



KEATON'S STORY:
The Surprising Uniqueness of Autism

A Little Bit Over the Foot

M. Keaton Hanks

Faye K. Hanks

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Carl Hanks Sr., my husband. He spent as many hours deciphering my handwriting and placing the story in the computer as I did writing it. Many, Many Thanks!

To Mark and Pam Hanks, parents of Keaton for taking Keaton's book seriously. They proofread it time and time again.

To Fran Louthan who reviewed the entire book, and made helpful and much needed suggestions.

To everyone who gave us permission to use their names and situations.

Finally, to the church family of Pulaski First United Methodist and to all friends who supported us.

Forward

While reading this book, there are a few things I feel are important reference points. First and foremost, Keaton has been an absolute blessing from God to our entire family and many others who cross his path. I am convinced that our family, and more specifically my marriage, has been strengthened ten-fold through his life. While I would be lying if I did not admit to having those days when I question why God will not simply 'heal' Keaton; I realize God has greater things in mind!

As Pam and I began searching for just the perfect name for our first born, there was a huge issue. We both had been school teachers for several years by then, teaching hundreds of kids. Every time one of us came up with a name, there always seemed to be an objection by the other. Seems our experiences with some of our more 'difficult students', left a bad taste in our mouths about their given names. After several weeks of tossing about names and even looking at a few of those "Name Books", our search became stagnant. Then out of the blue, Peggy Love, my mother-in-law called my wife and told her she had the perfect name, Mark Keaton; the first name after me and Keaton being my mom's maiden name. How many in-laws have that kind of relationship?

Peggy and mom did not meet until Pam and I were close to being engaged and they lived 90 miles apart. So why would she be so willing to name her first grandchild after my mom? Simple, she was a lady of

deep faith as is my mother, and this ‘decision’ needed to come from above. Peggy passed away when Keaton was only a child, but her kind face and her thoughtfulness are seen every day in his face. I believe she knew that Keaton and my mom would become attached at the hip and maybe even one day write a book! So when people ask if Keaton is a family name, I always say yes and in my mind I say, “Both sides of the family”.

Lastly, if you are reading this book looking for answers on Autism or more specifically Asperger’s Syndrome, I hope you know how important persistence and the support system are. Keaton would not be able to stand up in front of large groups to speak or go visit the sick without the love of our family and friends. But more specifically, he is where he is, because my wife would never take “no” for an answer. So when you read Keaton’s account of his school years, know that there was a wonderful mother- loving, nurturing, ever pursuing and to use Keaton’s words, ‘being a little pesky’.

Enjoy and God Bless,

Mark R. Hanks

Prologue

A great deal of prayer and greater amount of insistence from my grandson Keaton has resulted in my attempt to write. My hope is to impart to others the experiences I have lived as the grandmother of an autistic grandson who is so special to me. My first effort at creative writing consisted of poetry written in high school and in the early years of college. The poetry writing ended when I asked an English Professor to suggest a book that dealt with the subject of my interest. His exact response was “Oh no! Just what the world needs: another d*** lady poet”!

Friends and acquaintances have told Keaton that he should write a book. He has long enjoyed composing lists of names for parties, picnics or gatherings for special occasions. He writes his own notes in cards and in letters, nearly all of them sent by what is now called “snail mail”. He has given me at least three manuscripts of his portion of our book. For the last five years he has been ready. He finally convinced me by saying that he and his mother would like for him to have a book of his own to display as he speaks to groups regarding how he copes with autism. I realized how much it means to Keaton for us to publish this book.

Our book is a combination of Keaton’s writings and of mine. He sat next to me at our table to be able to read as I wrote. He stated that he wanted to be certain that none of his “transgressions” are included. What these are, or what he perceives them to be, I

have no idea! There are duplications of events and happenings in the two writings; I hope that the reader will appreciate the difference in our viewpoints.

We both agree that to express his feelings or emotions reflected in his own unique actions and reactions is worth sharing with others. Dr. Stephen Shore brings out so clearly in his writings and lectures the concept of the uniqueness of autism. Dr. Shore, a university professor, is a much sought after speaker as well as an author. In his statement that if we meet one person with autism we have met one person with autism--this is the foundation of Keaton's story.

I begin this endeavor in the knowledge and truth of this scripture verse: "I can do all things through Him who gives me strength"

(Philippians 4:13)

Chapter 1

(Early Childhood)

Our Adventure Begins

“Once Upon a Time” there lived a charming young prince who met an enchanting young princess; she lived in a nearby Kingdom. They were married in a grand cathedral; family and friends from both the royal families attended the ceremony. Happiness reigned over the realm. By and by a charming baby prince was born. He was loved and attended by his fairy godmother and his little old grandmother. The bliss was marred as a dark cloud of fear and anxiety continued to pass the windows of the nursery.

To Be Continued-----but not like this! I enjoy reading all kinds of books, but especially those with a little mystery and thrill. There are people who tell me that I am a fair storyteller; however, this book is to be a real-life story of a real-life person, Keaton Hanks. It is not easy to capture my love, thoughts, and emotions on paper, but a promise to Keaton is a promise that must be kept.

Mark Keaton Hanks, son of Mark R. Hanks and Pamela Love Hanks, was a beautiful baby boy. He is a very handsome young man today. In the first

several years of his life he exhibited a high level of intelligence and was fast to grasp concepts. For example he could identify each letter of the alphabet at the age of sixteen months and could work with negative numbers at the age of four years. He brought a great deal of joy to the family. He could easily recite the Pledge of Allegiance, the Apostle's Creed, things read to him, and give talks to family and friends while he stood on the fireplace hearth, using it as a stage. My husband and I on occasion traveled from our home in Pulaski to the Mark Hanks' home in Bedford to babysit Keaton and, from time to time, his sitter's young granddaughter. The granddaughter Anne was a daily companion to Keaton in the sitter's home.

Keaton was just past his first birthday when his maternal grandmother was diagnosed with a brain tumor. For the next year Keaton's mother made many trips to Rocky Mount to spend time with her mother Peggy Love. Usually Keaton and his father accompanied Pam.

Mark and Pam had purchased a second house somewhat larger than the first one they had previously owned. This house had a large yard and Mark added a wooden play set with swings, see-saw and a "tree" house. Floyd and Peggy Love wanted to see the new home, especially with their only grandson in it. Peggy was wearing a turban to replace her hair, and her illness had taken most of her strength. Carl and I had visited Floyd and Peggy only one time during her illness. Peggy died a year after her cancer diagnosis; Keaton had reached his second birthday just a couple of months before her death.

It was at some point between Keaton's second and third birthdays that Mark and I began to feel uneasy about Keaton. His lack of social interaction and his stilted voice tones were different than those of his cousins and of other children near his age. We could not explain our anxieties, and if others had doubts, they did not share them with us. Keaton was fearful of butterflies but not of crawling insects. Any change in plans or his schedule resulted in an outburst of anger or crying. He lacked motor skills to swing himself by pumping his legs.

The first traumatic experience occurred when Keaton was placed in a well recommended private day school; the school was located in a church. The general public knew little about autism twenty years ago. The teachers and the principal, who was the minister, worked with Keaton to the best of their abilities. However, none of them were equipped to deal with a young child who was developing autistic traits. Keaton referred to himself as "Keaton" or "you" not as I or me. It was difficult to understand his meaning. He appeared to be very antisocial and to be indifferent to the other children.

Keaton had spent the first three years of his life with his family or with a private sitter; he was most unhappy in this new situation. The surroundings were scary to him, and the conversation directed to him was confusing. He did not interact with the other children. To make his situation worse, Anne, who was scheduled to attend the preschool with Keaton, became ill and could not begin the first week of the term. He knew none of the students or staff. Within

a few days very stressed parents were picking up a very stressed little boy. Keaton had cried most of the day, eating almost nothing at snack or lunchtime.

The nap time was the worst for him and for the workers. The phrases he was saying during nap time confused the staff. The principal/preacher told Keaton's parents that he sat on his cot and said "Your momma's going to get you"; Keaton repeated this over and over. The principal believed that Keaton was threatening to have his parents rebuke the staff for something done to him. The family later realized that Keaton was reassuring himself that his mother would be back for him. This reassurance had been given to him by his parents and the staff over and over. By saying your and you instead of my and me, Keaton's meaning was unclear to the staff. Using the correct pronoun was something the family worked on with Keaton for many years.

It was now the end of his first week and what would turn out to be the end of his stay at this preschool. He became ill with a virus. The principal took this opportunity to call his father and to tell him that Keaton needed to be picked up from school. Mark was informed that it would be best for all concerned if Keaton was removed from that school permanently.

The family was in turmoil. Both of his parents were public school teachers, and some sort of care for Keaton was needed immediately. He came to Pulaski to stay with us the next week. During his stay, my older son, who is a physician, treated Keaton for his fever. I asked my son Carl Hanks Jr., what he thought might be Keaton's basic problem. I must tell you now

that Carl Jr. (Hank as he is known by his family and friends) is very slow to share a medical opinion with anyone unless he has examined the person for that particular problem. We have often become annoyed with him for this, but actually understand and agree with his ethics. I have been known, however, to remind him that he is the only doctor (so far) whom we have helped to finance through medical school. After my worried insistence Hank told me that he believed Keaton to be “a little autistic”! This was my first time to hear this term applied to Keaton, but it would not be the last time.

I shared the conversation with Carl Sr. and with Mark. Mark added this information to his growing concerns about Keaton. He spoke with a colleague regarding his brother’s suggestion of autism and Keaton. The friend told him that there was no such thing as being a little autistic. He said that it was the same as saying that someone was a little bit pregnant. How wrong that person appears to us now! For the remainder of the term Keaton was placed in the care of a grandmotherly lady during school days. He was quite content to be with her and enjoyed the meals she prepared, especially the gravy and biscuits. He says that he still thinks of her when he eats a gravy biscuit meal, one of his favorites.

Mark and Pam had close friends, Chris and Shelly Watts, who visited them often and brought their daughter, Taylor. Taylor was several months younger than Keaton. While Keaton did not play games or build block houses with Taylor, he did enjoy her company. He listened as her speech improved and as

she became quite a conversationalist. This was good for both children and they seemed to look forward to seeing each other. The comparison between Keaton's monologue and Taylor's conversation with others was yet another concern to add to Mark's growing list. He shared this concern with me as well as with Pam.

Pam suggested that Mark share all of his doubts with the pediatrician during Keaton's four year checkup. The doctor examined Keaton thoroughly and spoke afterwards with his parents. His response to Mark's concerns was that if Keaton had been a grown-up, the doctor would say that he resembled an absent minded professor! Keaton had read aloud the letters on the wall charts and had made observations about the pictures while the doctor completed his check-up. He told Keaton's parents that Keaton was above average in height and in weight for his age. His only negative observation was Keaton's speech. He said that Keaton appeared to be a "late bloomer" in his speech patterns.

Pam was relieved at this report and felt very hopeful; Mark was not so confident that all was as it should be with Keaton. Their opinions were shared with me during our next telephone conversation.

The family enjoyed a good summer. Carl and I had begun to take trips with Mark, Pam, and Keaton. We were quite happy to "little boy" sit to give Mark and Pam an evening out to go to a restaurant or a movie or some other entertainment. Basketball camps for Mark usually resulted in Pam and Keaton visiting with us or just enjoying little outings on their own. The parents felt ready for a new school experience for

Keaton. They had decided on a pre-school child care facility near their home. Everyone who had dealt with the school spoke well of it. Keaton and his parents visited and were satisfied with the environment; Keaton was enrolled.

This became a turning point in our lives. After a few days, the teacher/owner, Miss Amy, telephoned Pam at home. She told Pam that she believed if Keaton did not receive professional intervention he would not be prepared to begin public school kindergarten the following year. She described him as bright, able to answer questions during circle time, but not really showing signs of interacting with the other four year olds in the class. On the playground he would sit on the swing, repeating phrases to himself or stand alone, far from others.

Shortly after this conversation with the teacher, Miss Amy, Pam called me. She sounded upset and frightened. I listened carefully to her not all that surprised. After offering her words of reassurance and comfort, I told her that Mark and I had felt for some time that Keaton might need help beyond what we could offer him. An anxious mother then began her course of action toward Keaton's needs, which still continues today. She and Mark address what seems to be the most urgent requirement to help Keaton grow and develop to his full potential. How fortunate he is to have Mark and Pam as his parents.

Pam made an immediate appointment with Keaton's pediatrician. There she explained what the teacher had said regarding Keaton's behavior and the teacher's belief that he needed professional intervention. The

doctor examined Keaton again, just three months after his first examination. This time the doctor gave his complete attention to Keaton's speech and observed each action. He recommended that Keaton receive a specialized observation and referred him to a neurologist.

The trip to the neurologist was made by Mark, his dad, and me, along with Keaton of course. Keaton was given an Electro Encephalograph (EEG), the results of which were explained to Mark. In essence it showed existing irregular brain waves or patterns. The outcome of the trip to the neurologist was a referral to a speech therapist.

A speech therapist in Roanoke worked with Keaton each week. She was able to discern that in her professional opinion he had a type of autism classified as Asperger's Syndrome. This was yet another milestone for the family. We began to read any article, book, or any available information regarding Asperger's Syndrome. We accepted that it is possible for Keaton to be "a little autistic". Keaton returned to "Miss Amy's" preschool to complete the year.

Weekly trips to the therapist covered about four years. After the first year in Roanoke, he was able to see the same doctor in Bedford where Keaton lived. He became proficient in computer skills as he worked on a program designed to aid the understanding of the spoken word. This particular program was developed by Scientific Learning in California.

Keaton became better adjusted in his preschool. A speech therapist was sent from the county school

system to work with him weekly. He became more at ease with the other four-year olds and liked his teacher. Nap time, or rest time continued to be his least favorite hour of the day. All in all, our hats are off to his teacher “Miss Amy” for her very acute judgment. The early detection of autism is essential to create the path for growth toward a productive life.

In his position as head coach for the Liberty High School’s basketball team, Mark had begun to see an improvement in the team’s performance. Keaton and his mother attended every home game. He developed a real attachment for sports, especially basketball; which is still evident today. When the Liberty High School basketball team won a state championship, Mark held Keaton in his arms as he cut down the net. This was a great event to witness. The state championship victories were high times for Keaton, for the family, and for the community of Bedford.

During the second half of Keaton’s pre-school, a very important event occurred: his brother was born. He was named Gavin Christian Hanks, and was to have a strong impact on Keaton’s life. The Mark Hanks’ family was complete!

Note: The Towns and Cities identified in this story are located in the State of Virginia, unless marked otherwise.

Autism *Definition of Autism by Merriam-Webster*

Simple Definition of Autism

A condition or disorder that begins in childhood and that causes problems in forming relationships and in communicating with other people

Full Definition of Autism

A variable developmental disorder that appears by age three and is characterized by impairment of the ability to form normal social relationships, by impairment of the ability to communicate with others, and by stereotyped behavior patterns

Medical Definition of Autism

A developmental disorder that appears by age three and that is variable in expression but is recognized and diagnosed by impairment of the ability to form social relationships, by impairment of the ability to communicate with others, and by stereotyped behavior patterns especially as exhibited by a preoccupation with repetitive activities of restricted focus rather than with flexible and imaginative ones

Definition of Asperger's Syndrome

A developmental disorder resembling autism that is characterized by impaired interactions, by restricted and repetitive behavior and activities, and by normal language and cognitive development called also Asperger's Disorder

Autism *Definition of Autism by Merriam-Webster*

Medical Definition of Asperger's Syndrome

An autism spectrum disorder that is characterized by impaired social interaction, by repetitive patterns of behavior and restricted interests, by normal language and cognitive development but poor conversational skills and difficulty with nonverbal communication, and often by above average performance in a narrow field against a general background of impaired functioning.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Any of a group of developmental disorders (as autism and Asperger's syndrome) marked by impairments in the ability to communicate and interact socially and by the presence of repetitive behaviors or restricted interests—called also autistic spectrum disorder, pervasive developmental disorder

Facts and Statistics

About 1 percent of the world population has autism spectrum disorder (CDC 2014)

Prevalence in the United States is estimated at 1 in 68 births (CDC 2014)

More than 3.5 million Americans live with an autism spectrum disorder (Buescher et al., 2014)

Prevalence of autism in U.S. children increased by 119.4 percent from 2000 (1 in 150) to 2010 (1 in 68) Autism is the fastest-growing developmental disability (CDC 2008)

Prevalence has increased by 6-15 percent each year from 2002 to 2010 (based on biennial numbers from CDC)

Autism services cost U.S. citizens \$236-282 billion annually (Buescher et al., 2014)

A majority of costs in the U.S. are in adult services - \$175-196 billion, compared to \$61-66 billion for children (Buescher et al., 2014)

Cost of lifelong care can be reduced by 2/3 with early diagnosis and intervention (Autism. 2007 Sep; 11(5):453-63 The economic consequences of autistic spectrum disorder among children in a Swedish Municipality. Jarbrink.K1)

Facts and Statistics

The U.S. cost of autism over the lifespan is about \$2.4 million for a person with an intellectual disability or \$1.4 million for a person without intellectual disability (Buescher et al., 2014)

35 percent of young adults with autism have not had a job or received postgraduate education after leaving high school. (Shatluck et al., 2012)

It costs more than \$8,600 extra per year to educate a student with autism. (Lavelle et al., 2014) The average cost of educating a student is about \$12,000 - NCES. 2014

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Last updated: August 26, 2015

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A Little Bit Over the Foot

Introduction

My name is Mark Keaton Hanks. I was born on May 29, 1992, in Roanoke Memorial Hospital in Roanoke, Virginia. My family lived in Bedford, Virginia at the time. I have a form of autism called Asperger's Syndrome. Some say the autism was caused by a shot I received around nine-months of age containing mercury as the preservative; we really do not know.

This passage from the Bible is important to me as a guiding light for my life. "For I know the plan I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Jeremiah 29:11

Chapter 1

Early Childhood

I lived in Bedford, Virginia when I was first born. I was a happy healthy baby. When I was six months old, I could say, “Dada” and when I was one year old, I could walk and count how many blocks were falling.

I started staying with a retired English teacher when I was three months old. This woman kept both her granddaughter and me. I called her, “Memaw”. We all three did a lot of fun stuff together. We played in the swimming pool, we watched Barney on T.V., and we took walks. One time we walked over to her neighbor’s house, I put my hands in his bushes, and a bee stung me. I have never gotten over that fear since then. I could count how many horses and cows were in the field near my babysitter’s house because I could say my ABC’s and 123’s when I was a little more than one year old. Another time my babysitter’s cat scratched me. I have always had a fear of cats after that. I nicknamed my babysitter’s cat, “Peniecia”. I used to talk to my parents about Peniecia at my house a lot. My parents thought that it was an imaginary friend that I was talking about. They later realized that I gave my babysitter’s cat a nickname. I stayed with this woman for three years.

When I was three years old, I started going to a church preschool. I was very unhappy there. I cried for five straight days, eight straight hours a day. The reason that I was unhappy there was because I had gone to the same babysitter's house for three years and I was not used to going to a different place. Another reason I was unhappy there was because my babysitter's granddaughter was supposed to go there and she could not attend that week because she was sick. At the end of the week, the preacher called my dad and told him that when he came to pick me up that they needed to talk. My dad came that afternoon and the preacher told him to pull me out of the church preschool. I started staying with a woman who was a grandmotherly type for the remainder of the year. I was very happy there. There were about four other children at her house besides me. I had a hard time communicating with some of them. The woman who kept me could not tell that something was wrong with me.

The next year, I started staying with a woman who taught preschool at her house. My parents and my grandparents were starting to realize that something was wrong with me between age two and age three. My grandparents babysat me and my first babysitter's granddaughter at my house a few times when my babysitter had another commitment. My parents had some close friends of theirs that brought their daughter to my house. I had a very hard time socializing with them. My parents took me to see my pediatrician in Roanoke, Virginia and he said that I was a late bloomer.

My preschool teacher told my parents that she also was concerned about me because I was on the swing set by myself and not with the other children. My parents took me to see my pediatrician in Roanoke again, and they told him that I needed to see a specialist. He sent me to see a neurologist in Roanoke. The neurologist sent me to see a speech therapist. That speech therapist would not let my mom sit in the room with me while she was evaluating me. I did not like sitting in a room with strangers so I did not talk to her and I started seeing another speech therapist in Bedford who allowed my parents in the room. She said that she thought that I had a form of autism called Asperger's Syndrome. She had traveled to Sweden and other countries in Europe where she worked with students with similar behaviors. My mom arranged to have an elementary school speech therapist come to my preschool to work with me.

My family were members of Main Street United Methodist Church in Bedford, Virginia. We started sitting in the balcony the first few years of my life when we went to church. There was a man who sat up front and he recommended that we come sit with him when I got older. The reason he did that was because he had children and when they got older he and his wife made them sit in the front because they thought that it would help them focus and he thought that if my parents took me to the front that I would focus better. I nicknamed this man, "Mr. Sillybritches" because one time in church he had on golf pants and I had read about a character named "Mr. Sillybritches" in a book. There were many good

people at that church that my parents were close friends with and a lot of those people watched after me in church. Later on in life, I got fascinated with Bible stories, I learned about how to have faith, I ended up joining a Sunday School class and learning interesting stories, and it has had a lifelong effect on me.

I used to go to the beach every summer. The first few years of my life when I went to the beach, I used to have meltdowns whenever we would leave the beach. As I got older, I learned to tell time so my parents could give me warnings and I did not have meltdowns anymore after that. I loved routines rotating between the ocean, the pool, the lazy river, and hot tub. I always liked to go back to the pool after dinner for a few hours. If this did not work out, I often got angry with my parents. I always wanted to take just one more swim after supper while on vacation.

My dad was the head basketball coach at Liberty High School when I was a kid. Whenever I would go to the games, the athletic director, my mom, or my grandmother and I would walk around at the games because I could not sit still. The basketball players were like big brothers to me. They would come over and eat with us, study for tests, and play with my toys and me. I also enjoyed going with my dad to summer camps.

Liberty High School won the state championship when I was three years old and again when I was four years old. I used to love to play with my dad's trophies after he won the state championship. My

dad held me in his arms both years after he won the state championship. There are pictures in newspaper articles of him holding me after winning the state championship. I enjoy going back and looking at these articles. I remember facts and statistics from each game and enjoy sharing that information with others.

Chapter 2

(Elementary School)

“Expanding our Horizon”

In the early fall, Keaton began kindergarten at Bedford Primary School. His father took him to Liberty High School where he worked and placed Keaton on the correct bus to Bedford Primary School. In the afternoon Keaton was transported back to the high school and then went home with his father.

The school speech therapist had visited him on a regular basis at “Miss Amy’s” preschool, so the system had previous knowledge of Keaton’s autism. He adjusted to public school with more ease than one would expect. Prior to this time very few students had been diagnosed with autism. The school supplied an aide for the first half of the day. The individual attention was important to Keaton. He managed the afternoon with the class, only requiring a time out once in a while.

Carl and I attended a Christmas program in which Keaton’s class participated. He came on stage with the class but really did not sing. He wandered off the stage before the performance was over. However, by

the spring we saw him perform in a mock wedding with the other students. The class had worked with consonants and vowels; supposedly, consonants were male and vowels female. The bride was Ms. U and the groom was Mr. Q. Keaton was Mr. D, daddy of Ms. U. He handled his part well; he was beginning to enjoy performing “on the stage”.

During the summer following the completion of Keaton’s first grade the family moved to Lexington for his father to take a position with Virginia Military Institute. Keaton began the second grade there and remained to complete three years of school.

In Lexington his parents encountered some difficulty getting the exact help Keaton needed. The necessity of providing people to comply with the support called for in Keaton’s Individual Educational Program was slow to materialize. The information found in his IEP came from educators and psychologists. Basically his IEP called for “least restrictive environment.” The school intended to place Keaton in a Special Education Class. After the school staff understood his needs, Keaton was given an aide all day and was placed in regular classes. With an aide Keaton was able to have more freedom of movement. His apparent lack of interest in some of the classroom activities was not as disruptive to the teacher or to the other students. The aide was able to involve Keaton in acceptable activities of interest to him and at the same time teach him.

The understanding of autism remained vague as was the experience to know how to work with persons with autism. Keaton had an occupational and a speech

therapist, as well as a male aide. It developed that Keaton needed to be out of class and moving when he became restless. He walked the halls to release nervous energy. This resulted in his being discovered by the principal and taken to the principal's office for discipline. The speech therapist found Keaton doing push-ups as punishment. She called Pam that evening and a meeting with the principal, parent, and therapist was scheduled. The principal was instructed that the push-ups were inappropriate action to require of Keaton. Keaton's breaks were directed and supervised by his aide after the incident with the principal.

Handwriting has never been a skill that Keaton mastered. In a later school system he was allowed to use a recorder, alpha smart, and also a laptop computer. In the third grade, however, his teacher graded his handwriting. This, too, was a practice that was addressed and stopped. It was noted that he was receiving therapy for fine motor skills. Fine motor skills are slow to develop in autistic children and sometimes limited at best. Keaton still prints any written material.

One occasion when Keaton was riding the school bus, the driver found Keaton's movements a distraction for her. A minor accident occurred, and the driver claimed that Keaton had been the cause. After reviewing film of the interior of the vehicle it was determined that he had not been the cause. However, Keaton was secured in a seat belt after that. The family was agreeable to the seat belt, and Keaton felt important as he wore it.

During the time in which Keaton's family lived

in Lexington, a trip was made to The University of Virginia Hospital. The pediatric neurologist diagnosed Keaton with the condition known as Asperger's Syndrome. Keaton continued to go to the UVA's Kluge Clinic each month for as long as he lived in Lexington. It was suggested that he have a Magnetic Resonator Imaging (MRI) to reinforce the diagnosis of autism. The MRI was conducted at The University of Virginia Hospital. The results showed that Keaton did not have a brain tumor or a lesion of the brain. The diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome remained in place.

One of the humorous incidents from his time in Lexington involves Keaton's name for Gavin's preschool. Gavin attended a pre-school at the Catholic Church. Each time we passed the church Keaton would point out the "Cathaletic" school his brother attended. This seemed a logical name to him as his father was employed in the athletic building at VMI.

Keaton had physical therapy to build strength in his legs. This was paid for by his parents. This therapy was necessary for him to learn to pump his legs while swinging and to be able to ride a bike.

Elementary School Part II

Life Improves

THE MOVE TO PULASKI

By 2002, Mark had become somewhat disillusioned with his employment as an assistant coach for basketball at VMI. Pam was concerned with Keaton's experiences at the public school. All in all, the time was right for the head basketball coach's position at Pulaski County High School to be attractive to Mark. Also, frequent trips up and down Interstate 81 would no longer be necessary.

Mark and Pam were attracted to a house just four houses from ours. They were able to purchase this house from its owner, a person with whom Mark had played golf from time to time. This new location was given approval by all of our family. As Mark pointed out, Carl and I did not resemble the in-law jokes; we were always respected by all three of our children's spouses.

We had started to take summer vacations with Mark, Pam, Keaton and Gavin. It was a time of enjoying Mark and Pam's time-share program on various ocean beaches. Keaton loved being on the beach and in the ocean, and in time was a good swimmer. He enjoyed trips to Disney World, but only every other year on even numbered years. The even number item was just one of his fixations. The family had first visited Disney World on an even numbered year, so Keaton

wanted to go on even numbered years. This was to help satisfy his concept of perfect patterns. He still has definite ideas of what makes up these patterns and he does not like to change them.

Alas, summer came to an end too soon, as it always does. Keaton and Gavin were enrolled in the Critzer Elementary School nearby; Keaton in the fifth grade and Gavin in kindergarten. To illustrate how much Gavin had become aware of Keaton's condition, a conversation Mark overheard is paraphrased: Mark had taken Gavin for a pre-kindergarten test and chat with the principal. As he waited outside the door Mark heard the principal ask Gavin if he had any concerns or questions. Gavin replied that he would be fine, but he would need them to watch over his brother Keaton!

Keaton received all the help that was specified in his Individual Educational Program (IEP) at Critzer. This included a full-time aide; the man who was to work with Keaton had completed several years of college. He remained with Keaton for the entire year. Keaton was placed in regular classes; this would be true for him throughout his school years. (This is important to point out as it is usual for schools to place a student who is "different" in whatever special education class thought appropriate). Keaton was fortunate that his autistic needs had been identified early. He was never to be placed in Special Education Class again. His special help came in the form of additional time for tests and for aides appropriate to his Asperger's Syndrome.

I was a public school counselor for the last twenty years of my career. With interest, I viewed Keaton's school placement and special assistance. Realizing how very fortunate he was that autism was diagnosed early in his life, I continue to be thankful for present day knowledge of such needs. His quality of life is so much better than many of those who had little or nothing known about their autistic condition. The fact that twenty five or thirty five years ago educators were so poorly informed regarding autism continues to be a personal regret.

Not long after Mark and Pam moved to Pulaski, one of my twin granddaughters asked me if I thought that Keaton would grow up to be like her Uncle Mark and her Aunt Pam. My careful answer to her was that he would be himself, and be somewhat like his parents who raised him. She actually wanted to know if he would grow out of his autism.

He did well in his academic classes; in his physical education and music classes, he followed instructions, but not always interacting with his classmates. His aide was there to accompany him on walks in the hall when Keaton needed a change, or became restless. The library was a possibility as Keaton loved books. The playground was a favorite, and there was a therapy room he could visit.

His distraction that year was his observation of the students in the special education class. Some of these children had physical disabilities, others had mental or emotional limitations. He felt sorry for them and was fascinated by them at the same time. The situation was instrumental in his parents' decision

to place him in another middle school rather than the one in our community. Five years later Gavin attended the middle school in our community and was successful and happy there.

Keaton's house is located over the hill from our house with just enough of a hill that we cannot see each other's house. It was good that Keaton, from the time that he moved here, could walk to our house by himself. This gave him the opportunity to be somewhat independent, a small act of progress.

Keaton has always enjoyed Disney films and books with fairy tales. As a result of this, he called the neighbor who lives across the street from him, his "fairy godmother". She is one of our closest friends; she thought Keaton's name for her a compliment, as well as humorous. Later, as Keaton came to understand that fairy godmother was a fictional character, he decided that she must be his godmother. She is as close to being one as he has. Her name is Evelyn and that is what I will call her from now on in this book.

It was learned that a social skills development class for children with autism was being conducted at Radford University. Keaton was taken weekly to participate in the group. It consisted of six males. They played board games, took turns speaking, and wrote new articles and letters to help improve their social skills. As instructed, he wrote articles about the happenings in the group, as if for publication. This has proven to be a helpful skill for him with his present enjoyment of writing sports articles. He has sports related information on his blog and on his twitter page.

The only time that we became really frightened and upset over Keaton's actions at our house was on the last day of school at Critzer Elementary. Carl and I had picked him up at school instead of his riding his school bus to the high school to meet his parents. There had been a fifth grade "graduation" assembly we had attended, since his parents were busy with last day happenings at high school. Keaton had wanted to ride the bus, his usual routine, so he was unhappy with us for the change. After we had brought him home, he went into another room to be by himself, we thought. However, a little later, we realized that he was not in the house or the fenced-in backyard. We called to him, searched up and down the street, and also his house. All in vain! Just as we were ready to take the car to look for him, we received a call from the school that he had walked back to school, and had been found in the cafeteria eating pizza. We went back to pick him up a second time. He received our frightened and upset lecture. After all, he had walked several blocks with no sidewalks and had crossed a very busy highway. The end result was that we were all very relieved and grateful to have him safely home.

Chapter 2

Elementary School

I started going to school in Bedford, Virginia. Transition was hard for me. I visited the principal and met my teacher in April, the spring before, so I would get used to her. I played on the playground but I did not communicate with other children my own age. My teacher and my principal could tell that something was wrong with me. My kindergarten teacher and my first grade teacher were probably two of the best teachers that I had in my school career. I really admired both of them. In a kindergarten play, I was “Mr. D” the Daddy in a wedding where “Mr. Q” and “Mrs. U” got married. I was giving “Mrs. U” away. The principal was “Mr. M” the minister officiating the wedding. I was in a Christmas pageant that year also. When I was in the Christmas pageant, while the play was going on, I made every one of the Christmas decorations on the Christmas tree look straight. I always liked everything to look perfect. In first grade, I was George Washington in a play.

I used to collect Disney movies and watch each one of them. My top five Disney movies were Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin, The Jungle Book, The Lion King, and Mary Poppins. I had a huge fascination with

a character in a show called, “Goof Troop.” I used to refer to this character, Pete, as “A Bad Buddy”. I would later refer to children who could not behave as “A Bad Buddy”.

I also collected Veggie Tales movies and watched each one of them. My top five characters in that series were Bob the Tomato, Larry the Cucumber, Junior Asparagus, Mr. Nezzer, and Laura the Carrot. The things that I can recall that I learned from the movie are selfishness and rumors. My parents used to call me the “rumor weed” whenever I was gossiping about people.

Every day, I would go to Liberty High School with my parents before and after school. My dad was a math teacher and a basketball coach and my mom was a computer teacher. I would ride the bus to and from Liberty High School and Bedford Primary School. In the mornings before school, I hung out with my dad in his classroom and in the afternoons after school, I hung out with my mom in her classroom. Whenever I hung out with my dad in his classroom, I would draw a number line on the board and I could add and subtract positive and negative numbers. I could also add alphabet letters like $A + B = C$ or $C + M = P$. It took my dad a while before he figured that I was associating letters with numbers. I would also subtract letters.

I moved to Lexington, Virginia in second grade because my dad accepted an assistant basketball coach’s job at Virginia Military Institute. The school I attended never had an autistic student before. At first, they were going to put me in a special classroom, but my parents insisted that I belonged in a regular

classroom. They also did not plan to hire an aide for me but my parents insisted. I was lucky my parents knew school law because they were both teachers.

I had speech therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy. My occupational therapist taught me how to write and tie my shoe using backward chaining. My speech therapist taught me how to announce and listen to words. My parents paid a physical therapist to work with me and build up the strength in my legs. I learned how to ride my bike around the parade circle at Virginia Military Institute before 3rd grade. I also learned to swing myself by pumping my legs. This sensation of swinging gave me quite a feeling. I enjoyed this feeling up through middle school.

I was scared of loud noises in the cafeteria at school. Therefore, I ate in the storage room off the main office. I was also scared of fire drill bells. Someone would take me outside before the bells went off.

Three bad things happened to me while in this school system. I was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) so I had a hard time sitting down for eight hours. My teacher would allow me to walk around in the hallway when I was restless. My principal did not like me being in the hall and he would make me get into push up position in the office in front of parents, students, and other faculty members. My occupational therapist walked in the door one day and saw this. She called my mom to tell her what my principal was doing and a meeting with the principal was scheduled. They made available some training on autism for him.

The second thing was that my teacher graded my handwriting. I became very upset when I did not get an “A” on everything. My mom and my occupational therapist had a meeting with my teacher and explained that I was taking occupational therapy to learn how to write and should not be graded on handwriting. The teacher agreed and never did it again, she would put, “Not Your Best Work” on my paper. This practice worked for me until the end of elementary school.

The third thing was that I was in a bus wreck and my bus driver blamed me; she stated that I was the reason that the bus wrecked. They looked on the bus camera and saw that I did nothing wrong and that it was not my fault. They made sure that I got a seat belt on the bus afterwards as my mom recommended.

My occupational therapist was always trying to help. She would research thoughts on how to help autistic children. For example, she suggested brushing me with a surgical brush to try to calm me. My parents tried brushing me for eight weeks. Though this felt good, we could not tell that it helped.

One of my fears was a song called, “Let’s Get Ready to Rumble”. I was afraid of that song because the bell was too loud. When Liberty High School played in the state basketball tournament at Liberty University, the sound system was loud and it hurt my ears. They loved to play this song at The Vine Center and I would get up, go to the restroom, and play in the sink. A couple years later, they played the song at a picnic at Virginia Military Institute and I took off and ran to the barracks. My parents were frightened when I took off and ran and they were surprised because

they did not know that I could run so fast. I ran faster than my dad did that day.

One of my best memories was that I knew many Bible stories. My favorite Bible story was David and Goliath. I was also good with the genealogy in the Bible. I could name every ancestor and descendant from Adam to Noah, from Noah to Abraham, from Abraham to David, and from David to Jesus. I used to preach in school to students and faculty members. My parents told me that it was against the law to talk about the Bible in school. I did not realize that it was against the law.

Every morning my dad would drop my brother off at his babysitter's house and drop me off at school afterwards. I would ride the bus to high school every afternoon. My mom taught computers at Rockbridge County High School. On the way to school each morning, we would memorize every line of the poems that I had to memorize for class. My third grade teacher was one of the best teachers that I had in my school career. I really respected her.

I went to see my family physician in Buena Vista, Virginia. He sent me to see a specialist at The University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia to receive an official diagnosis. The day I met with her, I was quiet to begin with. She asked me questions about the Bible and she had my attention. I named every Bible story I could think of and every outfit that my mom wore to church every Sunday. She diagnosed me with a form of autism called Asperger's Syndrome. She also referred me to a pediatric neurologist in Charlottesville. He never seemed to remember what

we had discussed from one time to the next. I went to UVA for two years every three to four weeks and would get back to school because I wanted perfect attendance. I soon changed to another psychologist in Staunton, Virginia. She said that the reason that I was autistic was due to being delivered with forceps. I saw this psychologist for a year and then I quit going to see her because I moved.

I moved to Pulaski, Virginia in fifth grade because my dad accepted the head basketball coach's job at Pulaski County High School. I felt like I was much more accepted in Pulaski than I had been anywhere else because my grandparents, my uncle, my aunt, and my cousins all lived in Pulaski. I joined a social skills group at Radford University in Radford, Virginia. We met weekly for two hours to practice many social skills like taking turns, holding the door for others, and many other situations. I still keep in touch with two of the children from my social skills group and sometimes I run into them while I am out in the community. The professor in charge of the group suggested a gluten free diet might help reduce some autistic characteristics. We tried this for a few months, but it did not help me. A local news channel interviewed the professor, my parents, and me at Radford University after group one time. He was a sports reporter who knew my dad through coaching basketball. All of the interviews were replayed on T.V. on the local news station under the heading Hometown Hoops. The sports reporter and I became good friends.

Chapter III

(Middle School)

“A Few Bumps Along the Way”

In the early summer between elementary school and middle school, we had our usual Memorial Day Cookout for Keaton's Birthday. As his birthday is on May twenty-ninth we often combine the two outings. Keaton enjoyed these cook-outs; members of both his father's family and his mother's family attended. Friends and neighbors also joined the party. The age difference between Gavin and Keaton was more apparent that particular summer, however. Gavin was six years old and Keaton was eleven years old. It was noticeable in Keaton's growth and in his increased mood swings. Keaton was not a typical pre-teen or teenager. His parents would discover this truth later when Gavin was a teenager.

In late August the boys went back to school, Gavin to Critzer Elementary School and the first grade and Keaton to Dublin Middle School and the sixth grade. Keaton showed a real tendency to become attached to his teachers. This is a trait that stayed with him throughout Community College. It is less difficult for him to communicate with adults than with persons his own age. It still is today.

He did his classwork quite well. He later said that the sixth grade was easy for him, but the seventh and eighth grades were hard. Having several teachers per day created more change in his daily routine which required flexibility. It took most of the two years for him to adapt. This was a helpful prelude for his high school years and further education. The difficulty with class changes and multiple teachers was not reflected in his grades; as he continued to perform at “A” level in all subjects.

Changes were developing in Keaton during these years which he could not always understand or handle. Which one of us as a teenager did? He would like and dislike certain students at the same time. This upset him. All the while he was only interacting with the students in his imagination. Though he had a full time aide, he was sent to the principal’s office several times. His need to control his anger was evident. At what the anger was directed was hard to determine by Keaton or the staff. He sometimes would walk in the halls; other times he visited the school counselor. He was prone to keep his feelings of frustration and being “different” to himself; only later did he verbalize some of his fears. He appeared aware of the differences caused by his autism yet did not understand them. He wanted friends, but did not share the interests of the other students. He feared having the students know he was autistic. In the cafeteria he made friends with the workers rather than the students. We hurt to see his sadness and confusion.

He began piano lessons during these years. We had given his family our piano since all our children

were grown, and we no longer had a piano player in the house. He seemed to enjoy these lessons, and again exhibited his delight in performing before an audience at the annual recitals.

The family traveled to Disney World during this summer. Keaton enjoyed the Disney characters there, and in story books and in movies. He would tell the stories over and over, adding his own happy events and endings as he pleased. He recognized all of the characters, and each of their stories. He created a happy ending even where none had existed. Dickens' "Christmas Carol" was then and is now a favorite of his and of mine. We might watch that and several other old Christmas movies on the Fourth of July, or just any time of the year.

When Keaton was in the eighth grade he took a class in family living skills. He enjoyed the class very much, and with the aid of his teacher made himself a pair of patchwork shorts. Several years later I had the pleasure of meeting the teacher socially; she told me how much she had enjoyed having Keaton in her class. She shared that one time he had taken twenty or more minutes to tell the students about his Southern ancestors and their activity during the Civil War. This was a whole different slant to her as she was from a state in the northern part of our country. I have wondered exactly what he told the class, because it would certainly be from incidents overheard in conversations at our house. My great grandparents lived during the Civil War. Their portrait hangs in the den with great granddad in his Confederate uniform! Their stories had been handed down to me.--- I must

have handed them on to Keaton.

The family was always watching for his “genius” of autism; we were aware that high functioning autistic people might excel in music, science, math, etc. Keaton was capable in these areas, but his unique acceleration would be evident to us and to others a few years later.

He performed in the school talent show, playing the piano. The cafeteria ladies and staff stood in the back of the auditorium. Some of them cried and others cheered to see Keaton on the stage and enjoying himself. He stood to take a formal bow at the conclusion of his selection. The bow was an action he had been taught by his piano teacher. Interestingly enough, Keaton performed a second time in a piano recital that day; the recital took place at our Methodist Church.

The final assembly for the eighth grade students was attended by both his parents and his grandparents. We were proud of his recognition as a straight “A” student, and for his perfect attendance. It was a relief to Keaton and to all of those closely related to him that the middle school years came to an end, not with a loud bang, just with a small sigh!

Chapter 3

Middle School

I went to middle school in Dublin, Virginia. I had some good experiences and some bad experiences. In fourth grade, I had one teacher for Social Studies, one teacher for Math, and one teacher for Science. Switching classes was hard for me in fourth grade because I had only one teacher all day for four years and that was the routine that I was used to. In fifth and sixth grade, my parents always made sure that I only had one teacher because they knew that I was not ready to switch classes yet. It was the first time that I started meeting people in school. Sixth grade was easy for me. I only had one teacher that year. I really enjoyed having one teacher. I admired all of my sixth grade classmates. My sixth grade teacher was also probably one of the best teachers that I had in my school career.

Seventh and eighth grades were hard for me. I had four classes each day with different teachers. I had a lot of homework in all of my classes every night of the week. We were trying different medications to try to help me focus. These medications were hard to get right because I was growing so fast. I was angry most of the time and would walk around in the

hallways to try to control it. I had a hard time making friends. My seventh grade English teacher and my seventh grade history teacher were probably two of the best teachers that I had in my school career also. The most humorous thing that happened was that my seventh grade English teacher nicknamed her husband, “Mickey-D” because he drove his car over a bush at McDonald’s one time. That story fascinated me. Every time I saw the man I would call him, “Mickey-D” to his face. An interesting thing was that my seventh grade history teacher’s husband was the head football coach at Pulaski County High School. She and I would talk sports every day in class. I always loved going to every Cougar football game and every Cougar basketball game and that is something that I still love doing today.

One summer, my family took a Disney Cruise. They knew that I had a fascination with Disney characters and they thought that it would be something that I would enjoy, but I felt like I was hostage on the cruise ship. In my mind, I thought that I could wear shorts and short sleeve shirts every day in the summer time. There was a rule on the ship that I had to wear long pants to dinner. It was the summer and I only liked to wear shorts. One evening when they had that rule, I was so angry and I wanted to jump in the water off the ship. To this day, I only like to wear short sleeve shirts with short pants and long sleeve shirts with long pants, no mixing!

That summer my family took a vacation to Williamsburg, Virginia. During the vacation, we went to an amusement park called Bush Gardens. I rode a roller-

coaster called, “Apollo’s Chariot”. My stomach went “woo” down the hill. I tried to get off the ride before the next hill, but my dad just held me tight and screamed along with me. I was scared of rides that made my stomach go “woo”. That is a fear that I have not gotten over yet. Sometimes my parents would drive down a hill on Peppers Ferry Road in Pulaski, my stomach would go “woo”, and my parents would drive slow so they did not make me nervous.

Also during middle school, I thought of odd and even number patterns in my head. I liked for football teams or basketball teams to be undefeated or lose two or even number games for an overall record. I did not like odd number loss records. I have outgrown that one thing. Another thing was that I liked people to have an even number of grandparents living or dead. That is also something that I have outgrown. I am glad that I have both of my dad’s parents living. I miss both of my mom’s parents. My mom’s mom died when I was two years old. I have no memory of her dying. My mom’s dad died when I was going on 22 years old. I was just relieved that he was in a better place, no longer suffering. That was all that was important to me. I was upset when both of my aunt’s parents died. I used to see them every Sunday for lunch when I was a kid. I miss both of them a lot.

I liked going in my playroom and listening to music to calm down. I would listen to the disco party on Q99 every Saturday night. I would email the D.J., Bill Thomas and request a song such as “MacArthur Park”, “Maniac”, or “Raining Men” for the Saturday night disco party. I was fascinated with Delilah, who

plays love songs on Sunday – Friday nights on Q99. I got an autographed picture of her for Christmas one year.

I hung out with the boy who lived across the street from me. He moved in the house across the street from my house nine months before I moved to Pulaski. He went to Dublin Middle School just as I did. He used to invite me to do a lot of stuff. That was the only person that I hung out with at the time. We still keep in touch.

I used a program called Virginia Grade Level Alternative to complete the state testing. I passed the math and English tests. I did not pass social studies or science because my teachers accidentally turned in multiple choice questions and not my essays and fill in the blank tests. They got some training after that and learned how to complete the V.G.L.A. notebooks.

I performed in piano recitals every year at First United Methodist Church in Pulaski, Virginia. All of my family and many of my friends and neighbors attended my recitals. One day before I had a recital in the evening, I performed in a talent show at my middle school. Many of the office staff and cafeteria staff came to watch. They cheered and cried.

The big end of middle school events were the 8th grade dance, awards ceremony, and graduation. I did not decide to go to the dance until the last minute when one of the faculty members called my parents at home. He told them that he was very disappointed that I was not coming to the dance and that he wanted me to come. I went to the 8th grade dance that Friday

night. I had such a great time because I danced with many girls at the dance. The girls asked me to dance with them and it made me feel special. The awards ceremony was held several days before the end of the year. I received a perfect attendance award and an A/B honor roll award also. I attended 8th grade graduation the last day of school. My dad and my grandparents attended my graduation.

CHAPTER IV

(High School) “Happy Days”

In August of 2006 Keaton began his first year at Pulaski County High School. He had no apparent fear as he began his freshman year. As a ninth grade guidance counselor I had observed the uneasiness in beginning students, and had tried to encourage and support them. It was obvious that Keaton was familiar with the physical buildings of the school and knew many of the faculty and staff. In the high school his father was a math teacher and basketball coach, his mother was the Instructional Technology Resource Teacher; once again Keaton had a full time aide. His female aide would be with him all four years and has continued to correspond with him. For the last two years she did not need to stay in the classroom constantly; she often stayed in the pod and checked on him from time to time. His progress was quite evident.

His genuine friendliness came as a pleasant surprise to us. He enjoyed being around other students and would have been on a first name basis with his teachers, something his parents could not allow. We are astounded by his ability to remember details, names, faces, dates and family connections. If Keaton

has met you he remembers everything about you, all that he could learn in the time spent with you.

It has been mentioned that he lived across the street from my good friend Evelyn who has been widowed for many years. For a while she had a male visitor who began to visit her frequently. Keaton did not know this person, and the fact troubled him so much that when he saw the car pull into her driveway the next time, he walked across the street. He put out his hand to shake hands, and told the man who he, Keaton, was, and asked the visitor his name. Keaton then proceeded to tell the man, that he had moved across the street to protect Evelyn, and hoped that the man had honorable intentions. Just imagine, these two people were in their late seventies or early eighties. Evelyn's visitor, in his gracious manner, assured Keaton that he would behave like a gentleman. This person became our new friend, dear to all of us. We were grieved when he died a brief few years later.

Keaton's younger brother Gavin is an important presence in his brother's life. Gavin was nine and Keaton was fourteen when they were invited to a church related event for young people in a member's home. I reminded Gavin that he should "watch out" for Keaton. His look was quite serious when he replied that he would, and that he probably would be looking out for Keaton all of their lives. Quite an insight for so young a person!

One afternoon Carl and I had been asked by Keaton's parents to pick him up at the high school; we arrived about five or ten minutes before the dismissal bell. He came out of the building and walked to our parked

car. I asked him to get into the car so that we could leave the parking lot before school was out. He just stood on the walk and responded that he could not leave until the final bell sounded. I tried to change his mind, explaining that he had been released early for just this reason. He still refused, saying it would not be right if he did not follow regulations. Frustrated, I asked him where his flexibility was. His response was to hand me the piece of stained glass artwork he had just completed, and to say, “Here it is”! I now have that stained glass hanging in a window, and tell everyone that it is entitled “Keaton’s Flexibility”.

An example of Keaton’s ability to handle dates, is that I asked him what day of the week December 16, 19** fell. He replied that he needed a little “thinking time” to compute his answer. After a minute or so he came up with the correct day! To explain this date, I will share that this is the date of my birth eighty some years ago. How he can perform such a task, I do not know. This also goes for days and dates of events in the future. Pretty amazing, isn’t it?

Swim Team

My oldest son, Hank, had become the coach for the swim team when his twin daughters were freshmen at the high school. Four years later, Hank’s son “Chip”, a freshman, wanted his dad to be his coach in swimming; Hank, being an emergency room physician, was able to fit this in his schedule—just barely. Keaton who was two years behind Chip, loved the water and was a good swimmer, so he joined the team. Hank, his wife Janet, and the other coaches had patience with the

swimmers. Keaton learned to dive and do flip turns. Soon he was swimming in events in public swim meets. His favorite stroke was the free style; he swam this in competitive meets. He placed or ranked well in some of the events. He took part on relay teams also. It was somewhat apparent that his actions differed from those of the other swimmers. Keaton was quite happy to attend meets and to swim whatever strokes he was assigned. The family attended any event that was nearby. I know that several of Keaton's friends and acquaintances came just to cheer for him. He often had a large cheering section. Hank continued to coach until Keaton graduated. The doctor had spent a total of ten years as a swim coach in his spare time!

My daughter, her husband and our youngest grandson do not live in Pulaski. Both sons and their families live here and attend the church to which Carl and I have been members since we moved to Pulaski fifty two years ago. Keaton has always enjoyed the church services and Sunday school. A few years ago the youth director was not as attentive to Keaton as he was accustomed. Keaton complained to me that the director just did not understand autism, and was intolerant. Later, when Gavin was in the youth group he found the director to be helpful and sometimes fun. This upset Keaton again, and he talked to me about it. I explained to him that I felt that he had "gotten off on the wrong foot" with the person. This came across to Keaton as he had "gotten a little bit over the foot" with the leader. This phrase is the subtitle of our book; it sort of describes Keaton. Carl and I use the phrase "a little bit over the foot" to cover most any situation we encounter. Keaton also continues

to use the phrase, but only when he is referring to relationships.

There is a caring teacher who attends church with us; actually there is more than one. She was employed as an English teacher while Keaton was in high school. She was also responsible for the school's yearbook. She became aware of Keaton's love to be a part of a group though not necessarily a "team player". She asked him if he would like to be on the yearbook staff. He was delighted; he worked with the staff for his final three years of high school. Even after graduation, he continued to help her sell the yearbooks. Presently, she is employed by New River Community College, in her doctorate field, English.

Another one of Keaton's favorite teachers, whom he had for Algebra, was the sponsor of the school's Chess Team. Guess who took up chess and was a member of the team for all four years? He has not pursued the game of chess since his graduation. He shared a love of the West Virginia Mountaineers with this same teacher and with his Aunt Tina's family. To keep harmony in our family, he is the only one who wears clothes with colors for WVA, UVA and VA Tech. Now that Gavin is a student at the University of Virginia, our favorite yell is "Go Hoos".

It was quite apparent that Keaton was very happy in high school. He was known by almost everyone there. I have failed to mention that he was six feet six inches tall by his senior year, really hard to overlook (no pun intended). He had a "crush" on several young ladies. He counted everyone with whom he came in contact, as his friend. Therefore, as one might hope,

his friendliness was greeted by friendliness on most occasions. There were times Keaton was made to appear foolish; he believed people to be honest and caring. When he realized that a prank or joke had been played on him, he was crushed. He has now learned to forgive, something we should all practice. He has decided that he can speak to the persons who were involved in those hurtful situations. In his heart he forgives them, and will share that he can speak to them because he has “moved on with his life’.

In his junior year, we saw him tapped for the National Honor Society, and he was selected to be a marshal for graduation. Keaton attended several dances with his friends, prior to his senior year.

In his last year of high school he attended the homecoming ball game at which he was crowned “Homecoming King”; an honor that had been voted on by the entire student body. He attended this dance as the Homecoming King. In the spring, Keaton had a date for dinner and for the senior prom. Before the prom, his parents and grandparents went to the state park to take pictures of the couple in their formal attire. In his senior year he received the school’s most prestigious award: Most Valuable Cougar. This was decided by the senior class, faculty and staff. No words of mine can explain how proud and happy we were for Keaton to receive this award. Later, I will introduce the words of someone who could.

It is customary for the student selected as Most Valuable Cougar to speak at the graduation ceremony. Once again, family and friends were present in the stadium to hear Keaton’s speech. We each felt that we

were special friends of this very special person. Most everyone there must have felt the same. He received a standing ovation from the several thousands of people attending.

Keaton experienced a happy and rewarding four years at Pulaski County High School. He walked across the platform with a bounce in his step. All in all, one can see that Keaton had overcome many of the traits attributed to a person with autism.

Chapter 4

High School

I went to Pulaski County High School in Pulaski, Virginia. Many good things happened to me in high school. I started making friends, I started having crushes on girls, I was on the swim team, I was on the yearbook staff, and I was a member of the chess club.

My uncle was the swim coach. He invited me to be a part of the swim team. Most people were accepting of me on the swim team. Family members, friends, and acquaintances used to come watch me swim at the meets. I worked very hard to learn how to dive in the water. I also loved how the water felt. We had an assistant coach who worked with me on my diving and strokes. She was dedicated to helping all of us improve. The team would ride the bus to and from away meets. We would listen to a lot of music and have fun on the bus. I nicknamed my bus driver, “Koolaide” because he dyed his hair with colors that looked like koolaide.

I had a psychologist that I saw for a few years. This person did not show up for some of my appointments and did not call me when he was late or was unable to meet. This upset me because it threw me off schedule

and I was used to the same routine all of the time. This psychologist switched schedules, so I started seeing a different psychologist. The new psychologist always called me whenever she was late and whenever she could not come. She referred me to see a psychologist in Richmond, Virginia. He said that his main concern was that I was super stressed. He referred me to see a cognitive behavior specialist and an anxiety specialist in Blacksburg, Virginia. I saw this psychologist in Blacksburg for several years. He worked with me on deep breathing. He was one of the best psychologists that I ever saw. It broke my heart when he retired. I see a cognitive behavior and an anxiety specialist in Radford, Virginia now. She is very smart and I like her.

One summer, I went to a facility in Fishersville, Virginia to learn how to drive and to be evaluated to see what kind of job I could get. I was very homesick. I was supposed to be there for eight or nine days but I only stayed for two days and I left. I cried for two straight days. My roommate was scared of a bug. He wanted me to pull down the emergency button when a bug ran across the floor. I stepped on the bug and killed it instead. One of the main reasons why I did not like that place is because I felt like the people that worked there were “standoffish” and many of the children were from different backgrounds that I did not understand.

The summer before my ninth grade year and tenth grade year, I took a course called, “Camp Cougar”. This was a summer P.E. class for high school students to take if they did not want to take P.E. class during the school year. I would go canoeing, white water rafting,

and all kinds of different things. There was a man who was my aide in Camp Cougar both summers. He and I got along quite well. I really admired him. One time I was white water rafting toward a rock and I said, "Jesus, take the wheel" because I wanted God and Jesus to keep me safe so I did not hit a rock or get hurt. This man and I ended up being close. He ended up being my weightlifting teacher my senior year of high school. One time in weightlifting class I moved from one exercise to another and I said, "Thank Goodness" and he said, "I do not want to hear thank goodness because that sounds weak." I still laugh when I think about my teacher saying that.

I always had an attachment to three math teachers that I had known for years. My parents were math teachers at Pulaski County High School at one time. These three women taught with my parents in the math pod. I ended up having all three of these women for math when I was in high school. We all used to get together during the summer at baseball games at Calfee Park in Pulaski.

I have always had a fear of thunderstorms and I have never gotten over my fear. Since I have not gotten over my fear of thunderstorms, I moved my bedroom to the basement so I could sleep well and I would not be afraid of thunderstorms at night. My dog, Gigi shares the same fear.

One time in English class, I was reading the book called, "The Scarlet Letter". My teacher said to the class that she was looking for a four-letter word that was the theme of the book and started with the letter, "F". I accidentally spelled out the word,

“F???” The teacher said that the word that she was looking for was FATE. The teacher took me outside the class to discuss what I had done. She was going to have me sign a contract. My mom and my school psychologist walked in the English pod and saw what was happening. The teacher told them what had happened. My mom told my teacher the reason that I thought that was because the character committed adultery in the book. My mom later told me that I needed to think about situations and words, no way would a high school teacher expect a student to answer any question with the “f” word.

Towards the end of my junior year, I was selected to be in National Honor Society and a graduation marshal due to my straight A's that I had made in school. I had a 4.0 G.P.A. I only missed two days during my time in public school. The first day that I missed was in tenth grade because I had bronchitis and the second day that I missed was in eleventh grade because I had a doctor's appointment in Richmond, Virginia.

I was voted to be the homecoming king my senior year of high school. I felt like it was a blessing from GOD. I also wanted to be homecoming king because I knew if I won the award it would mean that everybody at school accepted me. One time in government class, this student told me that he was going to win and I told him that I was going to win and I did. One reason I thought I would win was because my best friend who lived across the street from me was my campaign manager.

The top honor that I received was to be named the Most Valuable Cougar. The qualifications for the award

were being very conscientious and hardworking, extremely dependable, helpful, polite, honest, and a very positive role model. There were about 2,000 fans that day in the gymnasium when I received the award and every one of the fans clapped for me. I received hugs and kisses from family members, friends, faculty, staff and administration throughout the school system.

One day I texted a girl to ask her if she would go to prom with me and she replied that she would love to go to prom with me. A few months later, we went to prom together. I gave her some candy and flowers before the dance. She and I went out to eat with her brother and her brother's girlfriend. We all went to take pictures at the lake and then we went to the dance at prom and to the after prom party. We still keep in touch.

Since I was selected Most Valuable Cougar, I was chosen one of three graduation speakers. Towards the end of my high school career, there were rumors going around that I was going to propose to this girl in my high school graduation speech. My grandmother told me that she heard about the rumor. I was horrified when I found out about the rumor. I gave a graduation speech, with no proposal, during my high school graduation and everybody gave me a standing ovation. I graduated with a 4.0 grade point average.

Addendum:

JANET HANKS COLUMN, printed from The Southwest Times, Pulaski, VA Janet Hanks is the wife of Dr. Carl Hanks, Jr.. She is the daughter-in-law of Carl & Faye Hanks. Her column appears weekly in the Southwest Times Newspaper.

Keaton's Graduation Speech appears just as his parents printed it for him. He practiced before them and before me. The pauses are marked; they were to remind Keaton to read slowly and to look up from the paper at the audience.

Pictures of "Homecoming King" and "Most Valuable Cougar" are reprinted from the Southwest Times by permission of the editor.



2009 Homecoming Court

Pictured above are the 2009 Pulaski County Homecoming Queen Corina Clark and King Keaton Hanks. Other members of the 2009 Pulaski County High School Homecoming Court are Duke, Jolly Martin; Duchess, Regina Lewis; Prince, Tahrirk Peak; Princess, Demi Milstead.

Hanks is Most Valuable Cougar

THE SOUTHWEST TIMES, PULASKI, VA., WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2009



Nino Sylmar/SWT

Mark Keaton Hanks is congratulated by Pulaski County High School principal Rod Reedy for being named the 2009-10 Most Valuable Cougar. In the background is PCHS's plaque honoring past recipients.

Enthusiasm, positive attitude and hard work earn Keaton Hanks Most Valuable Cougar crown

By Nino Sylmar
SWT Correspondent

As the Pulaski County High School awards assembly comes to a close after a 2-1/2 hour-long session, PCHS Principal Rod Reedy calls the six nominees for Most Valuable Cougar to the front: Katrina King, Mark Keaton Hanks, Melinda Joy Hall, Matthew Christopher Clontz, Emilie Rebecca Church, and Derek Clark Brown.

The six come up to take their seats at a designated area and the principal addresses them.

"Although we would be very proud to have any of our six nominees selected

to represent PCHS as the Most Valuable Cougar, we can only select one individual for the 2009-10 school year."

Soft music along with a drum roll from the Golden Cougar band starts to fill the air, and the principal continues, "Our Most Valuable Cougar for 2009/2010 is described by his classmates and faculty as very conscientious and hardworking; extremely dependable; helpful, polite, honest; a very positive role model ... He highly values education, maintaining a GPA of 4.0 and a class rank of eighteen over 353 seniors.

"He is serving as gradu-

ation marshal; a member of the National Honor Society and is very active in our athletic program."

A stand with the veiled picture is wheeled toward the stage as Principal Reedy concludes, "... In fact, enthusiasm, positive attitude and inspiration are probably three of the signature characteristics of — Mark Keaton Hanks — our 2009/2010 Most Valuable Cougar!"

The black veil from picture is quickly yanked off—revealing Keaton's somber face, and in the same micro-second, the music from the band rose to a crescendo, as cheers and applause erupt. Keaton

suddenly finds himself blanketed by hugs and congratulatory pats on the back, from his parents, Mark and Pam Hanks, from school staffers and members of the audience.

As the Most Valuable Cougar, Keaton received \$250 check and MVC ring from Jeff Leach & Jostens and a watch from Lemon's Jewelry. The other nominees were each given a \$50 check by Scott Arnett of Horace Mann Investments.

Keaton, 17, is the eighth male PCHS student to win the coveted title while eleven were female MVCs.

Asked what his goal in life was, Keaton replied, "A sportscaster."

A beautiful world

One of the many definitions of bias is "partiality." Another is "favoritism." Still another is "preconceived notion." It's an interesting word, bias, because it so often defines the human condition. We judge without thinking. We are partial to our own ideas. We play favorites. It's just what humans do, in the absence of real data (or sometimes, in spite of real data.)

I confess to having some biases of my own. Right now, I have to confess that I have sometimes looked at the very young with jaded eyes. I mean, these are people who can text, but can't talk, right? They play virtual games instead of real ones. They watch television shows that make people born before 1970 reach for the smelling salts. What is this world coming to?

Well, I'll tell you, it's not half bad. See, people with one kind of bias might look at a child who is different from other children and say, "There goes a strange kid." They might say things TO the kid. They might mock him almost behind his back, just at the edge of where he can see. That would be what we might expect.

But that is not all of the reality. The world can, as my Beloved said on Friday night, sometimes be unbearably beautiful. The students at Pulaski County High School elected their homecoming king on Friday night, and he wasn't a football player. He wasn't a basketball player. Heck, he wasn't even on the chess team, although he anchors the swim team. He was my precious nephew, Keaton.

Isn't the homecoming court supposed to be about fall sports and people who wear uniforms? Not at PCHS. At Pulaski County High School, the student

body has the very real ability to look at other things - character, intelligence, warmth, humor - and make those their criteria for electing a king.

Am I biased? Oh yes, I am. I have watched my nephew grow up, watched his parents' selfless dedication to his welfare, and seen him overcome barrier after barrier. I have been privileged to be part of a family that loves no matter what, never gives up, never allows "can't" to replace "can." As I stood in the middle of that screaming, weeping crowd on Friday night, and watched the crown settle on his head, I was so proud, I thought I'd explode.

I'm proud of my nephew. He's an amazing person. But more than that, I'm proud of his school, and our community, where beautiful things happen. On Tuesday, Keaton received PCHS's Most Valuable Cougar award, another milestone in a life marked by struggle, but suffused with joy.


In personifying the traits that make a "most valuable Cougar," one of the things that stands out about Keaton is that he makes the most of every opportunity. Not only that, but he gives other people the opportunity to be their best selves, an ability to which we all should aspire.



Tuesday evening, I got an email from Keaton. He said, "I got Most Valuable Cougar. It was such an honor. I hope you have a great day." Yeah, kiddo, it was a huge honor, and we are hugely blessed to live in a place where it can happen. I'm going to have a great day.

Janet Hanks is a longtime resident of Pulaski who teaches writing and American literature at New River Community College.

Local Color

Janet
Hanks

Class of 2010, faculty, staff, school board members, and honored guests....Welcome! 

Abraham Lincoln once said, “I will study and get ready, perhaps my chance will come.” And just as he predicted, June 11th, our big day, has finally come.  In some ways, it is a happy day, and in other ways, kind of sad.  We are definitely glad we

have achieved the standards of graduation, and we hope we are ready to move on to the next steps in life; however, we are sad to leave the friends we have made here at Pulaski County High School. 🏠 We have all needed guidance and direction during our years at PCHS, and, you must admit, all of us have been blessed with great teachers

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and a helpful and an understanding staff.

John Wooden, 10 time national championship coach at UCLA, always gave his players “7 Simple Rules for Life”:

1. Be true to yourself
2. Help others
3. Make each day your masterpiece
4. Drink deeply from good books




5. Make friendships a fine art 

6. Build a shelter against a rainy day 


7. Pray for guidance, count and give thanks for your blessings everyday. 

These 7 simple rules are similar to advice my parents have given me, telling me, for one thing, I need to be kind to others,

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so they will be kind to me
in return.  And guess
what?  It worked! 

My family moved to
Pulaski the summer before
I was to start 5th grade,
and I will have to tell you,
I was a little nervous to go
to another new school.


But this school was
awesome!  I had never
attended a school where so
much kindness was

displayed. 📖 My middle school years and high school years were also great. 📖 Again, I was shown kindness from most everyone no matter where I turned. 📖 In the fall, famous local author Janet Hanks wrote an article about her favorite nephew - 📖 me 📖 entitled “Beautiful World”. 📖 In her finishing remarks she said, “I am proud of my


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nephew...but more than that I am proud of his school, and our community, where beautiful things happen.” 


The people of Pulaski County really get it; they understand human nature.



I count all of you here my friends.  Each one here is a “valuable cougar” in my eyes, and I still find it hard to believe that I was chosen to be the “most

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valuable cougar” for 2010. Thank you for your confidence in me, and I will always be proud of the honor because you believed in me. 

John Wooden also said, “If you do enough small things right, big things can happen.”  So,  Class of 2010, let’s be ready, set, and go into the next adventure.  I challenge you to continue to spread

kindness wherever you go.
Big things are sure to
happen for each and every
one of us. 

In closing, I wish each of
you much success and a
blessed future.  Thank
you! 



Keaton and Taylor (1996)
Keaton Hanks and his best childhood friend, Taylor Watts



State Champions (1996)
Mark Hanks brings home the basketball state championship with Keaton in his arms



Keaton's Flexibility (2007)
Keaton's Stained Glass Flexibility



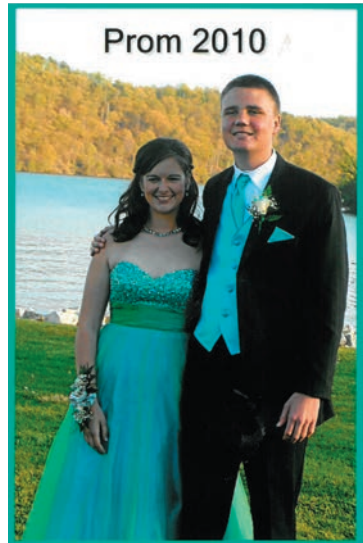
Keaton and Gavin (1998)
Keaton Hanks and his younger brother, Gavin Christian Hanks



Keaton and Korey (2009)
Keaton Hanks and his neighbor and friend, Korey Branch at a street cookout at Keaton's house



HS Graduation (2010)
Keaton Hanks shaking hands with the principal at high school graduations



PROM (2010)
Keaton Hanks and his date and friend, Whitney McDaniel at his senior PROM



Keaton with Bond and Ridpath (2013)
Keaton Hanks with two of his professors after college graduation

Keaton for taking Principles of Management this semester and being a Great student! Congratulations to having earned the most total points in the class at this time! Oh how wonderful, oh how marvelous! "Education is the highest kite one can fly!" You are soaring... 😊
Sept. 26, 2017
L. H. H. H.

NEW RIVER COMMUNITY COLLEGE



Keaton Grad (2013)
Keaton Hanks hugs the president at college graduation

Keaton Hanks: Working hard, helping others

Mention New River Community College graduate Keaton Hanks' name in front of just about any of the college's faculty, staff or administrators and big smiles quickly appear. The December 2012 graduate has made a name for himself at the college through his friendliness and stellar work ethic.

Hanks began his studies in administrative support technology at NRCC in 2010 -- holding up his end of a deal with his mom, Pam Hanks, that he would get a college degree. But, for him, there was more to that deal than just making the grades to get a degree. Hanks has Asperger's syndrome, an autism spectrum disorder that can make things like social situations and big transitions difficult.

To ease the shift from high school to college, Hanks began visiting NRCC during his senior year in high school.

Pam Hanks, an instructional designer at NRCC, says that college faculty and staff were very welcoming.

"From day one, he was made to feel like family here," Pam Hanks said. "Everyone at NRCC is very student-oriented."

Hanks is quick to agree, noting that one of his favorite parts of studying at NRCC has been interaction with his teachers and college staff. He acknowledges support from many people and offices on campus, specifically mentioning members of the disability services staff and director of volunteer services Dr. Don Stowers, who helped him set up tutoring sessions and other assistance. He also had compliments for NRCC's president, Dr. Jack Lewis.

"I want to thank Dr. Lewis for

checking up on me and always being really nice," Hanks said.

Pam Hanks' fellow staff members at the college note that Hanks, too is genuinely interested in others. When

he stops by his mom's office, he makes his way around to each person and asks about how they and their families are doing.

Hanks' English composition professor and family friend, Dr. Paige Cash, has high praise for the graduate.

"Keaton Hanks is the student every teacher dreams of having," Cash said. "He is dedicated to his work as a student, and as a role model, he has no equal. His success serves as an inspiration to us all."

NRCC faculty recently recognized Hanks' academic prowess and work ethic by naming him the 2013 Outstanding Student in administrative support technology.

Hanks also distinguishes himself outside of NRCC, by keeping up a busy schedule of volunteering in addition to a recently acquired data-entry position with EAC2 Consulting in Pulaski. When he's not working at EAC2, one can find him volunteering at Pulaski Health and Rehabilitation Center, helping with Bingo and chatting with patients or putting his lightning-fast typing skills to use in the offices of Pulaski County High School or Critzer Elementary.

While it can hardly be said that Asperger's syndrome defines Keaton Hanks, he makes sure to talk about it. After discussing his successes throughout his college career, he hopes his story will help parents whose children have Asperger's realize that anything is attainable for their child.





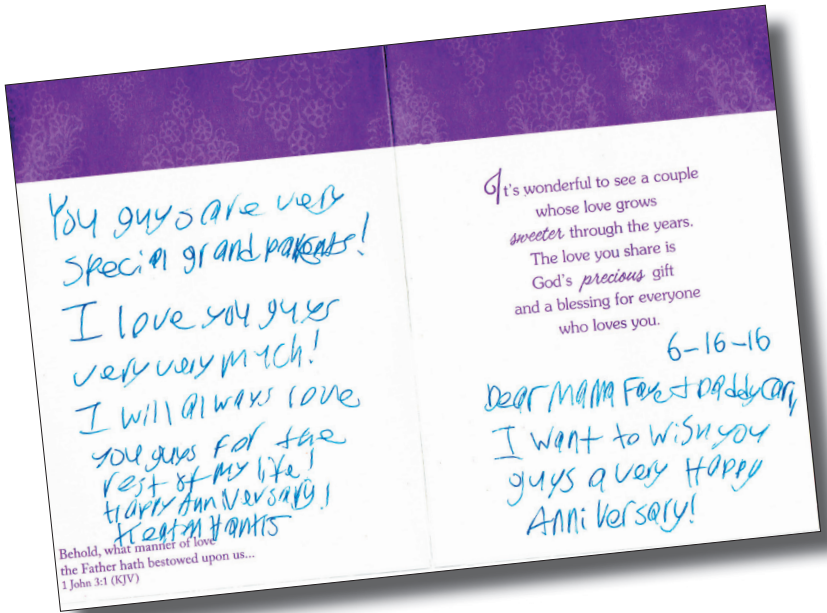
All Hanks Family (2013) Carl Hanks Sr. and Faye Hanks' Family Christmas Card
Back Row: Mark and Pam Hanks, Hank and Janet Hanks, Carl and Faye Hanks, Tina and Gary DeHart, Sarah Campbell, and Suzanne Blakeney; *Front Row:* Keaton, Gavin and Chip Hanks, Logan DeHart, Jeff Campbell, and Brent Blakeney.



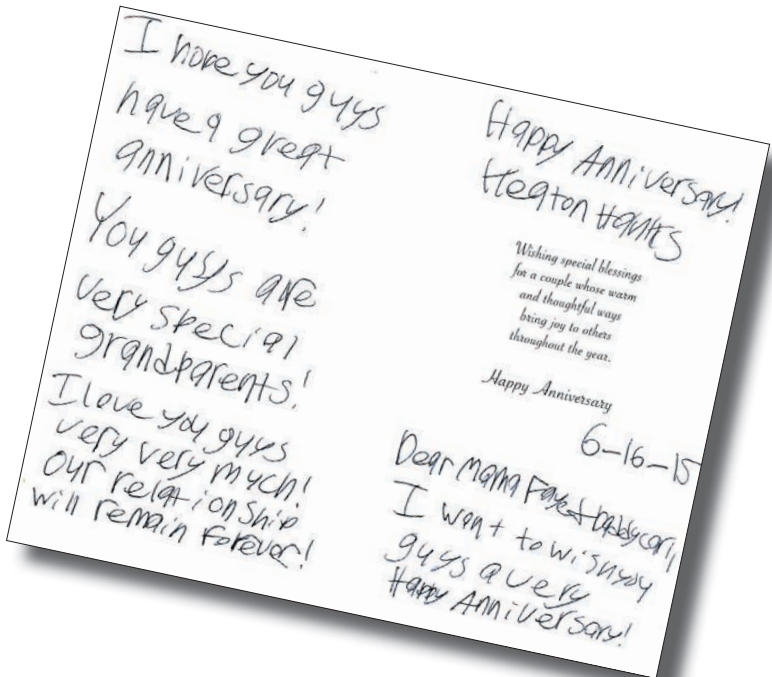
EAC2 Halloween 2015 (2015)
 The office staff at EAC2 Halloween party:
 Emily Bland, Keaton Hanks, Sara Terry,
 Jon Cash, and Mike Crabtree



Keaton's Family (2014)
 Keaton Hanks and his parents, Mark and Pam Hanks and his brother brother, Gavin Hanks in their family Christmas card picture.



Keaton's Anniversary Card (2016)
Keaton's anniversary card to his grandparents



Chapter V

(College Years)

“Striving to go forward”

Keaton had completed thirteen years of public school receiving nothing below an “A” in his classes. He had missed only one day in the tenth grade and one in the eleventh grade, both due to illness. He was a prime candidate for college. He had no desire to go away to school nor did his parents feel comfortable having him leave home and the security of family and friends. So with New River Community College close by, he enrolled.

He had honed his computer skills nearly all his life. This was a natural choice of careers for him. For the first time in over four years he found himself in school without the benefit of having his parents nearby. The student body is made up of people from six surrounding counties and he knew few of them.

He was befriended by counselors and tutors. Keaton enjoyed going to college and sharing this fact with others. This is what many of his classmates were doing and what he expected to be doing. He experienced the let-down feeling that often accompanies the transition from the feeling of success and being

among friends to the feeling of beginning again and “I am not sure I will succeed” .

His mother joined the staff of New River Community College in October of his second year. He then became acquainted with the people in her department and also visited the classroom of his Aunt Janet, who had taught English at NRCC for several years. He met a faculty member I had taught in kindergarten my first year in Pulaski. How time flies!

Keaton completed all of the required courses for an Associate Degree in Administrative Support Technology. He was on the President’s List each semester, receiving a total of nineteen A’s and three B’s. (He counted them all, as he loves facts with figures.)

He won the top honor from his department, receiving the Presidential Administrative Technology Support Award. For yet another graduation ceremony family and friends were present to see him receive his diploma. Most students shook hands with Dr. Lewis, the college president, as they walked across the stage. Not Keaton, he gave Dr. Lewis a big hug!

Keaton has had a long time fear of persons’ knowing that he is autistic. He wants to “be normal” and to be accepted as such. Once when he had exasperated all of us, he asked his mother how people knew he was autistic or had a disability, as he likes to call it. Her reply was to ask him if he thought it could be going in circles with his arms straight out or possibly his repetition of words or questions. This appeared to go right by him. Today he still rubs his hands together and gives a big smile when he is excited and/or happy.

To become more independent is very important to Keaton. He sometimes talks of having his own apartment away from his parents. We assure him that it is a very expensive ambition involving rent, utilities, groceries, and all the necessities involved in living alone. We point out that he has his own “apartment” in the basement of his home. The basement is his choice as it has no windows, and he can sleep there without experiencing fear of storms. To be awakened by storms is something that has always frightened him.

We remind him of his posture and of his voice tone. Both tend to cause people to turn and look at him. It is not that it is an embarrassment to the family, but rather it is not the image that Keaton wants to project. I will have to say that Keaton accepts criticism well. Fortunately, he receives more positive remarks than negative ones.

I have attempted to explain that while Keaton will always have some characteristics that are due to his autism, he continues to exceed all our hopes and prayers for him. There is more in the following section regarding his present life and his ambition; this will show more clearly how his special gift of love for others enriches the lives of all whom he meets.

Chapter 5

College

I attended New River Community College in Dublin, Virginia for two and half years. I visited the campus several times at the end of my senior year and during the summer to become comfortable with the transition. I met with a counselor who saw that I had test accommodations. I went to the counseling center to take my tests and I used a tape recorder in class.

I went to academic assistance from time to time, they tutored me in some of my classes, and I did homework there sometimes so I would not have to worry about doing it at home. I listened to my tape recorder and used my note cards so I would make good grades on my test. I had a counselor to read my tests to me because I needed a quiet place to take my tests.

The most humorous thing that happened at the community college was that one time my teacher got a haircut and I looked at her kind of funny and asked her about her haircut and she told me about it. I told her that I did not like it. The good news was that she thought that it was funny; it did not hurt her feelings. That same teacher and I always hugged each other and began on a positive note every day.

The hardest class that I ever took was accounting. I would go see my teacher during office hours and before class and get some extra help on my accounting. I was afraid that I was going to get a “D” or an “F” in the class. My dad and I would work for hours at home because he majored in business. I was relieved that I got a “B” in the class rather than a “D” or an “F”

I used to love History class because two of my history teachers would tell interesting stories. There were times where I answered questions and I would tell interesting stories. One time, I told the History class the story about Thomas Jefferson and John Adams both dying on the same day. My brother and I used to argue which one died first when we were younger. I used to think that John Adams died first and my brother used to think that Thomas Jefferson died first. I later realized that my brother was right and I was wrong. I thought that John Adams died at 2:00 in the morning and that Thomas Jefferson died at 2:00 in the afternoon. I later realized that Thomas Jefferson died at 12:50 in the afternoon and that John Adams died at 6:20 in the evening.

I took an Intro to Business class. I always kept everybody on track in class, but one day I was asleep out in the hallway. One of the students woke me up and I went to class. There were two older women and an older man that used to do group work with me in class and they always made sure that I was focused. One time my teacher asked a question. My response was, “Money is time and time is money. If you are wasting time then you are wasting money.” I said it in a high-pitched voice in class. The reason I said that

quote in a high-pitched voice is that one of my dad's accounting professors in college used to say that quote.

I took principles of management also. Two young girls close to my age and two older women did group work with me in that class. The coolest part is when my teacher gave me a \$100 dollar bill for having the highest average in class one time and another time when I had perfect attendance in that class.

One time I spoke on the student panel to answer questions for high school students with disabilities who were planning to attend New River Community College. They were coming to learn what college was like and what kind of accommodations they could have. One of the students asked me if they read my test to me. I told them yes and that they could read the test but they could not give answers because it was cheating and the person reading the test did not know the answers because they did not take the class.

I graduated from college with a 3.8 grade point average. I got hugs from the two professors I worked most closely with and most students shook hands with the president as they crossed the stage but I got a hug.

Chapter VI

(Today)

“The beat goes on—and on—and on”

Upon graduation from New River Community College Keaton did not find a Sunday school class in our church that fit his age and interests. He and his older cousin Chip attend the same class as their parents. The range in ages of the members of this class makes it an agreeable group for Chip and Keaton. Keaton became acquainted with Sarah Terry in this Sunday school class. She was in the process of moving her computer business to Pulaski. Her business is called Expert Advice, Customer Care Consulting or (EAC2Consulting). This was the field in which Keaton had received his degree. Sarah employed him on a part-time basis as a first job experience for him.

Keaton was receiving aid from the State Department of Rehabilitative Services; Sarah was committed to have people come to her place of business to observe him. The Department of Rehabilitative Services provides persons who have special needs with a job coach who can help them find suitable employment. Of course, Keaton and his parents had found employment for him. The job coach needed only to follow up with Keaton while he was actually on the site

After a while his work hours became eight to twelve o'clock, Monday through Friday and he also began to receive a salary. His "boss", as Keaton calls her, has been very kind and understanding. She has had to receive Keaton's Job Coach on several occasions. His coach observes him and makes suggestions to the employer regarding Keaton's special requirements, and how best to address them. Sarah has adjusted his schedule to include variety and movement. We remind him to be certain that he repays her with quality effort on his part. We appreciate his opportunity for employment, and he is very proud of his job.

Gavin who is five years younger than Keaton obtained his license to drive, so Keaton decided that he too wanted to drive at least around in our county. He studied online, was given "behind-the-wheel" lessons taught by a licensed instructor and practiced driving with his dad. In 2014, he felt ready to pass the driving test. He called our house to ask his grandfather to do him a favor. The favor was to take him to the Department of Motor Vehicles to get his license. I was surprised, but Carl readily agreed, and off they went. Keaton was unable to locate the hazard flasher on his car, so the lady asked him to come back the next day. He passed his driving test without difficulty. He surprised his parents with his new license when they returned home from work.

It was evident that Keaton was not going to fit the image of autism that we had thought he would. His great strengths and love are his memory of names, faces, connections of relatives with one another, and his sympathy and affection for others. This is not

what we expected, but is a beautiful gifting all the same. Examples of these characteristics will be seen in the following stories.

An amazing number of times someone will approach me at Church, in a grocery store, or out in the community and tell me how touched he or she is to receive a card with a note in Keaton's unique handwriting. It could be in response to an illness, a death in the family, or congratulations on an achievement or event; maybe it is just because he is thinking of them. He truly cares and is interested in other people.

When there is to be a cook-out or a party of any kind in our neighborhood he is more than willing to make out one of his famous lists, and to contact each person. Often times he places a remittance time limit so he can keep track of responses, and can do a follow up call or visit if he has not heard from them. He considers himself co-hosting an event if he does the inviting. He is especially fond of picnics and cook-outs at his home. He does not always acknowledge the monetary cost and actual work which such things involve.

Today, for example, as my husband and I were taking a coffee break at the YMCA a former teacher stopped to talk with us. He told us that Keaton was "on stage" this evening. When I looked somewhat confused, he said that Keaton was to speak to his wife's psychology class at Radford University, something Keaton has done each semester for several years. The former teacher went on to tell us that he and his wife had received a letter last week from Keaton. In his letter

he wrote that he wanted them to know he would soon be the author of a book. Keaton considers the couple to be his friends. He had the husband for science and the wife was his psychologist in high school. Evidently the couple feels the same way about Keaton. The former teacher shared with us that the world would be a different place if others “had the heart” that Keaton has.

We have in our antique kitchen cabinet, several copies of lists that Keaton has printed on the computer. There is a list of people he wants to invite to our 60th wedding anniversary celebration. This party is still fifteen months away. There is still plenty of time to make final arrangements for the reception! The revisions are numerous; he adds and subtracts names to the list as he deems appropriate. At times the list is so long that we have to adjust our minds to consider the church fellowship hall, rather than our newest restaurant and conference center. Keaton’s attention to details and his need to have facts accurate and settled in his mind is one of his traits of autism. This is evident in several of the accounts of his actions.

In addition to a list of names and telephone numbers of persons Keaton feels I should have on my bulletin board, I have a list of people to whom Carl and I should send one of our picture family Christmas cards. Our immediate family now has sixteen people and counting. Maybe that should be waiting; we have no great grandchildren as yet. His number of recipients of our cards continues to grow. Keaton enjoys having friends and acquaintances he can list and number. He wants the same thing for us.

One of Keaton's unusual creations is our obituaries, complete except for the final dates. Our obituaries are not found to be amusing to our children, their spouses, and our grandchildren. Keaton even wrote a new one before Carl and I made a trip to Israel and to Jordan two years ago. He was afraid that we might not live to return from the trip and he wanted our approval of this obituary. It was such a lovely obituary for the two of us together, that I almost, but not quite, was sorry he could not use it! In my opinion writing of future obituaries does not have to do with Keaton being obsessed with death now. When he was young, he was fascinated over the details of someone's death. Today, his writing of obituaries is more about his need for information and details to be on paper and to be as accurate as possible. He even changed the minister listed in his draft of my obituary when our church received a new pastor last year. He told me what he had done only after the fact.

His neighbor, Evelyn, is also the proud owner of her obituary authored by Keaton. She has said that she plans to keep it, because Keaton included all her families' names, even her parents and her five siblings. She is an octogenarian, and feels that it is not likely that her sons, grandchildren and great grandchildren will remember all these people in the future.

We employed a voice instructor who lives nearby to give Keaton training in speaking in more normal voice tones. This is helpful whether he is talking one to one, or speaking to a group at the Community College, The University, or a group of special education teachers. Keaton tends to use nasal tones

and to say his sentences in “sing-song” fashion. He speaks slowly, dragging out his sentences. Sometimes in public places such as restaurants, he talks too loudly. When reminded of these actions he does correct them. The instructor reinforced our efforts to help him. She also helped him to discover that he enjoyed singing.

As his employment takes only a half of his day, unless he is working on a special project, he is left with the afternoons and evenings. He really needs to have something to do all the time. Two afternoons a week he employs a personal trainer at the YMCA. He will tell you that his parents want him to build up his upper body muscles to enable him to stand up straight for all his six feet six inches in height.

Keaton presently attends a group for autistic adults; it is held on the campus of Virginia Tech University. He has the opportunity to interact with other people who have Asperger’s Syndrome. This workshop meets monthly and is supervised by a Virginia Tech graduate student. She shares materials containing suggestions and ideas for employment; and she instructs them on skills that could improve their conversation. The group practices their newly acquired knowledge on one another, and play board games that enrich their understanding of the skills. This experience has aided Keaton in his public speaking.

He volunteers to help fill backpacks for elementary school children in Pulaski County. The program called, Feed My Sheep, allows students selected by the faculty at each school to secure food to take home for the week-end. Keaton visits the residents at two

of the nearby nursing homes and patients at the local hospital. We insist that he have someone with him when he visits another facility in the county, in which some of the residents have severe mental handicaps. The family fears that Keaton will be harmed or be accused of some wrong actions. He is not always aware of the motives or the intent of others. Keaton takes treats (of their choice) to several of these patients; they look forward to his visits.

At times he will practice with the Chancel choir, and with the praise band at our church. He has sung with the choir on some Sunday mornings. When he was unable to drive due to repairs on his vehicle, members asked Keaton when he was planning to return, as they missed him. They shared with me that he prays a meaningful prayer for the choir before rehearsal. One reason he does not always attend the choir practice is that several of his favorite sports such as basketball, or later in the season baseball, tend to have games on the same nights as choir practice. He does choose these games over choir practice. This is not an unusual choice for a young man, especially since he does not consider himself a permanent member of the choir.

He is proud of his blog website and his twitter account. One can read Pulaski County's football and basketball articles on the blog. The twitter account gives the scores from games played in the New River and in the Roanoke Valleys.

After his graduation from college, Keaton had been asked to speak to psychology classes and to groups connected with the New River Community College.

He hopes to expand the number of his speaking engagements. In these talks he shares his experience of living and developing as a person with autism. He has spoken to workshops, to students and to teachers. In the early spring he spoke in Roanoke to a group of employees of Community Colleges throughout Virginia. His childhood friend, Taylor, attended the conference, as did his employer, and the president of New River Community College. The president of NRCC hugged Keaton at the conclusion of his presentation, returning Keaton's hug at graduation.

We have confidence that the future holds a great deal of variety and happiness for Keaton, with many surprising, humorous, and heartfelt events for the family.

He has improved at accepting his autism, and strives to help others to see that in spite of this condition he has become a worthwhile member of the community.

Chapter 6

Present Days

I started working at Expert Advice on Customer Care Consulting in Pulaski, Virginia in February 2013. A woman who is in my parents Sunday school class offered me a job as a data analyst at her business. She has been very successful in her business. I have been working there for three years now. I really like it. At first, I was an intern in the computer company but soon I started to receive a salary for my work.

One requirement is that I wear long pants; as long as I wear long sleeve shirts with it, I am fine. Shorts with short sleeve shirts go together in my mind. Along with that, I like it when Pulaski County football team wears burgundy jerseys and burgundy pants or when the Virginia Tech football team wears maroon jerseys and maroon pants or when the University of Virginia football team wears blue jerseys and blue pants. Another thing that I like is when I wear my sweat pants and matching sweat jacket or my sweat pants and the same color sweatshirt together, solid man solid!

One day my mom and I were shopping in a grocery store. The manager asked me to come see him. He saw that a hair bow was missing and he accused me

of stealing it. The girl cashier told him that she saw a woman take the hair bow. He took my mom and me over to the camera. He was still trying to say that I stole the hair bow. My mom and I figured out that I was straightening up the shelves. A few days later, my grandmother went up and spoke to the man. She tried to explain the real story to him and that nobody in the family was going back there to shop again. He still would not admit that my family was right. My mom called the corporate office a few days later. He received some discipline.

One time there was a crime in my neighborhood. A few days later a news reporter was coming around the neighborhood trying to get interviews. I was out in the front yard taking my dog for a walk. This news reporter invited herself in my yard and did not ask my parents' permission and put me on camera. I did not see any reason not to answer questions that I knew the answer to. I usually like being on camera. My dad came out in the front yard and saw what happened. He tried to tell her not to put it on T.V. He even called the news station a few hours later and asked them to delete it. The next morning when I got out of bed, I watched a replay of the interview on the news website on my iPad. I was very relieved that they kept my interview nice and short and that they left some things out of the interview.

Sometimes people inform me that I am pesky. I do not realize that I am pesky and cannot help myself. They usually tell me this when I ask the same questions over and over or when I plan a party and expect an immediate R.S.V.P. It is difficult for me to wait.

When my dad came back to coaching after taking two years off, he bought me an iPad to keep statistics for every basketball player. The only thing that I put in the stats program were the points each player scored and I did not put in the misses. Everybody on the team shot 100%!

I took a driver's education class with an instructor for one month. In the first evaluation, he gave me some things to work on. Nine months later, I took the second part of the evaluation and he gave me some other steps to work on. Two weeks later, I took my third evaluation on the interstate. My instructor felt like I was ready to go to the Department of Motor Vehicles to take my driver's test. The next week I went to the Department of Motor Vehicles to take my driver's test. This woman was asking me questions. She wanted me to put my window down. I was having a hard time putting my window down. I took my car home and borrowed my grandmother's car. This woman was asking me some more questions. I was confused on what she was talking about. I was not used to driving my grandmother's car. She told me that I could come back the next day. I studied the parts of my car that evening. The next morning I went back to the Department of Motor vehicles. That woman asked me the same questions again. I knew every answer. She let me take my driver's test. I passed my driver's test and got my driver's license that afternoon.

I belong to a social skills group for autistic adults at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. I learn about friendship appropriateness and work appropriateness.

There are three boys close to my age, one girl close to my age, and two grown men a few years older. One boy is a meteorologist. Another boy goes to college and works in the diner at the college. Another boy just graduated from college with an I.T. degree. The one girl is going to school to be a meteorologist. The one man is married, has four children, and is a stay at home dad. The other man is a librarian at a college.

In my spare time, I work out at the YMCA with a personal trainer in Pulaski, practice with the chancel choir and the praise band at First United Methodist Church in Pulaski, and take voice lessons with my neighbor. I participate in the backpacking program for needy children. (This program is housed in Jordan's Chapel United Methodist Church in Pulaski). We put foods in backpacks. I visit shut-ins at the nursing home, the hospital, and the rehab center in Pulaski; and visit with special needs people at a special needs home in Dublin and take them food. I write articles about Pulaski County football and basketball on my blog, and tweet scores on my twitter account for schools in the New River Valley and the Roanoke Valley. I love to go to the Pulaski Yankee baseball games every summer, walk around, and catch up with people. My mom and dad call me the Mayor.

In my head, I think about calendars, presidents, vice presidents, coaches, movie plots, etc. For calendars, I can tell you what day of the week any date of the year is/was for any year. It might take me a few minutes to think about what day of the week the date is/was for any year, but I can tell you if you wait. For presidents or vice presidents, I know facts about their term in

office or about their family history like their spouses and children and parents and siblings or their birth date or death date. For coaches, I know everywhere they have coached, what year they served their terms as the coach at certain schools, and how many wins they have. For movie plots, I can tell you everything about the plot, to specific events of the movie, or all of the characters' names.

In the future, I plan to speak to autistic clinics and to classrooms about my life with autism. I have been a speaker at Radford University for the last several years. I spoke at a state community college conference about my life with autism. I am very satisfied with my job and plan to stay at the business because I work with a good Christian group.

This passage from the Bible is very important to me, "So in Jesus Christ, you are all children of God through faith." Galatians 3:26. I also like what Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber quote at the end of every Veggie Tales movie, "Always remember that God made you special and he loves you very much."

Epilogue

Here he comes now, loping over the hill, turning into our yard. Soon he will open the door and call out to us and ask one of his questions that I know so well. “Where are you guys”? Or maybe “Where have you been”? “Who did you see”? “Guess who I saw today”? If I do not reply he will answer with a description of the person and his or her family connections, rather than to just give a name. He enjoys talking and pacing the floor in addition to having us for an audience for a while. In addition to his “I have a question for you”, he may say that he needs a serious talk. This talk could be about a subject that is troubling him or some “scoop” he has heard or overheard. When he speaks about a past event whether yesterday or years ago, he will start with “Back in the day”.

Our house has become his second home. We encourage his conversations and keep the chocolate ice cream and chocolate chip cookies ready for him. Where we go Keaton is welcome to go with us. He is a part of our family and we want him to know it.

We provide him with a season ticket to our family box in Calfee Park. It is baseball season again so Yankees beware! We are likely to attend every home game here in Pulaski.

In closing, I pray that Keaton’s life may have a Happy Ever After ending. To quote our favorite character Tiny Tim, “God bless us everyone!”



CLARA FAYE KEATON HANKS

SHE HAS BEEN MARRIED TO CARL HANKS SR. FOR 59 YEARS. THEY HAVE THREE ADULT CHILDREN AND SIX GRANDCHILDREN. SHE RECEIVED HER BACHELOR OF ARTS DEGREE FROM EMORY AND HENRY COLLEGE IN EMORY, VIRGINIA AND HER MASTER OF EDUCATION DEGREE FROM RADFORD UNIVERSITY IN RADFORD, VIRGINIA. SHE TAUGHT IN FLORIDA, MASSACHUSETTS, GEORGIA, KENTUCKY AND VIRGINIA. SHE RETIRED AFTER TWENTY YEARS IN GUIDANCE FROM PULASKI COUNTY HIGH SCHOOL IN VA. SHE HOLDS HIGH THE LOVE FOR GOD, CHURCH, AND FAMILY.