



CHAPTER 4

UNITY: Together We'll Stand

After my mom died, Dad made an important decision that would affect the lives of every child in our family. Following the funeral, family members and friends suggested to my dad, “We can take some of the kids home. We can keep them and raise them.”

My dad said, “No, together we’ll stand; divided we’d fall. So, we’ll keep them together.” He stayed home with us and would not allow anyone to separate our family. The reason my brothers and sisters are so close today that nobody can come between us is

because my dad kept the ten of us together then. That evening after the funeral, I watched my father sit in the family room, and I knew what he was thinking—“What am I gonna do now?” At night I thought I heard my dad talking to himself in his room. Now I know he was praying. He was afraid, but he couldn’t let anybody know. He did the best he could, and he succeeded. He kept us together.

Dad didn’t send *any* of us to go live with aunts or uncles. He kept *all* of us. He let us know we were all deserving of his love and attention. Our mother’s death was a cause for real grief, but if our father had allowed us to scatter in the wind, or if he had neglected us and let us run wild, it would have caused added tragedy in our ten lives. Instead, he made it his mission to keep us together and turn us into a cohesive unit. In fact, this process had begun even before Momma’s death. Our family worked together, played together, slept together and traveled together. We were all separate parts of the same organism—the family.

In addition to running the house and farm, Mom and Dad had always worked in town—Dad at the cotton gin and Mom cleaning houses. Whenever they were gone, the oldest child at home was in charge, and we were all expected to follow their directions and accomplish any work that needed to be done. Now that Mom had died, Eunice stepped up as she usually did on Momma’s work days. We missed Mom’s singing and praying. We longed for her loving care, but we did not suffer. Eunice made sure that Dad had his coffee every morning before his feet hit the floor, just like Momma had. She cooked, cleaned and patiently combed the hair of every child in the house before they went to school. Life went on.

A few months after Mom’s death, Eunice graduated from high school. Friends invited her to stay with them and work in Detroit. My oldest sister knew the money she could earn and send home

would be needed by the family. So, at the end of the summer, Eunice traveled north, and 16-year-old Eula took her place. Now it was Eula's turn to get up at five in the morning and bake biscuits from scratch, set out Dad's freshly laundered work clothes and keep the household going. I don't remember anyone telling my sisters to do this. They just knew the work had to be done, and they stepped up. As each sister grew up, graduated from school and went out to earn a living, the next one in line took her place—not that it was easy for them. Sometimes there were slip-ups, and things weren't always done the way Mom would have done them.

Part of the job of cooking on the old wood stove was remembering to bring in the kindling each night to start the fire for the next morning's breakfast. Occasionally, one of the girls would forget until it was late. They were afraid to stumble out to the woodpile in the dark of the late night or early morning before sunrise. So, the next morning they would take some old, out-grown shoes out of the box on the back porch and burn them in the wood stove. Dad would have thought it a waste to burn shoes for fuel—even if they were worn out—but no one let him know, and breakfast tasted fine just the same.

Although we continued to think about and grieve for Mom, there was no time for us to sit around and mourn. There was too much work to be done just to keep food on the table, and, as usual, it took all of us to get the work done. For example, about every six weeks it was time to slaughter a hog. We kids hated this work because it took a whole stinking day with every one of us working. First, my dad and older brothers would catch the hog in the corner of the pen, and then Dad would strike it in the head with an axe. Using the shotgun would have meant too much buckshot to be fished out of the meat. Meanwhile, we younger kids would fill a big

kettle with water and set it to boiling in the yard. Then, Dad would slit the hog's throat to let the blood run out. We'd dump the carcass in that big pot of boiling water to scald him. It was a hot, messy job fishing the hot hog back out of the kettle. Then we'd use knives to scrape the hide and remove the bristles.

Dad would cut the tendons in the hog's back legs, and feed a wooden dowel rod through them. The rod was hung from the side of the shed, and the suspended hog was gutted. The intestines were removed and given to the girls. They would clean them and wash them over and over. After careful washing, the chitlins still stunk, but when cooked properly they were good to eat. Dad directed us in helping with the butchering and packaging. Some of the pork was put in the deep freeze, while the bacon and hams were smoked in the smokehouse out back. We used every part of the hog—even the hooves and heart.

Butchering was hard work, but it not only fed us, it also helped feed our neighbors. Every time we butchered, Dad gave each family in the community a piece of meat. It was the same with the produce we grew. Whenever people came by, Dad not only offered them whatever was ripe, he made us kids go pick the vegetables for them. After a hard day's work, we weren't always happy to do this. We grumbled that if the neighbors had asked us to, Dad would even have had us cook the vegetables and spoon feed them. But the Golden Rule was part of the foundation of Dad's Christianity. That's the way things were done. We were taught to look out for our family first and our community next.

Each member of the neighborhood reciprocated as they could. Mrs. Lucy Turntine shared her telephone with us and allowed the girls to borrow salt, pepper, flour—whatever they needed as they cooked for us. Members of our church prayed for us and helped us

any way they could. One example of the love we were given came at Eunice's graduation. During her commencement march, Eunice looked out at the families of the hundred-some graduates. Then she broke down and began to cry. "I see everyone's mother but mine. I'm the only one without a mother." Mrs. Annarine Smith, the mother of her friend Eloise, stepped up and placed her arms around Eunice and comforted her, "I'll be your Momma. I'll love you." True to her promise, Mrs. Smith has kept in contact with Eunice ever since, always showing she cares especially for my sister. So, we were surrounded by two circles of love and unity. Our family formed the first, strongest unit, followed by the community.

After a full day of work, you would think we'd be so tired we could hardly move. I'm sure Dad wished for that. Instead, as he gathered us on our knees to pray in the family room around the fireplace each night, we often found ourselves in trouble for fidgeting and giggling. You know how it is. When you are a kid, the times you are supposed to be the most serious are the times you just have to laugh. As Dad would get wound up in his prayer, someone would break wind, one of us would snort, and we'd elbow each other. Woe unto the one who giggled out loud. He was likely to get backhanded. Knowing that only seemed to make it funnier and harder to keep still.

When we finally piled into bed, the giggling and whispering often continued. As I said before, the girls' room had two double beds for the six of them, and we three youngest boys slept in one bed. We arranged ourselves in a zigzag pattern—the first child would sleep at the head of the bed, the second slept at the foot and the third had his head back at the top of the bed. It could take a long time to settle down each night with three kids to a bed. Dad was patient to a point, but he would finally have to put a stop to it all. Then we would finally fall asleep, a tangle of arms and legs

entwined like one strange young creature.

One thing Dad was not patient about at all was fighting. Absolutely no fighting between us kids was acceptable. If even a small argument broke out, he'd sternly recite "Love one another." That was the scripture we heard more than any other. So, the only time we fought was when Dad was away from home. We might really lay into each other then, but the minute we saw his truck coming, we'd fall in line immediately and get back to the chores we were supposed to be doing. If someone was hurt, we all worked at patching him up before Dad returned. No one ever tattled to Dad about any fights. We all covered for each other.



Flora, Eula, Lillie and Carol (left to right) posing on the old rusty GMC truck that became part of our family.

Wherever we went, our family traveled together in the old, dark delta-green GMC truck, which became almost a symbol of our unity. Dad bought it new so long ago no one in the family could clearly remember when or what vehicle we had before it. That truck became part of the family, but, unlike us kids who grew bigger and stronger over the years, it just became more decrepit. The truck suffered bumps and scrapes as each child in the family grew old enough to learn to drive. Dad put his share of wear on it, too. He drove with a heavy foot, and the red dirt roads of Alabama supplied very little traction. Early one morning, Dad left for work in town as we kids were eating breakfast. We could hear the whine of acceleration as he started up the road, followed by total silence and then a loud crash. Dad had been traveling so fast the truck hit a bump, went airborne and landed in a wooded area off the road. He came out of this embarrassing situation without a scratch, but the truck wasn't so lucky. So, the GMC truck gradually changed from bright and shiny to rumpled and rusty. Body damage went unrepaired, but Dad changed the oil and did most of his own maintenance on the car. He couldn't afford to pay anyone else to do work he thought he could do himself, and "Mr. Do-It-Yourself" loved to repair and invent.

Dad even created his own version of a camper for transporting us kids. He built a framework over the bed of his pick-up truck by throwing a tarpaulin over it and fastening it down with stakes fitted into the holes on the side. Finally, he put a bench or chairs in the back up against the cab. We kids would ride in there wherever we needed to go—some on the bench and some on the floor. That's the way Dad took us to church every Sunday. He didn't say, "You guys go on to church." He said, "We're all going to church. Get in the truck and come with me." I can remember my sisters running out of

the house with their dresses clutched in their hands. They'd sometimes have to finish dressing in the truck on the way down the road to church because Dad wanted to go *now*.

We also traveled to Brewton some 30 miles away to visit my father's sister, Lillie Mae Smith, in our homemade camper. Travel time was special to us kids, since it was one of the few times we couldn't possibly be expected to do any work. We'd sit together in the back of the truck laughing, joking and talking. Often Henry Jr. would begin to preach, imitating our minister, Reverend Bradley. Most of what he said was nonsense, but we kids egged him on, throwing in bits of the service ourselves. We never imagined that Henry would become a real pastor who has now preached God's word for some 30 years. Fortunately, his sermons today are a great deal better than those we listened to as we bounced along in the back of that old GMC truck.

We were poor, but our family was united and happy. We were unaffected by the brokenness of the world around us. We lived through the tumultuous 1960s in the United States, insulated from the world and its ugliness. The weekend before Mom's death, more than 500 people began a 54-mile march for African American voting rights from Selma, Alabama, to the state capital in Montgomery. On the outskirts of Selma, police assaulted them with tear gas, whips and clubs. Later in the decade, our country suffered assassinations and riots. I didn't really know much about any of that until I was older. Dad kept us close to our rural home so he wouldn't have to worry about outsiders hurting us.

Maybe my older brothers and sisters knew more about the hard realities of the times, but events seemed to work out to protect me from most of the harshness. Escambia County High School integrated when I was in seventh grade. My junior year I

became a member of the football team. Our state championship that year helped the whole community weather the changes in a more positive way than in other places across the country. It was a wonderful thing after that championship game to see black people and white people joyfully hugging each other. That was what made me most proud of our win—that we brought the community together. By the time I enrolled at the University of Alabama, the football team had recruited black players for several years. Many barriers had already been broken. African American All-Americans and team captains were already a fact of life, and Alabama had enjoyed championship years again since the team's integration. I occasionally brushed up against discrimination, but it didn't have the negative effect on my life it could have if my father hadn't been so good at protecting us.

Looking back over my life, I realize my family was my first, most important team, and in many ways my dad was my toughest coach. He had a hard life, and the way he dealt with us was rough sometimes. But I don't know how he would have kept us together and out of trouble if he hadn't been strict. We had to fear and respect him enough to follow his directions. Otherwise, he would have been overrun by the ten of us. Although we had plenty of trouble to overcome, we kids had a great time growing up. We shared everything from bedrooms to bath water to outgrown shoes. Our family didn't have much, but the one thing we did have was love for one another. We learned to think and work together as much as possible. Although we are all grown now, we are still so close that we call each other whenever there is joy or trouble in our individual families. When one of us has a problem, all of us have a problem. We band together. The love we have for each other runs from heart to heart and breath to breath.

Being a success in life almost always relies on a solid joint effort. No matter where you work or what your other interests are, you need the help of others. The success of the group depends on the cooperation of each individual, and few of us ever achieve success on our own. Working together as a unit even through the strike took the Dolphins to the Super Bowl at the end of the 1982 season. We didn't let the strike stop us. We continued to hold workouts even without our coaches. The whole mindset was to stay together and keep our edge. We looked past the strike toward winning our division and going to the playoffs. We stayed together as a team.

Unity made the Killer B's defense so strong that, in the strike-shortened season of 1982, we held five of our nine opponents to 14 or fewer points. We played the best defense in the AFC in the final four weeks of that season. In the first round of the playoffs, we easily beat the New England Patriots 28-13. Our defensive coach, Bill Arnsparger, had thoroughly prepared us for the Patriots' plays, and we followed his instructions to a T. We shut down the San Diego Chargers, who had the number one rated offense in the league, in our playoff game, winning 34-13. In the conference championship, we completely shut out the New York Jets 14-0. A member of our defense, A.J. Duhe, was even responsible for one of Miami's two touchdowns, picking off a Jets pass and carrying it for a 38-yard touchdown. In those playoff games, we only allowed our opponents to complete two passes. We enjoyed our successes together, and when eventually we suffered failure, we stood together, too.

Our solidarity kept us from blaming each other after our Super Bowl loss against Washington. I always felt a responsibility for the loss, having missed that tackle on John Riggins, but Coaches Shula and Arnsparger reassured me that it was not all my fault—a team

wins together and loses together. Reading over the newspaper articles of the time, I see that I wasn't blamed by my teammates, either. In fact, most of us spent too much time looking for the fault in ourselves to point fingers at anyone else.

Defensive end Kim Bokamper thought he had missed a chance to salvage the game, too. In the third quarter, he deflected a pass from Joe Theismann at Washington's two-yard line. Both Theismann and Bokamper struggled to gain control of the ball, but Theismann was victorious, knocking it away from Bokamper. Bokamper's dream of taking the ball in for a Miami touchdown was shattered.

The press quoted both Blackwood brothers as saying the fault lay with our *entire* defense, although some in the media said the problem lay not with the defense but with the offense. While Coach Shula second-guessed himself about replacing quarterbacks sooner, he praised Woodley's improvement over the course of the season. Our team didn't try to blame each other or the referees. We admitted that Washington's offensive line was tough and that John Riggins and Joe Theismann made some terrific plays. The day of the Super Bowl, the Redskins just played better ball. So, we did what we could. We looked ahead to next year. Coach Shula told us he was proud of our accomplishments in making it to the Super Bowl. He encouraged us to learn from the experience, and we made up our minds that we would continue working to the best of our ability. This wouldn't be our last Super Bowl.

Home Team Lessons

A successful team is unified in good times and bad. Even the superstars can't do it alone. The quarterback needs a strong offensive line to pass and run the ball and eventually score. Teamwork leads to the

touchdown. The offense relies on the defense to prevent the other team from scoring. It's the same way in the church. A strong, dedicated, charismatic pastor can lead the way, but co-pastors, board members, Sunday school teachers, prayer supporters, nursery workers and volunteers for various tasks make the church function and fulfill its mission. The same is true of every organization. What's a leader with no followers or support group? Nothing! A group's whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

“Together we stand” was my dad's first lesson in teamwork. To be successful team members, we have to see ourselves as part of the whole. No one stands alone. We must work together and refuse to pick at each other even when we find weaknesses.

Management books may say the best way to have a successful team is to carefully select each person who works with you—but that's not how it is in the real world. Most of us don't have that luxury. If you work in a church or volunteer organization, you have to work with everyone—even the guy who votes against the pastor on every issue. In business, managers have to deal with the employees already there. You go with what you've got. Because of labor organizations and contracts, the very worst worker is still hard to get rid of. Even on athletic teams, where players are often cut or traded, you're left with people who have talent in one area and are weak in another. The team succeeds by pulling together and learning from each other.

Two thousand years ago, Christ said, “And if a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand” (Mark 3:25, KJV). Abraham Lincoln repeated this scripture, urging that the Union not be dissolved. When my mother died, Dad made “together we stand” our family's motto. I still believe it today. The team that doesn't stand together will surely fall apart.