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exchange

WENDY HAYWOOD

A HEARTFELT REFLECTION ON LIFE, LOSS, AND FAITH

The Haywood family's
journey to finding hope
after heartbreak

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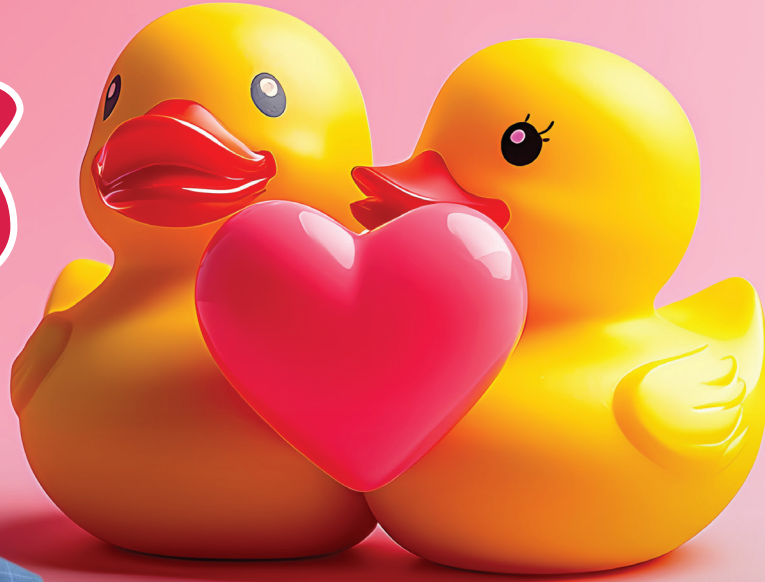
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Love is in the air

Good News celebrates the love that strengthens communities, brightens hearts, and makes life more beautiful.

YOU KNOW that first breath of spring? The way the warmer air gives you goosebumps — the air is soft, full of promise, carrying hints of something new. After months of cold, we step outside, and for the first time, the sun lingers a little longer, warming our hands, our faces, our hearts. Maybe it's still daylight when we get home from work. Love is a lot like that. It's the warmth that lingers after the winter. The breath that fills our lungs when we didn't even realize we were holding them.

Love exists in big acts with large sums of money, sure. But more often, it's in the small acts — the moments we miss that swirl through the air like dandelion seeds, taking root in ways we may never fully see. It's checking in on a friend, even when they insist they're fine. It's the extra few seconds we hold the door open, the way

we buy the person behind us a coffee in the morning. It's letting go of old grudges, choosing forgiveness even when it would be easier to stay cold.

The beautiful thing about love is that it multiplies. The more we put out into the air, the more it spreads, catching in the wind, drifting far beyond where we first let it go. Love is not just an action or money, either — it's a kind of magic that moves everything it touches in the right direction.

This issue of Good News is dedicated to that love. Not just romantic love but the kind that makes communities stronger, hearts lighter, and life a little more beautiful. Love rooted in appreciation, in gratefulness, in the quiet choices we make every day to make the world a little warmer.

So breathe it in. And then send it back out into the air. **GN**

Wesley Bryant,
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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LEA HIBDON

MOVING TOGETHER IN FAITH

REFIT Tullahoma proves that fitness is about connection, not perfection.

By Jeriah Brumfield
Photography by Ashleigh Newnes

IT'S MONDAY evening in Tullahoma, and the gym at Grace Baptist Church is full of life.

The lights are low, the disco ball is spinning, and the room resounds with upbeat music as women of all ages gather for their weekly REFIT workout. Leading the group is Lea Hibdon — a coach's wife, devoted mom, fitness instructor, and education assistant for Response to Intervention (RTI) at Farrar Elementary. Lea's positive energy and zeal for fitness create an environment where movement and joy abound, and community connects well past the gym floor.

Lea has transformed REFIT Revolution, a community-centered dance fitness experience, into a safe space for women to connect, find strength, and share their stories in a faith-filled environment. Here in Tullahoma, REFIT combines faith,

friendship, and physical health into one empowering experience.

A NEW CHAPTER IN TULLAHOMA

Lea and her family moved to Tullahoma in August 2022 for her husband's coaching job, marking yet another relocation for the family. As an experienced traveler, Lea was no stranger to the challenges of starting over, but this move was particularly hard.

"We had lived in our last home for six years — the longest I'd ever been in one place. I left so many roots behind this time," Lea shared.

However, an unexpected encounter at a high school basketball game in Sparta changed her perspective.

Lea recalled, "My husband introduced the kids and me to the man who drove the team bus, Mike Shirley. As the game started, Mr. Mike sat with us, and he began

to share his testimony right there in the stands. I was in tears. And then I left that night knowing God has us exactly where we need to be."

One Sunday in December, while visiting Grace Baptist Church, Lea's path crossed with Mr. Mike again. This time, he introduced her to his wife, Mrs. Diane, and mentioned that Lea had taught fitness classes in the past.

Before Lea could even process the idea, Mrs. Diane had already planned how she would integrate Lea's fitness past into their church's ministry. She proposed a weekly fitness class for women, led by Lea herself.

"I was actually going to let my REFIT certification expire," Lea said. "But the following week, Mrs. Diane had it in the church bulletin, and on Jan. 9, 2023, our first REFIT class started in Tullahoma."



▲ Devotions and prayers bring the women together, ending the workout with connection and faith.

FAITH, FITNESS, AND FELLOWSHIP

REFIT in Tullahoma is a ministry of movement. The music is uplifting, the atmosphere is welcoming, and every class ends with what Lea calls “heart work” — a devotional and prayer time designed to encourage women spiritually as much as physically.

“We aren’t made to do life alone,” Lea said. “I want every participant to know they belong, that they are loved, and that they are prayed for before walking into our doors. I want them to leave with a positive, uplifting experience for the mind, body, and soul.”

The workouts themselves are accessible to everyone, no matter their fitness level. Lea offers modifications for every move, encouraging participants to find what works best for them. Guests can always modify the moves — maybe do toe-taps instead of full kicks, or step-ups instead of lunges. And sometimes, you just have to let the music take over and dance your own way.

“As long as you’re moving, it’s a win,” Lea noted.

For Ruthie Gage, one of Lea’s participants turned instructors, REFIT’s inclusivity is what makes it so special.

“There’s definitely a support system in place,” she explained. “In today’s culture and environment, there’s a dire need for emotional connection. Working out with like-minded people brings a sense of empowerment.”

TRANSFORMING LIVES, STEP BY STEP

That belief in connection and empowerment took on new meaning for Lea in 2005 after losing her father to cancer.

“We had a Relay For Life walk in 2005 that started at night, and someone from your team walked laps until the morning. The cheering and the encouragement, and really just the determination to keep moving, really changed me. I witnessed many cancer survivors showing up, under all their circumstances, and finding the strength to walk. It was truly motivating.”

Since then, Lea has used fitness to inspire others, particularly women, to persevere and lean on a community of supportive, like-minded individuals.

“We all deal with some kind of hurt, hang-up, or habit that tries to define us,” said Lea. “Sometimes people don’t even realize how much God is in the details until they tell their story out loud to someone. I love to encourage people, especially women, that this isn’t the end of their story.”

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR NEWCOMERS

Lea knows firsthand how intimidating it can be to walk into a fitness class for the first time, but she tries to encourage women that the hardest part is simply showing up.

Lea admitted that there are times, even after all these years, when a flutter of nerves settles in her stomach before class begins. She remembered one evening, feeling particularly anxious. She stepped outside to

get some air before starting the music and noticed a woman sitting in her car, seemingly debating whether or not to walk in.

Lea walked over and simply said, “You’ve already made it past the hardest part — you’re here! Now, all that’s left is a few more steps through those doors.”

The lady then joined Lea for class.

Lea encouraged, “Ladies, just show up. I’ll save you a spot every time. You’re always welcome here.”

DREAMS FOR THE FUTURE

Lea dreams of one day opening an even bigger space for classes, complete with a coffee bar, a bakery, and even a wellness center. But for now, she enjoys teaching in the church gym, knowing that it’s the people — not the location — that make REFIT special.

A MOVEMENT OF LOVE

For the women of REFIT Tullahoma, fitness is a way to love and uplift each other by staying active. And in this town, that love is making all the difference.

“When I became a REFIT instructor, I was encouraged to make it my own,” said Lea. “But I never wanted it to be about me. I wanted to create a place for women to come together to hoot and holler, laugh, sweat, motivate each other, lift each other up, know that they are loved, and possibly meet someone from class to call a friend. The greatest command is to love God with all your heart, and the second is to love your neighbor. Through our REFIT community, I hope we embody both.” **GN**



A HEART FOR BEAUTY AND RESCUE

Shannon Cole is on a mission to transform the world into a kinder, more beautiful place.

By Jeriah Brumfield // Photography by Ashleigh Newnes

WHEN YOU walk through the doors of Blessed Forever Aesthetics in Tullahoma, you're stepping into Shannon Cole's world. Every detail, from the calming colors on the walls to the gentle sound of soothing music, invites you into instant tranquility. The walls are well-adorned, and the furnishings make the space feel like home. Behind this business is a cozy space overflowing with benevolence, comfort, and care.

Take a stroll to the back of the building, and you'll find a surprise that reveals another layer of Coles' heart. In a cozy, climate-controlled room, you'll meet her other residents — a handful of cats lounging in their own little oasis. These are her furry companions that she's taken in, who have become her family and are loved just as fiercely as the clients she greets with a warm smile.

Cole has always had a natural instinct to care for and enhance others' well-being. She began her career as a registered nurse, tending to patients during long hospital shifts. While she felt fulfilled by healing others, she dreamed of one day helping people feel good in their own skin.

That dream led her to open Blessed Forever Aesthetics in 2015. This spa is the perfect space for beauty and self-care, offering services like Botox, fillers, chemical peels, laser treatments, permanent makeup, and IV hydration therapy. Cole's nursing education gave her the knowledge and experience she needed to perform advanced procedures as a cosmetic nurse.

As her business grew, so did her vision. She brought on two other skilled professionals who offer massage therapy and lash extensions, making Blessed Forever a one-stop destination for self-care.

While Cole's professional life revolves around beauty, much of her personal life revolves around animal rescue. She ventured into this world almost unexpectedly when she started encountering stray cats around the community.

One day, Cole discovered a box of kittens abandoned at Tullahoma's Rocket Ship Park. The tiny babies, still attached to their umbilical cords and crawling with ants, were barely alive.

"I had no clue what to do," she said. "So when I reached out to the internet, I received a response from Linda Becar at Cosmos Kitten Rescue."

Becar immediately began sharing kitten-raising tips with Cole, offering advice, and even dropping by with gifts.

"She came to my house to make sure that I had all the proper materials."

Before long, Cole fell in love with nurturing kittens back to health.

“Around the clock, every three hours for six weeks, I fed these babies with a bottle and fell in love with the cause. I started doing what I could do and trying to take care of these creatures that could not take care of themselves,” she recalled.

Since then, Cole has actively supported Cosmos Kitten Rescue, a nonprofit that rescues and rehabilitates abandoned cats and kittens.

She has fostered many kittens, donated supplies, and even built a “cat apart-

ment” behind her building with heat and air conditioning.

Cats of all sizes and colors lounge on plush beds or play with dangling toys. A few are permanent residents, while others await adoption through Cosmos Kitten Rescue.

Not all of Cole’s kitten rescue stories end positively. Cole has cared for cats with heartbreaking stories: a blind kitten, another that survived an acid attack, and many others who had been abandoned and forgotten.

One time, Cole took in a tiny kitten named Nudge, weighing only a few ounces at 3 weeks old. Cole found Nudge in a concrete culvert in Hillsboro, and after rescuing him, she cared for him for three weeks.

He seemed to be doing well, but tragically, he passed away suddenly from a viral infection — feline immunodeficiency virus — a disease that can be transmitted from an infected mother cat to her kittens if they aren’t vaccinated. The loss of Nudge



was traumatic for Cole, but it did not discourage her from continuing to rescue and nurture other kittens back to health.

“I just keep on pushing on and do everything I can to try to help get these animals taken care of so that they can live a healthy life.”

However, the beauty of animal rescue often outweighs the difficult moments, and these are often seen in the adoptive stories that come full circle.

“I had one kitten that I posted on my Facebook that had been severely injured on its neck,” Cole said.

“Being a nurse, I knew what I needed to do in order to nurse this cat back to

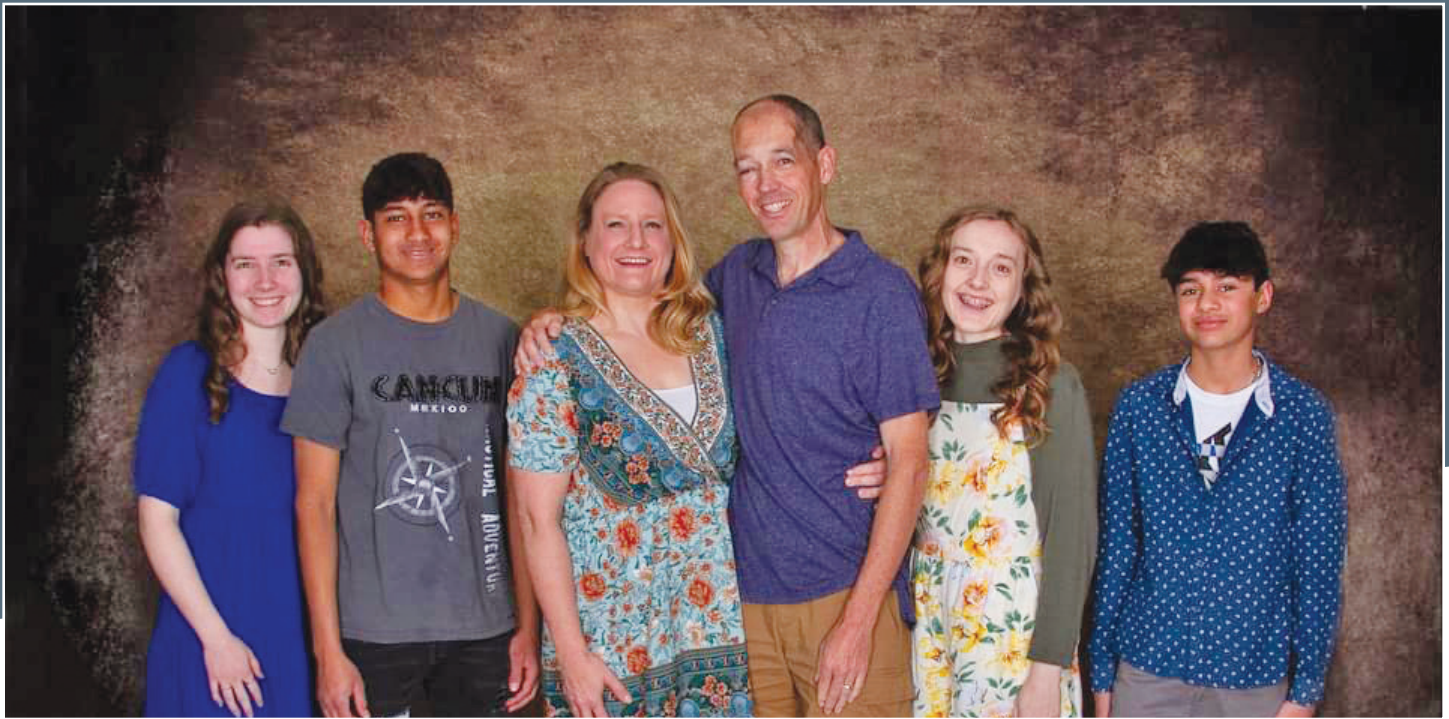
health. And, of course, he got adopted, and the family that adopted him said he was one of the sweetest cats ever, and they send me pictures of him all the time.”

Walking out of Blessed Forever Aesthetics, it’s clear that Cole’s work is far deeper than skin care. She has built an oasis where beauty, benevolence, and love intersect. Cole shows she cares for all creatures by helping clients embrace their natural glow and rescuing kittens in need.

Many clients come in for an invigorating facial and, as they leave, find themselves enriched by a bit of kitten therapy as well. It’s not uncommon for clients to peek in and say “hi” to the cats before or after their appointments.

Cole plans to continue to leave the world a little more beautiful with every face she touches, every kitten she rescues, and every act of kindness she performs, all while encouraging the community to do the same.

“I’m not saying you should go out there and spend your last dime on somebody. But even if it’s a hot meal, a hot cup of coffee, food for an animal that’s starving to death, or even going to see your grandbabies in a play at school, you have to do it. That one act of kindness can lead to so much more in your own personal life. It just makes your heart full and makes you a better person.” GN



▲ Abby, Miguel, Ellen, Clay, Sophia, Rafa Pogue, Easter 2024. Before Clay's second brain surgery.

A Family of Faith: Boldness Amid Adversity

The Pogues confront recurring health struggles while continuing to build a strong, united family.

By Jeriah Brumfield // Photos submitted by Ellen Pogue

CLAY AND Ellen Pogue sat at the kitchen table, sharing a meal with their family — a moment they cherished each evening since their family was formed. Across from them sat two young boys with a look of curiosity and cautious hope on their faces as they tried to make sense of the unfamiliar world around them. No one had fully prepared them for this — not the boys and certainly not Clay and Ellen, who found themselves navigating a new family dynamic while confronting a future that seemed as uncertain as it was full of promise.

As they looked at the boys, Clay and Ellen couldn't help but think back to the journey that had brought them to this moment just seven years ago. With two

daughters already at home, they had set out on what they thought would be a typical mission trip to Costa Rica.

The couple never imagined how profoundly that trip would alter their lives. During their regular visits to the orphanage, they were delighted to learn that two wonderful boys, Miguel, 10, and Rafa, 5, whom they had met on their last mission trip in 2017, were brothers. But another shocking realization they made was that the boys desperately needed a family. The boys, confined to the orphanage, had little knowledge of the world beyond it.

As Clay and Ellen prepared to leave, Miguel ran after them, pleading in Spanish, “No quiero que et vayas” (“I don't want you to leave”). That heart-tugging moment

set the Pogues on a path that would change their lives forever.

Upon returning home, they began the long and complicated process of adoption. Years of paperwork, waiting, and prayer followed before their family expanded to include the two boys.

Interestingly, the Pogues weren't the only ones forever changed by their visit to the small, 15-child orphanage.

“Our friends also adopted three kids from the same orphanage,” Ellen said with a laugh. “So now there are five in our area, and another family — who adopted five — lives about an hour and a half away. We adopted half of the orphanage.”

When the adoption was finalized in November 2020, Miguel and Rafa were thrust into a new world — a new country,

language, school, and family. It was quite an adjustment for children who had spent most of their lives in an orphanage.

“The boys came into our lives when they were 13 and 8,” Clay said. “There’s a lot of family history they missed out on, and it was hard to know they hadn’t experienced the same things our daughters had.”

The boys, who were academically behind, struggled with language barriers and the vastly different education system in the United States. Ellen did her best to help, but the adjustment coincided with another challenge for the family.

Clay had been privately dealing with health concerns before the adoption process even began.

“I knew something was wrong,” he admitted, “but I didn’t want it to affect our adoption.”

Shortly after the boys arrived, Clay’s fears were confirmed. Two noncancerous brain tumors, which had been visible for months, were diagnosed, and surgery was quickly scheduled.

“The boys barely had time to adjust before Clay’s surgery,” Ellen recalled. “They were learning English, getting used to a new home and school, all while we were just trying to keep it together.”

Despite the overwhelming events, the Pogues pressed on. They believed their faith in God and love for one another would guide them through any storm.

Over the years, the family sought outside help to support the boys academically, hiring tutors and advocating for after-school support. Progress has been slow, but there is hope as the boys continue to catch up.

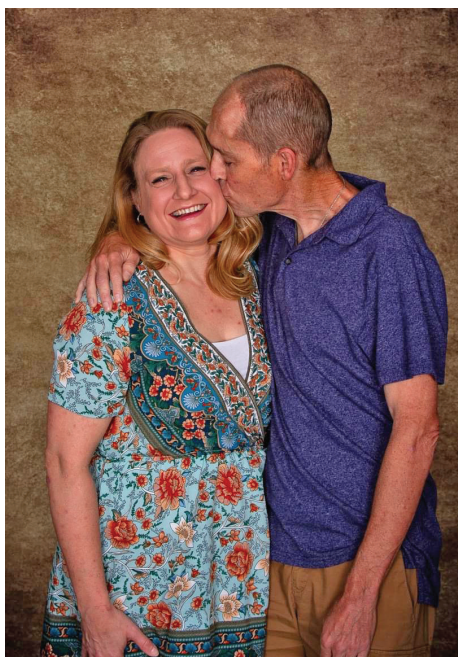
Through it all, the Pogues’ love for one another has been their foundation. They’ve learned the value of perseverance — during medical crises and in daily moments of parenting and growth. They celebrate every victory, large and small, from their oldest daughter’s wedding to their cherished annual “Gotcha Day” traditions — the anni-



▲ Clay, Rafa, Miguel, and Ellen Pogues cave tubing in Belize in October 2024



▲ Sophia, Rafa, Miguel, and Abby Pogues, hiking at the Hanging Bridges in Costa Rica for the first hike as a family of six in October 2020.



▲ Ellen and Clay Pogues, Easter 2024



▲ A comparison of Clay’s right eye from June 22(left) to July 29(right)

versary of when the boys officially became part of their family.

“We take trips, go to movies, or share a special dinner on ‘Gotcha Day,’” Ellen said. “It’s our way of remembering how far we’ve come as a family.”

However, the journey ahead is far from smooth. In the spring of 2024, Clay’s brain tumor resurfaced, and he was also diagnosed with recurrent colon cancer. Once again, the family endured surgeries, chemotherapy, and hospital visits.

“Clay has become bolder in his faith since his medical journey,” Ellen said. “He talks to strangers now, shares his testimony, and spreads the word about Jesus. I’ve seen him change in ways I never imagined, and it’s been incredible.”

“Even before all the medical stuff, He sustains me every day,” Clay affirmed.

The boys have also embarked on their own faith journeys, both professing faith.

Through the trials of health struggles, surgeries, and raising their children, the Pogues have discovered the true meaning of family. It isn’t merely about taking care of the kids or managing Clay’s health. It’s about showing up for each other, no matter how hard it gets.

“Yes, we are going to have troubles in this world,” Ellen said. “But God is there for us every step of the way. He’s done it before, and He will do it again!”

Now, as they sit around the table, Clay and Ellen reflect on how far they’ve come. The road has been long and difficult, but their struggles have made the triumphs that much sweeter. For the Pogues, their journey shows just how strong love, faith, and family can be. **GN**

BOUCHARD'S GRILL: A FUSION OF FLAVOR

Savor Tullahoma's local food truck where American classics meet Mexican tradition.

BOUCHARD'S GRILL is a local food truck offering gourmet smashburgers, burritos, and fries. It offers a seamless blend of American burger classics and Mexican favorites.

As you roll into Tullahoma via Highway 55, you will see the beautiful black and red trailer on your right announcing boldly, "A taste of American and Mexican tradition." And boy, do they deliver on that promise!

Bouchard's Grill offers some of the best smashburgers I've tasted. The crispy-edged, double-smashed beef patties are greasy, meaty, and seared to perfection. The food truck offers a few flavor profiles, starting with the "931" smashburger, which is your classic double patty with cheese, typical burger toppings, and housemade "BB Sauce." You can spice things up with the "Firefighter" smashburger with its melted pepper jack cheese, grilled onions and jalapenos, and spicy BB Sauce.

But my favorite, as evident in past excursions, is the "Good Morning" smashburger! Double beef smashed patties

with melted American cheese, bacon, and egg, but hold the lettuce, tomato, mustard, and mayo for me. Served on a soft, delicious bun, these burgers deliver bold flavor in every bite, blending simplicity and indulgence. The perfectly fried egg with the salty bacon elevates the smashed patties to burger bliss.

Not a fan of burgers? Bouchard's Grill offers some amazing hot dogs and loaded fry options, too — you have to try the chili cheese fries! You can also enjoy one of the fully loaded, grilled burritos — each a 14-inch tortilla packed with perfectly seasoned steak or chicken, flavorful Mexican rice, beans, queso, pico de gallo, and choice of sauce. Or opt for the bowl instead of the tortilla!

Bouchard's Grill is a local hot spot for flavor and indulgence. The seared smashburgers or grilled burritos, with their bold flavors and fresh ingredients, offer an unforgettable taste in every bite. It is a must-visit Tullahoma food truck, serving up American and Mexican traditions.

Which will you order? **GN**



GOOD NEWS IS COMING TO DINNER!

We will feature a local food critic's thoughts as they dine in Tullahoma. This month Tabitha Buckner visited Bouchard's Grill.

Bouchard's Grill

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A HEARTFELT REFLECTION ON LIFE, LOSS, AND FAITH



The Haywood family's journey
to finding hope after heartbreak

By Jeriah Brumfield
Photography by Ashleigh Newnes

GRIEF HAS a way of shaking the very foundation of a person's soul. It is a force that can leave even the strongest among us questioning everything they hold dear. Yet, as relentless as grief is, it also has the power to light a flicker of hope that guides a broken heart through the darkest night.

For Wendy Haywood, a mother of three and a woman of unrelenting faith, grief has been both a painful reality and a transformative teacher. Wendy and her family's experience with loss is equally heart-breaking and deeply inspiring. She and her husband, Troy, raised their children with love, faith, and a sense of joy that continues to inspire them today.

"Arnold Engineering Development Complex brought us to Tullahoma 39 years ago. I am forever grateful for God's provision, allowing us to raise our

children in Tullahoma. Tullahoma is a wonderful place to raise a family," Wendy said.

Today, their two sons carry forward those same values as pastors in Tennessee. Her son, Jesse, leads a church plant in Cookeville, while Jacob, their daughter Jaimie's twin brother, is pursuing a doctorate and serving as a pastor in Portland.

Troy and Wendy believe the fruits of their home have grown from kindness, familial love, and abundant faith.

However, Wendy and Troy's daughter, Jaimie, is no longer here to witness the incredible legacy of their family. She died unexpectedly, leaving behind two young children and an unimaginable void.

"She was full of love and cherished every moment," Wendy recalled. "Her faith in God was

LOVE
IS IN THE
AIR



JAIMIE AND WENDY HAYWOOD



▲ Weston and his mom, Jaimie

“

“WE DIDN'T WANT TO LOSE OUR DAUGHTER, BUT KNOWING THAT MANY LIVES HAVE BEEN CHANGED THROUGH HER DEATH BRINGS COMFORT TO OUR HEARTS.

- WENDY HAYWOOD

evident in everything she did. She hated to miss anything, especially with family. I often think about that — how much she loved being part of life.”

Wendy described Jaimie as a deeply creative person with “a big, loving heart.” Though Jaimie worked as a court reporter, she spent her final years as a stay-at-home mom after the birth of her first child, something she embraced wholeheartedly. Being a mother was her greatest desire, and she cherished every moment with her family.

Jaimie’s love for her family and their traditions made the events that followed all the more heartbreaking.

Wendy recounted the day her world changed. Her daughter, healthy and lively just days before, suddenly fell ill with flu-like symptoms. Within 48 hours, she succumbed to sepsis. The loss was swift,

shocking, and devastating. Wendy described those early days of grief as a time when her faith was tested in ways she never anticipated.

“I have a selfish mom’s heart,” Wendy admitted. “I want her here. But over the years, I’ve learned to trust God’s plan, even when it’s hard to understand.”

Amid such sorrow, Wendy, Troy, and their two sons leaned deeply into their faith. It became their anchor and a source of strength when nothing else could console them.

“I can’t imagine going through any of this without faith,” she said. “Praying was a big part of my journey. The joys of motherhood, even amid grief, gave us reasons to give praises to the Lord.”

Though true healing seemed far away, those joys continued to prosper, extending to the entire family.



Losing his twin sister became an equally heartbreaking and transformative moment for Jacob. After Jaimie's death, Jacob felt called to help others process and work through their grief. He is working on a dissertation on suffering and has authored a book, "Battles in the Promised Land." In it, he reflects on the power of faith in guiding a broken heart through darkness, which is an experience that parallels his family's own.

Nearly 11 years later, people still reach out to Wendy to share how Jaimie touched their lives and how she continues to impact them today.

"Recently, my husband got a text from someone saying that her passing changed his life," Wendy shared.

"We didn't want to lose our daughter, but knowing that many lives have been changed through her death brings comfort to our hearts."

One of the most precious lessons Jaimie left the family was valuing the present. Her love for holidays and family gatherings still lingers, and the family can almost feel her jubilant spirit, especially during the holidays. These moments of nostalgia keep Jaimie's spirit alive.

When the Haywood children were younger, holidays were a time of joy, togetherness, and special traditions passed down through generations. Wendy remembered one particular Christmas when her husband made an unforgettable sacrifice to preserve the magic for their children. It's a memory the family holds dear to this day.

"We would go to my parents' house every Christmas Eve," Wendy said.

"Santa and all the gifts went with us from Tullahoma to Columbia, Tennessee. One night, we were setting out gifts when I realized I had left something at home. It was a 1 1/2 hour drive, and my husband drove all the way to Tullahoma to get the one little thing our 4-year-old wanted. The kids had no idea what we went through just to bring them joy."

Holidays are different now. The family feels Jaimie's absence in every tradition, every gathering, and every laugh that isn't hers. Since her passing, the family has had to adapt to changes in those traditions. The Haywood family finds ways to honor Jaimie's memory by creating new moments while holding onto the old ones that keep her spirit alive.

"Holidays are a big deal, and it's hard to change because we

get so attached to the traditions," Wendy said. "But through the loss of our daughter, I've learned to accept change, as hard as it is."

Wendy said she and her family hold tightly to the hope that has sustained them and strive to share it with others.

"The things of this world no longer matter to us. What matters is leaving a godly legacy and knowing where you will spend eternity. God entrusted us with the loss of our daughter, and I want my brokenness to show others the hope in Jesus and how He can carry you through any trial."

Looking back on the family's healing journey, Jacob said, "God is good. There is hope."

This has become the family's mantra.

Jaimie may no longer walk this earth, but her love, faith, and joy continue to inspire her family — and countless others — to cherish every moment and let faith lead the way. **GN**




▲ Jesse, Troy (holding a portrait of Jaimie), Wendy, and Jacob



THERE'S POWER IN PERSEVERANCE

A life-threatening incident inspired one man's resolve to begin again.



By Jeriah Brumfield
Photography by Ashleigh Newnes

IT'S 4 a.m., and the world around him is still asleep. The only sounds are the soft rush of his breath and the steady pounding of his feet on the pavement. The crisp morning air fills his lungs, pushing him forward with each step. He doesn't rely on music or distractions — just him, the road, and the silence of the early morning.

As he runs through the muted streets of his neighborhood, the first light of dawn begins to creep over the horizon. Passing by an American flag, he notices how the sun rises perfectly behind it, shedding long, golden rays across the houses, still enwrapped in the calm of night.

His movements are practiced and fluid — almost effortless — but a subtle intensity lies beneath the surface. He had no second thoughts about hitting the snooze button, no hesitation. His mind was already in motion, already set on the day ahead. As he runs,

the scent of victory lingers in the air — a victory not measured by medals or applause but by the act of showing up. Every morning, without fail, he gets up and puts in the miles. It's a personal battle won, a mental and physical challenge conquered before the day has even begun.

As head coach for Tullahoma High School's girls' track and field team, he leads by example, using the same discipline and willpower that inspires his own early morning runs. He hopes to empower his athletes to push their own limits, whether in school or in their daily lives.

This kind of determination isn't always visible at first glance, but sometimes, the most profound lessons come from the most unassuming places. One man's rise from a near-death experience to becoming a dedicated runner, speaker, and advocate shows how passion and perseverance can transform a life.

LOVE
IS IN THE
AIR



CHRIS CLEMENS

“

**PEOPLE DON'T
DECIDE THEIR
FUTURE. THEY
DECIDE THEIR
HABITS, AND
THEIR HABITS
DECIDE THEIR
FUTURE.**

- F.M. Alexander

It was an ordinary day in the sawmill where Chris Clemens, 19 years old at the time, worked during the summers while attending Central Missouri University. What seemed like a harmless task of pushing wood shavings into an auger turned into a near-fatal accident. A shallow cavity of wood shavings suffocated him, leaving him gasping for air, unable to free himself from the weight.

“I was engulfed in wood shavings,” he recalled. “The person I was working with tried to pull me out, but the weight was too great, and I was ingesting the wood shavings.”

What followed was a devastating oxygen deprivation to his brain, a condition known as anoxia, which led to a complete loss of motor function. The incident forced him to relearn everything: walking, tying his shoes, writing his name — he was forced to rediscover basic skills that were once automatic.

“I recognized everyone. I could still speak, still read words, but I couldn't translate them into writing,” he remembered.

Despite the overwhelming odds, he pushed through, determined to rebuild his life. His siblings fed him, and his father had to carry him to the bathroom. It was humbling, to say the least, but it was the beginning of a profound transformation.

After a year of intense rehabilitation, he returned to college to earn his bachelor's degree and to prove to himself that he could overcome any obstacle that came his way.

“I had to approach everything differently. I had to outline chapters, highlight them, and read my notes to recall information,” he said.

The effort paid off — he graduated on time, just five years after high school.

“I went back and got my master's degree at [Middle Tennessee State University] in 2002,” he added. “I used to say I would never go back to school — never say never.”

His strength in academics was only a fraction of what he gained during the process. It was also the discipline he obtained through adversity.

“We are hardwired to find a path of least resistance,” he reflected. “But unless we put something difficult in our way, we're not maximizing our potential.”

Running became that challenge. It started as a way to push his body,



▲ *The day has barely begun, but Chris has already taken on the miles, turning his determination into a daily routine.*



▲ Katie Grace Nichols (2024 MS State Champion - 800 meters), Chris Clemens, Lily Storey (2022/2023 HS State Champion 800 meters), Brindley Duncan (MS State Champion 800 meters 2022/2023, State record holder. HS State runner up 800 meters 2024 school record holder as a freshman)

testing the limits of what he could do. But over time, it became therapeutic. His early morning runs, done without music, gave him the space to think, process, and reflect on his life.

“Hearing the roosters and birds and being able to see the sunrise come up over the horizon gives me the opportunity to work through a lot of things in my head,” he explained. “I’m not sure what other outlet I could find that could give me the same satisfaction.”

Aside from personal therapy, running is a competition with himself and a demonstration of mental toughness. Clemens gets up at 3:40 a.m. every weekday and averages up to 100 miles a week.

“I thought only elite runners did that,” he admitted. “But then I realized I could do it too. Now, it’s just part of my routine.”

Clemens has also embraced new challenges by diving into marathons and 24-hour races. He has obtained a series of accomplishments that seemed almost impossible for someone who was once unable to perform even

basic tasks. Among his most significant achievements are six finishes at the renowned Vol State 314-mile foot race, completing the Boston Marathon in 2013 — the year of the tragic bombing — and running over 25 marathons (26.2 miles) and more than 30 ultra-marathons, with distances ranging from 31.1 miles to an awe-inspiring 327 miles.

But it was his first experience with the Vol State 314-mile race in 2018 that truly transformed him. The multi-day event, held in the scorching heat of July across the entirety of Tennessee, tested his physical limits and his mental fortitude.

“There were times where I questioned if I had it in me to finish,” Clemens admitted. “There were times I wanted to quit, and it didn’t seem worth it anymore. But when you get to that finish line, and you can look back on the gravity of covering 314 miles by foot, it changes your mentality about what’s possible.”

The race was arduous at times and tested his endurance, but it



culminated in a groundbreaking sense of achievement. Along with the invigorating feeling of finishing the race came lifelong relationships with fellow competitors, who are now like family. Each year, they exchange messages, share photos, and celebrate each other’s journeys.

“They have become quite a big part of my life,” Clemens said.

However, his greatest achievement is knowing that his life inspired others to lead active, healthy lives and to show them that anyone, no matter the circumstances, can overcome. His students, who often witness his early morning runs, sometimes ask him about his races.

“Did you win?” they inquire. His answer sometimes is, “No, but I finished. And that’s what matters.”

As Clemens finishes his early morning runs, the world begins to stir. The once-muted streets come alive with the sounds of a new day — roosters crow, cars pass, and neighbors shuffle out their doors. For Clemens, the miles are already behind him, but the lessons they carry travel outward.

So, the next time you see him pounding the pavement, let his example inspire you to lace up your shoes, gather some friends, and get moving. After all, the finish line isn’t as important as the decision to start, and greatness happens in the daily choice to show up, push forward, and thrive. **GN**

January Chamber Coffee



Photography by Ashleigh Newnes

The January Tullahoma Chamber Coffee, hosted at the Beechcraft Heritage Museum in Tullahoma, brought local professionals together for a morning of networking and community connection. Sponsored by Good News, the event provided attendees with the opportunity to enjoy lunch, exchange ideas, and strengthen business relationships in a welcoming setting.



1. Jessica Lawton and Quivaris Northcutt 2. Jae Pearson, Sandy Wisnoski, and Meg Glenn 3. Jodie Perry and Nancy Fuller 4. Annie Rone and Hope Nunley 5. DJ and Keith DeMell 6. Tony Glenn, Jack Owens, Miriam Benjamin, Katie McNabb, and Will Thomas

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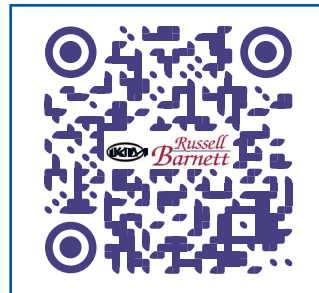
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