

CHAPTER 7

EARLY HIGH SCHOOL YEARS: 9-10TH GRADES

(Ages 15-16 Years)

Toward the end of the summer vacation we took our normal trip to Louisiana. Upon returning we learned that the teacher that I had had for the past three years was not coming back. He had been transferred to – of all places – Eastwood middle school. Since the junior and senior high school were together in the same special class, we were going back to Oak Hill, and we were expecting him to be there when we arrived. His absence was quite disturbing to me since we had spent all of those years together. While we had not always seen eye to eye, I had grown quite attached to him. We had sort of grown up together. When he first arrived he was single and an avid Alabama fan. If Alabama would lose or even take a hit from the rankings that came out on Sunday, he would rant and rave and be miserable all day Monday. In his final year he had gotten married, and this had tended to settle him down. In fact, a year or so after this I met him at the grocery store and asked him if he had gotten to the Alabama game, and he said that he had hardly had time to think about football anymore.

It was September of 1981, still two months away from my 15th birthday, when I entered the 9th grade. The first day was a bit formidable in anticipation of our new teacher. However, to my pleasant surprise the teacher turned out to be the student teacher that I had had in the fifth grade. She was the one that I had a crush on, and I must admit – it was still there. She was one of the friendliest teachers that I had ever known. She rarely lost her temper, and therefore was quite easy to get along with – a dedicated professional who cared much for her students and insisted that we come to her with any problems that we were having, no matter how small.

One of the first things that impressed me was the way that she attempted to treat us as young adults. Perhaps I was used to her 5th-grade style and surprised that it had changed so much. But, this was certainly a pleasant surprise, since we were all of high-school age now. As an example of this, once a year the teachers would meet with the parents individually and have a discussion about their child where they explained about progress, where they needed more work, and the goals that they should achieve in the future. These meetings had always been held apart from the students, but she changed that. She felt that since we were the subjects, we should be present so that we could ask questions and give our opinions. She did not relinquish the right to have her last say, but before giving her opinion she would ask for our point of view.

Another sign of her more mature approach was that at the beginning of each school day we would all gather around the front of the classroom and she would tell us what we would be doing that day as well as those things that were going on at school that would have any impact on us. Because of this mutual respect that we had for each other she quickly acquired the respect of the class, and I found that we all got along quite well.

On the other hand, a new teacher is much like a new boss – it takes a while to get used to new styles and demands. Unlike my previous teacher, she loved to lecture, and one of her pet

peeves was manners. She insisted that we treat each other with the “pleases” and “thank-yous” just as we did with her. If she were not pleased with this, she would let it be known from what she called her “soapbox.” If we were to be treated as adults (and we were to the extent possible), then we had to act like adults. This included the ability to accept constructive criticism, and she was not reluctant to lecture us when we did not meet her high standards. I do believe, however, that quite a bit of good came from these lectures for all of us.

While I was quite excited about my new teacher, the 1981-82 school year got off to a tragic start for all of us. On the first Saturday of October, 1981 just as the first Alabama football game ended and I was turning off the radio the phone rang. Since I was closest to it I picked it up and to my surprise it was my new teacher on the other end. She gave me a confusing “hello” and “how are you?” which was certainly unusual on the weekend. Then she asked to speak to Mom, who had already picked up the extension. Of course I was very concerned about what I had done to warrant such a call. But soon the mystery was over as Mom came in and informed me that Erin, one of my fellow students from Oak Hill had died in her sleep very early that morning. She had had Spina Bifida. I wished now that the phone call had been because I *had* done something. She was only 11 and her death was quite hard for me to accept. My two experiences with the loss of those close to me were situations in which there was fair warning and death was known to be a possibility. This one was sudden. I had just seen her at school the previous day and she was as healthy and normal as always. No one could tell that that would be her last day. She went to bed Friday night just as everyone else does, but just never awoke. And, of course, she was so young. I had known Erin since the fourth grade when she had begun attending elementary school and she had followed me to Oak Hill.

Needless to say the following Monday was a very sad day, and our teachers got us together to try to keep this from having personal negative consequences. They asked us if we had anything to say or any questions. There were a few comments that we had that were the normal things about the funeral and how her family was doing. All of the class had about the same relationship with Erin. She was somewhat shy and kept to herself. But we all really liked her and she has to rank among the friendliest and most lovable persons that I have ever known. Even now I often remember her sweet smile.

While that got us off to a sad start, we knew that we would have to go on and cope, so the teachers gave us plenty to keep our minds occupied. One of the major problems that I had before (in my going to Eastwood) was the shyness that I felt in being integrated with the normal classes. As most kids, I was afraid of making a fool of myself. This, of course is true to some extent in the protected environment that we had at Oak Hill; however, it is not nearly as pronounced. My shyness did not prevent me from carrying on conversations with other students and my own teachers. However, it did limit me from initiating anything with the other teachers that I did not have for classes, and I had some problems with the new kids that I was meeting for the first time. Usually to combat my fear, I would refrain from talking altogether.

Sometimes my failure to talk would be interpreted as a snobbish attitude. Unfortunately, it appears that this is what several of the teachers at Oak Hill thought of me. When my teacher caught wind of this, she started incorporating this into her lectures. She indicated that she wanted to see an

improvement in this area. While this included all of the students, since I was an informal leader, I felt that this applied particularly to me. It was quite hurtful to me to learn that some of the students and teachers would think that I was snubbing them. This certainly was not my intention, and I was concerned about it. I determined that I would work on this, and, indeed, this became a full time concern. I tried to speak with everyone who I encountered.

This problem also manifested itself when a teacher would ask me a direct question. I had a hard time answering because I would focus on the students staring at me, which made me nervous and unable to speak with anything but a low voice. This seemed to start a year or so before. As it turned out, my new teacher had a slight hearing problem, and she was constantly insisting that I speak up so she could hear. This was annoying to me at the time, but it was the first step toward overcoming my shyness, and I soon recognized my increasing confidence and was quite glad that she had kept after me. When you take a deep breath and speak up, people will listen. When you mumble it is an indication that you do not even believe what you are saying.

The emphasis on manners for handicapped students is quite important. We cannot earn livings by physical work in most cases, and therefore we have to rely on what we know. This should pose no problem in our information age. However, it does not matter what you know, if you do not have the social skills to properly get along. The fact that handicapped people are often subjected to discrimination and treated as intellectual inferiors makes it essential that their manners go beyond the normally-accepted standards of good taste – they must be proactive in impressing others in this regard.

Our new teacher concentrated on our current course work, but she was also concerned about the future. She tried many ways to help us discover something that we could do once we completed high school. As for me, she suggested that I might make a good receptionist. Every time the secretary would be called away and someone was needed, she suggested that I take her place. This task consisted of answering phones and taking messages for the principle. I thought that this sounded like a neat idea, so I went along with it. It was somewhat fun and gave me a sense of importance. However,

it was a little nerve-wracking knowing that I could mess up a message or accidentally cut off the principle. The thing that bothered me most was the inability to actually see the person that I was talking to. It made me nervous not being able to see if they were “getting it.” This is not a problem with most people, I am sure; it might even seem silly. However, at my stage of interactive development this was quite a problem.

A major transition came when our teacher decided to upgrade the school’s curriculum. She decided that year that those with the mental capacity to do normal schoolwork should be taking classes comparable to those in the normal high school classes, with hopes that they would get a high school diploma. Those who qualified, in this case, included only my friend Sherri and myself. Before this transition, our work had consisted mostly of the teacher handing out a workbook. We would get the assignment, return to our desks, read a chapter or so, and answer some questions for which we would receive a grade. In this format, there was little room for discussion, and this both facilitated and encouraged different students to do different things.

With the new teacher there was a major change. Our work would be a much more involved process. She took a much more active role. At the beginning of each class we would go over the highlights of the chapter, and she would make sure that we had a fair idea of the material before we would get into independent study. Then, we would read the chapter again and answer the questions in the back of the book. She would then go over the answers with us the following day. Then, to make sure that we really understood, at the end of each chapter she would give us a test. This took a little getting used to, since up to that time we were not given that many tests. Studying was essential, and this became a completely different way of our viewing school. The school itself was maturing in viewing physically handicapped students differently from the mentally handicapped.

At the same time, she did not put too much pressure on us. One day I asked her what would happen if I flunked a test. I was expecting something like a threat to get a zero or flunk out, but instead she said: "Well, then you just take the test again." Not that this let me off the hook – I did not want to have to take any test over. But it did take the panic edge out of the new process.

Another innovation that she implemented was to try to get the same books for us as they were using in the regular school system. If she could not, she would get books that were as close as possible. I am not sure, in retrospect, the reason that they did not use the same books from the beginning, but it was probably that the special education program started primarily for the mentally handicapped, and they probably thought a different set of books was required. However, she was intent on correcting this problem. For our science class she got her hands on a microscope and we were able to study a number of very interesting things, such as the composition of a human hair. There was some talk of our dissecting a frog; however, that never did come about. I was not too upset over this – I never did fancy the idea of getting that involved with frog guts.

The discussions that preceded our work often did not leave us sufficient time to complete all of it in class. This increased dramatically the amount of homework that we had, which did not sit very well with my friends or me. I was used to getting home, kicking off my shoes and winding down. Now I had to commit myself to an hour or two of homework before I could relax. At first we thought that she was being far too hard on us, but I can recall a new feeling of satisfaction that only comes when you know that you have accomplished something. I felt good about myself, and my self-esteem was improving. I learned that if I applied myself, I could learn anything and pass any test that came my way. So, even though this was a difficult transition, I could see that she was not just being hard; she was preparing us for the future. Only a few of us recognized this at first, but it was not long before the rest of the group came to this conclusion as well.

It was at this point that I began to realize a new talent within me. The subject was English, and I was required to write a major report. Realizing what a football fan I was, my teacher suggested that I write a report on Alabama's recent games. It was difficult getting started, but once I got a page or so down it began to come quite quickly. I also realized for the first time that homework can actually be fun – putting my own words down on paper and watching them come alive. I never could stand picking out the noun, verb and adverb – whatever – but writing entailed none of this. Not only did my teacher bring out the fun of writing, she taught me to think.

I have always been a terrible speller. Once a week the teacher would give us a list of words to learn. This would entail looking the word up, using it, and, of course, learning how to spell it. Even where we were supposed to use it in a sentence, she refused to accept any generic sentences – it had to capture the full meaning of the word. Again, this forced us to think.

Usually everyone who is in high school has one or two subjects for which they have particular interest, and they spend extra time and become quite proficient in these things. I did not determine what this was until the 9th grade, when the teacher told us that we were going to be studying history – in this case the history of the State of Alabama. As soon as we began taking the class, this captured my interest. I have always had a knack for remembering names and dates when certain events happen in general, so it was not really work for me. But the details of things close to home – those which might even involve members of my family and myself – were of particular interest to me, and I found them easy to learn. I was particularly interested in how Tuscaloosa came into being, and how seemingly insignificant events (at the time) ultimately assumed great importance as they shaped the lives of future generations – sometimes affecting people centuries after they occur.

I enjoyed reading the chapters as they were assigned. However, one time when I finished a chapter I noticed that the next one was on a subject that looked of interest. Then the next one looked interesting. I kept on reading and reading ahead until I had read the entire history book. It seemed more like leisure reading than a textbook. And soon history became a hobby rather than a school subject. Even today I cannot resist buying history books whenever I go to a bookstore. So, needless to say, history was my favorite subject throughout high school, and I believe I got B's on only two tests, but straight A's on my report cards. Wish I could say the same for math.

The new teacher also had her fun side and she made learning quite enjoyable. One of the first things that she did when taking over the classroom was to throw a party for all of the city school officials, including the city school superintendent. The list grew even beyond that, and before we knew it she had managed to invite the mayor. I am not sure what possessed her to want to have this party except that it might have been another way to apply her teachings on manners. At any rate, it was a lot of fun. She ran into trouble when trying to get a bus to take us to the supermarket in order to get the ingredients for the food we were going to make for the party. However, when the school officials learned that the mayor was going to attend and that the local newspapers were going to cover the event, they decided that it would be a good idea to provide the bus. Once we got back with all of the ingredients, she made a major class project out of preparing the food.

She organized us when we did not organize ourselves. For example, I was in charge of reading the directions on how to make the brownies, while the other students participated by following my directions – each having a different function. Unfortunately, I read the directions wrong and we ended up putting too much water in the bowl to start. This resulted in the brownies coming out lumpy, for which I took a lot of kidding. But that was all part of the learning experience, and the process itself had the effect of bonding the class at this early point in our existence.

The party came and went without a hitch. The mayor showed up and everything went according to plan – lumpy brownies or not – it all worked out. This too resulted in giving us a sense

of self worth and the recognition that we could succeed in a joint project even if there were a few setbacks along the way.

To add fun to our days, she would introduce us to various games between classes. This helped break up the day so that it was not so boring. However, it also gave us something to do at home to fight boredom. Often we would be somewhat isolated at home, especially when the weather was not ideal. At these times these games would save the day.

The thing that the new teacher did which I appreciated more than anything else was getting us involved again with Special Olympics. She got our class totally involved in these events, and this really brought not only enjoyment but a sense of fulfillment to the class. To my understanding the original goal of the Special Olympics was restricted almost entirely to mentally handicapped individuals. Gradually it began to reach out to people with all types of handicaps, both mental and physical. Our previous teacher had not shown much enthusiasm for this type of thing – it was considerable trouble as far as transporting students, to say nothing of all of the paperwork administrative chores that went with the event. This tended to put a damper on it as far as our participation was concerned, and I really had not felt that I even wanted to get involved.

With the new teacher there was a renewed interest in such activities, and she made a special effort to assure that the students got involved. This rubbed off on the students, as I can attest, and as I got into it I recognized that this was a whole lot of fun. It added considerable enthusiasm to my life, both in looking forward to it and participating in it. The first Olympic event that I participated in that year was swimming. We used the pool at the University, and the team composed of me and my classmates competed against others from across the state.

At the start of the first event we all got into the pool, each in our separate lanes. When they blew the whistle to start I stumbled out of the starting gate and my feet got tangled up, so I had to go back and start over. The length of our race was one complete lap – to the end of the pool and back again. But, as I got half way across the pool I noticed all of the other contestants were on their way back to the other end. Yet, in my condition, I was practically exhausted at this point. Had this happened three years before (when I was in sixth grade), this would have really been a major catastrophe to me. I recalled how I had competed in the wheelchair race in the sixth grade and how devastating that was to me at the time. However, now I had matured considerably and had paid special attention to a part of the oath of the special Olympics – if I can paraphrase: “... if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt.” As I saw everyone rushing past me in the opposite direction I realized that I needed to readjust my goal. In fact, my goal at this point was just to make it across to the other side of the pool. By the time I struggled to make it the exertion of the race had sapped me of any possible strength to make it back. Finishing was out of the question, but I had accomplished my goal just by competing. I felt a sense of survival, so to speak, that I had made it across just once. Winning was never really within the realm of capability; and yet, I *had* won. My feeling of victory was reinforced as Coach Wilson and others congratulated me.

What was the difference? Why was it that in the sixth grade my loss was devastating, but now it was not even registering as a loss? How can we feel so powerful about something at one point in our lives and it become almost insignificant at another? There were two dynamics at work

here, and both of them contributed equally to my dramatic change in attitude. The first and probably the most important was a maturing within myself. I now realized that whether it is the team that you are cheering for or an athletic competition that you, yourself are participating in, it *is* only a game. Yes, it is more fun to win, but losing does not have to be a harmful experience that results in a loss of self-esteem. There was a good reason why I lost. This disease was taking its toll; it is an irreversible process. Now *that* is something to deal with. If I could deal with that, I could deal with anything. Life itself and survival was my victory. Playing in the game was just icing on the cake.

But then there was also a maturing at this point in the Tuscaloosa Special Olympics organization. The congratulations and support that I recognized despite my obvious last-place non-finish was re-assuring. The people were different now – some were new, and others had matured to a point where they understood the reality that the Special Olympics attempts to convey: that those who participate are winners, if for no other reason than that they make the contest possible. It is when we all put away the necessity of “winning” as a childish thing that we can learn what true victory is all about. Handicapped people win when they participate and thereby contribute in whatever way that they can. Someone has to come in last, and that person makes a major contribution to everyone else. Spiritually this is what Jesus was teaching when he washed his disciples’ feet. And suddenly I had a whole new understanding for the mysterious teaching of Jesus when he said: “The last shall be first and the first last” (Mt. 20:15). True, he was not talking about sporting events. But if you are reading me right you will understand, neither am I. The subject is service.

These contributions are quite significant not despite, but because of our handicaps. There were other swimming events that required even more strength and stamina than this first event, and, of course, I was not able to participate in them, at least not as an athlete. However, being a spectator in these events was sufficient, knowing that I had participated and that I had won my victory, there were other ways that I could serve – perhaps by congratulating the person who served by coming in last.

As much as I loved to swim and found a sense of freedom in the water, it was obvious that swimming was not going to be a sport in which I could be competitive. However, there was such a sport. In the spring of my ninth grade year our school participated again in the Special Olympics – this time in bowling, which was held in Jasper, Alabama (about 30 minutes from Tuscaloosa). I needed to ride the school bus that was going to take our class to Jasper, but that bus was not equipped to handle wheel chairs. Therefore, Sherri, one other students and I went in a station wagon owned by one of the teachers. Somehow our car got separated from the school bus and when we entered the city we did not know how to get to the bowling alley where the event was to take place. She stopped at several places to ask directions, but each time it seemed that she either got misdirected or not directed at all. Time was passing by and it was getting close to the time for the event to begin. Finally, she pulled into a gas station and talked to the cashier who seemed to know where we should be going – perhaps he was a bowler. To get it right, she wrote the directions down. When we finally arrived at the bowling alley we were about 45 minutes late. I was surprised at how concerned they were about us. They had called the local police and hospitals in an attempt to locate us.

While we had entered in a panic, fortunately, we had two things going for us. First, this was bowling, and so it did not matter exactly when you participated, you could still generate a score. Second, this was the Special Olympics and not some cut-throat sporting event which would disqualify you if you failed to show up on time. As I got into the game, I realized that I was doing much better than I thought that I would. Unless you are a dedicated regular bowler, you tend to have good days and bad. I had been bowling a few times before, but nothing on a regular basis. However, this was one of those good days when it seemed like I was in the groove and the pins were falling just right. When the scores were added up I was in the top three and was able to get a metal out of it. I had no disappointment in not being first; perhaps this was overwhelmed by my jubilation in not coming in last. Because of this, bowling became my sport of choice for the Special Olympics. For, unlike swimming, most people can participate in bowling to some extent regardless of their handicap. In life, as in sports, we should keep seeking new experiences until we find something in which we can truly excel. Few people have such handicaps that they cannot find something – few handicapped people that is. In this case “normal” people probably have as many problems in finding their niches than do the handicapped. Perhaps the handicapped are forced to look harder, and this plays to their advantage.

One day our new teacher checked out a book at the library on famous Alabama ghost stories. One took place in a small town about 15-30 minutes west of Tuscaloosa in Carrolton. It was about a man who had been arrested years ago for some heinous crime. As he was being taken into the courthouse a mob gathered outside to lynch him. Just about that time a thunderstorm came up. The man had been standing at the second story window pressing his face against the glass when suddenly lightning struck, killing him instantly. A few days after his death it was noticed that an impression of his face could be seen in the window at certain times when the sun hit it just right. The story went on about how someone had broken the glass but when it was replaced the impression re-appeared.

Our teacher told us this story a few days before spring break. I told my parents about the story and asked them if we could take a ride over to the courthouse and have a look at it for ourselves. It turned out that this was the week that my grandparents were coming over to visit with us, so we decided to wait for them to come and make it a family outing. Carrolton was a small town, very small, much like the Mayberry that we have all seen on TV. Almost all of the old county seats had the courthouse inside of a square, with streets on all four sides of it. We got out of the van and each of us took turns staring at the second story window through my binoculars. Sure enough, there was an impression of a man’s face on that glass. Whether someone had put it there to coincide with the legend, or whether this was just the natural reflection from the trees and the light poles around it, could not be determined. But there was no denying that something up there looked like a man’s face, and this was both interesting and exciting.

One other extra school activity that reflected our new teacher’s enthusiasm was a one-night stay at a local campground just outside of Tuscaloosa at a place called camp Partlow. There were several cabins built around a large lake, and different schools took turns spending one night at the cabin that was dedicated to us. I had had the opportunity to participate in this before, but for some reason or another – usually just lack of interest – I had never taken advantage of it. However, in the

spring of my 9th grade I found out that our new teacher would be one of the chaperones, and her enthusiasm was enough to make me give it a second consideration, so I signed up. They had a number of activities planned for us, the most memorable being the boat ride. They had a boat there that was wide enough to accommodate folks in wheelchairs. In fact, the dock and boat were set up to facilitate this with ramps. I had never realized how relaxing and refreshing a simple boat ride could be. I was amazed to see all of the scenes of nature which surrounded the lake – the trees just getting their new leaves, the birds and the squirrels making their nests, and the fish that seemed to be jumping everywhere. It was such a peaceful and serene setting; it bothered me that I had not taken advantage of it sooner.

Our teacher took the occasion at the camp to continue her pursuit of good manners. I had a habit of after eating cleaning up any leftover sauce on my plate with a roll or some bread. However, since I knew what she thought about this practice, I avoided doing this in front of her. But in this case, she was over with the girls and Coach Wilson was overseeing the guys. I kind of looked around once I had finished, hating to see all of the good leftover sauce on my plate go to waste. The coach asked me: “You wanna sop that up with some bread?” “Sounds like a good idea to me,” I replied, and he brought me over some bread. I guess I was caught off guard, since our two overseers obviously did not have their signals straight as far as manners were concerned. So, as I partook, I kept looking out of the corner of my eye to see if she was watching. I got off.

School let out in May and the summer came with its usual activities. The only thing that was out of the ordinary was getting my wisdom teeth out. Usually this is done in the dentist office. However, with my MD the dentist did not want to take a chance, so they performed the surgery at the hospital. This came off, as it does with the vast majority of people, without a hitch. Of course, like most, I did have swollen jaws for a while, but the hardest part was going two months without eating a single hamburger. Somehow I managed to survive.

Usually if I was going to have a spell of depression, this is when it would start. However, this was an even year, and it was one of my “off” years (or maybe I should say on/good years). I cannot really account for it with any special activities. Perhaps I was so worried about the oral surgery and getting through it was such a relief that I just forgot to be depressed. At the time, of course, I was not keeping track of it or anticipating it. The summer proceeded with its typical activities. I went to the mall with the family, went to some movies with Missy, and we went to Louisiana twice. In retrospect, however, I realize that this was just a reprieve, not the end of the depression.

One of my favorite movies at this time was *To Sir, With Love*, starring Sydney Portier. For those who were not fortunate enough to see it, the plot of the story involved a teacher who had moved into the city and was teaching a class full of students who did not care for education, school, manners or much of anything else. They had no respect for authority, and for the most part, had no part in the future of society. The teacher had to get through to them. In the process of conducting his class, he not only taught them the subjects, he taught them class – manners, the way people perceive you, and a general integration into polite society. In time his effect on the class was to enable them to see the value of all of this, and to make dramatic changes in their lives.

While obviously not as dramatic, this reminded me a great deal of the teacher that I had in the ninth grade and the first part of the tenth grade. We were not nearly as bad as the students in the movie, to be sure. However, I did not realize how boring and mundane things had gotten until she came and lightened things up. She was more fun, and she cared in many different ways. For example she took personal interest into what we were going to do after leaving school. She helped us all tremendously with our self-esteem. Before she came I enjoyed school somewhat, mostly because I was with my fellow companions. I cannot say that I enjoyed the course work, but before we never really had a chance to show what we knew. I would miss school for relatively minor reasons, such as weather, cold temperatures and things like that. However, with the new teacher, I felt that if I stayed home I would miss something, and so I did everything that I could to make every class. I would rush through breakfast and hope that the bus would come early. Indeed, this had to be one of my best years, and it seemed that my depression was a thing of the past. So, as the summer of 1982 drew to a close I was already looking forward to working with my teacher again in the tenth grade.

But, as they say, all good things must come to an end. In early October of my sophomore year in high school the teacher informed the class that her husband was being transferred to Memphis and that they would be leaving at the end of the month. Needless to say, the announcement hit me like a bomb. For a while after the announcement I could not keep my emotions under control, and while I tried to hide this from the class, I believe that she knew how upset that I was. However, I got things under control and held out at least until I got home. The main thing of concern was not only my missing her, but also finding out who the new teacher was going to be. So, as each day passed in October I looked forward with great concern to the end of the month.

Our teacher was also expecting a baby that year, and Mom went through her belongings and found some books that she had had when Missy and I were born. They were mostly how-to books on taking care of new babies. So, we decided that instead of throwing them away we would give them to the teacher.

Her last day there was on a Thursday, and the class gave her a going away party. I was somewhat depressed about the whole thing, but I did a real good job of keeping my emotions under control. School was to be out the following day on Friday for what they call in Alabama an "in service" day – the teachers meet for organizational things but all classes are dismissed. I decided that it would be easier to take the books to her on the in-service day rather than my lugging them to school with me. Of course, there was also the fear of being discovered giving the teacher books on baby rearing. For some reason I never bothered to tell her that I was coming back to see her. I slept a little late, but was really anxious to get one last chance to see her. Finally, Mom and Missy got ready and we all got in the van and went over to the school. We waited in the van while Mom went in to see if the teacher was still there. Much to my frustration, the custodian told her that the teacher had gone home for the day. This was a major disappointment to me, and Mom indicating that we could equally well send the books to her was little consolation.

Since we were already out and needed of a haircut, we decided that we would go over to the barbershop at the shopping mall. The barbershop was located on one of the main thoroughfares of the mall, and you could look out and see shoppers as they were going about their business. As I

was getting my haircut I noticed one woman coming in from the parking lot who resembled my teacher. I thought that I might just be imagining things since at this point there was nothing that I wanted more than to see her one more time. She got closer and then stopped and looked in the window at me. I could not believe that it was her. Mom told her that we had a going-away package for her, and we agreed to meet in the parking lot in about 15 minutes. Even though the haircut seemed to take forever, we still got out to the parking lot in plenty of time, and had to wait. But it was not too long before she pulled around in her car. She was very pleasantly surprised with her gifts, and we had a few minutes to visit before she was off. As we drove home a song played on the radio that captured my mood – it was Nat King Cole’s *Pretend You are Happy When You are Blue*.

Life goes on, as I told my friends: “It is time for us to break in a new teacher.” We had known for a week or two who the new teacher was going to be. I had known her vaguely since she had substituted on occasions and she taught summer school in 1978. Upon arrival, one of the first things that she did was to let us know that we were going to have to work hard because the stronger curriculum worked up by the former teacher would be implemented. Like our previous teacher, she loved to lecture. And, although her lectures were not nearly as friendly, they often had a political flair about them. I often thought she missed her calling to run for office. Of course, she had some very large shoes to fill, and there were times when I found her a little strict and questioned her fairness. It is difficult at this point to be totally objective. This new teacher has to follow someone who I had gotten so attached to; it could be that I was the one not being totally fair.

It seemed the hardest part was that I had always had a good relationship with all of my previous teachers, even though I did not get as close to them as the last one. With my new teacher, I could not tell if she liked me, hated me, or just tolerated me (as I suspect was the case). It was not until after I graduated from high school that I discovered that she had two aspects to her personality. As a person she was always friendly, but she put on another personality as a teacher, perhaps to maintain discipline within the classroom. As time went by I began to recognize that she had some really good characteristics, and it was good for me to recognize that authority figures can have a wide range of personalities.

There was one particular incident that tended to characterize our new teacher. There was one teacher across the hall from our classroom (I will call her Ms. Cunningham). She was very good friends with my previous teacher who had moved to Memphis. One day Ms. Cunningham told me that my former teacher had moved from Memphis to Texas. She offered to address and mail any letter that I wished to write to her. I felt that this was a great idea, since I had not been in contact with her in some time. I wrote the letter at home, and a few days later took it to school. Ms. Cunningham changed her mind and said it might look better if I addressed it myself, so she gave me the address to copy down onto the envelope. Being sensitive to my current teacher’s feelings, I did not just do this out in the open, but tried to be somewhat discrete in all of this. I was planning on just copying it to the envelope and putting it in the mail at home the next day. However, my new teacher seemed to have overheard our conversations and she surprised me by coming up and asking me if I had completed addressing the letter. I told her that I had. More to my surprise, she even offered to mail it from the school. In retrospect, I saw that I had misjudged her, and there was no jealousy to be concerned with at all.

It was during the 9th and 10th grade that I began to notice attitudes of many of the other students with their various handicaps. It seemed that some allowed it to defeat them, while others took a positive approach and refused to allow it to beat them. There were three students who stood out during this period (two of them joined us during the 9th grade). One of them was suffering from epilepsy, which would occasionally result in seizures for which he took medicine, I believe, once a day. While this lessened his chances of seizures it caused a side effect of making his gums swell up. In the normal school setting this stood out like the proverbial sore thumb, marking him as being different. Of course, some of the less than considerate low-life would bait him at times and tease him, and his response to this was to fight it out with them. This went on for several months before they decided to deal with it by allowing him to attend Oak Hill (which had a distinctive handicapped program). The theory was that since he was so much different from the others, he was being harassed. They reasoned that in an environment with other kids who were also different, this would not be the case. This reasoning is not altogether bad, but it is not totally correct either. In this case it was probably an administrative thing to try to deal with the problem as opposed to a best-case analysis. In reality, the change did not help matters much since he was now the big kid who could bully the others. With this role reversal, he merely took advantage of the other kids with handicaps just as he had been abused before. This alienated him from even the older handicapped kids and the teachers, which further reinforced his ugly behavior.

My own personal opinion was that he was not just trying to prove that he was tough; he seemed to be downright mean. This had to be something in the approach to his upbringing; I do not believe that such behavior occurs naturally, since it was not typical in the handicapped. It seems that the distribution of those disposed to such behavior is about the same in the handicapped population as it is in the population of normal kids. However, it is clear that it could get quickly out of control in a handicapped child since there is a natural emphasis upon asserting one's normalcy and not being intimidated by the handicap. However, there is a difference between being intimidated by a handicap and being intimidated by what other people say. And there is a difference between allowing the handicap to motivate excellence in what you can do and allowing other inconsiderate people to motivate you to lash out at the world.

Another handicapped student who arrived that year had a condition that was not highly apparent. On rare occasions, however, he would vomit blood, which was obviously a very serious thing. Like the other student, these attacks would come on at random and without warning. However, there were some suspicious moments when it seemed that he would get them at opportune times. On one occasion the regular teacher had been absent and we had to go to another classroom. Apparently everyone was told which classroom to go to; however, he somehow got the idea that he would stand outside and tell everyone else where to go. It turned out that he did not have instructions to do this, and the teacher went out to retrieve him. In the meantime, two other students decided to try out their wrestling skills on each other and they ended up getting into a fight. When she came back with the student and saw the ruckus, she blamed him for having to leave them unattended. Was it just a coincidence that he had one of his attacks shortly thereafter? No one knows for sure – it could be that this triggered the attack. But one of the teacher's aids confided to me that whenever the teacher could not spend as much time with this student as he would like he seemed to have one of these spells. This is not to say that the whole thing was contrived; indeed, stress could

be a significant part of the problem. However, this also seemed to be somewhat related to his personality, which was universally down. He was always talking about dying, what he would leave people in his will, and such as that. There seemed to be little positive about him, and unless someone else fed on this type of personality (and no normal person would), they just did not like to be around him. Of course, like our epileptic friend, all this did was reinforce his attitude that everyone was against him and that he was fully justified in making himself totally obnoxious.

I do not blame the students themselves. Their parents had to have a lot to do with it. One day just before classes started I was sitting at my desk (his desk was just a few rows over from mine), and I saw him writing something. Shortly after this I saw him take the note to the teacher and claim that it was from his mother. It stated that he had to be leaving school early for a doctor's appointment. The teacher was a bit suspicious and asked if she could call his mother to verify it. Of course, he was infuriated at such a suggestion. I was resolved not to say anything figuring that once his mother was contacted that would put an end to this charade. The teacher proceeded to call his mother, and much to my surprise, she backed him up. Perhaps he did have a doctor's appointment, but I know that the note was not authentic. He left that day before school even began, which indicated to me that the entire affair was bogus – why not just stay home to start with? It seemed that neither he nor his mother really cared much about his education, and within a year he just dropped out of school altogether. It was a terrible waste of a good mind. I don't know how many times I have seen mentally handicapped individuals who would give anything to have his intelligence, if you can call it that. After all, how intelligent is someone who throws it all away?

The third student that I wish to focus on because of his attitude arrived early in my 10th grade year. This young man, whom I will call Jimmy, was notable for his positive attitude even though he had a serious case of Spina Biffida. In fact, the handicaps of the two students described above could best be described as minor inconveniences compared to Jimmy's affliction. I had met Jimmy earlier, but had not seen him for three years. Jimmy was not only confined to a wheelchair, but he had considerable problems in accomplishing normal bodily functions that the other two took for granted. If anyone had a reason to be down on life, it was Jimmy. However, he never let on that he had any problem with life at all. He was one of the friendliest students, and never once did I hear him complain about his condition.

As I developed my concepts of the value of mental attitudes in these adolescent years, I also looked toward others outside of my peer group. In my case, the people who I contacted most outside of my family and school friends were the people at church. I saw some people who would serve and worship God expecting very little in return and just being grateful for everything that they had. The bible refers to these as being well planted; or as Psalms 1 says: "a tree planted by the river of water." They are firmly rooted so that when the storms of life come they do not blame God and everyone around them (who might not be suffering as much as they perceive that they are). Then there are other who seem that the slightest problem (e.g., someone just saying something about them that they think is unfair) will cause them to forsake God, His people, and all sense of propriety. They will lash out and attempt to hurt others with no concern for the many painful processes that they are setting into motion. For example, one lady seemed to be very active and attended all of the services. However, when her niece got childhood diabetes she lost all of her faith. She blamed God for this as well as all of her other problems, and within a month or two she had left be-

hind her life of faithfulness to the Lord. All of the members attempted to talk to her to get her back into our fellowship, but she would have none of this, and she never returned.

Yet, I have seen people withstand the most trying of circumstances. One young couple, for example, had always wanted children, yet the wife had had several miscarriages. It was sad to watch this occur again and again, and while you would expect someone like this to get bitter, she always was able to put it behind her after a period of grieving, and keep things positive as far as her relationships with her fellow Christians were concerned. In fact, she became an inspiration to all of us, and I know that she encouraged me.

I also began to become more aware of the differences in the ways that others treat the handicapped. As an example, once when I was in the eighth grade the fire alarm went off and we did our normal fire-drill thing, which put us out in the schoolyard, not knowing what was going on. While we were waiting there our teacher told us that someone had called in a bomb threat. I could hear sounds of astonishment from the teachers' aids, chastising him for telling us this. He went over to them, and after talking with them momentarily he came back and told us that he was just kidding. I am convinced that no such protection was practiced with the normal kids, and I just wonder what they expected us to do. It is totally naive on their part to think that they could keep this from us forever. So the cover-up was far worse than leaking the information. The major problem, however, was that it highlighted to me the difference in the way that people view the handicapped. Do they think that we cannot handle such things as well as normal people? Perhaps those with mental problems should be so shielded, but this was not the situation in the schoolyard.

Another similar type of shielding occurred in conjunction with the death of one of my greatest idols, Bear Bryant. On January 26, 1983, a month after that "final" game, I heard the news on the radio that Bear Bryant had checked into the hospital complaining of chest pains. I knew that this was quite serious, but had always thought of Bear as being indestructible. At this point he had retired as the winningest football coach in history, with his last game being the 21-15 win over Illinois at the Liberty Bowl.

I went on to school, and that afternoon after school I was waiting for the bus with a student teacher who was going to push me onto the bus. A teacher's aid came up to her and was whispering to her the news about Coach Bryant's death. She quickly responded with: "Shhhhh," not wanting me to hear. I guess they knew that I was quite fond of Coach Bryant, and they did not want to be the ones to break the news to me. Of course, I was to hear the news before very long (in fact, as soon as I got on the bus, the bus driver gave me the news). I am not sure why they had the feeling that they did not want to tell us these things, but it seems to me that this is part of a general impression shared by most people that physical handicaps indicate emotional and mental problems as well. You would think that teachers would know better than this. I found this quite distressing to be treated in this way – perhaps certainly much more distressing than if they had just told me about his death as they would anyone else. Coach Bryant was 69 years old and had been in bad health for the last few years. His health had probably forced him to retire, and when I heard that he was in the hospital I had a feeling that it was serious.

Coach Bryant's funeral service was held a few days later at a local church building in downtown Tuscaloosa. However, his body was to be taken to Birmingham for the burial. Therefore, the funeral procession would have to travel north on Interstate 59. There just happened to be a road that ran behind the Oak Hill School building that overlooked I-59. The morning of the funeral the teachers asked us if we wanted to watch the procession go by. Naturally we took them up on their offer. Around 11 o'clock that morning we put our coats and hats on and went out to brave the cold weather as we made our brief journey to pay our last respects to Coach Bryant.

At first it did not look like we were going to see anything for as soon as we arrived at our spot an 18-wheeler pulled over to the side blocking our view. Fortunately, one of our teachers yelled to him to move his truck so that we could have a clear view. After a few minutes we saw the beginning of the procession. It started with the hearse followed by about six buses with all of the team and dignitaries aboard. This seemed to be followed by hundreds of cars, and the police presence was excessive. Some had certainly come out of their love for their good friend or relative. Others just had to get into the act.

As I sat there watching the procession pass by, two thoughts went through my mind. I was grateful to my father for the opportunity he gave me to meet Coach Bryant. But what hit me hardest was that his retirement had been so brief. He had literally given his life for the game of football. Now he was not going to be able to sit back and relive memories of all those great victories. Perhaps it was fitting that it ended this way. The pursuit of becoming the winningest coach had spurred him on well after retirement age. He was reputed to have said: "Give up coaching? ... I would be dead in a week." If so, it was not a bad prophesy.

As the year progressed we found that our new teacher did have her fun side, and she allowed us to participate in the annual drawing contest sponsored by the Tuscaloosa library, which involved the various schools in the area. Each grade had its own contest – we would all draw pictures and submit them. These would be hung in the library and judged according to a variety of criteria. Drawing was a hobby of mine, and although I was not perfect, a number of teachers had suggested that I enter the contest. I never had any great ideas as to subjects, nor did I feel that I had the time, so usually I would just pass up the opportunity. However, our teacher this year encouraged everyone to enter and set up a time each day that we could work on our drawings. So, that made things quite different. I drew a pirate ship, and after about a month we all had our drawings completed. I did not expect to win but felt that it was an acceptable drawing. After about a week or so, my father received a call from someone at the library informing him that I had won second prize. He got confused at first, since Missy had always been a great artist, and I had not told him that I had entered this contest. I was pleasantly surprised, since I enjoyed the project and really was not in it for the competition. That Monday when I went back to school I learned that our class had done quite well, and that one of my classmates had come in first. The teacher then arranged for the two of us to go to the library and get a picture made with our artwork and prizes. This was quite a proud moment for me, and I greatly appreciate her efforts in seeing that we participated in this contest.

A couple of years before the tenth grade we had all gotten permission slips to participate in sex education classes, although these just went on record. Now, however, the powers that be decided that it was in our best interests to conduct these classes – the boys in one class and the girls in another. In my case, I had learned about these things from my own parents, and they decided that there would be no reason that I should have to participate, so they refused permission. In the spring semester of the 10th grade (February, 1983), they separated us into two groups, and I had the feeling that this had to be a sex education class, although I did not know the reason that I was participating, since I knew that my parents had not given permission for it. This bothered me somewhat, since I felt that it was not consistent with what my parents wanted. However, no one really stated the purpose of this segregation by gender, so there was not much that I could say to object. It was a bit disarming, and the class did not really get underway very quickly, since there were a couple of the boys missing and the teacher went out to find them. It was quite nerve-wracking for me since I had no idea what was going on. I did not want to question anything out of respect for my teachers; but I knew that my parents would be displeased if this was a sex education class.

When the teacher finally came back, I learned that we were going to watch a film. This seemed even more distressing. Who knew what I was about to see, and surely my parents would find out. As they turned down the lights and rolled the film a mechanic came on the screen and started demonstrating how to repair various problems in car engines. I later found out the girls were seeing a film on how to apply make-up. Needless to say, I was quite relieved that this was not the sex-education class that my natural instincts had told me. I was even more relieved that I had kept my mouth shut and not questioned my teachers over this. I felt foolish enough to have so misjudged the situation, I did not need to be further embarrassed by making such a fool of myself before them as well. In retrospect, how many times do we get up tight about something that is about to take place only to find out that our anxiety is not justified?

There were two student teachers that served in the spring semester of the 10th grade. One of the student teachers was friendly but strange. She was always singing and acting like she was pre-occupied. Her two weeks in charge of the class turned out to be quite confusing. When she lectured in history class, she would run her words together making it very difficult to understand what she was saying. One day in math we were studying fractions. She was going to teach us a new method to work with fractions. She proceeded through it quite slowly. I thought she was doing this for us, but in retrospect, I believe that she really did not understand the process herself. I realized that it was slow so, getting the hang of it, I went ahead and completed the next six problems. When she saw me getting ahead, she thought I was using the wrong method. However, once she saw my correct results she realized that the method probably did not matter that much.

The other student teacher was a lot easier to get along with. She was determined to concentrate her two weeks on the history of Tuscaloosa. The first class that she taught started out quite interesting. We were discussing how Tuscaloosa got the nickname Druid City. There was quite a bit of speculation about how our city was related to the ancient people called Druids, who were especially noted for their tree-planting inclinations. It was speculated that since many of the older streets of Tuscaloosa were lined with very large trees, that this could account for the nickname. As part of the class exercise for this, she had the class put their hands in the air and wave them around pretending that we were trees. I found this to be quite astounding and unbelievable that a 10th grade

class was being asked to do something so childish. It was as though she had forgotten who her audience was, and that her mind had regressed to her training for kindergarten. I found the exercise quite humiliating and refused to participate along with a couple of my friends. Our class was composed of people from a range of mental aptitudes. However, I do not feel that even those of the lowest capacity appreciated being treated in such an immature way. Apparently the regular teacher understood our plight, and the student teacher did not attempt anything of this nature again. Teachers should just ask themselves: if I had a normal class of this age group, could I get away with such a thing? Normal junior high kids would rebel at this; in some places the teacher might get assassinated.

I have noticed a similar tendency on the part of medical and care givers with regard to the very old. The treatment goes beyond niceness to a condescending loss of dignity. Perhaps old people do lose some mental capacity – certainly some do, but I do not think this can be generalized. Perhaps a subset of them enjoy being treated as babies and asked to play ridiculous childish games and participate in touchy-feely type things. If so, perhaps they should be singled out for this special treatment. However, I am inclined to think that most of them go along with this degradation in their dignity as a matter of peer and authority figure pressure. Most of them would just love to get a switch and take their young whipper-snapper, cheer-leading, patronizing social directors out to the woodshed.

Spring vacation of 10th grade came around before I knew it, and we took our normal visit to Louisiana, leaving on Saturday and coming back on Wednesday. We were only there for 4-5 days and Kevin looked the same as always. He had lost a little weight, but he looked good and there were no concerns about it. He was going to a special school and had to live at the school in Alexandria. This was quite near his home, and occasionally he would come home on weekends and always on holidays. I should have been up beat seeing Kevin's good condition and everything else going well. I cannot say what triggered it, but once again that monster from the past – depression – started creeping up on me. This one was going to be one of the worst spells that I had, and it would last the longest. Perhaps part of it was because of the normal letdown that occurs once your vacation is over. I had looked forward to this vacation, and enjoyed it very much, and going back to the same old grind was not my idea of fun. Leaving my grandparents and cousin also seemed to contribute to the problem.

I could feel the depression coming on around Thursday of spring vacation. At this time I did not know how to deal with depression as I do today. Instead of getting my mind occupied with something else, I would just passively watch TV. Gradually the depression would build up. At some point it would build to the point that I could not control my emotions and the tears would flow. I cannot put my finger on what triggered it specifically; although the entire set of circumstances coming together at this time all played contributing parts. There was something about the spring – that time of year when my parents had first learned that I had MD. The same cycle was repeated as before: thinking evil thoughts about my parents and God, wondering if I really loved them as I should, and contemplating my eternal fate. This, in turn would lead to guilt that would result in another round of blame. Similarly, I would question my status before God and my eternal destiny.

It was at this time that I began to recognize the pattern with regard to my depression. It seemed that it always occurred in the spring. I began thinking that when I died, I hoped that it would be in the fall or the winter, since I would hate to die in a state where I was in this cycle of hatred of everything and its resulting depression. I recognize now that I could have broken the cycle by getting something to challenge me and getting my mind active. Instead I just sat there and watched TV – whatever was on, it did not matter whether I liked it or not – I would just sit there and stare at it.

Sometimes I would watch CNN where they would show the same thing over and over. I would watch it for hours not really caring what else was on. I learned later that watching the same thing over and over (especially the news, which can be depressing on its own) was the worst thing that someone who is suffering from depression can do.

The most painful part of it all was the fear of not knowing my eternal destiny. I had been brought up in a home with biblical principles, and I believed then as I do now in the concepts of eternal rewards that were taught by Jesus. Thus, to be in a cycle of hatred and despair was indicative to me that my soul was not right before God. In the pits of depression I needed to turn to the Lord now more than ever. However, like Jonah of old I was trying to run away from God. I would have stayed home from church if I had had my choice. I am grateful now that my parents still had control over this, and as a result I went most of the time. However, I avoided it as much as I could. Whenever anyone would try to initiate a religious conversation with me I would immediately change the subject. I did not want to consider eternity – it was just easier to avoid it altogether. However, like anything else, when you are trying to avoid something is just the time that you have a difficult time getting away from it.

Case in point: when the student teacher took over the class for two weeks and decided that we would study the city of Tuscaloosa, the first things that she dwelt on was the number of churches that were in Tuscaloosa. She went around the class and we each had to state where we attended church. It seemed that I could not get away from the subject of religion no matter where I turned.

At this time Dad talked to me about being baptized for the remission of my sins as taught in the bible (Acts 2:38, 41), and thus being baptized into the body of Christ, his church (Romans 6:3). At his urging I almost went through with it, but this was in the middle of this bout with depression and I was worried about a lot of other things. I should have realized that this is just the time that a person should turn to God. However, I was quite childish and was not sure what would happen if I should sin after I was baptized. I was under the false impression that if I sinned after I was baptized I would be lost. It was not until later that I realized that being forgiven of sins after baptism is possible, since you have already established that relationship with God. I began to understand that this was not license to sin, because in order to be forgiven one must repent, and that would be impossible if sin were a way of life. But at this point in my spiritual maturity I just had not allowed myself to become aware of these things.

I was not confident enough in my faith to attempt to understand the biblical concepts, but as time went on and I heard more and more on the subject it began to become much clearer. I am sure that my parents were disappointed that I did not respond when they expected it, but they knew that they had done all that they could. I am also sure that they knew that forcing me to comply would not accomplish anything – it had to be something that I wanted to do of my own volition. While I realize that this gave them pain, in retrospect I am glad that I did not obey the gospel just because they wanted me to – it had to be something that I understood and was motivated by faith to do.

For the most part I could keep my depression under control. I went back to school after spring vacation, and since we had a stronger curriculum we were kept quite busy, and I really did not have the time to feel sorry for myself or think evil thoughts. I was too busy trying to get A's and B's in school. While I did not mind letting my immediate family know that I was depressed, I tried to keep it away from the kids at school and other relatives. I believe that I succeeded for the most part.

The hardest part about going back to school after depression had set in was that it was confusing for me. I was depressed for being depressed – it was a vicious cycle – and I kept thinking about how I had not dwelt on these thoughts before spring vacation. I was also depressed because I wanted to go back to that time when I was not depressed. Then there was also that fear that even though I had been through it before and had been able to overcome it, perhaps this time I would not be so fortunate.

During the week I would have a reprieve to some extent from the depression as I was being forced at school to think of other things. I know that this was the case for on weekends some of it would return. My parents attempted to remedy this situation by going on drives on the weekend, and this did have a positive effect.

Jimmy was the one person who helped make life bearable at this point. He was the one I referred to earlier who had Spina Biffida. Of all my friends, he was the one who could get me out of my gloom – he was a great joker. He never brought others down with his attitude. He spent most of the time at the regular school system, but joined us at Oak Hill for lunch, PE and home economics. I had an incentive: if I could just make it through the morning until he came, then I would be all right. If you recall, we had been in summer school in 1978 and 1979, so we had much in common, having both graduated from the Don Rickels college of insult comedy. Back then our relationship at times was strained trying to outdo each other. Now, however, it became friendly competition. As we matured, of course, we abandoned the habit of just insulting each other and had many serious conversations. We developed a strong friendship, and this was a key element in overcoming, or at least coping, with the depression monster. For, although he did not know it (and probably does not to this day), I feel that he was the only thing standing between total insanity and me.

After spring vacation the school days resumed and summer vacation started to approach even faster. This was quite worrisome to me and caused me problems at this time. Being active in school had been one thing that kept me from dwelling on my problems at least five days a week. With the prospect of summer coming I was trying to figure out how I would survive with nothing to

do. About this time one of my classmates told me that she was going to participate in a summer program in town called WACS (West Alabama Comprehensive Services). It was a program sponsored by The University of Alabama designed to assist handicapped adults that began in 1973. While I do not know much about the background of this program, it was similar to a senior citizens group. The adults who took part in the program were physically handicapped, some quite severely. A few were just mentally handicapped, and some had both physical and mental handicaps. Most of them were in their early twenties to their early thirties. There was one man who was in his forties, but this was an exception.

This was a year-round program, with the exception of holidays. Occasionally during the summer they would allow handicapped students like my friend and me to join them. This enabled us to get to know handicapped adults, many of whom had long since overcome their handicaps, and who could pass on their advice to us. Since I was quite concerned at this about suffering through a summer of depression, I thought that this would be a great program in which to participate. I asked my parents about participating and they thought that it was a great idea. They talked to the people in charge of the program and the arrangements were made.

The WACS group met in a building close to the University campus. Once the group got together, various activities would take place. Some of the adults there had difficulty retaining knowledge, and so there were activities especially for them. Some, for example, were being taught to read. For those who had normal learning abilities there were classes in social studies, English and math. However, there was not a strict schedule. It was what everyone was in the mood for, and it was far more like a social gathering than a formal school.

One of the first things I noticed about this new group that I joined in about mid-July was that everyone treated the handicapped people as adults. This was quite refreshing after many of my experiences in the public schools. For example, there was no more Mr. and Mrs. X. Everyone called everyone by their first names, and there seemed to be a mutual respect triggered by this that encompassed everything that we did. In one case one of my regular teachers was involved, and so I determined that I would not call her by her first name since this might establish a habit that would be difficult to break when I went back to school. However, I addressed all of the others by their first names.

One of the other things that I noticed about the people in this program was that, unlike public school students, they were not afraid to speak up. This was because they were not afraid of getting downgraded for what they did not know (since there were no grades). If they had a question, or thought something was unfair, or had a suggestion, they did not hesitate to speak up. If any of the volunteers seemed to talk down to them or not treat them on an equal basis, they let their feeling be known.

We took a lot of field trips together – sometimes to a movie, and other times to a shopping mall or a grocery store where everyone who needed to could make some purchases. Other field trips of an educational nature to various potential job sites were also quite informative. One that I found the most fascinating was to the TV station in town to see how it operated. The program was partly sponsored by the University of Alabama, and the rest by businesses and individuals within

the community. There was one full-time teacher and two teacher's aides. There were also several volunteers from the general public who gave their time to make things better for those less fortunate. Others from the University planned to spend their careers in service to the handicapped came to get a head start on what was to come. Others who had completed their teaching but had not yet gotten a job would come to keep from having a gap in their resumes. Some of our field trips involved travel to nearby towns, and I especially enjoyed participating in their swimming outings.

The way that everyone interacted in this setting reminded me of my classroom back at Oak Hill. We had known each other for quite a while and became almost like family. Another thing was when the fact that one of the members of the group had a problem, all of the others would get together and see that person through that crisis. This was an informal thing, and much of the time the teachers would not even be involved in this. It was quite interesting to watch. Those of us who just joined the group were not as integrated into this process at first, and we just observed and did not participate as heavily as the others.

I was quite familiar with some of the clients at WACS, since many of them had paid regular visits to Oak Hill in an attempt to serve as an inspiration to those of us with handicaps and to demonstrate that having a handicap was not the end the world. One of the members of this group that stood out in my mind was a young man I will call Paul. The main reason I looked up to him was that he was older and had been diagnosed with MD. It turned out later that he had been misdiagnosed and had another muscular disease. However, the symptoms were quite similar to MD and so I could identify quite well with his situation, and he with mine. There are some people whose handicap makes them bitter to the world and there are others who don't let it bother them and serve as an inspiration to others, handicapped or not; but they are a special inspiration to fellow handicapped victims.

Paul was one man who had every right (if anyone does) to be bitter, for life had dealt him a cruel hand. Not only had he been born with a muscular disease that put him in a wheelchair early in life, but also his sister's boyfriend had shot and killed his mother right in front of him and there was nothing that he could do. I had always wondered, though we had never talked about it, how he was able to overcome such a sudden and tragic loss. Yet, he never even shared the story with us. Mom already knew the story and she mentioned it to me once or twice. I never brought it up to him.

The WACS program was somewhat like a school, but it did not have any kind of a rigid schedule; so it was a very relaxed environment. There was considerable socializing both as an entire group and as we would break into smaller groups. Most of the time Paul and I would gravitate toward each other and we shared our jokes and philosophy of life. He was always pointing out some of the positive aspects of being in a wheel chair. For example, he mentioned that when he went to a concert, quite often he would get to go backstage and meet the performer since security seeing him in a wheelchair would recognize that he was not a threat and let him through.

There was some work that we did within the WACS program. It was typical schoolwork – history, social studies and astronomy stand out in my mind. There were also outside activities such as shopping trips to the mall. One time we had a barbecue and so we went to the grocery store first and got all of the things that we needed to make that work out. Some of the others took advantage

of the opportunity to pick up some groceries for themselves. This was quite handy since the majority of the participants lived in nursing homes and did not have much of a chance to get out. There were also a number of movies that we saw, and one particular theater in town had half-price tickets for the handicapped, so we took advantage of that.

There were other trips that we took that were quite educational. On one occasion we visited the local TV station in Tuscaloosa. I always had a fascination with the inter-workings of TV, and it was quite interesting to see exactly what they did behind the scenes. I was only disappointed that I did not ask the questions that were on my mind, since I was still quite shy and soft-spoken at this point. The tour-guide at the station was quite good, but there were a lot of questions that she raised. They were on the tip of my tongue, but I just could not bring myself to speak up. This bothered me considerably right after the trip as I contemplated my missed opportunity. The trips that we took to the library were also quite educational and enlightening.

It was also in this summer of 1983 that I began to get my first experiences with a computer. The WACS people had saved up enough money to purchase a computer for us to use. While I did not get a chance to work with it myself, I got to observe Paul and another one of our common friends work on it. They were really into it, and it was just interesting for me to watch their activities. Occasionally they would give me a few lessons on its innerworkings. Obviously, this computer was not anything like what we have now; but it had enough capability to be challenging. We played a lot of games, but probably spent most of our time on “hangman.” This was a game involving a list of words with letters missing. Whenever you could not insert the correct letter another part of a hanging man would go up. If your hanging man was assembled first, you lost.

The only thing that ever bothered me about the WACS group was that sometimes some of us were not treated like adults. As a young adult sometimes I did not feel like I was being treated as such. One of the teachers had a boy friend that was in a band that played at the local clubs in town. On one particular night he and his band were in town, and the teacher began to arrange for transportation for everyone to go and watch them play. However, they excluded me because this was a bar where alcoholic beverages were served. I had never given a lot of thought to this. My own personal conviction was that a Christian should not go into a bar regardless of the circumstances, so even if I had been older I would not have gone to see the band. However, the teacher came up to me one day to apologize for excluding me, and she explained that I was under-aged. I tried to explain that I would not have gone in any event because of my beliefs. But she kept telling me that it was OK for young people to want to go to bars – that it was only natural and that I would be getting my chance soon. Apparently she thought that it was because my parents would not let me go and not because of my own personal conviction. This inability for her to see that I had my own mind and could make my own decisions on subjects such as these gave me no small consternation.

Another time one of the people there was a member of Jehovah’s Witnesses, and he mentioned how he liked to study the bible a lot. When I indicated that I would like to get together with him and study the bible together he said that my parents might not like what he had to teach me. Again, it was like I was some mama’s boy, and all of the decisions that I made were based on my parent’s preferences. At this point these things were *my* decisions and they should have viewed them as such. There are times when they went overboard in attempting to instill individuality and

self esteem, but ignoring simple things, like respecting a person's right to make decisions on religion and personal morality, can defeat all of these efforts. However, for the most part I would classify these problems as minor irritations, not major criticisms against either the WACS program or the people who were in it, whether clients or workers.

Due to the complex nature of MD, many of the volunteers at Oak Hill just cannot be expected to fully understand all of the aspects of this disease. They know that the person is in a wheelchair, but often do not understand that the disease affects all aspects of physical stamina. Depending on the stage of the disease, a person with MD can only push himself so far in a wheelchair before his arms begin to ache. At that point, most would prefer that someone else give a hand. When I first became confined to a wheelchair (winter of 1979) there was one volunteer worker who recognized me, but this was the first time that he had seen me in a wheelchair. For some reason he thought I was having trouble with my hips. One of the students had gone off and left something in the classroom. I was halfway down the hallway and he asked me if I would go back and get it. At this point making another trip to and from the classroom would have been impossible. I am quite sure that he did not really understand this.

Since that time I was quite shy about getting people to push me anywhere for fear that they would think that I was being lazy and ask: "why can't you push yourself?" Now, here at WACS in the summer of 1983 I was still reluctant to seek assistance. But here no one expected me to be able to push myself for long distances. This took me a while to get used to. On one of our trips to the mall one of our administrators was pushing me around the mall, and I felt rather uncomfortable about this. I got the idea that perhaps she and others would think I was lazy, and took me a while to get over this. I even asked her to allow me to push myself for a while. But, she did not see any need for this, and apparently she knew more about MD than I had given her credit for. Finally, she just insisted that when we were at the mall she would push me, and I finally became accustomed to this.

The main reason that I had decided to join WACS was due to the severe cases of depression that had characterized previous recent summers. I realized that unless I did something to occupy my time I would get locked into the vicious cycle of improper thoughts coupled with guilt. In some ways it helped, but not totally. Unlike regular school, the WACS program did not have a set schedule for the courses. It was: when we got around to it. This was an undisciplined setting, and this presented some problems for me. During those free times my mind would begin to wander and I would dwell on the depressing thoughts. There were times when I felt uncomfortable at church because I questioned my salvation with such thoughts. Unfortunately, the things that I was trying to stop thinking about kept cropping up.

There was one young lady there at WACS who I first thought had Cerebral Palsy but later found out that she had a more serious condition. She seemed to get along quite well; she was the mother of three children despite being in a wheelchair. One day she came to our session visibly shaken because she had gotten on the scales and found that she had lost weight. Apparently this was one of the negative symptoms of her disease – one that could be quite serious and even lead to death. All of the other participants gathered together and were trying to comfort her. One of the others asked me what I thought about dying. In general this would have been an excellent opportu-

nity to enter into conversation. However, under the depressed situation that I found myself, this just brought the problem up to me again. Instead of getting into detail I just said: “Well, I just never think about it.” What I should have said, had I been telling the truth is: “I try not to think about it.” Some of them might have thought that I was avoiding talking about it because I was afraid of dying because I had MD. This was not the case at all. At this point I was not positive that MD was fatal. I had thought about it now and then in the back of my mind, which I will go into more detail about later. No ... the main reason that I did not want to think about it was not the dying part as much as where I was going to spend eternity. That is what frightened me, and that is why I tried not to think about it.

The reason for my depression was more severe this year than in the recent past. Unlike most people, the hardest part of the day for me when I am depressed is the morning, forcing myself to get up. Apparently most people are more affected by depression at night, but for me it was the opposite. I usually felt good in the evenings – like I had overcome the depression. However, in the back of my mind I knew that once I woke up in the morning the cycle would start all over again. Maybe the reason was that in the evening I realized that I had survived another day – I had beaten it, and this was a personal victory. The hardest part, though was that I did not want to go to sleep. My depression was over, I was happy again, I wanted to keep busy, and the last thing I wanted to do was to go to sleep. I know that when I did, morning would soon arrive, and I would have to face the woes of depression as I dragged myself out of bed for another day. So, I did everything that I could to stay awake as long as I could. Whether it was watching TV or reading, I would do anything to stay up. There were times when my father would go out of town and my mother would let Missy and me stay up as long as we wanted, and we would be up until 3 AM. Even if what I was doing was not interesting, I still hated to, and was afraid to, close my eyes.

The depression began to worsen because of this, since not only was I depressed but I was also tired in the morning. It seemed to make the depression worse. I was told that if I read and did other things to keep myself busy that I would not have time to dwell on the depression, and this seemed to work most of the time. I had been reading the Hardy Boy mystery books for four or five years when suddenly there was a store in town that was having a sale on these books. So my mother would purchase one or two every time she went by the store. I would read them just as fast as I could. There were some days when I would read an entire book in one day. While this certainly served the purpose to scale down my depression, it was not sufficient to eliminate it altogether.

We went to Louisiana during this period and I took a couple of the books with me. My grandfather was also a fan of these books even though he was in his sixties. So, we would start a book together and see which one of us could finish it first. He usually won, but it was still a fun contest.

Part of what made the depression during this summer (of 1983) so much worse was the fact that I began thinking mean thoughts about my grandparents, especially my grandfather. (This was in addition to my thinking these thoughts about my parents and God, the main cause of my previous depression problems.) It really made me feel doubly guilty since he was being so nice to me. And I contemplated the relationship that Kevin had with him, which I knew was a close one. I wondered

if Kevin loved my grandfather more than I did. And I also continued to question my love toward my parents and God.

There were some other events that relieved the depression. The trips to Louisiana were always a tremendous Godsend. We went twice this summer. When we went in August it was a very interesting trip. We had just crossed the Mississippi River entering into the state of Louisiana and getting the river about an hour or so behind us when the van started heating up. We finally had to pull into a gas station to get a mechanic to look into it. There were two men that worked at the station – one a mechanic and the other who watched the pumps and everything else. It was quite hot on that August day, and my father stayed outside with the van to keep an eye on the mechanic. In the meantime, mom, Missy and I stayed inside the office where it was cooler. He had a TV in there, but being this far out in the country, there was not much on. He kept saying that it was five o'clock and time for wrestling, and so he took over the TV at this point. I am not much of a wrestling fan; but, no matter – the TV station was messed up and showing something else. The man talked a lot and it was somewhat interesting. He had been a deputy sheriff and had gotten shot while on the job. While recovering he had taken off from work and bought a gas station. That was in August. When we came back to Louisiana in December we noticed that the former deputy was not there any longer. We learned from one of the workers that he had recovered, sold the gas station and went back to work for the sheriff's department.

Another event that helped me stave off the depression was a visit from by grandparents. We were renovating the kitchen at the time and my grandfather was using his skills as a retired carpenter to do most of the work. I was quite fascinated by the way he measured the cabinets and was able to bring everything together. I have always liked carpentry, but have not been able to get into it very much because of my handicap. I do enjoy watching others work with their hands. At this point I could still use my hands but I did not have the strength that normal people my size would have. It did not take him long to finish, however, and they could stay only for about a week. After their visit the battle against depression resumed, just as it did shortly after the two times that we visited them that summer.

The loss of strength in my hands was a constant reminder to me of my deteriorating condition. I first noticed its significance late in 1982 during the Christmas pageant. I tried to applaud as I normally do with everyone else when I found that I could not get my hands to come together. So, I made a fist with one hand and hit the other one on that.

Then there was another reminder during the school year. It so happened that they had decided that our luncheon entitlement should not include dessert, so they started charging us 25 cents for it. Our teacher was doing her normal thing trying to get us to have good manners, not be snobbish and to interact with students from other classrooms. She established a weekly prize -- that the model citizen of the week would get 25 cents, or the price of dessert. One morning before school we were waiting for everyone to get there and an obnoxious girl from the other classroom came into our class. She talked incessantly and insisted that everyone shake here hand. Most of us just ignored her. When she got to me I held my hand out with the intention of squeezing her hand. However, as hard as I tried to squeeze her fingers, there was no effect. It was at this point that I realized that I no longer had the strength. However, the teacher walked in just at this point and saw me

shaking hands with this “young lady,” and immediately declared me the citizen of the week. Needless to say, this is the only case in which having MD earned me a free dessert. Perhaps God was trying to tell me something about being nice. I never did tell the teacher.

One thing that played a major part in diverting my attention from depression was a small, pretty, snow-white cat that we called snowball. It was very late in August – about the last week (I recall since it was close to my sister’s birthday). One Saturday morning a pretty white kitten showed up on our doorstep, probably having been dumped on the nearby highway behind our house. We took it in thinking that it had just wandered off and someone would claim it shortly. At this time I still considered myself a dog man and did not realize that I would develop affection for a cat. However, after a while we thought that it must be a stray and realized that we might be able to adopt it. Dad tried to discourage us saying that it was probably from the neighborhood – I am sure that he did not want us to be upset if it was claimed. However, there were no tags, so if it had been lost we had no idea where to return it. So we began taking care of it – giving it leftovers and eventually we got Mom to buy some cat food for it. She complied but let us know that if it ran away we should not be overly concerned. But, of course, once you start feeding it ...

So, for all practical purposes the cat was ours, and my sister called it Snowball. Eventually after playing with the cat I discovered that I liked cats just as much as I liked dogs. While we had had dogs before, this was the first cat, and it was quite an adjustment for Missy and me. The first thing that we learned is that (unlike dogs) cats were climbers and there was no way that you could counter that. Mom did not want the cat to come in the house at first, and it would sit on the back porch making whatever noise that it could begging to come in. My sister and I sat there watching her when suddenly she started climbing up the back screen. I started to panic thinking that the cat was about to fall off onto the porch about seven feet below. (Of course, I realize now that this would probably not have hurt the cat.) But, in my distress I quickly dispatched Missy to go out the front door and rescue the cat. It seemed an eternity for her to get around the house, although it could only have been a few seconds. She finally got there and was able to ease the little kitten back to safety. But we quickly got used to the cats climbing exploits and pretty much ignored it after that.

One afternoon Missy came home from school and she noticed that the cat was lying in the front yard. Missy had something to do around back so she went to the back yard, and she noticed Snowball was in the back yard. This was confusing, since she did not see how the cat could have gotten back there so fast. So, she ran to the front, and the cat was in the front, and then running to the back found the cat there as well. This was quite perplexing until she came in and declared that there were two Snowballs – the person who dumped off one had probably dumped off the other as well. While we were going to be able to keep one of them, the folks drew the line right there. Fortunately, the yardman was working that day and he drew an instant fondness to Snowball II, so that problem was resolved quite well and without major consternation.

From watching so many cartoons, I had gotten the idea that the only things that cats went hunting for were birds, fish and mice. We soon discovered that this was not the case. One of the major drawbacks of having an “outdoor” cat is that they will always bring you their dead carcasses

after they are finished with them. They must think that they are bestowing some great gift upon their owners. I have never known anyone who thought that this was anything too awfully special, but I am sure that somewhere in the wild this capacity to remember one's owner was held in high regard. But, what are you going to do? This cat's specialty was bringing up squirrels and chipmunks. Whether she actually killed them or not is in question – a sufficiently large number were killed on the roadway out back to generate a fairly continuous supply, so no matter.

One day the cat had brought what was left of a chipmunk (minus the head). It was my sister's job to dispose of the unwanted remains. She got a shovel and scooped it up and deposited it in the ditch our front. The next morning the body returned, so she had to find a more definitive resting-place for it. The next morning the head showed up. I told them that Snowball wanted to place the head in her trophy case. This went on for several days – perhaps the same victim, perhaps not – we could not really tell for sure. None of us were really pleased with this, and when Snowball brought in a bird one day, Dad went out and got a bell from the pet store to hang around her neck. This might have slowed her down a little, but not that much, perhaps demonstrating that the animals she brought in were not necessarily the workings of her own killing instincts as much as things that she found in the vacant lots that were behind our house, and perhaps even further.

Another thing that the cat would do, as it became dark, was to find a high spot and survey the area to see if there were any potential victims milling around. We did not realize how seriously she took this chore until one day Dad spotted the cat on the roof. We were wondering how she got up there, but we watched her and found that she was getting up on the van and from there jumping up to the roof.

After a little while Mom relented and allowed us to bring Snowball into the house. I was quite grateful for this, since I spent the vast majority of my time at this point in the house, and could do little but look at the cat. Now that the cat could come in I really enjoyed the diversion of playing with her. This was a difficult sacrifice for my mother to make, but I am sure that she recognized the therapeutic benefit that the cat had for me. Usually we would bring the cat in at night and then put it out the next morning while Missy and I went off to school. There were exceptions when we put the cat out at night and allowed it to come inside during the day.

After a month or so the cat attained "official" status when Dad took it to the vet and got whatever shots cats get of that age. This tended to seal the bargain in my mind that the cat was officially ours – if cats ever really belong to anyone.

A few weeks later a huge dog wandered up onto our patio. We were not sure what to do with it. It began eating the cat food and, of course, the cat did not like this at all. At this point the only dogs that she had ever contacted (to my knowledge) were the two Poodles that lived across the street. This dog was more like a Great Dane. Snowball she was spending much of her time outside, and one day she just disappeared. We thought it was because she was afraid of the dog. We called the pound to pick the dog up since there was no way we could keep it. In the meantime, we were beside ourselves wondering what had happened to Snowball. We went to school that day quite worried and when we returned the cat was still nowhere to be found. That afternoon Missy went out to get the paper and on the way back to the house she noticed the cat in the rear-view mir-

ror of the van. Snowball had climbed a tree and had been hiding there all day. We tried to get her down but she would not budge, even though the big dog was gone. When Dad came home we told him about the cat but he declared that he was not about to get a ladder to retrieve her. She got up there and he felt that she would get down. As it started getting dark, however, we saw Dad climbing up the ladder after the cat. It reminded me of the proverbial stories of calling the fire department to rescue a cat from a tree.

When the first cold weather came in the Winter of 1983, Mom relented even more as the temperature dipped into the teens, and we let Snowball have the run of the house except to occasionally be thrown out to take care of her personal needs. That Christmas vacation was a very pleasant time for me, since I did not have to look out the window to see Snowball, but could occupy my time playing with her. Actually just having her around as part of the family was quite satisfying for both Missy and me, and she tended to draw us together as well, giving us something in common to talk and laugh about. We even bought a Christmas present for Snowball that year.