

# Influential people, influential moments

By Gary Williams, ©February 2021

My wife, Raelene, and I both grew up in the Santa Clara Valley, about 50 miles south of San Francisco. When we were young, the area was on its way to becoming Silicon Valley, the fastest moving, fastest growing high technology center in the world. As adults, we became so used to the Valley's rhythms that we didn't notice we were working longer and longer hours, often spending 12- to 16-hour days at the business we owned, and then volunteering at church and in the community. It wasn't until we sold our company at the end of 2005 that our pace of life slowed down dramatically.

## **A revelation about people that came only after slowing down and thinking about "God moments" I had not noticed before**

Neither Raelene nor I had ever experienced serious personal illnesses or injuries until October of 2005, when we were about to finalize the sale of our company and house, in preparation for moving to Washington State. Then, an inattentive driver smashed into a car on Santa Clara's Lawrence Expressway and ricocheted into Raelene's Jetta, injuring her. That injury continues to cause her pain.

The same day of her traffic accident, I began to experience a serious pain and fever that led to a five-year illness and 13 surgeries under general anesthesia.

The first surgery was done on an emergency basis. The second took place as we packed our home in order to move north.

The injury and illness made the moving process even more of a blur than usual. What we know for sure, both of us being drugged and in a fog the entire time, is that family and friends pitched in magnificently to help us prepare for our new life adventure. Without them, we'd still be packing boxes.

We could fault God for "causing" our health disasters to hit us right when we were gaining freedom from the heavy demands of our business and volunteer activities, or we could thank Him for freeing us from the demands of work so we could recover. We choose the latter. God is good and He always wants the best for us.

To say that He deliberately caused a woman to bash Raelene's car goes against all we know about the depth of God's love for us humans. The same goes for my illness. Bad things



*Raelene and Gary, snow angels in the quiet of a wintry Sequim afternoon*

happen because we live in a rebellious world, one that praises individuals for their successes and blames God for their failures. That's not how Raelene and I choose to live.

The good that came of our medical issues is that we both slowed our lives from our formerly frantic pace and that provided an opportunity to begin working on relationships, both new and old. For me, that included time to examine my past. I was surprised to

find many previously unnoticed "God interventions" in a life filled with them.

### **Thinking about the past eventually led to this bit of personal enlightenment**

In 2013 or 2014, I joined a small group of about 10 men that was organized by a church in Vancouver, Washington, a church we attended for only a few weeks. How I came to be there is a whole other God story that I may write about some day. In the meantime, suffice it to say that I began to meet each week with men I didn't know and with whom I appeared to share little in common beyond our faith in Jesus. They were 20 to 30 years younger, didn't have similar work backgrounds and, while I was a native Californian, most of them grew up in rural southern Washington.

I felt very much out of place with my northern California, Silicon Valley business management experience, love of European sports cars and aversion to hunting. That

lifestyle was different than typically found in Washington, where hunting, fishing, boating, American muscle cars, four-wheel-drive trucks and camouflage clothing are popular.

Early on, as a way of getting to know one another, everyone in the group agreed to share our personal histories. I was at the tail end of the list and listened as one by one group members talked about the difficult situations they had experienced growing up and how those hard times had helped guide them to Jesus. Because my past was nothing like most in our study group, I found it hard to know what to say when my turn finally rolled around. I didn't have the same kind of stories and might not have shared them if I had.

Instead, I began to think about various people I'd known throughout my life who helped me avoid hard times in the first place or who helped to shape my life in other ways. So I did not talk about my happy and uneventful youth, choosing instead to focus on people who influenced me, whether they knew it or not. On the evening of my talk, the guys had a good laugh when I contrasted my big sinful life moments with some of theirs. For instance, I illustrated my rebellious youth by describing how I rode my motorcycle to church with no mufflers and smoked my car's rear tires when leaving the church parking lot after Sunday services. Scandalous!

The biggest surprise for me during this process is that I thought it would be difficult to come up with the names of more than three or four people who had made significant



*Clockwise from top: Robert Treacy, Russ Lucas, Mitch Zapp, Ron Moen. These are four of the men's group participants*

contributions to my life. I couldn't have been more wrong. It didn't take much wandering around in the past to realize that I've been blessed by dozens of men and women. The problem wasn't how to find positive influences to mention; the challenge was to pare down the list so my talk wouldn't take too much of our group's time.

It was thanks to this sharing exercise that I finally began to see that when I was plodding along at home, school, work, in the neighborhood and at church – pretty much lost in my own happy bubble – God was putting one key person after another in my path. Much of the time, I never even noticed.

It took retirement and a long illness to slow me down so that I could begin to appreciate the people and situations God has brought into my life. He was reminding me that His world may be separate from ours, but our Heavenly Father likes nothing better than to spend time in our world, where He can not only hang out with those who want to hang with Him, but He can introduce us to one another in often surprising ways.

What complicates the process, however, is that we're all busy and we all have moral faults. These keep us from the close relationship with God that He and our inner selves desire (The desire for relationship with God is in all of us, even if we don't recognize it). The good news is that because God wants us to be close, He keeps offering us ways to put things right with Him (reconcile). Sometimes

it is a seemingly random person who says or does something that helps nudge us in the right direction. Sometimes we nudge someone else. And sometimes God is using a loose-knit, unofficial team of us to carry out elements of a larger, more far ranging plan that may come to fruition long after we're gone.

No matter who God chooses to work with, however, we are all flawed. That's because we're all broken at some point in our lives; flawed people are all God has to work with. The Bible is full of examples of imperfect people doing great works for their Creator. The 11th Chapter of Hebrews lists several of them.

I seldom know how I affect the people who wander in and out of my life year after year, but thanks to the men's group assignment and some serious introspection, I began to write down names of men and women who've helped Raelene and me. Perhaps reading about a few of our important people will trigger your own memories of those who have been significant to you.

One influential bunch I recalled was the group that I and several other Saratoga Federated Church men formed in 2004-2005 with Ron Ritchie, a well-known California pastor, conference speaker and author. One evening, I was asked to lead a discussion about a Henri Nouwen book in which Nouwen writes, "For a person of faith, no meeting is accidental." This is a fairly innocuous line, but it resonated with me and continues to stick in my mind.



*Ron Ritchie led this group. I'm top left, with Norm, Jeff, Craig and Bill. Bottom row: Rich, Bob and Ron.*



At the time, I was also reading the Book of Romans in Eugene Peterson's *The Message* translation of the Bible. In Romans 3, it says, "Basically, all of us, whether insiders or outsiders (Jews or Gentiles) start out in identical conditions, which is to say that we all start out as sinners. Scripture leaves no doubt about it ..." For some reason, the Nouwen and Romans passages reminded me of what the Apostle Paul wrote in II Corinthians 2:14-16, where he said that we who choose to follow Jesus become the fragrance of Christ to those around us. Taken together, these words said to me:

1. We all fall short of God's desires for us, but God uses us to accomplish his purposes anyway
2. Every time we meet someone, it may well have been orchestrated by God ("For a person of faith, no meeting is accidental")
3. If we demonstrate Godly love toward the people we meet in our everyday life circumstances, we become the fragrance of Christ to those around us, not stinkers who drive people away from ourselves and our God.

No one really cares what we say we believe. It is how we smell (how we act) that counts. Whether I am paying attention or not, God brings people into my life. Our intersecting lives are not accidental; they are God planned, either to help us or so we can help others. Sometimes both.

The ultimate goal for every Christ follower is not to string together a list of good things accomplished, but to begin living each day in the same way that we want to live out eternity in the presence of our Creator. (Side note: Hell is not a sentence pronounced; it's a choice. It is entirely up to each of us to determine where we spend eternity. We can choose to live apart from the source of all love – that is truly Hell – or we can choose to live within the circle of the God's love.)



*This is our community group from our church in Vancouver, Washington, circa 2010. When Christy Quinn was hospitalized after a serious bicycle accident, we showed up to spend time with her. The crowd was too large for her room, so we took over a meeting area. God created all of us to be in community with Him and with our neighbors. Community, therefore, is intended to be an essential element of everyone's life. When we lack the encouragement of friends who know us and care for us, we are poorer for it. When they lack our encouragement, they lose what they could have received from us. Raelene and I are definitely richer for having found this community of Christ-followers. We hope we've added a little something, too.*

## More examples of the many who have influenced our lives

**Bob Danner, Youth Pastor, and Lee Pryor, Pastor,  
Central Christian Church, Van Nuys CA**

I attended Central Christian Church in Van Nuys with my parents and sister from the time I was six until we moved to northern California five years later, in 1957. I asked to be baptized at Central when I was nine. I don't recall if something specific led up to that moment, but it was entirely my idea.

I remember talking with Bob Danner in his cramped church office on more than one occasion, killing time while Mom and Dad were involved in something at church. Bob and I were both baseball fans and walking encyclopedias of baseball statistics. He gave me a 1950's book of baseball stats that I still have. When I decided I wanted to be baptized, it was Bob who first talked to me, to confirm that I knew what I was asking and why. I lost contact with Bob when we moved to northern California, but I'm sure he is someone I would have liked as an adult.



*Bob Danner*

More than 50 years later, I used Google to track him down. I was about two months late. I called the Danner phone number I'd found on the web and Mrs. Danner told me that Bob had just passed from our world into God's world.

At least my timing allowed me to raise her spirits. I told her how much I enjoyed Bob and how he had influenced my life. Maybe that's why I felt the urge to track him down then, instead of years earlier.

Just maybe, this was one of those times when God used me even though I thought I was merely indulging an idle curiosity. I don't remember the senior pastor, Lee Pryor, as well, though I also have good feelings about him. He is the one who dunked me in the church baptismal.

Another influential figure at that church was the man who taught my Sunday school class. As a rule, I did my best to avoid Sunday School while Mom did her best to keep me there. I especially hated the fill-in-the-blank questions we were asked to complete during our weekly lessons. I don't remember the name of this teacher, but he, Bob and Lee were there at a key point in my life and, by being who they were, they encouraged me to choose Christ.



*Central Christian Church, Van Nuys, CA, in the 1950's*

My teacher did not transfer many of the Bible facts needed to answer those fill-in-the-blank questions into my brain, but he modeled a type of Christianity I wanted to follow. It probably helped that I was an airplane enthusiast and my teacher flew B-25s for the Air National Guard. These are the same WWII bombers I loved to watch as they flew over our house in Van Nuys, a house only two long blocks from the busy Van Nuys airport.

### Lo Carstenson

Lorenz “Lo” Carstensen was born in Nebraska in 1897. He became a farmer and then served as a wagoner (wagon driver) in WWI. After settling in California, Lo supported his seriously ill wife, Wilda, while working two full-time jobs – carpenter and pastor – in what was rapidly becoming the technology center of the world. When my parents moved our family to Santa Clara in 1957, Lo was keeping the tiny Santa Clara First Christian Church alive by pastoring for free. The church was so small and poor it gathered in a modest motel meeting room, near the corner of El Camino Real and Bowers.



*Me on left, Sister Sue on right, Lo in suit, 1957*

Lo was a stutterer who stammered out an inarticulate, disjointed message each week that I could not force my young self to listen to. That said, I learned more from him than I can express, and will never forget who he was as a man of God. He epitomized humility and servanthood as he lived out his faith.

Lo showed me his Bible once. It was worn thin from being read over and over and over. When he prayed, it was from his heart. When he spoke, it was the same. The words may have been hard to follow, but I could tell how much he loved his Lord and cared about our little church. I respected Lo because he was a genuine follower of Jesus, even if not the most polished. Once in a while, when I hold my own well-worn Bible, I think of him. I can't recall any sermon I ever heard Lo give, but I remember his example. To this day, I get a kick out of Matthew 28:20. It concludes, "...lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen." I don't doubt it for a second!

### Effie and Jay Crosley

Effie and Jay Crosley were active members at Santa Clara First Christian Church, which is where my wife's family and mine got to know them. They were a generation older than our parents and become like an extra set of grandparents to Raelene and her sister, just as they did to me and my sisters. Though we went to the same small church, Raelene's family and ours didn't really know one another until she and I began to date. At this point, the Crosleys were thrilled. They had watched us grow up and cared for us both.

Raelene and I think of Effie and Jay with a special fondness. We remember them as kind, generous family friends who had no children of their own and who looked for ways to share their lives with others.



Jay owned a one-person business, distributing furniture refinishing products. He and Effie lived in a modest home a block off El Camino Real and Wolfe, in neighboring Sunnyvale. When we married, they wanted us to buy their business and their home. Neither of those desires fit our plans, but we greatly appreciated that they wanted to see us get a good start in married life.

Raelene and I did not know much about their background before they came to Santa Clara. We did learn, way too late, that Jay was an ordained pastor and could have married us. We live with the regret that we missed this opportunity. After we married we also discovered that Jay was quite a revival preacher as a young man in the Midwest and may have started his career as a child evangelist in Ohio.

Jay once told me that he did so much speaking when younger that he damaged his vocal chords. By the time we knew Jay, he was so soft spoken as to be almost silent. We never got the whole story; what I have left is a vague memory of a conversation with Jay that occurred decades ago.

Raelene remembers spending nights at the Crosley home as a child and hearing the cuckoo clock that hung in their living room. I bought Raelene a similar clock in the early 2000s, because they always remind her of our two friends. Another reminder is the redwood Wells Fargo-style desk in our guest bedroom. It was made by Jay's brother, who lived in Santa Cruz, California. When given the desk not long after we married, it had a broken drawer front, no drawer pulls and a slightly crazed finish caused by being in a fire years earlier. We stripped and refinished the desk. It was our first restoration project, one that led to many others.



*The redwood Crosley desk, during its restoration*



Best of all, Effie and Jay were the first to mentor us in the art – and value – of maintaining friendships with people younger than ourselves. Our education would continue with Si and Norma Miller, but that would not begin until 1980.

## **Bob Rhodes**

At any given time, the Santa Clara church Raelene and I grew up in had 80-120 members. As a rule, our preachers were not very good Bible expositors. They spent a lot of time on do's, don'ts and saving the saved, while not having much to say about how to develop a closer relationship with Christ or how to love the people outside of our church.

As a consequence, we were positive we were saved, but not sure about anyone else. I write these words knowing that we made some wonderful friends at that church, but what we learned about Christ was usually from church members, not the preachers. There was a notable exception, however.

In about 1965, the church hired a new pastor named Bob Rhodes, a recent graduate of San Jose Bible College. How our church came to employ him only God knows. Bob was a recovering heroin addict with a photographic memory and a gift for teaching. It had to be a God thing for our legalistic church to select a recovering heroin addict as our pastor.

Bob came into our small congregation like a blazing comet and disappeared almost as fast. The former because of his exceptional teaching ability and the latter because it wasn't long before he started using again. While he was at our church, however, Bob opened Raelene's eyes and mine to the person of Jesus in a way we had never experienced. This seriously broken man gave us the first glimpses of what it meant to walk with Jesus on a daily basis ... even while he was personally struggling. For that, he holds a special place in our family's history. I regret to write that we have no idea what happened to Bob and his wife Carol after they left the Santa Clara Church.



*Bob Rhodes*

### **Pearce Davies**

During the middle to late 1960's there were only two accredited Public Relations programs in the U.S., one at Texas State University and ours at San Jose State University (SJSU). The founder of our program was Pearce Davies, a Los Gatos resident with a long history of success in the field of Public Relations. The SJSU program is still recognized as one of the best in the country, and that's thanks to the foundation laid by Pearce.



*I have no photo of Pearce Davies. These are three PR students, between classes circa 1967 in the SJSU Journalism building: John Learch (left), Ann Carr and Phil (Last name unknown)*

Pearce was my college advisor and main professor in the PR program, in the Department of Journalism. I can't bring myself to call him "Professor;" we never did.

He knew a lot of PR professionals and often invited them to speak in our classes. He also took us to Public Relations Society of America meetings and other PR gatherings. Pearce wanted us to meet as many PR pros as possible, so they could give us insights into the profession and develop into contacts



that could be important when we entered the workplace.

We who graduated in 1967-68 liked the man as a teacher and friend so much that we got together and held a thank-you dinner for Pearce and his wife Nordi at La Hacienda, a pricey restaurant on Saratoga-Los Gatos Road, between these two California towns. There were a dozen former students and spouses, plus Pearce and Mrs. Davies. We had a wonderful dinner. The food was excellent and we former students had prepared a special thank-you presentation that included spoofing Pearce's favorite sayings. We laughed a lot that night and could see that Pearce was touched by our obvious appreciation for all he had done for us.

The first to leave the dinner table was Gary Hubbard. On the way out, the server handed Gary a single check for our entire dinner. A few seconds later Gary came rushing back to our table dragging his wife by the hand. His face was as pale as death and his jaw was flapping like a gasping fish. It seems that between the free flowing wine and expensive meals, we had run up a tab of several hundred dollars ... money none of us could afford and didn't realize we were spending. One of our number, Frank Landerville, was older than the rest of us naïve young newbie graduates, having served in the military before returning to college. Frank agreed to use his credit card on the promise of immediate repayment from the rest of us. Had he not been there, we might still be washing dishes to pay the bill.

Pearce taught all of us about our intended field of work, but more than that he taught us the importance of getting outside of our comfort zone and meeting new people. It was not about using others. Pearce was genuinely friendly and enjoyed being with others. When someone is truly interested in who we are and what we have to say, it's hard not to like them, as we learned from Pearce. This was important to me as a shy, insecure person who had grown up in a fairly legalistic church, one where the teaching tended to encourage us to separate from the world around us rather than enter into it.

### **Dr. Bryce Jessup**

We met Bryce when he was the senior pastor at Central Christian Church in San Jose, in 1975 or '76. Bryce was the son of William Jessup, a founder of San Jose Bible College (now in Rocklin, California, much larger, highly respected and renamed as William Jessup University).

Bryce shepherded WJU into the 21st century as its President. He then served as President Emeritus until his death in 2020.

Raelene and I had been attending Lone Hill Church in Los Gatos. We left not long after the pastor, Willard Black, left to start a new ministry of his own, one I helped him begin and later worked for. I'm not sure how we landed at Central, but I'm glad we did. We found Bryce to be an excellent teacher and an even better mentor and friend. Bryce always looked for ways to bring people together and his congenial manner had a remarkable way of building bridges and defusing conflicts.

Central was part of the same fellowship of non-denominational churches as Santa Clara and Lone Hill, but much larger and not legalistic. I served as a deacon at Central and taught the main adult Bible study on Sunday mornings. When we left Central in 1980 to



attend Saratoga Federated Church (SFC), it was not because of Bryce. He remained a friend and was someone I looked up to as a model of how to live for Jesus. Raelene and I both felt it was time to break out of the church circle we had grown up in and broaden our horizons. This is not unlike the feeling that caused two Californians to move to Washington State, 1,000 miles from friends and family. We're not as adventurous as those who emigrate to other countries. Changing churches and moving out of state is the most adventure we can muster.

What I observed in Bryce's leadership practices helped to soften some of the blunt-trauma management style that was drummed into me as a senior manager in Silicon Valley. From Bryce, I learned to listen to others better and to try and understand where they were coming from. I also saw Bryce as an example of how to be cheerful and friendly while still working to solve difficult issues that turn many of us into angry and combative people.

Bryce became President of William Jessup University when we were at Saratoga Federated Church, and he came to speak at our congregation in that capacity. After the service, he and I were chatting and Bryce told me how he used to know when I was disengaged during one of his sermons at Central Christian. "How?" I asked. "Because you always looked up at the ceiling," was the grinning reply. I'm careful not to do that anymore; it's another life change brought on by a friend and mentor.

When writing my book about Genesis and male-female relationships, *Perfection Collides With Free Will*, Bryce was one of the first people I sent it to for comments. He read my work, returned an encouraging note and then passed the book to Dr. David Timms, the dean of the Faculty of Theology/School of Christian Leadership at WJU. That referral led to suggestions from Dr. Timms that made a huge improvement in the book.

### **Sylvia Fast**

Sylvia was an older woman who attended Central Christian Church. She lived in a modest, single-wide mobile home, in an aging San Jose mobile home park. Because of limited income and limited mobility, she was usually at home, close to her phone. There, she was available to listen to anyone who needed to talk (this was before cell phones or the internet). Sylvia also had a second phone line, paid for by the Church. Because of her warmth and spiritual discernment, she needed two phones to handle the calls from those seeking someone to encourage them, listen to their woes or to pray with them.

Despite her modest circumstances, Sylvia was not shy about inviting friends and people she wanted to meet to her home for dinner. We were her guests one evening and had a delightful time. At one point in her church history, Sylvia organized regular mid-week prayer meetings. They became notable as we who attended Central realized that when Sylvia prayed good things happened. Clearly, Sylvia had God's ear.

Prayer was something of a necessary habit to me until I encountered this woman. She demonstrated that prayer is all about our relationships with God and one another. Prayer is a real conversation with a real personality, and the quality of that relationship depends on both talking and listening. We heard the term "prayer warrior" quite a bit when growing up. Sylvia is one of the few I've met who obviously deserved the label.

### **Dr. Stan Johnson**

Stan Johnson is an exceptional teacher who is also very good at being a friend. He was the senior pastor at Saratoga Federated Church (SFC) when we began attending in 1980. We

appreciated what we learned from each Sunday sermon. Because of Stan, my Bible is filled with helpful notes. He is also a warm and encouraging person.

Stan retired before we got to know him well, but we became good friends after his retirement, visiting him and his first wife, June, many times (June died after a long illness and Stan eventually remarried). His sense of humor, well hidden in the midst of the somewhat staid SFC congregation, came alive when we spent time with him.



I went to a San Jose Chamber of Commerce event not long after we began attending SFC in 1980. I had only shaken Stan's hand once or twice while exiting church and didn't think he knew me or Raelene. At the Chamber event, Stan saw me from across the room, waved and came rushing over to say hello, addressing me by name. That he knew my name and walked across the room to greet me made a powerful impression. His response was quite different than that of another pastor who, in response to my contacting him, once emailed that he'd like to meet me. Would I please search him out after a Sunday service?

There's a huge difference between someone rushing over to greet us or that same someone asking us to initiate the contact. Thanks to Stan, I try to remember that.

Spending time with Stan has led to long conversations about living for Jesus. Knowing someone with his intellect, wit and knowledge of Scripture continues to be an encouragement to me.

After Stan and June retired, Raelene and I rented a Chrysler Sebring convertible and drove to California's Gold Country to see them at their new home. We then took them on a long ride through the High Sierra to a little town where we enjoyed lunch beside a beautiful mountain stream.

Although June was quite ill at the time, she insisted we keep the car's top down the entire way. While we drove, I shared with Stan my satirical idea that people have

special clothing for pretty much everything they do these days, so perhaps more people would attend church if they had a uniform to wear. Stan and I spent much of the drive joking back and forth about that concept. I wish we'd written down his humorous remarks; they were insightful and really funny.

It was Stan who helped me surprise Raelene with a weekend in Colorado on her 50th birthday. He arranged for us to stay at a luxurious, not-yet-open conference center on property owned by his friend, David Brown. I then invited several of our friends to join us. David's property included one mile of private access to the San Juan River, one of the finest trout streams in America. And Stan is my witness that I caught a fat 22" rainbow trout



*Stan and June Johnson with Raelene in the rented Sebring, circa 1996-98*



on a fly. It's still the largest trout I've ever landed. Green vinyl tape on the rod marks the size of the whopper that only Stan and I saw before I released it back into the San Juan.

### Robert Pedrick

Bob Pedrick, a commercial Realtor, was about 70 and in a hospital, hours away from death by cancer. I was in my 30's and only aware of Bob because he taught a Sunday Bible class that Raelene and I had attended three or four times. We didn't really know Bob. Still, when I heard he was in the hospital, I felt strongly compelled to visit him. Even though I'm not good at this type of visit – and had only done this sort of thing a few times in my life – I overcame my normal reluctance and responded to God's urging.

When I walked into Bob's hospital room and noticed that his wife was there I was about to step back out. Bob saw me, waved me in and greeted me like his best friend. He then proceeded to tell Mrs. Pedrick that I was a teacher who would do good things for God. Was he a prophet, an exceptionally gracious man or just on drugs? All I know is that I went to cheer him up and walked away on a cloud, wondering what had just happened. These are moments we can't plan and can't explain. They happen when we listen to God instead of our own inner voices. I never saw Bob after that evening; he died a couple of days later.

### Si and Norma Miller

Si and Norma were our friends for 30 years and had a significant influence on the lives of Raelene and me. We visited them regularly when we lived in Santa Clara. After we moved north, we always made time to see them when in their area. Raelene's homemade toffee was



*Si, Gary and the five-gallon bucket of Raelene's famous chili*

an important part of each visit, some for Si and some for Norma. She always hid hers so no one else could find it.

Both Si and Norma smilingly told us many a time: "*Don't come here without toffee.*" Smiles or no, they were serious. For years, Raelene also made them special chili that met their dietary needs. The chili was so popular that for a joke we once took them a full, five-gallon container. Si accepted the heavy bucket without batting an eye. A few weeks later, he returned the empty bucket and said he was ready for a refill. I still have the bucket and the colorful joke label I made for it. Some things are too important to discard, especially when the sight of them brings back happy memories.

I first met Si in 1980 after wandering half asleep into the 6:30 a.m. gathering of a Thursday men's Bible study at Saratoga Federated Church. I didn't know anyone except Pat Robertson,

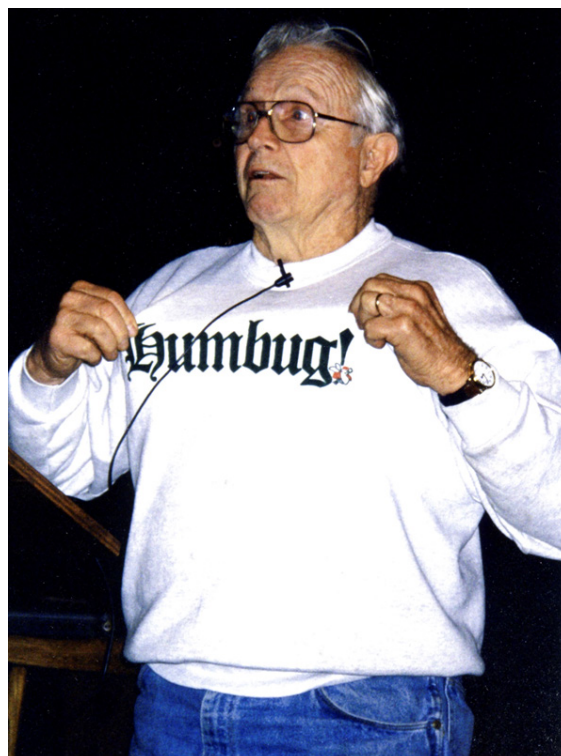
executive director at CityTeam, a downtown San Jose ministry. I was spending time with Pat as a volunteer management consultant. He suggested that the Bible study would be a way to make friends at SFC, where we were new. And, indeed, Si and others welcomed me. But Si went beyond the usual first greeting; he spent time getting to know me. For a 34-year-old who was new in the group and who felt very much out of place, the friendship of a man my father's age was quite a gift.

Si owned a successful business in Silicon Valley for years. When he retired, he filled his calendar with breakfast and lunch dates nearly every day of the week, all with men and women he felt called to befriend. And always, he shared his thoughts about Jesus. It wasn't long before Si began phoning me once or twice a month for lunch (He usually insisted on paying). I wasn't part of the A-list rotation – that was filled by guys Si had known a lot longer than me – George Elliott, Jon Anderson and others. I served as a regular fill-in when someone else couldn't make lunch. That spot fit me just fine.

Although I'm a lifetime night owl, I was part of the early-morning group for 15 years. That I made it through the first few weeks was largely due to Si. When someone was his friend, there was no doubt that he stood with them in every way possible. As time went on, I came to appreciate Si's spiritual insights. I even learned to appreciate the more challenging aspects of his personality, such as his generally critical commentary on the state of the organized church and his willingness to be blunt when he felt it was called for. At least his comments were well intended, if not always gently delivered. I also enjoyed helping our group found several ministries, one being Advent Group Ministries, which has aided thousands of troubled teens and their families over the past 40 years.

Si's generosity with money was well known, probably to his detriment. One day during lunch I told him how frustrated I was with Wells Fargo Bank. By this time, Raelene and I had purchased her father's small sign company and we were busy building it into a larger business, one that focused on corporate sign design and manufacturing projects. We needed an equipment loan and the bank's loan officer told me our application was ready for funding, but bank errors and delays were creating a timing problem. Si said: "You don't need Wells Fargo. I'll loan you the money." He then pulled out his checkbook and wrote me a \$25,000 check. No paperwork. No agreement regarding repayment or interest. No details of any kind. (\$25,000 is the equivalent of \$60,000 in 2021.)

I was stunned. To protect us both, I went back to my office and wrote up an agreement that included a current interest rate, checked it with him, and then mailed him a signed copy. Later I learned that Si had given out large "loans" many times, and some of them were never repaid. To this day it disturbs me that others took advantage of his kindness. But



*Si Miller, dressed to impress, while speaking at a Saratoga Federated men's retreat. His favorite attire was sweatshirt and jeans*

I also keep in mind that I never heard Si criticize one of his non-paying friends or complain about the loss of his money. Si cared about his friends more than money. He was an amazing example of grace in action.

One thing that stands out to me about Si is that he initiated time together on a regular basis. He did that with a lot of his friends. Before Si, I didn't have friends who called or invited me to lunch for no reason other than to be a friend. From his example, I learned to do the same. For years now, I've been reminding myself to be more like Si when it comes to staying in touch with people I know. I call them. I ask them to lunch. I write emails. I even give away copies of favorite books, like Si did. I'm not as consistent at it as he was, but I try. What I find interesting is how many times guys ask why I'm calling or why I'm giving them a free book. That they look for an ulterior motive shows how rare it is to exhibit the best of Si's practices as a friend and Christ follower.

There's more I could write about how Si and Norma influenced our lives, but I'll stop with a non-spiritual memory that involves Si and always brings a smile. More than 25 years ago, the Advent Group Ministries Board of Directors was meeting in the living room of Bob and Joan Leonard, in Saratoga, California. Si was on the couch, eating a piece of cake. The Leonard's large dog, Winston, was seated facing him, eyeing the cake with obvious lust. As Si brought a bite to his mouth, the cake crumbled and a large chunk fell into his lap. Winston reacted immediately, jamming his nose into Si's crotch. I've never seen a man of any age jump so high so fast. And I don't think I've ever laughed as hard.

### George Alder



We got to know Professor George Alder while helping to found the Institute for Christian Resources (ICR) in San Jose circa 1974-76. Besides serving as an important spiritual mentor, through both words and deeds, his friendship and encouragement were important to me at a time when I needed both. What George taught in his ICR workshops and written essays -- especially about Genesis and the environment -- has had a profound effect on me, something I didn't realize until I began writing *Perfection Collides With Free Will* more than 40 years after meeting him.

### David Pittman

Dave Pittman was a high school principal who attended Saratoga Federated Church when we did in the 1980's and '90's. At SFC, I once heard Dave talk about his family's long history of praying for current and future generations of Pittmans. In their prayers, they ask that God protect future generations and help them discover joy and peace in His loving presence. Because of Dave's remarks from 30 or 40 years ago, I still remember to pray for present and future generations of our family. I'm also reminded of the men and women of God in my own family's past and wonder how many of them prayed regularly for me.



## The Pratts and Pippengers



Raelene and I moved to San Jose's Almaden Valley in 1973, when I was 27. Cary and Jeanne Brooks, who we knew from the Santa Clara church, recommended that we check out Lone Hill Church, in Los Gatos. It was 10 minutes from our new house. We did as they suggested and on the first or second visit, Duane and Connie Pratt introduced themselves and invited us to their home after the Sunday evening church service. We accepted and had a great time getting to know the Pratts and two other couples from Lone Hill. The following Sunday, another couple asked us to their home after church. By the third or fourth Sunday, we were fully

invested in Lone Hill and its friendly members. It was – without a doubt – the friendliest and most welcoming church we have ever attended. No other group has ever come close.

Besides the Sunday service, we attended Duane's large Sunday Bible class, which drew people ranging in age from the 20's through the 50's, the core of the church. Duane was an IBM engineer, a brilliant man who was on that company's fast track to become a senior executive. He was also an exceptionally good and engaging teacher. Because Duane's business responsibilities required him to travel a great deal, he was looking for a regular stand-in to teach the class in his absence. For some reason, shortly after we began attending, Duane chose me. I had some experience at our previous church, but was very much a beginner in need of training.

Not long after I agreed to fill in for Duane, Dr. Milt Pippenger and his wife, Maribeth, joined the class. Milt's Ph.D. was in Education and he'd been a school district superintendent before joining the staff of San Jose Bible College (now William Jessup University). He was both a teacher and a teacher of teachers, and he was very good at both jobs.



Milt began tutoring me informally on how to lead the class. When IBM moved Duane and Connie out of state, I became the regular teacher. I never learned why Duane asked me, a newcomer with limited skills and experience, to take over the most popular and well-attended class at Lone Hill. I am, however, grateful that Milt showed up at the right time to help me grow into the position as best I could.

## Gary Gillmor, Santa Clara's first elected Mayor

In 1969, not long after I'd earned a university degree, married Raelene and was working at Memorex, the Army sent notice that they'd like me to join them in Viet Nam. Three

herniated disks and the intervention of Santa Clara's Mayor, Gary Gillmor, led to a last-second deferment, but not before David Elliott, our Memorex group vice president, had written me a nice goodbye note and my replacement had been hired. Fortunately, the company was growing so rapidly there was work for both Jane Lockwood-Peattie and me when I was allowed to continue working.

Gary did not hesitate to help when he heard that the local draft board didn't want to consider my medical history, even though they knew the Army doctors would reject me once I reached basic training.

He was another of those who had a significant influence on our lives without trying and, probably, without thinking much about it. He was my favorite teacher in high school, where he once joked to our class that he was grooming us to be his supporters when he ran for public office. About four years later, I worked on his campaign's management team when he ran to become the first elected Mayor of the City of Santa Clara. The campaign was a lot of fun, especially when he won the election. I also worked on his two following campaigns for state legislator. Those didn't turn out as well as the first.

He impacted our lives again in 1970. I was president of the local chapter of the Public Relations Society of America and invited the Mayor to talk at one of our luncheon meetings in downtown San Jose. To make sure he got there, I went to City Hall and served as his chauffeur. On the way to the restaurant, Gary told me he was selling a house he owned and asked if we wanted to buy it. Raelene and I had \$305 to our name (Yes, I remember the exact amount). I wasn't interested, but that night I told Raelene of his offer to sell the house on contract, meaning that no bank was involved; he would carry the \$28,000 mortgage himself. One look at the place and Raelene wanted it.

I called Gary the next morning. He accepted our \$305, backed by my good job at Memorex, and it was ours. Twenty years later, when we bought a historic home in downtown Santa Clara, it was Gary Gillmor's daughter Lisa who spotted it for us, before it hit the market. She then served as our agent. Had it not been for Lisa, we never would have found the gorgeous, very-original, 1903 Craftsman-Victorian transition-style house.



*I remember Gary Gillmor as an enthusiastic 25-year-old teacher. He probably pictured me as the 16-year-old senior who once complained about a B test grade and was jokingly told to memorize the book for the next essay exam. So I memorized the material and regurgitated it back to him word for word. I got the A. The ability to memorize like that is gone, as is my teacher, Mayor, Realtor and friend.*

## Ben and Estelle Schiller

In the early 1930's, my parents both lived in downtown Los Angeles. Mom is a couple of years older than Dad and was ahead of him in school. They both attended Belmont High School, but met at Alvarado Christian Church, on Alvarado Street, in downtown LA. I once asked Dad who initiated their first date. His answer: "Neither of us. It just became natural."



Alvarado was a terrific place. There, Mom and Dad formed life-long friendships, were mentored in faith matters and saw examples of what healthy families looked like. They remained close friends with Ben Schiller, their pastor, and his family throughout their lives. I remember Ben and Estelle Schiller well, and always warmly.

One such remembrance is when I was five or six. The Schillers visited our Van Nuys home one summer day, circa 1951-52. I had been out in our large back yard, eating tomatoes fresh off the vines and was covered in tomato juice and seeds. Ben was tall – and I was small – and I can still picture his delighted grin when he bent down to take a close look me, laughed, and said, "Hello, tomato face." That was his name for me from that day on.

## Last words about influential people

I had no idea how many people I would come up with when I finally sat down and began to think about those who have influenced my life. It stunned me to see how many pastors were on the list and I was surprised that men and women who didn't know one another fit into a pattern that shaped our lives in particular directions.

I haven't begun to name all those I could have, only a few who came immediately to mind. For instance, there is Julie Rogers, a high school teacher. Even though I was only in her sophomore English class for a few weeks, she and a classmate, Georgia Ward, were instrumental to my future in ways none of us could have anticipated. Mrs Rogers saw something in the writing of my 14-year-old self and recommended I switch from her class into Journalism. Georgia, who sat in front of me in English class, hectored me to take the opportunity when I was hesitant, though we hardly knew each other. Thanks to them, I soon found myself writing for a daily newspaper and entering college as a Journalism major. The ability to write that I developed in high school and college played an important role in every job I had from then on.

When I entered the corporate world as an inexperienced 20-year-old, there were numerous fellow employees whose words and actions not only taught me how to behave, but how not to behave in a business environment. Phil Davis, the manager of International Sales at Memorex in the late 1960's, was a friend who opened my eyes to the true nature of office politics. Others at all levels of company life, from CEO on down, continued the education that began early in my working life. When Raelene and I developed a plan to shape the culture of our own business, we had lessons from the past to draw on. What we came up with worked well, if our ability to retain clients, suppliers and employees is any indication.

Even when employed by, or volunteering with, church and para-church ministries I learned that no person is perfect, not even those who are diligently seeking to follow Christ.



We all have moral flaws; we all make mistakes. We carry our good and not-so-good character traits with us into every situation, be it at work, in the neighborhood or in gatherings of faith communities. No doubt this is why Jesus made it clear that those of us who claim him as our savior must choose to follow him each day of our lives. It's in the daily choices we make that we demonstrate where our hearts are focused.

Over the front door of our house is a mezuzah that carries this reminder from Joshua 24:14-15: *“So now: Fear God. Worship him in total commitment. Get rid of the gods your ancestors worshiped on the far side of The River (the Euphrates) and in Egypt. You, worship God. If you decide that it’s a bad thing to worship God, then choose a god you’d rather serve—and do it today. Choose one of the gods your ancestors worshiped from the country beyond The River, or one of the gods of the Amorites, on whose land you’re now living. As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.”*

### **A closing thought**

Almost all of the people on these pages were/are older than Raelene and me. It's something to keep in mind. The current culture is so focused on blame and division that many refuse to spend time with their elders, let alone learn from them. If we are open to learning from the women and men that God puts in our paths, age, skin color and the other categories being used to tear us apart these days will make no difference. Wisdom is found in a lot of different packages, sometimes where we least expect it.