mind was sharp as a trap. He was old, and his name was Oldfather, and he'd been mayor forever—since the beginning of time, decades unopposed. He was the spiritual godfather of that town.

There were only two churches in town: a tiny Methodist church, which barely hung on, and the Lutheran church. That was church. Church was the Lutheran church.

Everybody in that section of southern Minnesota was Lutheran, with just a few stray Methodists. They were accepted and okay, but you were basically Lutheran unless you were an atheist.

Mayor Oldfather intentionally pulled up in front of my office. He parallel parked, and nobody could parallel park like Mayor Oldfather. That was a thing of beauty and art.

He got out of his car, all hunched over, made a beeline right to me, and grabbed my arm.

"You know, I've been meaning to ask. I haven't seen you in church."

I said, "No, we don't go to the Lutheran church."

He looked me in the eye, calm as could be, and said, "Are you a pagan?"

He literally used that word. He wasn't even meaning to be insulting. He just calmly said it.

I almost laughed, but I didn't want to because he was a wonderful man.

"No, no, no," I said. "We go to the E-Free Church in Blue Earth."

His body just visibly relaxed. We were not pagans, thank God.

"Oh, that's great. E-Free. Oh, that's okay."

He had to make sure the new people in his town were not pagans. It was very important to him.

And there's one more story I have to get in, even though we're leaving so much out.

Every year at Kiester Days—I bet they still do it, though we haven't been in years—they had cow chip bingo.

Kiester Days was in June or July, somewhere in there. It was a three-day party, and it was packed. They partied. Led Penny, Tim Penny's band with his brothers, played all the time.

Everybody kept telling me, "You've got to come to cow chip bingo."

You bought tickets and picked a number. It was basically gambling. I had no clue what in the world cow chip bingo was. Everybody else knew what corn and beans were and what cow chip bingo was. Of course, we knew none of this.

Cow chip bingo turned out to be hysterically funny.

They roped off a big section of grass in town. Inside that area were bingo squares, like a bingo card, with numbers. They let a calf loose, and you bought a number hoping the calf would poop on your square.

If it did, you won a hundred or two hundred dollars, or whatever.

It took forever for that calf to poop. Everybody surrounded the ropes, yelling, "Come over here! Come over here!"

It was hysterically funny.

One year, the calf broke out. I was part of the group of men trying to catch it—Al and Jeff, and maybe Rick; I don't remember if he was there, but I know Al and Jeff were.

The calf escaped into town and was running for its life all over Kiester. It took us half an hour, forty-five minutes—it seemed like forever—to finally capture it and get it safely back where it belonged.

Oh my gosh, I still laugh my butt off thinking about that story.

This has been fun, reminiscing about Kiester. Wow. Talk about a trip down memory lane.

Part III
Stories We Carry



The Voices I Heard on 9/11

Told by Ken



I remember 9/11 like it happened yesterday. That happens with some of these historical moments. I remember exactly where I was driving down the road when I heard on the radio that Ronald Reagan had been shot. I remember being a little, little child and hearing that Robert Kennedy had been shot. I don't remember where I was when I heard about JFK, but I remember, exactly like a videotape, where I was on the playground when I heard about RFK.

But the most vivid memory I have of a historical moment—of "Where was I at?"—is the story I'm about to tell about 9/11.

I was at home that day, on a day off from work. I was a first-shift supervisor at Express Scripts, managing a team of 20 direct reports. We provided customer service for many, many people who received prescriptions through mail order.

Express Scripts was the largest pharmaceutical benefit manager in the country at the time. Most of its revenue, probably 80 to 90 percent, came from processing prescription claims for major insurance companies. Companies like Blue Cross, Humana, and Medica outsourced that

work, and Express Scripts made most of its money off prescriptions being filled at a pharmacy.

But probably 10 to 20 percent of the revenue—and I think I'm right about that number, because I knew it then—came from filling prescriptions by mail order. Typically, those were the common prescriptions people take every day by the millions: blood pressure medication, heart medication, insulin. Those types of medications are routine and normal and almost boring because so many people take them. They're so common, we forget about them.

But on 9/11, everybody remembered at home that their very life depended on getting their medication.

Most of our customers who used mail order waited till the last minute to order their medications. I know this firsthand because I provided support for them over the phone. People do that even when they're picking them up from the pharmacy.

Here is the nightmare that most people aren't aware of unless they worked at a place like Express Scripts or at a pharmacy. Pharmacists knew the nightmare, and we knew the nightmare, because on that day, planes stopped flying. Transportation ground to a halt. There was an airspace freeze. I don't remember how long it lasted. It's a piece of history; you can look it up. But planes were grounded, and planes are how medications get moved from one location to another.

Suddenly, we as a nation were under attack. We had no idea if more attacks were coming. There was chaos. I lived it. It was a horrible feeling.



I don't remember how Mary and I knew to turn on the TV. After the

first jet, of course, everybody was calling everybody. But I remember being at home in our great room, watching live on TV as that second jet plowed into the Twin Towers.

I don't even know the word to describe it. I won't try. Like other adults at that time who had children, family, or grandchildren, we took that in an indescribable emotional way. It wasn't esoteric. It wasn't just that our nation was under attack. It was literally the emotional feeling of, "Will my children be safe?"

That may sound silly telling the story years later, because we have the hindsight of knowing exactly what happened, how it happened, and what happened afterward. But I got to tell you, watching those planes plow into those towers, all you could think of as a parent was, "Are my kids going to be okay?" We had no idea what was happening. It was all real time.

Very shortly after the second plane struck, I got a phone call from work saying, "It's all hands on deck."

I remember they used that phrase with me.

"It's all hands on deck. You have to come in. Everybody has to come in. This is an emergency."

We lived in Plymouth, and the call center was in Bloomington. It was about a 20- to 30-minute drive without traffic. I jumped in my car immediately and went to work.

The Express Scripts building, which I believe now is actually a large church, was on what we call the Bloomington Strip—494, where it travels through Bloomington, Minnesota.

Keep in mind, there were 400 call center reps. When I came in, every

single phone in that building was in use. Every office phone, every spare phone they could find—not just the normal customer support cubicles. People I had never seen before were sitting at phones I didn't even know existed. They weren't official call stations.

I reported right to my boss's office, and she was in a panic. We were all emotional, all very upset. Our nation was under attack.

"Our customers are panicking," she said. "They're literally in panic, and our hold times are already an hour."

That later turned into two-hour hold times. I'm not exaggerating: two-hour hold times at a company where they were never longer than two or three minutes. Express Scripts had the resources, and they prided themselves on that. We had six locations. This Bloomington call center of 400 reps was one of six customer support call centers around the United States just for Express Scripts.

My boss told me that everybody, including her, the director of customer service, and the vice presidents, would be taking phone calls for as long as it took to get those hold times down.

I got to tell you, that meant I worked overtime, and I was on salary. I worked a 12-hour shift, as I remember, and finally was so exhausted they told me to go home. I'm pretty sure I was on the phone for 12 straight hours that day and the next day. Then I think it started to slack off, but as I remember, I took calls for four straight days.

My job as a supervisor with 20 direct reports was never to be on the phone. I was pretty much prohibited from taking calls, even if we were backed up or people were out. My job was to manage people, never to take phone calls. This was the one time I took calls after being promoted to supervisor two years before.

And I took phone calls for four straight days. So did my boss, and so did her boss.



The panic in people's voices—I will never forget it. God, I'm going to try to talk and not cry, because it was literally life and death to them.

I don't know how many calls I took from some older lady, maybe in her 80s. The older they were, the more tragic it was. They'd call me saying, "I ordered my heart medication too late. I only have four or five days left of my heart medication. Can you guarantee me I'm going to get my medication in time?"

And we had to tell the truth: "We can't guarantee anything, and we're so sorry. We can't guarantee anything. I'm so sorry."

And how many people who got their prescriptions at the pharmacy called saying, "My pharmacist can't promise me anything. I'm almost out of my medication, and the planes are grounded. Even my pharmacist can't tell me if I'm going to get my medication refill in time."

These were nonstop phone calls. I'll never forget it. How can you forget something like that?

The attack on the United States by terrorists was horrifying to all of us, especially those of us with children. We already had that palpable fear. For me, it was compounded by the tragedy of thinking of people, usually elderly people, possibly dying because they couldn't get their medication—and hearing them on the phone.

To this day, I've never tried to research it. I don't know for a fact that nobody died because they didn't get their medication in time. I would

like to think it's unlikely, that nobody died because the planes were stopped. I lean toward being almost certain that nobody did. But how can I know that?

All I can tell you is that I heard from hundreds of people. I was taking a hundred-plus phone calls a day for four days. Firsthand—not my employees, but me, sitting in my supervisor cubicle, talking to hundreds of people in panic.

The attack on our country was visceral and real to me as I heard the fear in people's voices. Nobody knew how much more of the attack would come, especially that first day. Especially that first day.

So, added to "Are we going to be attacked again?" was the very real and legitimate fear: "What if everything is shut down so long that I don't get my heart medication?"

Man, you can hear the tears in my voice right now. That was pretty overwhelming to me.

That is my story of where I was at on 9/11. I bet there are many other equally gripping stories.

I have told this story a few times, but this might be the first time in telling it that I've started to cry, and I don't know why.

Thank you for listening to my story.



Cricket Came Home

Told by Ken



I want to talk about Cricket, the pet that I miss most.

We got Cricket as a family. We had a bunch of young kids at the time, and I think it was about 1988. We were living in our rental house in St. Louis Park, Minnesota. It was a very nice house. Not much later—I think 1989 might have been the year—we bought our house in Plymouth, Minnesota, which our kids kind of call their forever home. Whenever our kids, who are now adults, think of home, they always think of those many years we lived in the log cabin house in Plymouth.

Memory is a little faded here, but we think we got Cricket from a day-care lady in St. Louis Park who had to give him up because he would occasionally nip at the little kids. I don't remember if we bought him or not, but we ended up with Cricket. I don't remember his age at that time, either. I'm going to guess one or two years old.

He was a nipper. I do remember him biting our young son, who was a crawling baby—a very gentle warning bite, so no blood. Our little crawling baby boy loved to grab Cricket's hair, and he learned after the

first time that maybe that wasn't a good idea. Well, now we realized, in our real-world experience, why this daycare lady had to get rid of Cricket.

Our family fell in love with him. He was a very typical purebred miniature poodle, and being a male, I would put him close to fifteen pounds. He was solid white, as I remember, but not bright white. He might have had a little peach color somewhere on him, but we remember him as a white miniature poodle.

He was a very stereotypical poodle, just an energy bundle. Absolutely adored us. We adored him, but the dog had no slow button.

We must have moved shortly after we got him, because I think all of my memories of Cricket are in the home in Plymouth. We fell deeply in love with him over many years.

We were pet people—all kinds of pets. When we were raising our kids, we took in a stray cat once. We had the hamsters and the gerbils. We had every kind of pet you can have, I think. We even had a bird once, a cockatoo, I think. Our kids loved pets, and Cricket was the favorite pet.

But then we had a friend who bred Aussies, Australian Shepherds. We fell in love with his dogs and ended up buying an Australian Shepherd puppy—not from him, actually, but from one of his customers who was also breeding.

We bought an Australian Shepherd called Shadow, and we adored that puppy. The puppy was amazing, but it was massive high energy, as all Australian Shepherds are. They are brilliantly smart dogs. So are poodles, by the way, and Cricket was also brilliant.

We had two very high-IQ dogs, but Cricket had aged out of the energy-bundle toddler phase of being a dog. He was now a mature

poodle, and Shadow, the new Aussie puppy, was driving poor Cricket insane. Cricket would constantly be biting and trying to subjugate an alpha-male Shadow, who was amused by it, actually. But we were always having to intervene, and it became a lot of work.

To cut to the chase, we made a decision that we regretted immediately afterwards. We listed Cricket for sale in the want ads.

We interviewed families over the phone, and then we met with a lovely family. We made sure that Cricket was going to a really, really good home.

So we sold Cricket.



There is an aside you need to understand: Cricket was a runner. I mean an all-out runner.

I found out from talking to other people over the years that many poodles are that way. Cricket could not be left alone like you can a Lab, a Labrador retriever, which you can leave outdoors once they stop being puppies and they'll hang around. Not so with many poodles, and certainly not with Cricket.

The first time we lost him for an entire day and found him half a mile away by driving the streets, we put on a full ID tag with our names and our phone number.

Before we sold him, I bet Cricket escaped five times at least—half a dozen, maybe ten times over the years that we had him. The farthest he made it before we got a phone call was about two miles away. Two miles away! It was so funny. We got a phone call: "We have your dog,

and we see his name is Cricket. He's playing with our kids, but you need to come get him now."

The ID tag was great.

We sold Cricket with the ID tag on, and I remember telling the new people, "Make sure you put your own new ID tag on Cricket, because Cricket is a runner." We made sure they knew that. I bet we said it three times.

They were like, "Oh no, we'll do that right away. This is great."

Cricket, by the way, loved everybody. He may have loved us, but I think he loved total strangers equally to us. He fell in love with the new people right away, and we never followed up. We just assumed he'd be happy. We told them to call us if there was a problem, and we never heard from them.



A whole year goes by, and I'm at work at Allstate Insurance as a sales producer, as I remember. I think that's what I was doing at the time, in Minnetonka, Minnesota, which was six or eight miles from home, maybe.

Mary gets a phone call at home from a total stranger in South Minneapolis. It turns out he was about two or three miles away from the people we sold Cricket to.

He's saying, "I'm a recording studio professional, and I have to go to work with a recording session in about fifteen minutes. But you need to know your dog just came up to me and is all friendly. I can't hold him for you. How far away are you?"

Well, we were thirty or forty minutes away, and I had the car. Mary did not have a second car.

He said, "Well, I have to let him go, but here's my address. Here's the corner, the two streets I'm on, and I hope he stays around and you can find him."

We were in a panic. I jumped in the car right away and raced home from Minnetonka to Plymouth to grab Mary. I really should have just gone directly to South Minneapolis. I don't remember why I didn't do that.

Anyway, I grabbed Mary, and we raced to South Minneapolis. Of course, the man was gone because he was in a recording studio session, and Cricket was nowhere to be found.

We started driving up and down the streets looking for Cricket. As I remember it, we didn't actually drive very far. It may have been just a block or two, and there he was, our little poodle running down the street.

But oh my gosh, he was filthy. He had not had a haircut, obviously, in the full year that these new owners had had him. He was filthy dirty and barely recognizable.

But of course, you always recognize your own child.

We pulled up next to Cricket on a South Minneapolis sidewalk. We opened our door and called his name. He was so happy to see us, and he just jumped right in the car, probably right on Mary's lap.

He was just so happy, because Cricket was always happy. That's something I didn't say earlier in the story. Cricket was the always-happy dog—unless, of course, you pulled on his hair and he nipped at you.

We took him home. We had to take him to a professional dog groomer

because he was just too much for us to clean up and clip. It was a nightmare. We usually did our own home-style haircuts with him and took him into the vet when we didn't want to clip his toenails, which of course has to be done. But he was so messy, we just couldn't clean him up ourselves.

So we got him cleaned up, and we kept him for many more years. Blissful happiness for all of us.

Of course, the obvious question is: did we call the owners that we sold him to, to let them know we had what legally was their dog?

Oh no, heck no. I'll keep that word PG and won't even go PG-13 here. Heck no, we did not call them. How could they dare let our dog get so unkempt and filthy and dirty, and never change the ID tag?

We felt it was the ethical and kindest thing to do for our precious Cricket: to keep him, rehome him again with us. We were so thrilled that the decision we made to sell him the year before, which we immediately regretted, was undone.

Cricket was home with us again forever.

Anyway, that's my Cricket story.



Angels Along My Path

Told by Ken



I want this final chapter of my stories, wherever it ends up in whatever book, to honor the angels that God has sent my way.

I truly believe there are angels, whether someone believes in God or not, whether anyone listening to this is a person of faith or not. There are angels. Angels, I think, simply means messengers. But we all understand what we mean when we say the word, and I think it is bigger than a theological declaration. Angels are the messengers that have come our way, that have saved or preserved or enriched our lives in very special ways. I have been blessed to have so many of those in my life.

I have struggled my entire life with childhood trauma. I have struggled with bipolar, diagnosed late in life. I have struggled with so many things, but my life has turned out so well. At 68 years old now, I bless the path that brought me here.

I want to say that again. I cursed the path I was on for many years, and in recent years, I learned to radically accept the path. But I want to say in this final chapter that I bless the path that brought me here.

Though the path had many sad and even horrible things in it—things done to me and things I did—I wouldn't choose that path for anyone else because of its pain. But in some ways, I can only bless the path, because the path included angels.

First, let me put a disclaimer. I'm not going to include my mom because she's my mom. She was all that and a pack of gum. She was everything a mother should be, a mama bear that protected us. She was so amazing that there might need to be a separate chapter devoted to her.

And also Mary Patricia Larson, who I've been married to now for 47 years and who is my very soul. As one of our daughters referred to her fiancé once—and I've adopted the phrase—Mary is my person. Something so much more and indescribable than just my best friend, my wife, my lover, the mother of my children. She is my person.

My mother and my wife are indescribably separate people in my life. But I want to talk about the angels I believe God sent to me, and we'll leave the theologians to debate that. There's even a phrase in the New Testament somewhere that says some have entertained angels unaware.



My Aunt Bea and my Uncle Bill rescued us and saved us after my parents were divorced when I was 10.

My Aunt Bea was a second mom to me. My Uncle Bill was the very first man in my life who showed me what a man should look like. He showed me how a man could be.

I never got the chance to tell him that while he was alive, though we were very close. I remember the last time I saw him. We drank wine in

his study in Oklahoma, where they had retired, and we talked about the big things and deep things of life. I will never forget that.

But I should have told him that he was the one who showed me what a man should look like: strong, gentle and kind.

And my Aunt Bea—there really are no words. I hung out at her house after school in fifth and sixth grade. The bus would drop me off, and I would talk that poor woman's ear off. She was my mom's sister and had all the beautiful characteristics my mom also had, but completely different, because they were uniquely hers.

My Aunt Bea and my Uncle Bill were angels to me.



Next would be Tari Dygert.

I got that job in the dining common at Bob Jones University at 18 years old, and it was a nightmare. There were eight of us young boys. Every one of us was a freshman because everybody had quit that job. We were such young, innocent puppies, and she was our big sister. That's what we called her.

Tari was a grad student and worked in the dining common, though not on our dishwashing crew. It was a huge dining common, feeding 4,000 sit-down meals every day. Tari was the embodiment of all that a big sister should be.

She really saved us all emotionally as we were drowning in an overwhelming job. It was so bad that the turnover was almost 100 percent every semester. It was the last scummy job nobody on campus wanted, and you ended up with it if you were too late to the party.

Because of Tari, we stayed together for over two years as a solid dish-washing crew. Many a night, she would do what was outside her job description and join us in the icky, hot, steamy, horrible room and scrub stuck-on cooking pans with us in deep sinks of hot water. She dispensed to us wisdom and love.

She went on later to do what she had dreamed of doing. I think she got married many years later, but she did go from Bob Jones to a Korean orphanage, where she worked with orphans, I believe, because that's just who she was.



My next angels were Russ and Beth Reach. Now they, in their stories, would say that we were their angels.

Russ has passed away and is an angel in heaven, I hope, today. But Beth is still alive, and Beth, I'm going to make sure you hear this story.

They met us in church. We were all young pups and newly married at Faith Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina, which met in a really dilapidated building on the bad side of town at the time.

They had been thrown out by the woman with Alzheimer's they were hired to take care of in her home. That's their story to tell, a long story. But they got tossed out and showed up at our door.

We had just met them, barely knew them, and they showed up late at night at our mobile home. Beth was crying and pregnant, sobbing. Russ looked embarrassed. We took them in, and they stayed with us—I don't remember how long. A few nights, a few weeks.

Oh my gosh, they fought like alley cats. They were new Christians and

a mess, got married in pregnancy because that's what you do now that you're a Christian.

They got established and set up on their own, but they stayed our very closest friends forever. We just saw Beth two years ago. She put us up at her home in Greenville. They raised wonderful children, and I could tell a million stories.

I just want to make sure they're in the book because, Beth, you don't know this, but in rescuing you and Russ, you rescued us too.

I'll just leave it at that. So many stories.



Next, of course, is Mrs. Day. Many of us—not just me—said behind her back that if there were such a thing as angels unaware, literal angels, like Clarence in the movie It's a Wonderful Life, it was Mrs. Day.

We always called her Mrs. Day, though she insisted, especially as the years rolled on, that we call her Betty Day, or B.D. for short. She really liked that, because she certainly never thought of herself as an angel.

Where she came from, I'm not sure any of us ever really knew her back-story. I think Beth told us later, but I don't remember for sure, that she had been divorced. Or maybe widowed. She was single and always Mrs. Day. She was older than us by 15 years or more.

She had a mysterious back life, but she was the masseuse for everyone who was sick in the church. She was the masseuse for Pastor Vaughn and his wife and family as they went through their tragic medical history. She had been a masseuse, I think, for a year on the road for the

famous evangelist—was it Bill Rice? [John R Rice]. I don't remember his first name.

She was a professional accountant by trade through the day. That's what she did to pay her bills. She lived in a tiny apartment.

But she was there to save my life in my first business collapse, when I was in my mid-20s. I was deeply and desperately in debt. She walked me through daily, showing up at our house in Kampus Kourt. It was a cottage built around a 10-foot-wide travel trailer that a friend gave us to live in for free. Me, Mary, and the three little kids in this tiny hovel.

She would show up every day to lay her hands on us and pray for us, read the Psalms over us, put me on a spiritual discipline of reading a daily devotional to lift my spirits. Encouraging me, requiring me to lay my hands on my three children every night and pray over them by name.

She would have me lie on the living room floor, which was so tiny, and massage me. She was a professionally trained masseuse, and she would give me a massage every night.

The times I forgot to do my little assignments, she would look me in the eyes and just cry. She wouldn't say a word. She wasn't trying to shame me. She would just cry because I had not done the healthy things for healing that I needed to do.

She was so short, way short, and she saved so many people. Beth, I know you're listening to this. She saved you guys. She saved Bill Ford after his wife Carol passed.

She just died a few years ago in a nursing home. I know she was sad near the end and discouraged because she was so disabled. But she was an angel for untold and uncountless numbers of people.

Next, Bill and Carol Ford.

When the business collapsed and Mrs. Day was seeing me every day, Bill, you and Carol swooped in to take me under your wings. Bill, you taught me how to paint houses, and you put me to work painting houses.

Carol, you've passed away now. You passed away in childbirth. But Carol, you made me those cucumber sandwiches with onions, and I'll never forget. You made my lunch every day because we were so poor that we literally didn't have money to eat.

Bill, you brought me to work every day for months so I could feed my family. I learned how to paint, and I learned how to replace a broken window because, of course, it was inevitable. Every painter cracks a window. When I cracked my first one, you just laughed and said, “Well, now I get to teach you how to replace a windowpane.”

Oh my gosh, Bill, I miss you two so much, and I miss Carol.

The next angels, Byron and Cheryl Cox.

When we left South Carolina and moved back home to live in my mom's basement, that didn't last longer than a few short months. Tiny house, moldy basement, and living with your mom—that was not a recipe for happiness.

You let us move into your second parsonage at Normandale Baptist Church, where you were the associate pastor. You and Cheryl were our

angels and let us live there for many months. Maybe it was a year before we moved and bought or rented that house in St. Louis Park.

You moved us in, you and Cheryl, and you were both our angels. I can't say all the ways that you were our angels, but you were our angels. We saw Jesus in both of you.

I guess I'm going to cry through this whole thing.



And John Hartzell, you became the pastor of Normandale Baptist Church. I think I was already the song leader—what churches now call the worship leader—leading singing out of the old hymnals when you came. It might have been because of you, or maybe the previous pastor, that I was put on the deacon board. Baptists don't call them elders, but in modern church parlance, we acted as elders. We were the spiritual leaders of the church.

You and your beautiful wife, Mary, and your lovely adult children—Tim Hartzell, I hope you hear this. You were amazing, and your wife.

John and Mary Hartzell were angels for us, but John, especially you. I saw Jesus in you. You gave me a reason to keep hoping and recovering. You've passed away, and I miss you so much.



Jay Swisher, I don't remember if it was 2002 or 2005. It's in the other stories. You were one of the five elders at Plymouth Bible Chapel, the Brethren Assembly. You were an angel for me, such a beautiful and gentle soul. And of course your wife, Rosie.

But Jay, you took me under your wing, as all the angels I've talked about have. I literally picture wings, people bringing me in under their wings. Jay, you were that. You brought me in under your wing.

You were so smart, well-educated, and a tender, beautiful soul who wrote beautiful original music to the Psalms and played guitar. Those three years at Plymouth Bible Chapel were beautiful because of everybody, all the angels there, but especially you, Jay.



And then Bob and Janice Moengen, our next-door neighbors in the home we lived in in Plymouth for many, many years. The home all of our kids, I think, call home, and it's always home when they say the word.

Bob, you were a beautiful man, and so patient with me, even when I almost destroyed your garage dropping that tree and missing it by inches. Even in your anger, you were restrained. That's a funny story now, but it wasn't funny then.

You were a dad to me. I don't think you ever saw yourself that way, but you were.

And Janice, you were grandma to our kids. You were the one I called standing in Webster City, Iowa. I called you, not even my wife. I called you in the middle of the destruction of my business in 1998. I didn't know who to call, and I called you, and you prayed for me.

You prayed for me.

Ace, you will be listening to this and never believing you were an angel. Not even sure you believe in God anymore, but I believed in you.

You showed up in our lives when we had the Halloween blizzard that buried our little tiny part of Plymouth in feet of snow. I had seen you across the street and immediately judged you because I was a fundamentalist Christian at the time and you were some kind of weird Jesus freak.

But we dug cars out of the snow for two days together, and I fell in love with you against all of what should have been because of my fundamentalist Baptist judgment heart.

Brother, I just fell in love with you. I had a man crush on you. You were so bigger than life, always just bigger than life, and I felt so honored that you wanted to be my friend.

And you were my friend. You were there for me in so many ways, and you helped me remodel my basement so my mom could live in it. You were a carpenter and a sailor, and boy, that's putting it mildly. You sailed yachts on the Atlantic Ocean, for gosh sakes.

We just saw you two years ago down on the Gulf of Mexico, and you took us out on the dolphin cruise. That was just stunning. We closed the pub down on the Gulf—you and your beautiful girlfriend and Mary and me. We just closed the place down talking all night, didn't we? Oh my gosh, I'll never forget that.

But Ace, do you remember when you kidnapped me? You scared the living bejeebers out of me, knocking on my car window in a driveway. You either did that as a separate event, and I almost peed my pants, or

you did it when you kidnapped me to go sailing with you in freaking November, because there was an inch of ice on Medicine Lake.

Whatever the occasion at the window, which I will never forget, you kidnapped me with no excuses, no explanations, with a thermos of coffee, and drug me out to Medicine Lake for the 16-foot O'Day Day Sailer that you had bought from us. It was Mary's grandpa's boat. You ended up with it, and we sailed on Medicine Lake through an inch of ice.

I can still remember the ice cracking as the hull broke the ice. We sailed for probably a couple hours at least, dressed up like Eskimos because it was freaking cold.

If there is a heaven, I've lived it right there in those moments. It was so stunningly beautiful.

That's just the soul you are. You just do crap like that. That's just who you are, what you do. “Hey, let's just go do this thing.” What a beautiful human being you are, and an angel you were to me, sailing there.

I can't finish this without saying you are the one who forcibly—because you were always forcing me to do crap out of my comfort zone, you hippy, long-haired Jesus freak—drug me to Dunn Brothers on Lake Street, Minneapolis.

You took away my virginity. That is where I learned to drink real coffee, not gas station crap, which, to me, prior to Dunn Brothers on Lake Street, was what coffee was. I mocked this new trend of what I still call foo-foo coffee, like the Europeans have been drinking forever.

But you made me drink my first latte. You made me do it. Thanks a lot, buddy, because that's a very expensive addiction I have now.

I know you'll be listening to this. I love you, Ace.

Mark and Cathy Bonneville, we've talked about you at length, Mary and I, in another recording, but you were our angels.

You helped heal and rescue us after the 1998 business crash, the telemarketing business. We were lost and wandering and sad and desperately poor, and you rescued us. You were family to us. You were our family.

Cathy, you have such a tender and beautiful soul. Your heart is as big as Texas. You give and give and give to anybody and everybody, every stray human, every lost human soul, every stray cat. You can't see people without seeing the real them beneath the surface. You always see their needs.

You are so beautiful, and you're my sister. You will always be my sister.

And Mark, I've had three or four best male friends, but you are the person I now tell everybody is my best friend as I'm recording this story. You know the most intimate and hurt and damaged parts of me. I've shared wounds that I have at the deepest levels with very few people, and you're one of them.

I've seen and heard your wounds, the real you. We just saw you on the deck a week or two ago. My gosh, till the day I die, you are my closest brother. Cathy, you're my closest sister.

Mark and Kathy, you are my brother and sister.

I've lost the chronology of this, but Mike and Alice Sanders.

I hope you're still alive, Mike. Pretty sure Alice is. We've lost connection, but you were family to us in the Kampus Kourt Trailer Park.

Mike, the stories we could tell. They could go on for a million hours. But Mike and Alice, this is also dedicated to you. You were angels for us.



Next, James Peterson. We still stay in touch. Mary is in your wife's group.

Jennifer Peterson, you still lead the group that Mary's in, and I bless you for that.

James, without you, I wouldn't have had a place to heal at Crossroads.

Do you remember our first time, when we ate at that yellow restaurant where they had the sloppy, greasy, greatest cheeseburgers in town? The Elbow Room. That's where I think I fell in love with you right away.

You have been in a category of men I call bigger than life, men I've always felt a little intimidated by. But you have spent all the years we've known each other trying to make me not feel intimidated by you. You are a great man.

To me, more than that, you were my healing place at Crossroads as the senior pastor. You created that environment for all the years you were there because you were the leader, and that's what leaders do.

You made a safe place for me to heal, and you embraced and welcomed in and even went through The Ultimate Journey. Because of that, I found healing.

Thank you.



Deanna Hanson, like Mrs. Day that I talked about earlier, if there were angels unawares that were not human but angels in skin and human clothing, you, just like Mrs. Day, were one of those. I put you in the Mrs. Day category, and only you two there.

I don't want to rank all my angels. Probably a bad idea when I'm listing them. But you literally saved my literal life when you stood in the foyer at Crossroads Church, so scared.

I found out later that you are terrified to do things like this, and you told me you'd never done it before, maybe never after. But you grabbed me—not physically, but you cornered me at Crossroads and looked me in the eye. I think your finger actually did hit my chest as Mary was standing next to me.

You looked at me and said, "You are hurting deeply. Kelly Gau and I have been talking about you, and God told me to tell you that you are hurting and you need to go to this class called The Ultimate Journey."

Deanna, if you hadn't done it that way, and if you hadn't done it with Mary standing next to me, I never would have gone to The Ultimate Journey. You didn't know how perfect it was that you did it that way.

But that's a God thing, and I know you like that phrase, so that's a God thing. You were God's angel to me, and you saved my life.

We've called each other brother and sister since then. But Deanna, you're more than a sister to me. You're God's angel.



And Ray Gaskill.

Ray, you were Jesus' eyes to me in phase one of The Ultimate Journey. You were God's angel sent to me, and I despised you for the first two full sessions, maybe the third one.

I remember for sure, for a fact, I had my arms folded for the first two classes, the first two Tuesday nights in The Ultimate Journey. I remember glaring at you with my arms folded, daring you with my eyes to fix me because I was so unfixable.

You just looked at me like Jesus.

I could not have healed without you. I really believe that God sends specific people to me in my life at specific times when they are the only person I could have seen or heard, the only person who could have broken through.

That's all I'm going to say, Ray.



Marty, you were Ray's assistant. You were apprenticing to learn how to lead an Ultimate Journey 1 class, and also because you were going to be, if you were not already, on The Ultimate Journey board from Crossroads.

But we became David and Jonathan friends.

That friendship we shared for the next five or six years at least—people

sometimes jokingly, to our faces, said we were like a married couple. But we were.

We spent what felt like hundreds of hours at Perkins, mostly Perkins, remember, but other places. You taught me how to give birth to a cow. I don't know how many hours I spent with you amongst the cows and at your house.

You remember we said we were like David and Jonathan, and we felt that and knew it. I learned your soul and you learned mine.

You saved me from quitting The Ultimate Journey after I got the reviews from my first class that I facilitated. Somebody who's still my precious sister—I won't name her—wrote in a review that sometimes I could be too much.

The shame I felt from that. I exploded in profanity in your den at your house, and you rescued me from that meltdown.

I kept facilitating classes, and then Mary did. So many things I could talk about.



Finally, John Sullivan.

John, you were God's angel. One of the last things you did in your active priesthood at Christ Church in Austin was to be God's angel, to bring to me the final healing I needed.

I was really beginning to find a good place of healing with all of my therapy. And God bless the therapist angels sent to me. You know who

you are. You're going to be reading and listening to this story. I don't want to embarrass you, so I'm going to leave your names out.

But my therapist, who I've seen now for several years, and my psychologist prior to her—you have also been angels that God sent to me.

John, I needed spiritual healing, and you were the one who brought me back to full fellowship in Jesus' body.

I never knew until I met you, until I came to Christ Church, that all along I had been on a path to lead me to Christ Church in Austin, where I stand every week and recite the Nicene Creed with 40 people who believe it and love the story as deeply as I believe it and love the story.

I cry without embarrassment, and they all see me cry as I say the Nicene Creed, the most beautiful story I've ever heard.

I'm so triggered by church, from hurt in the church for so long, and suffering from my diagnoses and my childhood trauma. John, one of the last things you did was receive me, with the bishop, into the Episcopal Church in the ceremony in Mankato. I cry when I think about that.

I feel like I'm home.

I don't want to make you cry as you listen to this, but I'm so sad you're no longer our full-time rector because of health. You know—and if you don't know, I'm telling the whole world right now—one of the last, most beautiful things you did as the priest of Christ Church was to bring me into the fold and help heal me for these three years we've been there now.

I love you so much, so much.



For all these angels, you have all been uniquely, specially designed to be part of the healing of my life. You all have special places in my heart.

And for all the angels I did not name, and the ones I've forgotten—I'm going to feel terrible, I know, because later today and tomorrow I'm going to remember the precious names that didn't make it into this recording. But you are all loved.

The innumerable angels that have saved my life. The hospitals, the mental health professionals. The medical community that has saved my physical life I don't know how many times. Minnesota IRTS. I'm going to say that.

Angels, all of them.

That's how I want to end this book, to talk about my angels. God bless you, angels.

I believe, and I choose to believe in the story, and I choose to believe in heaven, and I choose to believe in a good God. But I hope, like the title of one of C.S. Lewis's books, when I cross to the other side, I am surprised by joy.

That I'm surprised by joy, and I see you all, and I know you all.

Thank you to my angels. These stories are dedicated to you.



Never a Dull Moment

Told by Mary



I'm going to talk a little about my life now in my late 60s. I'm 68, and we live in a high-rise senior building with other seniors. We were almost the youngest when we moved in—there were a couple younger ones. Now we have a lot of peers here who are also in their late 60s. We've been here almost seven years, and we're still enjoying it. It's never a dull moment.

My life at age 68 is never dull. There's always something for me to do. I deliver meals five days a week to people who can't get down to get their meal in the lunchroom. They can order it. It's not a free meal, although some people qualify for free. I enjoy that, and I've made a lot of friends doing it. People always look forward to seeing me, and I look forward to seeing them. That keeps me going.

I usually go to the YMCA about four days a week. Sometimes I go to more than one class a day. I like to do strength training, step aerobics, and yoga, and I've made some friends doing that. One of them even went floating with me this summer.

That's another one of my hobbies. If you've known me at all, you know

I love to go in the lake, blow up a floaty, and go out there and float for an hour or so. I find it very relaxing and very enjoyable. Another thing I love to do is have fires out back. That started in Kiester, and that was a great thing to start doing. I've tried to keep it up.

I ride my bike maybe once or twice a week, about 30 minutes. I don't go more than four or five miles, but I enjoy that. I count it as a blessing every single day I can get on the bike and have the strength to do it. In the winter, I ride a bike in the hallway right outside my apartment, and that's another way I get my exercise.

I like to walk in the state park. We are birdwatchers, and we have been for many years. The state park's just outside of town, so it's a quick drive over there. I love seeing the seasons change, and I'm looking forward to going out there tomorrow because it's been a whole week. I love to go birdwatching and, if I'm lucky, get some photos of birds or nature or flowers or even mushrooms.

We like to take trips. This year we went to Winona for a few days. We went to Clear Lake, Iowa, and then farther south. We ventured into some new towns and ended up in Decorah and the Ice Cave. We like little out-of-the-way restaurants. We also went to Wisconsin. In September, we went to my reunion in the Chicago suburbs and caught up with some family members.

We're always going to visit family. We have the eight children, and they're scattered around a circle from where we live, and the 22 grandkids. We love you all, and we really look forward to those visits. It's always a good time. We keep really busy with things like that.

I'm in a small group where we do Bible study or book studies, and that meets usually once a week. I've been doing that for nine or ten years. I

don't even remember, but it's been a while. I look forward to that because those are old friends, and I feel loved in that group.

Starting in the summer, we like to go to concerts. Most of them are free ones, but we do enjoy catching the music. Mostly it's down at the lake at the gazebo. Once in a while after yoga, I'll go to hear music out at the winery with the yoga ladies, and that's fun too. It's been almost three years, and I'm slowly making some casual friendships with them.



It's fun keeping up with the grandkids and watching them grow. Sometimes we'll go to parks, do some birdwatching with them, or go out on the lake. I like to find books, especially for the younger ones. They're all readers, and they love books. Even the little ones love to look at books and have them read to them. I really enjoy that.

Sometimes I'll get to watch them for a little bit, or go with their parents and help keep an eye on them. It's kind of fun. When I show up, most of the kids say, "Grandma, what did you bring us?" It's only small stuff, but I'm always on the lookout.

I guess my mom was the same way. She always had stuff for the grandkids. It was weird stuff when my mom would save things for them, but they looked forward to it. They remember some of the weird stuff she brought them. It was unique, so they enjoyed getting it.

I guess I've turned into my mom that way. Lots of books and little things, little trinkets and mementos that I find along the way. It's hard to keep up with all of them because there are so many, and they're getting older.

But I do enjoy spending time with the grandkids—going places with

them, staying in their home and watching them, or having them come into my apartment or out in my yard and meet my neighbors. We live across the street from two schools, and there's a playground out there, so that's always fun to bring the grandkids out there. I look forward to doing more of that.



I'll mention a few things that Dad and I like to do together. I already talked about going to state parks. We really enjoy that, so we do that in the warmer months. We love to travel to different cities, different states, and just see new things.

We have this thing that we don't like to do the same thing more than once, so we're always looking for a new place, a new little restaurant to try out, a new little town to visit. That's always fun for us, and we usually combine it with seeing friends or family.

We like to go to music events. We have some favorite bands we follow, and if we hear they're going to be in a town nearby, we like to try to catch them.

When the weather's bad or cold, or late at night, we always have the TV on. We don't turn it on till after dinner. I like to watch the news. Dad—Grandpa—doesn't like the news, so sometimes I'll go watch it in the bedroom, or I'll catch it on YouTube at night when I get ready for bed.

We do like our dramas, like Call the Midwife and The Chosen. Oh, we love NCIS Origins. There are so many. We like the Chicago shows—Chicago PD, Chicago Med. We also like murder mysteries, especially if they're British or Australian or even New Zealand. They just seem

more fun when they're in another time period or from another country. We enjoy those more than the American ones, but we'll watch some of those too. We never run out of things to watch, and that's one thing we do agree on.

For many years we've done genealogy, and we kind of go in spurts. We used to do it the hard way, with a lot of legwork. Back in the old days, we had to actually go places and get into the records and look at microfiche. Now it's all on Ancestry.

We made a couple books, and it's a hobby you can have for your entire life and never exhaust it. We know we have a lot more of that in our future. We've just got to make the time to do it, because it's time intensive. Once you get into it, it's hard to stop. You forget you're going to have to eat and go to the bathroom because you get so excited.

And you meet people. I've met relatives in Canada, and I know I have relatives overseas that I've heard about—contemporaries, my generation—but haven't met. There's more of a language barrier with Sweden. But anyway, it's just a fun thing to do.

I'm still making photo albums. That's a constant, never-ending thing too. Now Dad does it digitally, but I've done it the old-fashioned way. Jennifer got me started on scrapbooking, so that's something I hope to do more of. I didn't know I would enjoy it, but turns out I enjoy it. We'll just do it together.

I also have some crafts I like to do. When I drive, I like to crochet. [Editor's Note: unclear — possible gap in recording.] It's always really basic things like dishcloths. I just finished making a yoga bag, which took hours and hours, but it was an easy, easy pattern. It's working pretty good till I rip a hole in it, dragging it, because my yoga mat is very heavy. I've made some Christmas stockings and things like that too.

I still plan to get into more coloring. We were talking about that at lunch, coloring books for adults. Some of my neighbors are into cards and bingo. I haven't got into that with them, but I might do that someday, or playing dice. I still like games, but pretty simple, basic games. I've kept a few. I haven't got rid of all of them.



I don't know who's going to hear this, how far in the future this will be played, but I just want to say I love all my kids, my in-laws, and all you grandkids. Right now there are 22, and maybe there are more to come that we haven't met yet.

If you're listening to this and it's years later, I hope you have some good memories of times we spent together. And if you don't, I hope you learn something from listening to this about what our lives were like in our older years, and that this will be a blessing to you to hear it.

I love you all.

Our MEMORIES

In this scrapbook lives
pieces of our forever



Those who went before us



MARY'S MOM & DAD

Pat & Leonard

MARY'S GRANDMA & GRANDPA



"Henny" and Helen



MARY'S MOM & DAD

Leonard & Pat

MARY'S GRANDMA



Alethea Kingswood



MARY'S GRANDMA & GRANDPA

"Henny" & Helene

MARY'S GRANDPA



Karl Gunnar Larson

KEN'S MOM & DAD



Marj, Kent & baby ken



Kent, Ken, Matt & Laura



KEN'S GRANDMA & GRANDPA

Midge, Ted,
Kent & Beverly



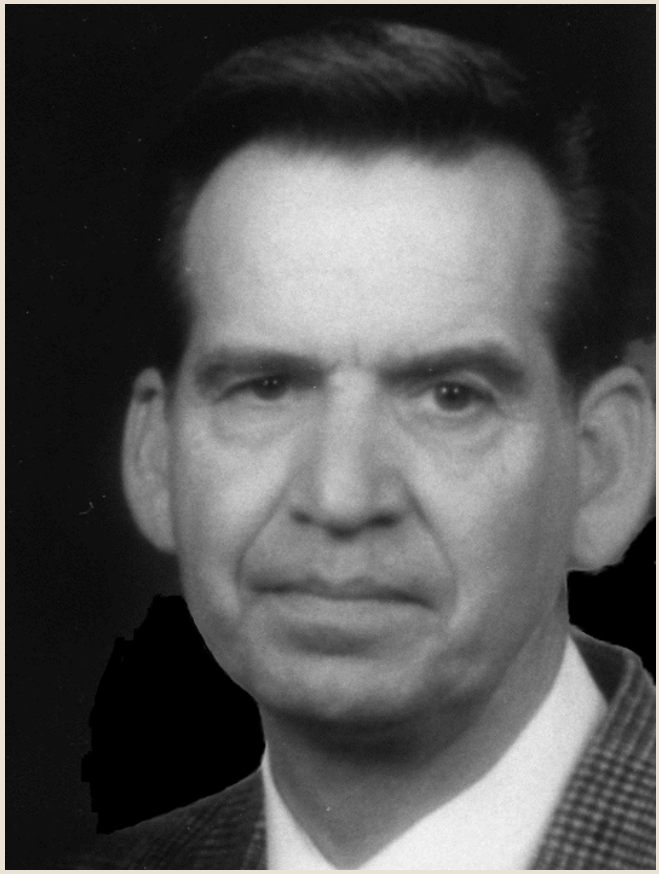
Jack & Josie Levittt, 1923



KEN'S MOM

Marj

KEN'S DAD



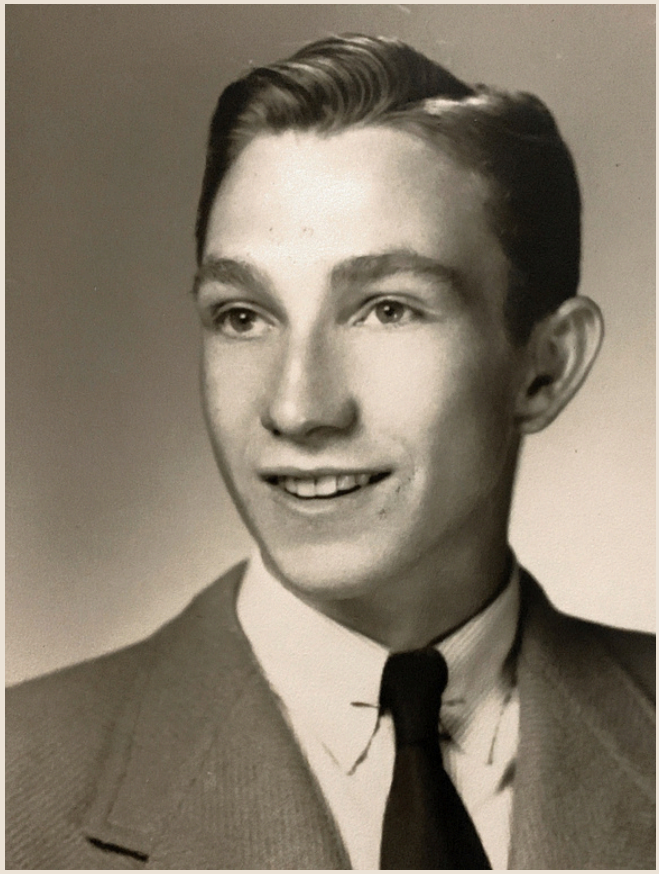
Kent



MARY'S MOM

Pat

MARY'S DAD



Leonard

Our Family



Bible Conference



Engagement day



Wedding party: Bill Lee, Matt Hood, Linda Medrano, Laura Hood



We were so happy that day



Ken, Mary, and Grandma Jo



Ken & Mary



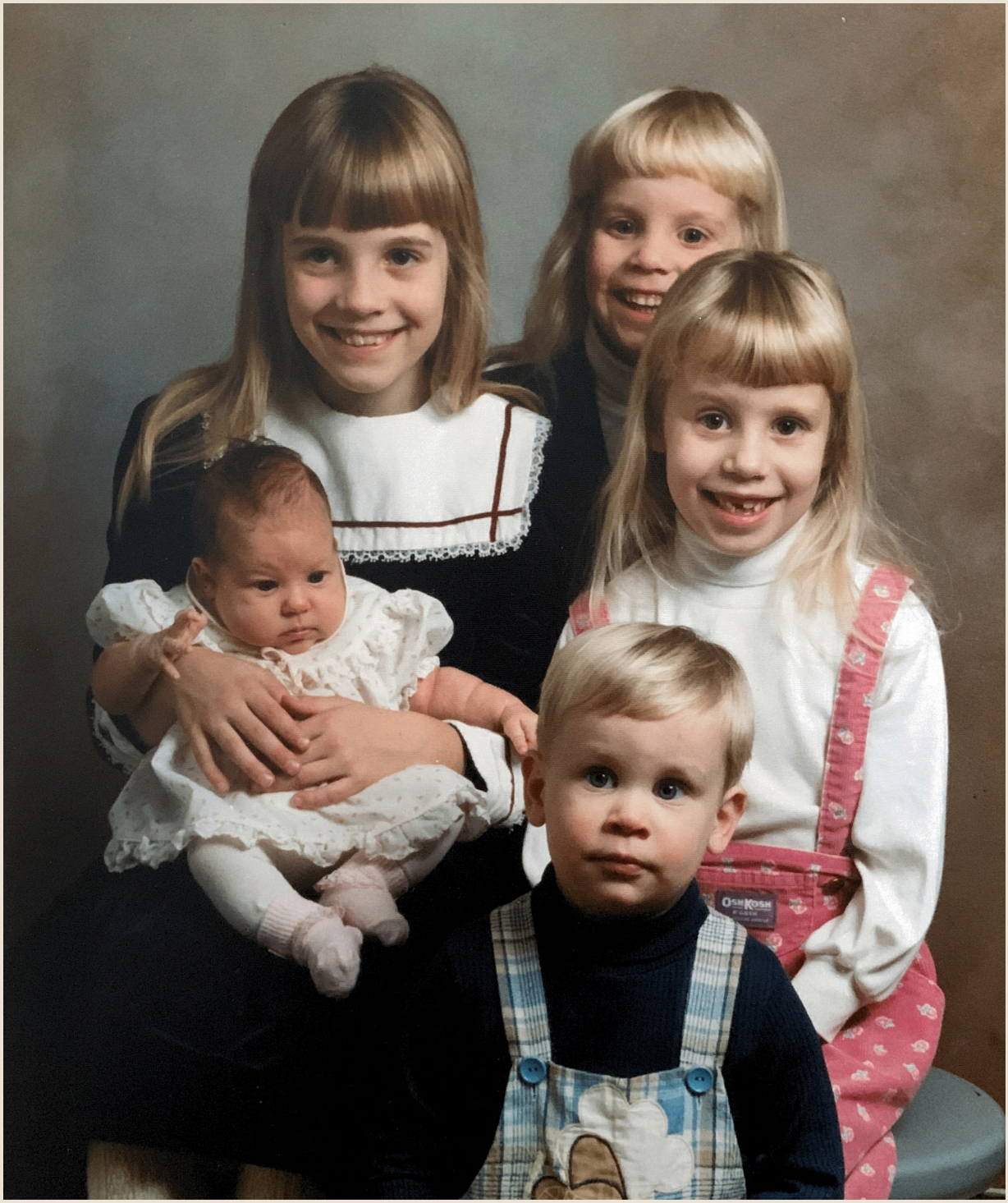
Ken, Mary & Jennifer (1981)



Ken, Mary, Jennifer & Jessica



Jennifer, Jessica, Emily (1986)



Jennifer, Jessica, Emily, Kasey
(Ken Jr), Melissa (1989)



Jennifer, Jessica, Emily, Kasey (Ken Jr),
Melissa, Amanda (1992)



Jennifer, Jessica, Emily, Kasey (Ken Jr),
Melissa, Amanda, Catherine (1996)



Ken, Mary, and all the kids (1999)



All the kids, minus Jennifer (2000)



All the kids, minus Jennifer (2001)



Mary, Ken, and Kasey (Ken Jr), Melissa, Amanda, Catherine, Jeremy



All of us at Jessica's wedding

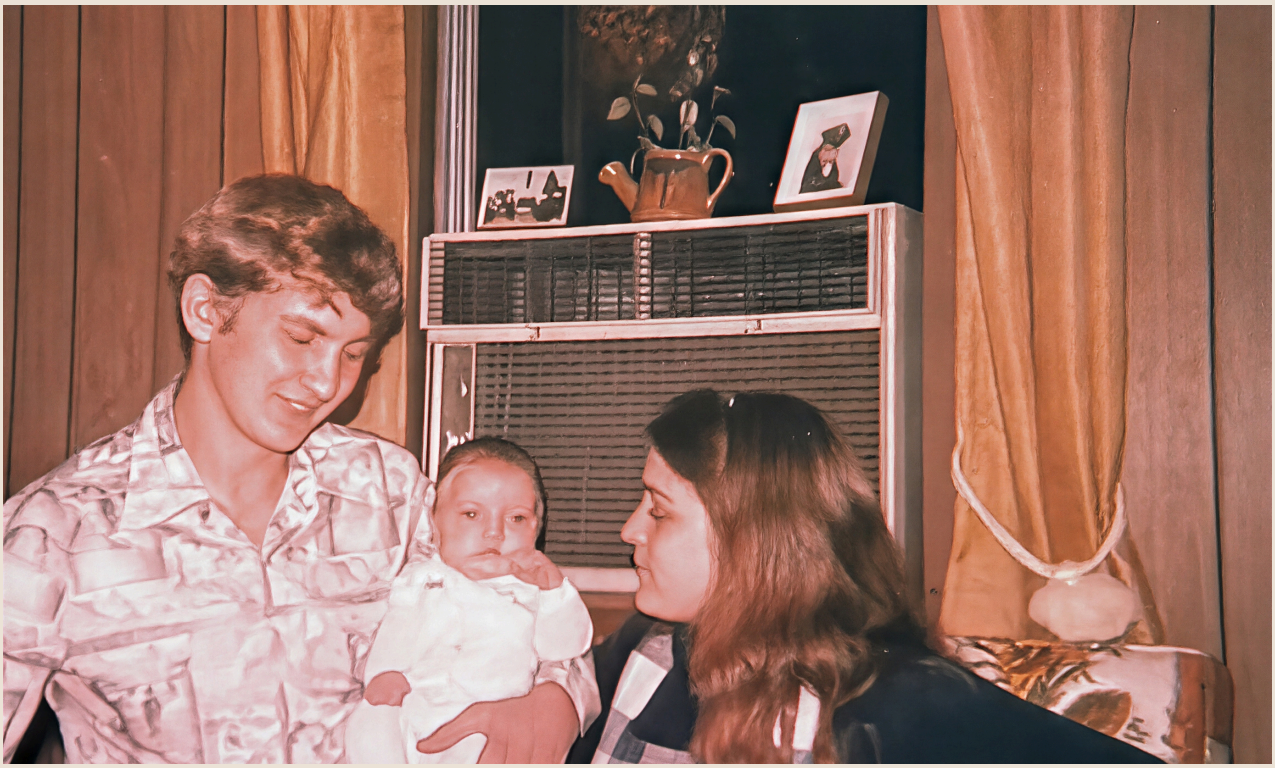
Snapshots

We had to choose from hundreds of candid snapshots. It was hard. The photos included here are not more important. We were simply limited by the number of pages available. Every memory and every photo is important, even the ones we had to omit.









Russ & Beth Reach





Betty Day



Keith and Allyson





Ken & Catherine



With
Jennifer









With Justin







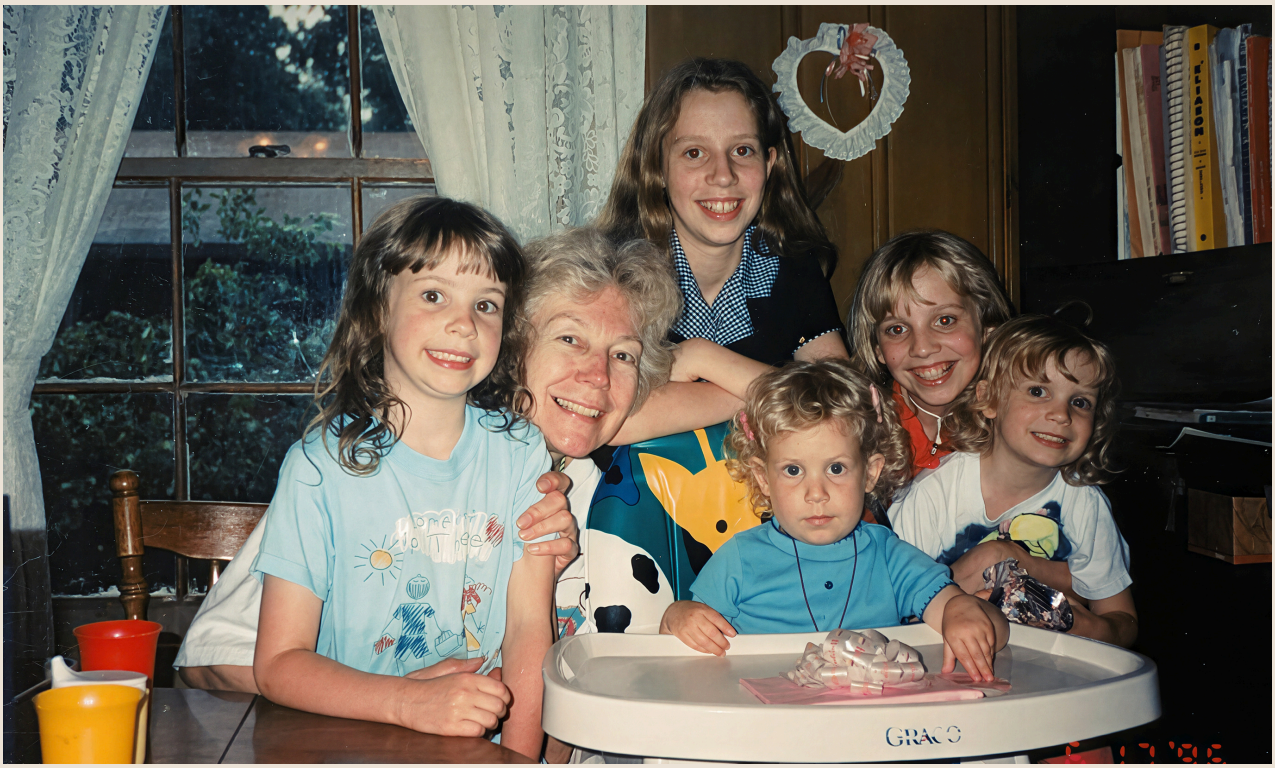











GRACO







Ace





Christian & Shadow





Mark &
Cathy








PENNY LANE
SAT
2PM

Our Children

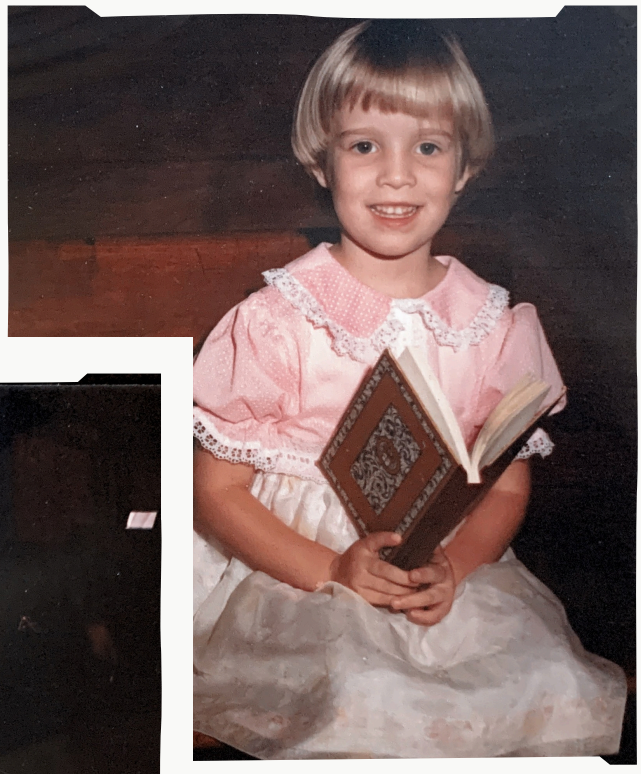


They made it all worthwhile. The joy they each brought to us is immeasurable. We would choose each of them all over again, exactly as they are.

We gave birth to seven, and two more we raised as our own. Every one was an equal gift from God.

Jennifer







Jennifer







Jessica







Jessica







Emily







Emily







Kasey (Ken Jr)







Kasey (Ken Jr)







Melissa







Melissa







Amanda



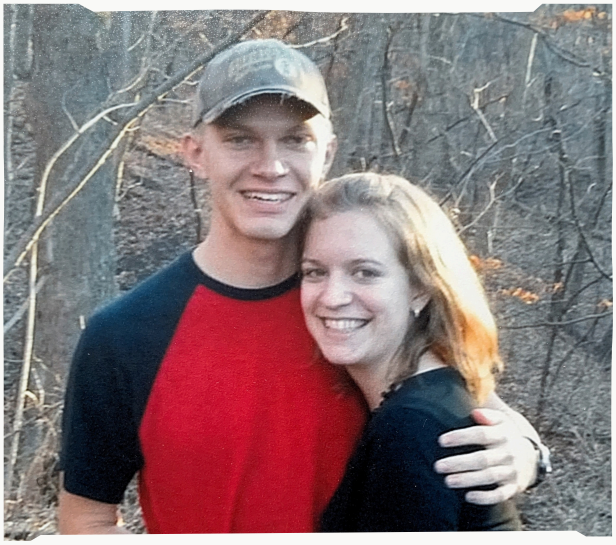




Amanda







Catherine







Catherine







Jeremy







Jeremy







With baby
Elliot & Nellie

Laurie







Laurie



Our grandchildren

We love this time of life! Our grandkids are such a joy to us! And they have the best parents in the world. Watching them as they grow is so beautiful.



Danny & Victoria



Jase, Nolan, Easton



Jeffery



Kenny, Serenity, Emerson



Samantha, William, Malachi



Colton, Elliot, Claire



James, Jana, Mark, Barnabas
Amy, Leonard, Gabriel

Florida 2024

We took a one month road trip tp Florida and saw many friends and family. We made it all the way to the Keys!









Mary, Julie, Paul, George



Janene, Mary, Daryl, Ken



Richard & Heather Murray



Sarah Sterling



Norm & Delane Dukes



Carol Lillibridge



Savannah GA





St Augustine FL





With Tammy & Bryan Colton in St Augustine




CUBAN COFFEE QUEEN
Greetings
FROM
KEYWEST
SOUTHERNMOST CITY
IN THE U.S.A.
FLORIDA
LETTY HOWAK

We made it!


CUBAN COFFEE QUEEN
WE DELIVER
TRY OUR NEW



St Petersburg

Millie & Dave
Fitzgerald

Keith & Diana





Palm Harbor

Katie & Mitchy Tsalickis





Gators!

Randy, Kathy, and Nick Elstrott





Dolphin watching with Captain Ace in Perdido Bay





On the dolphin cruise

Lovebirds










Calvin Klein







With Jason Gray





Our life today

We live in a wonderful retirement community in Albert Lea, MN. We stay active in our community, attending lots of local functions. We also see our grandkids as often as possible. And we enjoy the beauty of southern MN. We hike and birdwatch in our area including our local state park. Enjoy a look at what we get to see every day!



Thursdays on Fountain









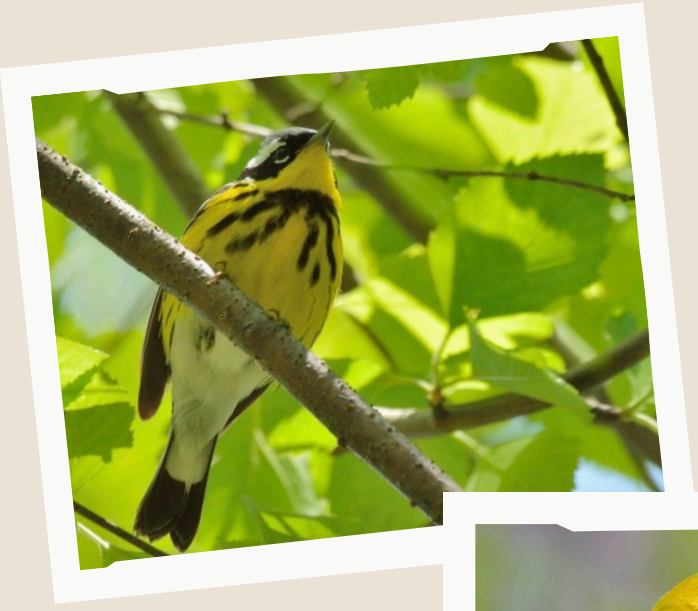
The view out our window



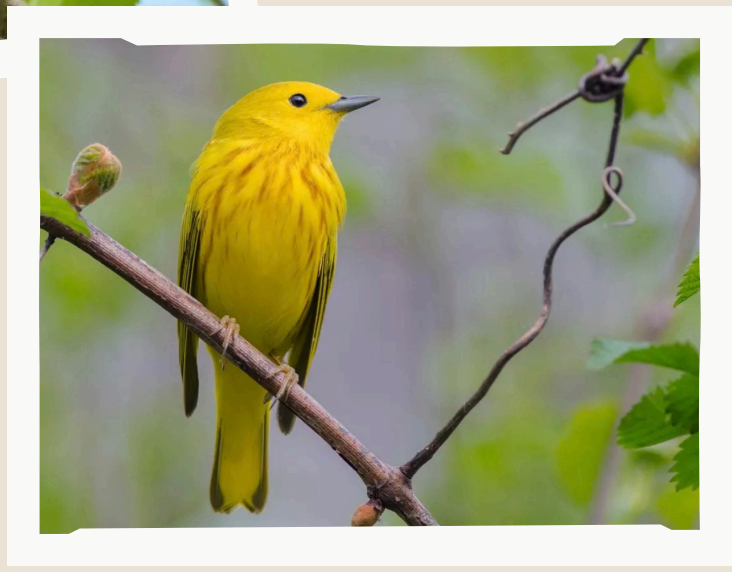


Our state park





birding!







Albert Lea





In every laugh, every hug, every step —
we found each other.

Add more...

Preserved Online

Here are the links to the audio recordings, the book, and the photos. They are archived in Archive.org and Ancestry.com.

The **audio recordings** are listed in a web player, which will not play on iPhones. Use a laptop or computer web browser to play the audio in this link: https://archive.org/details/room-for-one-more

The **book** is also preserved in Archive.org at these links:
https://archive.org/details/room-for-one-more-book
https://archive.org/details/room-for-one-more-book-no-images
The first one includes all images and loads very slowly.

Ancestry.com also has the book (without photos) and audio recordings safely preserved in the gallery of Kenneth Clayton Hood, born 08 Apr 1958.

