

## Sherry's Son

Before I was born, my parents devoted many of their early years as international missionaries. They met in college and continued to minister there and abroad. Soon after marriage, my dad began his career as a producer and an on-air personality. While my father was busy reporting Christian news to the world, my Mother was just beginning what is now one of the largest benevolence ministries in the world. She began with a church broom closet and a vision. Each month, we would give away approximately 1 ton of clothing. It took a team of 45 volunteer employees to regularly sort through all of the donations. I remember skipping with overwhelming joy while packing multiple cargo containers bound for Croatia and Nigeria. Through this amazing experience, my mother taught me that the value of investing in people is worth more than a lifetime of monetary wealth. She taught me that integrity is earned through commitment. Today, the Clothing Closet has grown in size several times over. The last time I visited, they had 3 train cars filled with items yet to be sorted.

My siblings and I were home-schooled by my mother throughout elementary and much of middle school. When I was 12 years old, my dad was offered a job from the American Center for Law and Justice. This is the world's leading Christian Law center. Because the ACLJ headquarters was located in Atlanta, we were soon packing. We were apprehensive about leaving until we found out that my dad would soon have a salary of over 100,000 dollars and that the law firm was giving us a 15,000 square foot house worth well over 750,000 dollars.

He was now the executive producer for Jay Sekulow. Jay Sekulow was the chief counsel at the Supreme Court's case of Roe vs. Wade and the lead attorney for the ACLJ. In addition to producing, my dad was co-authoring a college textbook on reconciliation. He and his colleague were appointed to teach the class at the University of Georgia. Furthermore, Mr. Sekulow had created an account that would ensure the best college education for me and my siblings. My mom soon started sharing her vision and building a benevolence ministry at our new church. Everything seemed wonderful, except when Dad came home. Although in the public's eye, he was one of the leading Christian men in the country and an elder in a successful church, he had always had a dark side. He was a very angry person who would often privately make us take off our clothes and beat us with bamboo and belts. It was degrading for him to make me strip naked. I felt worthless. We had always been terrified of him and too afraid to tell anyone. If we ever displeased him in any way, not only would he bruise our bodies, but he would refuse to talk to us for days. This hurt even more. Punishment would often come as a result of not wearing socks with our shoes at the playground, or forgetting to say "yes sir." I always tried to be a perfect son, but it was never good enough. I think the thing that hurt the most was the fact that he never said, "I love you." I thank God for our mother who represented a place of refuge and love. When she could, she would protect us from the beatings. We would pretend that we lived a perfect life as we went to baseball games, piano recitals, and gymnastic competitions. But when we came home, we

often hid in closets and clothing hampers, fearing that he might be in a bad mood. We would soon find out that his dark side went much deeper than any of us could have ever imagined.

Then in 1997, tragedy struck. By accident, my mother found out that he had been having an affair with a woman from our church. She cried for weeks. As she continued to pray and seek wisdom, she felt that there was more he was not telling her. After questioning him, he told her that he had committed about fifteen affairs starting the week after their wedding day. This pain was deeper than anything he could have done to us physically. All of a sudden, the money and the house lost their value. I truly felt abandoned. I still loved him. Why didn't he love us? I knew from that moment that our lives would never be the same. Over the next few weeks, more disgusting secrets kept surfacing. He knew the whole time that if he was caught, he would lose everything. He didn't care.

After breaking the trust of all his friends and family, he was fired from the ACLJ. Within months, we were living in a tiny apartment. He refused to work or leave. My mom took on a full time job at Stone Mountain Park and provided for all of us. Being a compassionate and forgiving person, my mom kept asking him to join her for marriage counseling, thinking that he would try to restore the marriage. He had no such intention. She would ask him, "Why won't you say I look pretty." His response was always, "You could look better." Again, she would ask, "Why won't you tell me you love me?" He would lash back, "I told you I loved you once. I'm not going to say it again." This is how it always had been. I am grateful that my mother continued to pour herself into us. Even though we were losing everything, she assured us that we still had great value and purpose. How I longed for a father with integrity. Before long, he had maxed out all of my mom's credit cards and continued to abuse us on a nightly basis. We lived in constant fear. This time, there was nowhere to hide. It is difficult for me to describe the terror I felt trying to sleep at night. I knew that at any moment, my father would break my door open and begin to beat me just like the night before. I didn't know what to do. My mother waited for him to change for two years. It was only when she learned from a professional counselor that he was psychotic, narcissistic, and a sexual addict that she finally divorced him. They had been married for 22 years. Soon after the divorce, my mother's mom died. With the little insurance money, my mother was able to find a small house for us to rent in Snellville. My dad refused to pay child support and was thrown in jail, where he refused to work on work release. My mother had no choice but to file bankruptcy. She did make enough money to take care of us, so she began to sell everything we had. She sold her antiques, her jewelry, and finally the furniture. We lost everything. Still the bills kept coming. She was working up to four jobs at a time. At the age of sixteen, I found myself with the responsibility of being a father to three younger siblings and helping to provide for my family. I felt as though my childhood had been violently stolen from me. I felt alone. At first, we lived without cable television or internet. Soon the utilities were being turned off for long periods of time. We survived for most of one winter with no electricity or gas which meant no hot water. I will never forget that awful winter. We had to take cold showers in a freezing house every day. When one of us got sick, there was nowhere to get

warm. We were suffering. By this time we had sold everything of any value and we were being issued food stamps. I tried to keep my spirits up, but my future looked bleak. I became depressed, and at times suicidal. I did not want to die, but the devastation and pain were too much to bear. It was like a heart attack that just wouldn't stop. I had always been a straight A student, but I began struggling in school. I remember going to bed every night asking fearful questions, "What would be turned off next? What else can we survive without? What are we going to eat tomorrow?"

Through all of this, my mother was patient and instilled in us the importance of forgiveness. She encouraged us never to give up. We knew that God had a purpose for us despite our circumstances. After a few years, we lost the house through a foreclosure. We had nowhere to go and my grandmother had passed. Fortunately, one of my mother's friends found a house in Norcross to rent for 500 dollars a month. We are still living there. We are always one paycheck away from being on the street. It is scary to be in such a place, but I know that all things work together for good to them that love God and are called according to his purpose.

Despite the turmoil, my family and I have always been tenacious. One of my sisters is the assistant director for an intense, nine-month discipleship training program for college students. She is on full-scholarship and studying to become a pastor. My other sister, a recent high school graduate, has just finished her first semester in the program and is also on full-scholarship. My brother is a junior in high school. He is an honor AP student. He spends his summers attending Phillips Academy Andover on full scholarship. I am currently the president of the Student Government Association, the president of Phi Theta Kappa, and the president of Campus Crusade for Christ, all while maintaining a 4.0 GPA. I dream of soon writing a book about the ministries my mother has started.

The pain of divorce is much deeper and more soul wrenching than most people can imagine, unless they have been through it themselves. Divorce can mean the end of you and your family's hopes and dreams, the end of your lives as you have known it, a loss of control, and feelings of rejection, loneliness, and blame. There is anger, depression, helplessness, bitterness, resentment, feelings of worthlessness, and guilt. The list goes on and on. In the midst of all this turmoil my mother found Visions Anew an organization that helps women going through divorce. They provided her with legal, financial, and emotional support. For the first time in a very long time she had hope. That hope radiated to our whole family. We will be forever more grateful for the help and love that was extended to our family.

Brandon