

But God ... His Story in My Life

Since their teen years, my sons Jon and Andy have been actively involved in creating and producing films. They are now husbands, fathers, and partnering film directors with their company Erwin Brothers Entertainment. One of my favorite scenes in their movie *Woodlawn* is near the end of the movie when someone says, “Well, do you believe in miracles?” A character named Tandy says, “Yes, I do. I am one.”¹ Well, I'm just Shelia and I do believe in miracles, because I am one. I am just a girl who was born in Gadsden, Alabama. My father owned the local grocery store in a small community called Hook's Lake. The store was the center of the community. It was a fun place to grow up. We lived on the street just behind the grocery store. The school bus stopped in front of the store and all my friends would go to my house after school for snacks. My parents became everyone's second mom and dad.

My grandfather was a pastor, as was his father and five generations before him. Consequently, Christ's love has always been a part of my life. I am sure I heard His name from my mother's lips even before I was born while she carried me in her womb. By the time I was four years old, I knew His story and His plan of salvation, and with that story, I came to understand that I was a sinner. My mom said that at that age, she began to see that I was under a great deal of conviction. There was no organization like Child Evangelism Fellowship that taught parents how to lead their little ones to Christ, and she did not know how to lead me to salvation at such a young age. The church I attended was not far from my house, and we were there every time the doors were open. When I was six years old, our small church had a revival. My father did not attend church with us, so as was my mother's custom, she sang in the choir and I sat on the front row so she could make sure I paid attention. I initially sat in the choir with her during church, until one Sunday I thought it would be funny to crawl under her skirt. From that day on I sat in the front pew. On the Sunday of the revival, I do not remember a word the preacher said that particular day, but I do remember I wanted the forgiveness of Jesus. I tried to get my mother's attention up in the choir, but she told me to be quiet. After the service when I saw her, I began to cry. She asked what was wrong, and I told her I wanted to accept Jesus into my heart. She took me to our pastor's office and we talked for a long time. He told me to go home and think about what we had talked about that morning. If I still wanted to become a Christ-follower I could come down at the service that night and he would pray with me. Before the day was over, I had become God's child forever.

Although I don't remember much about my new life in Christ, I know I was grateful for His dying for me. I also thought it was now up to me to pay him back by being the best Christian I could be. Every time we had a revival, I rededicated my life to Christ. My purpose was to please God and to “be good.”

Through heartache and disappointment, I came to the end of myself and my own effort to live the Christian life. I was 20 years old when I understood I could not be what I wanted to be. I found my heart attitudes were still a problem, and I was helpless to do anything about them. In disappointment and frustration I told the Lord that I could not live the Christian life and if this was the abundant life, I didn't want it. The Lord began to teach me that He never said I could live the Christian life. By studying His Word, I began to understand that He is the only one who can live the Christian life, and He will live it through me, if I only yield to His control.

This was the best news I had ever heard. So, I did yield! My life has never been the same. He has done more than I could ever have dreamed of or hoped for. His love is from everlasting to everlasting—what a Savior! Not only did He live a perfect life for me, and then die on the cross for me, He continues to live His life through me. In return, I get to experience a truly abundant life. John 10:10 “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

By that time, I had graduated from Gadsden High School and was attending college at Troy University. I graduated with a double major in education and art. I also met and married my husband Hank. Long before we

met, we had both committed our lives to full-time Christian work. Together we have spent the past 45 years in a variety of ministries.

From my senior year of college and continuing over the past 46 years, I have invested my life in the lives of other women through discipleship, one-on-one mentoring, and group Bible study. I love Jesus, my husband, my two sons, my two daughters-in-grace and my amazing grandchildren. I also love the Word of God. Understanding who I am in Christ and learning to live my life through that understanding continues to transform me from Glory to Glory.

“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” Life with Christ is a great adventure. 2 Corinthians 3:18

Our story is one of change and redirection. As college seniors, we thought we would go on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ (CRU), *but God* had different plans for us. We had only been married for three months when we arrived in Birmingham, Alabama, after spending the summer working with youth in Evergreen, Ala. Our college days had been full of the enjoyment with great friends. We had been the leaders of the CRU action group at Troy University. Life was amazing while we lived in Troy, and ministry in Evergreen was so fruitful that summer, *but God* had us move to Birmingham to start over again.

We moved into a very small one-bedroom apartment located upstairs in one of the large homes on the south side of Birmingham. Hank continued his education at Southeastern Bible College while I taught school. Hank also worked part-time at Shades Mountain Independent Church as the youth director. What an unbelievable year 1972 was for Hank and me! In the early seventies God was sweeping our nation with a youth revival, “The Jesus Movement,”ⁱⁱ by which we saw many lives transformed through our ministry.

That fall the Lord gave me a wonderful gift. Soon after I communicated to Hank my ongoing struggle to apply all the things I had learned about being a godly wife, he learned about a lady teaching a Bible study in our city. With great excitement, he told me all about her and the following Tuesday night Hank drove me to her house and dropped me off for the study. That day I met Joyce Yancey, speaker and Bible teacher with the Wales Goebel Ministry, a ministry to teenagers in Birmingham. Over the past 45 years she has been my “spiritual mom and mentor.” So much of who I am comes from our relationship. My friends started to call me “Echo,” because when I opened my mouth, so much of what Joyce was teaching came out of me. Watching her walk with the Lord through some very hard times grew my faith and trust in the Lord.

At the end of that year, Wales Goebel, founder of Wales Goebel Ministry, invited us to join his team. We were assigned Woodlawn High School. Wow (and double wow)! The next two years were filled with revival in a school torn apart by integration. We watched God show up!

Hank’s dream was to attend Dallas Seminary. In 1975 their freshman class was full but Hank was accepted to summer school and off we went to Dallas with our little car packed to the top with our belongings. I thought the plan would be to come back to Birmingham at the end of that summer. *But God* had a different plan.

Not many people stayed in Dallas for summer school, so it was a long, lonely summer. I got a summer job working at a fabric store. I was very homesick and longed to be back in Birmingham with our great friends. Every single day on my way home from work I asked the Lord to let us go home to Birmingham. One day I noticed a vacant apartment for rent next door to the apartment that we were subleasing for the summer. In my heart, I was hoping that someone would rent that apartment so we wouldn't have a place to live and would have to move back to Birmingham to once again be with all our friends and family. Sure, enough one afternoon I came by that apartment and the rent sign was gone. I thought to myself, “We're going home!” When I walked in our apartment, Hank was standing there grinning from ear to ear. He shared that he had gotten a spot in the

freshman class at the last minute and that (guess who!) he had rented the apartment? That's right...we would be living in that apartment!

One of my new Dallas friends who knew I was so homesick gave me a plaque that read, "Bloom where you are planted." ⁱⁱⁱIt wasn't long before I began to fall in love with Dallas. God gave us so many wonderful friends, and we lived in Dallas for the following seven years.

To make ends meet, Hank secured a job working at the radio station at Dallas First Baptist Church-KCBI. He was a natural and fell in love with radio work. In December of that year we found ourselves in a new place of learning to trust God. We did not have the money for Hank's winter semester of school. We prayed, Hank even enrolled for school, but when school began, the money was not there and he dropped out. It did not make sense. Why? *But God* had a plan. In January, a local TV station came to Hank and asked him to work for them. Hank replied, "I do not know anything about being a news reporter." They said, "We will train you."

My teaching career at Schofield Christian School had turned into a principalship and for the next several years I served as principal there.

Little did we know that there was a very good reason that God had not provided the money for Hank to go to school that winter, I was pregnant and would not be going back to work in September so I could become a full-time, stay-at-home mom. God had provided even before we knew we had a need. After a couple of years at Chanel 11 as a reporter, they asked him to become an anchor. At that point Hank could return to finish his degree at Dallas Seminary. Hank and I were in love with Dallas. It looked like it would be our forever home *but God* was about to send us back to Birmingham.

While we were in Birmingham for a dear friend's wedding, Hank got a call from a station in Birmingham, the "Magic City." Channel 42 needed an anchor and news director and they wanted Hank. We spent the next two weeks packing to return to Alabama.

As you can see ours is not a story of graduating from college, getting a job, and staying in one place until we retire. No, our story is a story of "*but God*." With many more twists and turns, Hank accepted a four-hour talk radio show called *93 Live*, which lasted 20 years. He became the Christian conservative voice for most of the state of Alabama. I remained a stay-at-home mom, community Bible teacher, and homeschool teacher for our sons.

Our sons finished high school and life was good. *But God*, in the winter of 1999, provided a new surprise in our lives. Hank and I went to dinner at our favorite restaurant when a chance encounter changed our direction once again. Hank stopped by the table of our friend, Alabama State Senator for District 14 Bill Armistead, to congratulate him on his upcoming run for Lt. Governor. Hank asked him who was running for his seat in the senate. Bill responded, "How about you?" On the way home that night Hank told me what Bill had asked him. He then asked me what I thought, and I told him I thought it was a great idea.

We ran a grassroots campaign with very little money and lots of wonderful volunteers. The night before the election Hank and I decided to go over to the next town to eat dinner so we could be alone. We got in the van and Hank reached over and took my hand and we both started to laugh. We said, "We are going to win." We felt God was going to give Hank the victory that night. We did not tell anyone else about that evening. The day after the election the newspaper headlines read, "Miracle ERWIN wins Senate seat." We quickly became inducted into the political world. For the next eight years Hank became Senator Erwin. All the years of training in his role at *93 Live* equipped him for this opportunity and God mightily used him.

From 2010 until November of 2019, we were semi-retired and run a travel agency from our home in Birmingham, Alabama. I had independent contractors who worked under me planning family vacations. Hank lead groups in traveling to the Holy Land, and we enjoyed the benefits of traveling the world ourselves.

Our sons Andy and Jon are married to our wonderful daughters-in-grace, Mandii and Beth, and we have seven grandchildren. My sons are film directors with their company Erwin Brothers Entertainment, now

Kingdom Story Company. Some of the movies they have produced are *October Baby*, *Moms Night Out*, *Woodlawn*, *I Can Only Imagine* and *I Still Believe*. Often moms say to me, “My child wants to make movies. What did you do to make that happen?” I always laugh a little inside, because it truly has been a God thing, not a mommy or a parent thing. “We just walked with the Lord and taught them to do the same.” The answer is always the same. Follow the Lord with all your heart, give your children encouragement, believe in them, and then trust the Lord with the outcome. My book *Raising Up Dreamers* tells our story, was published by Focus on the Family and came out in July of 2019.

In the spring of 2019, our sons relocated their company to Franklin, Tennessee and ask us to join them. We have enjoyed our new home and all our new friends.

In summation, I have been the wife of a student, a youth director, a high school football team chaplain, a pastor, a teacher, a radio personality, a news reporter/anchor/news director, senator and a businessman—all the same man who has been both guided and blessed by a God who never fails. As we have followed Jesus, our life has been a great adventure.

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- ⁱ Tandy Gerald- Woodlawn, Erwin Brothers Entertainment
 - ⁱⁱ www.cru.org
 - ⁱⁱⁱ Mary Engelbreit (www.maryengelbreit.com)