

# FROM THE PROJECTS TO THE PODIUM

How a Kid from the Philadelphia Projects  
Became an Elite Running Coach,  
Prolific Author & Biblical Scholar

A MEMOIR



MICHAEL H. EXTON

# FROM THE PROJECTS TO THE PODIUM

*How a Kid from the Philadelphia Projects  
Became an Elite Running Coach  
And a Prolific Author*

An Autobiography

by Michael H. Exton

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*Dedicated to my mother —  
who wanted me to be a Philadelphia lawyer.  
She wasn't far off.*

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## PREFACE

Dear Reader,

This book may read as though I was a near perfect kid and person. I was not. I had real failures, real flaws, and real moments of weakness that don't always make it onto these pages.

The apostle Paul said it best: *"I worked harder than all of them — yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me"* (1 Corinthians 15:10). That is my story too. I worked hard, extremely hard. I gave everything I had to coaching, to writing, to studying the Bible. But I was never the source of what was accomplished. God was.

Whatever good came out of my life — the runners who became champions, the books that opened eyes, the biblical truths that found their way to people who needed them — I showed up and gave everything I had. But mostly it was God working through a very imperfect person, accomplishing far more than I could have ever achieved on my own.

Read this book as the story of what God can do with an ordinary person who is willing. Because that is all I ever was.

— Michael H. Exton

**PART ONE**  
**THE FOUNDATION**

*The Early Years, 1955–1983*

# CHAPTER 1

## *The Con Artist*

I was eight years old when the con man walked into our lives.

His name was Cipriano. He was a big, strong Italian man — handsome, charming, and an amazing carpenter by trade. My mother fell for him. She was raising six kids by herself in a three-bedroom apartment in Bartram Village, a housing project on 54th Street in Southwest Philadelphia. She was tired. She was alone. And here came this man who seemed like the answer to everything.

He wasn't.

• • •

Cipriano was a professional con man. That was his real trade — not carpentry. Oh, he could build anything. He was genuinely talented. But he never actually worked. Here's how the scam went: he'd take on a job, something like a room addition, and he'd work on it for a few days. Just long enough to look legitimate. Then he'd go to the client with a sad story — all of his expensive tools had been stolen. The client, who had already seen him do good work, would hand over the money to replace the tools. And that was the last they ever saw of Cipriano. He'd move on to the next mark and run the same play all over again.

I watched him do this over and over. Year after year. And I noticed something. He never got caught. Not because he was lucky, but because he was good. He could look you straight in the eye and lie to you with such sincerity, such conviction, that you would believe every word. And then the next day he could look you in the same

eye and tell you the exact opposite with the same sincerity. That's what con men do. They don't sell a product. They sell conviction. And Cipriano was one of the best I've ever seen.

I didn't know it at the time, but I was being trained. Every lie I watched him tell, every scam I watched him run, every time I saw people fall for it — it was all going into a file cabinet in my mind that wouldn't be opened for another twenty years.

• • •

But Cipriano wasn't just a con man. He was connected to the Mafia, and he was a murderer.

For years, he had managed to avoid going to trial for the murder by paying off his lawyer, who in turn paid off the right people. But eventually the lawyer told him the judges couldn't be paid off any longer. A trial date was set. And here's the thing about that trial — over the years, the witnesses to the murder had been dying off. One by one, they were found dead. Until there was only one witness left.

The night before the trial, that last witness was found dead at his home.

So the monster-to-be never had to face a jury. The case was done. And that's when everything changed.

• • •

See, for about the first year, Cipriano was actually nice. We all liked him. He was pleasant to my mother, decent to us kids, and the household almost felt normal for a while. But during that first year, the murder trial was still hanging over his head. He had somewhere he needed to be on his best behavior. He had consequences waiting for him. He was running a con on us too —

the same way he conned his carpentry clients. Be charming. Be trustworthy. Win them over. And then take what you want.

The moment that last witness turned up dead and the trial disappeared, the mask came off. He didn't need to pretend anymore. There was nothing left hanging over him — not the courts, not the law, not anything. And that's when the nightmare began.

• • •

From that point on, we lived in absolute dread of him. He was constantly beating us. Constantly berating us. Constantly threatening us. There was no peace in that apartment. Every day was about survival. Every day you were walking on eggshells, trying not to set him off, knowing that it didn't matter — he'd find a reason anyway.

But the worst was at night.

We'd go to bed, and it would be quiet for a while. And then we'd be woken up by the sounds of my mother screaming in pain, begging him to stop hitting her. Imagine being a kid, lying in your bed in the dark, hearing your mother cry and plead for a man to stop beating her. And then you hear him tell her to clean up the blood.

Clean up the blood.

That's what we lived with. Night after night. Year after year. A coward. An animal. A man who could only feel powerful by terrorizing a woman and her children.

And that wasn't all. He did unspeakable things to members of my family. Things I will not detail here out of respect for my siblings, who did not ask for any of this and do not deserve to be defined by

what that man did to them. But I will say this: he was evil. Pure evil. The kind of evil that hides behind charm and good looks and a firm handshake.

And yet, for reasons I can only attribute to God, he never touched me. Not once. Go figure. In a household full of children, with a man who had no boundaries and no conscience, I was somehow spared. I didn't understand it then. I'm not sure I fully understand it now. But looking back at the rest of my life and everything God had planned for me, I believe He was protecting me even then — long before I knew Him.

• • •

We lived at the bottom of the 54th Street hill, just a block from Elmwood Avenue. The hill started up at Elmwood and ran down to our apartment. And every single day, I would stand at the top of that hill and look down.

I wasn't looking at the view. I was looking for his car.

If the car was there, I knew what was waiting for me. If it wasn't, I could breathe. That was my daily routine — an eight, nine, ten-year-old kid standing at the top of a hill, checking to see if it was safe to go home. That's no way for a child to live. But that was our life.

And when the car was there, the walk down that hill was the longest walk in the world. A snail's pace. Every step closer to the apartment was a step closer to whatever was waiting inside. And there was my dog Ginger, waiting for me at the bottom, wagging her tail like everything was fine. She always seemed to sense that something was wrong, and she'd try her best to cheer me up. Ginger was the one constant in my life during those years — the one thing that was pure and safe and loyal.

• • •

This went on for five years. From the time I was eight until I was thirteen. Five years of terror. Five years of watching a con man operate at close range. Five years of learning, without knowing I was learning, how a liar works.

And then my mother ended it.

One night, after all the kids were sound asleep, she waited for him. She sat in her bedroom in the dark, and she waited. He finally came home around three in the morning, the way he always did. And when he opened that bedroom door, my mother started shooting. One bullet after another.

She missed. But she didn't need to hit him. The message was delivered. Cipriano made a U-turn and that was the last any of us ever heard of him again.

Five years of beatings. Five years of terror. Five years of "clean up the blood." And my mother, a waitress who worked on her feet for fifty-five years, a woman who volunteered making meals for the homeless, ended it all by herself on one cold dark night with a gun and the kind of courage that Cipriano never had.

He was a big, strong man who terrorized women and children. She was a tired single mother of nine who'd had enough. And she won.

• • •

My freshman year at John Bartram High School, the monster was gone. But we were all still afraid. Every day we half-expected him to reappear. Every unexpected sound, every car pulling up outside — your mind goes right back. You can't just flip a switch after five years of that.

But he never came back. And slowly, life started over.

• • •

I need to be very clear about something here, because it's the most important part of this entire story.

Yes, Cipriano sharpened my eye. Yes, watching a professional con man operate for five years taught me things that most people never learn. But in the end, that had very little to do with Cipriano himself. The real reason I was able to see what I would later see — the deception, the fraud, the lies told from pulpits to sincere people who trusted their leaders — was God.

God, for reasons I may never fully understand, apparently planned all of this a long time ago. Perhaps even before I was born. He allowed those terrible years to happen — not because He wanted my family to suffer, but because He knew what was coming decades later. He knew there would be a moment when tens of thousands of good, faithful people would be deceived by a man standing behind a podium with the same sincerity and conviction that Cipriano used to con his carpentry clients. And God needed someone in that room who would see through it.

So He took something terrible and redeemed it. He didn't cause the evil — Cipriano's choices were his own. But God, in His wisdom, used those years to prepare me for a purpose I wouldn't discover until I was in my thirties. He guided events in my life so that He could open my mind to the truth. Without Him specifically choosing me for this job, I would have never seen it. I may not have been as easily deceived as others, but there is no way I would have figured out everything I did unless God wanted me to and guided me in that direction.

Why He chose me? I have no idea. Well, maybe I have a few ideas. But they are just that — just ideas.

• • •

The con artist's stepson learned to spot lies. And decades later, God would use that training to expose the biggest fraud I would ever encounter — one that would shake an entire church to its foundation.

But that story comes later. First, let me tell you about where it all began — a place called Bartram Village, a dog named Ginger, and a mother who was tougher than any con man who ever lived.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Bartram Village*

Nine kids. Two adults. Three bedrooms. One bathroom. That was our apartment in Bartram Village, a housing project on 54th Street near Elmwood Avenue in Southwest Philadelphia. The buildings were boxy, three-story brick structures, originally built in 1942 to house defense workers during World War II. By the time I came along in 1955, they housed families like ours — big, loud, crowded, and just trying to get by.

Right across the railroad tracks from where we lived was Bartram’s Garden, the oldest botanical garden in America, established in 1728. And Bartram High School was nearby too, where I’d attend for one year before we moved. Morton Elementary was where I went to grade school, and Tilden Middle School after that. Everything was right there in the neighborhood. That was our world.

• • •

My mother’s name was Henrietta. She was a waitress for fifty-five years. Let that number sink in. Fifty-five years on her feet, serving other people, raising nine children, and somehow keeping that household together through everything life threw at her. And later in life, she volunteered making meals for the homeless. A woman who worked harder than anyone I’ve ever known still found time to feed people who had even less.

But what made my mother special wasn’t just her toughness. It was her voice. My mom was a great talker — and I don’t mean she talked a lot, although she did. I mean she was exciting to listen to. Most adults are boring talkers, let’s be honest. But not my mom.

She spoke with conviction, with emotion, with perfect control and articulation. She told stories that were hilarious and interesting and made you lean in. All of my Philly friends loved my mom. They'd come to the apartment and end up in the kitchen listening to her hold court, and nobody wanted to leave.

If you've ever wondered where I got my voice — the tangents, the fire, the zeal, the excitement— it came from that kitchen. It came from her. Out of nine kids, I'm the one who ended up most like my mother.

My older sister Vicki told me something years later that I never forgot. I had asked her once why it always seemed like I was treated a little differently than everyone else. And she started laughing. She said, "Michael, it's because you were mom's favorite. When you weren't home she would constantly tell us how good you were, and 'Why didn't anyone else turn out like Michael?' You never got in trouble, you did well in school, and everyone liked you. And do you blame her for treating you better than the rest of us? She should have treated you better! Plus, not only were you the most well-behaved but you worked harder than the rest of us." No jealousy. No resentment. Just pure honesty. That was Vicki.

• • •

Vicki was my oldest sister. Her real name was Victoria, but we all called her Vicki. In some ways, she was like a second mom to me. She was sharp, she was smart, she was a great student. And she had this gift for making sure everyone at the table felt included — she'd ask questions, draw people out, make sure nobody was left sitting in silence. She ran a room differently than my mom did. Mom would grab you with a story. Vicki would pull you in with a question.

A few years before she passed away, I told her she was like a second mom to me. I was surprised by her reaction. She was truly startled — she had never thought of herself that way. And then she blushed. This strong, confident woman actually blushed. Because she had spent her whole life doing it without ever realizing anyone noticed. But I noticed. And I'm glad I told her while I still could.

Here's something interesting. All of my sisters called me Michael. Not Mike — Michael. And what's strange about that is no one else in the family was called by their full name. Vicki was Vicki, not Victoria. But for some reason, to every one of my sisters, I was always Michael. My mom called me Michael too. And to this day, I only like it when women call me Michael. When a man calls me Michael, it kind of bothers me. It just doesn't sound right. The name belongs to my mother and my sisters. That's where it lives.

• • •

My brother Jack was a year older than me. People sometimes had trouble telling us apart — he was older, but I was just as tall and eventually grew taller. Jack and I delivered the Philadelphia Bulletin newspaper seven days a week. Monday through Friday, the branch manager would drop the papers off and we'd deliver them to our customers right there in Bartram Village. But on Saturdays and Sundays, we had to get our wagons and haul them to the branch location on Woodland Avenue.

On the way to the branch office, we always stopped at a corner store and bought a big giant slice of cheesecake. A dime. That's all it cost. A dime for a slice of cheesecake that was the highlight of our week. Two brothers pulling wagons through Southwest Philly on a Saturday morning with cheesecake on their minds. Life wasn't complicated.

I loved my dad. I should say that. I'll tell his story later, but for now I'll just say this: I loved him, and the only other person in our family who felt the same way was Vicki. Just the two of us. My parents divorced when I was about five, and then Cipriano entered the picture three years later. But before all of that, there was a family. There were good years. And I remember them.

• • •

Before the con man came into our lives, I had a routine that I loved. I'd get up early for school and race to Morton Elementary. Not walk — race. Because if you got there early enough, you could play football or stickball or handball in the schoolyard before the bell rang. That was my motivation to get out of bed every morning. The games. The competition. The thrill of being a kid with nothing on his mind except whether he could win before the bell went off.

Once Cipriano moved in, that ended. He made me walk my younger sister to school every morning. No more racing to the schoolyard. No more games before class. By the time I got to school with my sister, the bell would ring and that was it. He took that away from me. A small thing, maybe, to anyone else. But to a kid, it was everything. He didn't just change the rules. He drained the motivation right out of my mornings.

And after school, the change was even worse. Before Cipriano, I'd race home, change from my school clothes into my play clothes, and run right back outside to play with my friends until dark. Then home for dinner, a little TV, and off to bed. A normal, happy routine. After Cipriano, everything was about survival. Coming home meant checking for his car. Playing meant watching the clock. And bedtime meant lying in the dark wondering what sounds you'd hear.

• • •

And then there was Ginger.

I was about twelve years old when I met her. Jack and I were on our Saturday newspaper route, heading to the branch on Woodland Avenue, and we'd just come out of the corner store with our cheesecake. And out of nowhere, this reddish-brown dog came sprinting straight at me. She had a huge, heavy chain around her neck, dragging the rest of it behind her as she ran.

I don't know where she came from. I don't know who had her before. But whoever it was didn't deserve her, because they'd kept her on a chain heavy enough to hold a grown man. She'd broken free somehow, and she ran right to me. Not to Jack. Not to anyone else on the street. To me.

I immediately called her Ginger. I petted her and shook her paw. And that was it. We were friends forever.

She followed me home. But my mom said no dogs. Nine kids and two adults in a three-bedroom apartment — there was barely room for the humans. Ginger didn't care about the rules. She just sat outside the apartment and waited. Patiently. For hours if she had to. And the second I walked out that door, she'd jump on top of me and lick me to death.

The first thing I did was take that heavy chain off her neck.

After a few months, my mom fell in love with Ginger too and decided I could keep her. Nobody could resist that dog. She had a way about her.

• • •

Ginger followed me everywhere. If I went to the store, she was right behind me, waiting outside when I came out. If I went to school, she'd walk me there and then be waiting when I got home.

She was my shadow, my companion, my comfort. Especially during those years with Cipriano.

She always seemed to sense when something was wrong. On the days when I stood at the top of the 54th Street hill and saw Cipriano's car parked at the bottom, and I'd start that long, slow walk down to the apartment — Ginger was right there beside me. She couldn't fix anything. She couldn't protect me from him. But she was there. And sometimes that's enough.

My mom constantly commented about what an amazing mother Ginger was when she had her first litter of puppies — about eight of them. She doted on every single one. As they got older, we gave them away one at a time. But Ginger's maternal instincts were something my mom genuinely admired, and coming from a woman who'd raised nine kids on her own, that was high praise.

But poor Ginger had some terrible things happen to her. One day she apparently got too close to men who were hot-roofing a building, and extremely hot tar fell on her — or maybe the workers threw it at her. It burned away a huge area of her fur down to the bare skin, which was terribly burnt. She was in awful pain for a long time. No vet. No medication. She just had to endure it and heal on her own. And she did. Because that's who Ginger was. A dog who had broken free from a heavy chain wasn't going to be stopped by anything.

• • •

In June of 1969, we moved to South Jersey — to Mullica Hill, right in the middle of the country. Cows, peach orchards, tomato fields. No more housing projects. No more dangerous streets. We could all finally breathe again.

One of the wisest decisions my mother ever made was moving us to South Jersey. If we hadn't gone, my brother Jack would never have made it. Almost surely he would have ended up in jail or on drugs or something terrible. South Jersey saved him. South Jersey saved a lot of us.

And nobody loved it more than Ginger. We didn't keep her chained up or locked in the house. She could come and go as she pleased. Every day she'd go on an adventure all by herself, exploring the countryside, the nearby creeks, the wooded areas. This was a dog's dream come true. She went from being a chained-up city dog in Southwest Philly to a free country dog in New Jersey. And when she came home from her adventures, we'd be waiting with a plate of leftovers from dinner. She loved it.

We lived in a big two-story house built sometime around the middle of the 1800s. Ginger was a natural wild dog — she wasn't a house dog and never pretended to be. She'd run into other animals on her explorations, which sometimes led to trouble. A skunk one time. A porcupine another. She came home from the skunk encounter and the whole family smelled her before we saw her. The porcupine left her with a face full of quills and a look that said she regretted every decision that led to that moment. But she never backed down from anything. That was Ginger.

She loved hunting rats and mice. They stood no chance with her. But her most ambitious project was a farmer's chickens. A farmer down the street pulled into our driveway one day, angry as could be, with a rifle in his hand. He told us our dog had been digging a hole under his chicken coop and eating a chicken every single morning. A fresh chicken breakfast, courtesy of Ginger. And with his rifle in his hand, he said if she ever came on his property again, he'd kill her.

The strange thing was, when the farmer was telling the story, Ginger was standing right there and she seemed to understand every word. Her ears went flat. She looked away. She knew the jig was up.

After the farmer drove away, I had my mom drive me to the farm with Ginger in the car. But Ginger knew something was up and didn't want to get in. She had no choice. When we pulled into the farmer's driveway, I had to drag her out of the car and over to the chicken coop. She definitely knew what was coming. And for the first and only time in my life, I yelled at Ginger. I rubbed her nose in the hole she'd dug. I hit her hard and screamed at her to never come back here again.

That evening, Ginger just sat there looking so sad. Not because of the punishment itself, but because it came from me — the one person who had never hurt her, the boy who took the chain off her neck the day they met. So I went to her and told her I still loved her, but she could never do that again.

She never went near that farmer's land again. One lesson. That's all it took. Because it came from me.

• • •

Eventually I graduated from Clearview Regional High School and headed off to Montclair State College in northern New Jersey. In the meantime, my family moved back to Pennsylvania — not to Philly, but to Darby, just outside the city. It was better than Philly, but not a whole lot better.

If moving to South Jersey was one of the wisest decisions my mom ever made, then moving back to Pennsylvania was one of the worst. Especially for my three half-brothers — Cipriano's sons. They were constantly in and out of trouble with the police, with

school. None of them graduated from high school. They were on drugs, selling drugs. The youngest — the ninth child and the baby of the family — stabbed someone in a fight and came very close to killing him. He's been in and out of prison his whole life, although mostly in.

And here's the thing that still haunts me. All three of those boys are just like their father. They never saw Cipriano again after the oldest turned three. They had zero contact with him, zero relationship, no role model to imitate. And yet they turned out to be natural-born con artists, just like him. It was in their blood. They didn't learn it — they inherited it. And they used those gifts to their full advantage, conning many people out of money. Especially my mom.

• • •

A few months after I left for college, my mom called me with news that broke my heart. Ginger was gone.

My younger sisters had taken her with them to a mall, which was pretty far from the house. They couldn't bring her inside, so she waited outside. But when they came out hours later, Ginger was nowhere to be found. They looked everywhere. She was gone.

And that was it. No more Ginger.

I cried and cried and cried.

From about age twelve to eighteen — some of the most important years of my life — Ginger was my constant companion. My protector. My comfort when I saw that car at the bottom of the hill. She chose me that day outside the corner store in Southwest Philly, and I chose her right back. I took off her chain, gave her a name, and loved her every day for six years.

After all these years, I still think about her from time to time. Some bonds never break. Not even after decades.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Paradise Farms*

Nothing before it and nothing since has ever come close. Not even in the same universe. If you asked me to name the single greatest experience of my life, the answer would take no thought at all: Paradise Farms Summer Camp in Downingtown, Pennsylvania. Seven consecutive summers, starting at age seven. Seventeen days each summer. And from age seven to thirteen, every one of those days was pure, unfiltered joy.

What made it so sensational for a city boy from Philly? Everything. The food? Yes. The games? Yes. The sports? Yes. The arts and crafts? Yes. The Indian games and dances? Yes. The haunted house? Yes. Skit Night? Yes. Olympic Day? Yes. Singing folk songs around a campfire while a counselor played the guitar? Yes. Eating burnt marshmallows around that same campfire? Yes. Living in a cabin with seven other boys? Yes. Going on overnight hikes in the woods and camping out under the stars? Yes. Going on creek hikes? Yes. Going on blackberry hikes? Oh yeah. Going on thorn hikes? Well, maybe not.

But the best thing of all was none of these things. It was the counselors. Uncle Bill. Uncle Jerry. Uncle Rocky. Uncle Ed. And on and on it went. Almost all of the counselors each year were amazing and seemed to genuinely love the campers. And the campers definitely loved the counselors. Most of them were

college students from West Chester College, and they brought an energy and creativity to that camp that I've never seen matched anywhere. My sister Vicki loved Paradise Farms so much that she became a counselor herself and chose West Chester for college because of that camp. That's the kind of mark it left on people.

• • •

Now, that first year was not good at all. I was only seven. The age minimum was actually eight, but my mom wanted me to go to camp with my older brother Jack, so she told them I was eight. But once I experienced those seventeen days as a seven-year-old, I understood exactly why the minimum was eight. Seven was simply too young. I was lonely. I missed my mom. I was too young to really enjoy most of the activities. I did love the food — that was the one thing I really liked.

It didn't help that one of the campers in my cabin was a disaster. He was too old — the age limit was fourteen, but he had to be at least fifteen, maybe sixteen. And from day one it was obvious he didn't want to be there. His parents had forced him to go, and honestly, I didn't blame them. If I were his parent, I'd want to get rid of that kid for as long as I could. But he made life miserable for the first-time cabin counselor who didn't know how to handle him. Fortunately, there was another older boy who was great and helped balance things out. And the counselor? He was just okay. But it wasn't all his fault — that one kid was a handful.

Before the encampment was even over — I think we had about three or four days left — the troublemaker took off and walked all the way home to Philly down the railroad tracks. The same tracks that brought the train from downtown Philly to camp and back. More than likely he got off the tracks at some point and just hitchhiked a ride home, as hitchhiking was popular back then.

Other than that, I can't remember too much about that first year, other than I didn't like it.

We took a train to camp that first year or two. After that, campers came and left on buses.

• • •

But then the following summer came around, and it was the exact opposite. Everything changed. My cabin counselor was an experienced, well-liked counselor that most of the kids already knew. All the kids in my cabin were great. No troublemakers. And they'd raised the age minimum to nine — probably because of me the previous year. But my mom still had to lie to get me in.

They had all kinds of games that I'd never heard of. And every single day we would play at least one or two games that we never played again the rest of the encampment. Over seventeen days, that's an enormous catalog of activities. Somebody at Paradise Farms really knew what they were doing.

Capture the Flag was a classic, but we played it near the woods, which made it that much more exciting. You could sneak through the trees and then burst out with a surprise attack on the flag. It was the four Hill cabins against the four Valley cabins — a war in the woods, and it was glorious.

Then there was Fox Hunt. All of the counselors wore flags on their belts, like in flag football. They'd take off at the same time, scattering in all different directions through the woods. Then we had to hunt them down and grab their flags. A bunch of city boys from Philly who'd never been in real woods chasing grown men through the trees — we went absolutely wild for it.

Gold Rush was cabin against cabin. Before the game, counselors would paint rocks different colors — gold, silver, and red — and scatter them all over the camp. Gold was worth the most, red the least. But the weight of the rock also mattered. The heavier the rock, the more it was worth. So once you found one, you had to get it to the weighing station as quickly and as safely as possible. Safely, because half the counselors were running around as thieves. If they caught you, you had to hand over your treasure and start all over. But if a thief was chasing you, you could scream for help and maybe a sheriff would arrive in time — because the other half of the counselors were sheriffs. The strategy was everything. Do you go for the big gold rock that slows you down and makes you an easy target? Or do you grab small ones and make fast trips?

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Three days stood above the rest: Olympic Day, Indian Day, and the scary night that I can only call Monster Night.

Olympic Day changed my life. It was my first experience with track and field events, and it lit a fire in me that burns to this day. Just like the real Olympics, we had short races, medium races, and a cross-country race. Long jump, triple jump, high jump, shot put, discus, javelin. Plus timed races like running the bases and a seventy-five-yard sprint with a U-turn around a cone. It was the two boys' camps against each other — Camp Weitzel versus Camp Bellevue — with two age divisions: nine to eleven and twelve to fourteen. First place was five points for your camp, second was three, and third was one.

I quickly found out that I was best at the longest race — the cross-country race — and, interestingly enough, the triple jump, which I learned how to do instantly. As I got older, I did very well in these events, and toward the end of each encampment they'd hold

Award Night in the rec hall. Blue ribbons, red ribbons, white ribbons for the top three finishers. That night was electric for me.

Olympic Day is what started my love for the Olympics, for track and field, and for cross-country. Everything that followed — high school running, college running, thirty-seven years of coaching, the California Grizzlies, state championships, national records — it all traces back to a camp field in Downingtown, Pennsylvania.

We also had Water Olympics, which was just like Olympic Day but in the pool. Who could swim the furthest underwater, who was fastest in the crawl, the backstroke. I wasn't too good at any of these events, but it was a lot of fun to watch as all the campers sat around the pool with our feet in the water, cheering everyone on. And speaking of the pool — we went swimming every single day, along with three great meals.

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Indian Day was fantastic. All day long, everything revolved around some sort of Indian activity. First thing in the morning, we'd all get painted up like warriors — face paint, the works — and we stayed that way all day.

One activity was a fire-building contest. You gathered wood and tried to light it by rubbing rocks together. A long rope was strung between two trees at a precise height, and the object was to get your fire going and build it big enough to burn through the rope. Cabin against cabin. You can imagine the scene — eight groups of boys frantically blowing on sparks, piling twigs, erupting in cheers when the flame finally caught.

Then came the Tribal Wars. All eight cabins separated and went into the woods in different directions. Each camper had a feather attached to each upper arm with a rubber band. When you ran into

another tribe, you went to war. Once both your feathers were taken, you were dead. But you could find the Medicine Man wandering the woods with a supply of feathers to bring you back to life. At the end of the day, the cabin with the most feathers won. And then at night, we all gathered around a huge bonfire and performed the Indian dances we'd been practicing all encampment.

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Monster Night was terrifying and wonderful. Many of the counselors would put on these grotesque masks — gooey, bloody, one eyeball hanging out — with frighteningly realistic makeup. There must have been some great makeup artists at that camp. The kids would just sit there eating snacks, scared to death, while the counselors performed creepy skits and told scary stories. There wasn't just one skit but several, and they weren't all skits — sometimes a hideous-looking creature would step out of the dark and tell a story that kept you up half the night.

I remember one. A boy was camping in the woods with his group when it started to drizzle. The counselors woke everyone up to hike back to the cabins — but somehow they didn't see him on the outskirts of the campsite. He woke up alone in the middle of the night. So he grabbed his flashlight and started walking back. At first everything was fine. But then he noticed it — a dim, dull light about thirty meters behind him, and a huge shadowy figure beside it. He walked faster. But the next time he turned around, it was twenty meters back. Then ten. He started running, threw down his sleeping bag and gear, sprinted with nothing but the flashlight until he couldn't run another step. And then he felt a big, cold hand on his shoulder.

*“Hey buddy, do you have a light?”*

The place erupted.

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Skit Night was another favorite. Each cabin performed a skit in front of the whole camp, and most were surprisingly good for a bunch of kids. I remember one where two boys held a blanket up high like a curtain. Two other boys walked past the front and one said, “Hey, I think this is it. All we have to do is toss some money over and loads of money will come back.” They threw a dollar over the top. Nothing. They tried a piece of cookie. Nothing. Finally, one of them got mad and spit over the top. A huge bucket of water came flying back and drenched them both. The crowd went nuts.

On quieter evenings, we’d gather for campfire songs. We’d scatter about looking for dry wood, stack it up, light it, and then sit on the big flat stones that circled the fire pit while a counselor or two played guitar. We’d sing folk songs that were very popular in the 1960s — “Michael Row Your Boat Ashore, Hallelujah,” “If I Had a Hammer.” I enjoyed it much more than I thought I would. There’s something about singing together around a fire under the stars, with no distractions, just the flames and the music and each other, that hits you in a place you didn’t know existed.

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The hikes were a world of their own. Blackberry hikes were my favorite. We’d hike outside of camp to where millions of wild blackberries grew. Everyone brought an empty, cleaned-out quart-sized milk carton. When our cartons were full, we’d head back to camp and put them in our cereal for the next few days. I loved blackberries then and I still love them now.

Creek hikes were pure summer. We’d hike down the creek in old sneakers until we came to a deep part with a Tarzan rope. You’d grab on, swing out over the water, and decide whether to let go or

ride it back. Some kids wouldn't do it. Some did it fifty times. Then the kitchen crew would arrive in pickup trucks with drinks, hoagies, and cheesesteak sandwiches. Afterwards we'd head back on the dirt trail that ran along the creek.

Overnight campouts were magic. We'd hike out to a stretch of pine trees, set up camp, roast marshmallows around a fire, and sleep under the stars in our sleeping bags. In the morning, the kitchen crew would drive out in pickup trucks with orange juice, milk, cereal, eggs, and sausage — breakfast served right there in the woods. And nearby there'd be a creek with a Tarzan rope, and we'd swing on it for an hour before hiking back to the cabins. The food always showed up at exactly the right moment. Whoever ran that kitchen understood that half the magic of camp is the meal showing up in the right place at the right time.

And then there was Uncle Bill's Thorn Hike. Uncle Bill was everyone's favorite counselor — tall, long beard, a great storyteller. He must have been a counselor at that camp for twenty years. Once each encampment, he'd lead a thorn hike for anyone brave enough to try. I'd had so much fun on the blackberry hike that I figured I'd give it a shot. But when I noticed fewer than ten campers had signed up, I started to doubt my choice. Too late — we were already marching out with Uncle Bill leading the charge, singing camp songs.

When you arrived at the destination, you saw exactly what it was. A big open field with nothing but thorns, and you had to hike straight through it, trying your best not to get jabbed too many times. After that one hike, I was done. Never went back for a second try. But some kids did. How Uncle Bill pulled this off every single year, I will never know. Today it would never happen — the lawsuits would pile up before lunch. But that was Paradise Farms. A different era.

Three of the last four summers I received Honorable Mention for the Walwakeya Award — the camp’s highest honor, so prestigious that some encampments, no camper won it at all. I got Honorable Mention at ages ten, twelve, and thirteen. The only reason I didn’t win it at ten or twelve was that some counselors thought I was too young.

At thirteen, it should have been a done deal. But on the final evening, right before the counselors voted, I’d chosen to play a softball game. Two counselors and about twenty campers headed to the field. Everything was fine for the first couple of innings. Then the counselors started changing the rules. Instead of three strikes, everyone got four. Instead of three outs, each team got four — then five. They stopped keeping score. They made a complete mockery of the game.

Now, I cannot play a game like softball, football, or basketball unless the score is being kept. Otherwise it’s pointless. If those two counselors had told us what they planned to do before I chose softball, I would have picked another activity — fishing at the lake, anything. So I told them I wasn’t happy and asked if I could leave and go to the lake. They said no — once you chose an activity, you had to stay. But I told them this wasn’t what I chose. I chose a normal game of softball, the same game played every single evening, every single encampment, every single night — except this night. They wouldn’t budge.

Those two counselors voted against me that evening. I lost the Walwakeya by one vote. At thirteen years old, it stung badly. But looking back, I can see something in that moment that I’d carry for the rest of my life: the refusal to accept a standard lower than what

was promised. The same standard of excellence I would demand from my runners for thirty-seven years.

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That last summer — or what should NOT have been my last summer — my cabin counselor was Uncle Jerry. And on the final night, after the Walwakeya vote, Uncle Jerry did something extraordinary. He read me his confidential report card — the evaluation that every counselor was required to write about each camper and hand to the camp administrator. The campers never saw them. Neither did the parents.

What he wrote was full of praise after praise about my character. And he said he hoped that someday he would have a son exactly like me. I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

The following summer, we moved to South Jersey. I couldn't go back. For the first time in seven years, no Paradise Farms. And that first summer in Mullica Hill was the most boring summer of my life.

When I never showed up at camp, Uncle Jerry was crushed. He couldn't understand why. So he did some investigating, found out my family had moved to New Jersey, and tracked down our address. And in the middle of August, when the encampment was over, who do you think was knocking on our front door?

We were both so happy to see each other — not just me, but the whole family, because everyone knew him. He stayed the entire day. My mom made a great dinner. Then he drove back to his home in the Kensington-Fishtown area of Philadelphia. He also told me that if he'd known we'd moved before the encampment started, he could have gotten special permission for me to attend.

That was the last time I ever saw Uncle Jerry. But I never forgot what he wrote on that report card.

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Every summer when I came home from camp, I was sad for about a week. Couldn't shake it. And then I'd snap out of it and be fine. Decades later, the exact same thing happened at the end of every school year when I was a teacher. A week of feeling that loss before I could reset.

It took me a long time to understand why. In both cases, it was the same thing: I poured myself into relationships with children — real relationships, not surface-level — and then the season ended. Suddenly. The kids were gone. The connections were gone. Whether it was a cabin full of boys in Downingtown or a classroom full of students in California, the pattern never changed. I loved kids, I invested in them completely, and then I had to let them go.

Camp, school, and later even the apartment complex where I lived — wherever there were children, I connected with them. And wherever there was a goodbye, it cost me something. That's the price of caring the way I care for kids. I've paid it gladly, every time. But it was Paradise Farms that taught me how.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Uncle Mike*

*Paradise Farms, 1976*

In the summer of 1976, seven years after my last summer as a camper, I went back to Paradise Farms. Not as a kid this time. As a counselor. Uncle Mike. I was twenty years old, and my sister had given me a perm, so I had a head full of curly hair that I was quite proud of. My youngest brother Nino was a camper that year and ended up assigned to my cabin, which made the whole thing even better.

It was a full-circle moment. The homesick seven-year-old who'd cried for his mom in the Lenape cabin was now one of the Uncles. I knew what those counselors had meant to me — Uncle Bill, Uncle Jerry, Uncle Rocky, Uncle Ed — and I wanted to give these kids the same thing they'd given me.

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Two of the counselors that summer I had known as campers when I was growing up at Paradise Farms, and they were both outstanding. Uncle Buck was younger than me and was one of the sons of Mr. Collie, the man in charge of everything at the camp. I think Buck only went to camp one summer as a camper, just so he'd know firsthand what it was like. He may have even been in my cabin — I'll have to check my camp pictures. Buck went on to become a medical doctor.

Uncle Dave loved to go deep-sea fishing in Florida. He may have been the camp director that year. And there was Uncle Roger, who was a lot of fun, though I don't remember him being a camper in the years I attended.

Between Buck, Dave, Roger, and myself, the counselor team was strong. These were good guys who cared about the kids. And having Nino in my cabin added something personal to the experience — my own little brother getting to have the Paradise Farms experience with his big brother as his counselor.

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The highlight of the summer — and the story I'll never stop telling — was the Doc Savage Raid.

One evening the camp showed a movie: Doc Savage, The Man of Bronze. I loved it, and so did the campers. What got us was the way Doc Savage would get into these massive battles with criminals, and by the end his clothes would be completely torn to shreds — but his hair? Perfect. Not a strand out of place. We thought that was the greatest thing we'd ever seen.

The next day, I looked at my boys and said, "Who wants to join me in a Doc Savage adventure and raid the girls' camp?"

Every hand went up.

So we ripped our shirts open, Doc Savage style — torn, shredded, hanging off our shoulders — but we made sure our hair looked absolutely perfect. Then we charged across camp and invaded the girls' side. A pack of wild boys with destroyed shirts and immaculate hair, led by their curly-haired counselor, storming through the girls' camp like we'd just won a war.

There's a black-and-white photograph of the aftermath. All the boys lined up with their torn-up shirts, grinning from ear to ear, and me in the middle with my perm still looking good. When those kids got home and their parents opened their bags and found shredded shirts, I'm sure the phone calls to the camp weren't

pleasant. But that's camp. That's what memories are made of. And I guarantee you every one of those boys still remembers the Doc Savage Raid.

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But underneath the fun, something had changed. And I could see it clearly now because I had adult eyes.

The Paradise Farms I'd loved as a boy was fading. The camp was far less competitive than it had been in the 1960s. They had dropped some of the best activities — including Olympic Day, the single event that had sparked my love for track and field and changed the entire direction of my life. In its place, they'd added more arts and crafts and softer alternatives. The distinctive games and competitions that had made Paradise Farms unlike any other camp in the world were being stripped away, one by one. I can't remember all the specifics, but the feel of the place was different. The edge was gone.

And then there was something far worse.

There were a few boys in the Bellevue camp having homosexual sex in the cabins. And I believe one or two of the counselors as well. This was shocking and disturbing. The counselors were the people entrusted to protect and guide these kids. It was a betrayal of everything the Uncles I grew up with had stood for. Uncle Bill, Uncle Jerry — these men would have been sickened by it.

But it was also a sign of the times. What was happening across America in the mid-1970s was now invading the camp. The culture was shifting, and Paradise Farms was not immune. The competitive spirit that had built character was being replaced by a softer philosophy. The moral boundaries that had once defined the place were being crossed right there in the cabins. The structure,

the discipline, the wholesome fun that had made those seventeen days the greatest experience of my life — all of it was eroding.

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I'm glad I went back. Glad I got to be Uncle Mike for one summer, glad Nino got to experience it, glad the Doc Savage Raid happened. Those are memories I treasure.

But I'm also glad I saw the truth of what was happening. Because it taught me something I'd carry into everything I did for the rest of my life: greatness doesn't sustain itself. It requires people who refuse to lower the standard. The moment you start replacing competition with comfort, the moment you stop keeping score, the moment you let the rules slide — you lose what made the thing special in the first place. I'd seen it happen at the Walwakeya vote when two counselors changed the softball rules. Now I was seeing it happen to the entire camp.

Paradise Farms gave me the seven greatest summers of my life. It gave me Olympic Day, which gave me track and field, which gave me a coaching career, which gave me the California Grizzlies. It gave me Uncle Jerry, who wrote on a confidential report card that he hoped to have a son like me. It gave me campfires and creek hikes and Gold Rushes and the Tarzan rope and blackberries in my cereal.

And then it gave me one more gift: it showed me what happens when people stop fighting to protect the things that matter. I would never make that mistake. Not as a teacher. Not as a coach. Not as a man.

Seven summers as a camper. One summer as a counselor. A lifetime of lessons.



## CHAPTER 5

### *The Runner*

In my freshman year at John Bartram High School in Southwest Philadelphia, I ran cross country and track. I did fairly well for a young, very immature freshman. But then in track, in May, one of the coaches for some reason took a few of us to the Philadelphia cross-country course that we raced at each week the previous fall. Why he did that I'm not sure, because that is very unusual and I've never seen another coach ever do it.

He took about ten of us there and we jogged the 2.3-mile course as a warmup. Then we stretched a little with a few strides. Then we got on the starting line and the coach yelled "Go!" and off we went. I wound up running an amazing time for a first-time novice ninth grader. So fast that everyone on the track team kept talking about it.

So I had it all planned. I would win the city cross-country title my junior year, and then repeat as a senior but also break the course record that dated back to the 1940s.

But that summer we moved to South Jersey.

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I enrolled at Clearview Regional High School in Mullica Hill. The difference between the two schools was staggering. I would rate Bartram and the elementary and middle schools I'd attended in Philly with a two on a scale of one to ten, with one being the lowest score possible. Clearview I would give a ten.

What a difference. I no longer feared being jumped at school, or being knifed at school, or shot at school, or robbed. Plus I could

never build a friendship with the teachers at Bartram. But at Clearview it was the exact opposite. Zero fear. And the teachers were amazing. Many of them I wound up knowing very well.

But I did miss my wonderful running coach at Bartram — Mr. Watson. George, I believe, was his first name. When I told him at the end of the school year that I was moving, he hated to see me go for several reasons: he thought I had great potential as a runner, and we had a wonderful friendship. I was actually surprised at what he said.

Now Mr. Watson was a Black man, an inner-city kid at one time, just like me. But he was so happy for me that my family was taking me away from the dangers and the crime and the bad influences of the city, and moving to an incredible environment in Mullica Hill to raise a family. He was much more concerned for my well-being than he was about his cross-country and track teams and what I would probably achieve on those teams in the next three years. That told me everything I needed to know about the man.

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That first summer in South Jersey was terribly boring. There was nothing to do. No Paradise Farms, no friends, nothing but cows and cornfields. But I was running every day. About ten miles every day. I couldn't wait for school to begin in September.

But something happened right before school started. I went to bed as usual expecting a good night's sleep, and something went wrong. I woke up with a horrible chest cold. Unfortunately it was a very serious cold that eventually led to me getting asthma. Very severe asthma. The type that can kill someone. And it almost did exactly that, two times in my life.

Eventually I was able to run a little bit and I joined the Clearview cross-country team. Unfortunately the coach was terrible. He knew nothing about coaching and didn't want to learn anything about coaching. The school district had forced this very boring, dull history teacher — I should know, because I also had him for history class — to coach the cross-country team, which he was very much opposed to doing. But he was a very nice and considerate man, and eventually he would let me make up the workouts each day for the team.

Because of my severe asthma, I could only run a few months out of the year instead of 365 days a year the way I'd planned. So for the next three years at Clearview I did okay, especially given the limited training I was forced to do.

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But in track, we had a real coach: Mr. Swanson. Wayne was his first name. He was white, but he and my previous coach at Bartram, Mr. Watson, were very similar. Both great coaches. Both great men.

Mr. Swanson put me in a steeplechase race my sophomore year — they only had the steeplechase event once a year. And I did very well. My best race of the year, I thought. I couldn't wait to run it again my junior year.

But that year Mr. Swanson put me in the distance medley relay instead, as he thought we could break the school record. And sure enough, me and the three seniors broke it — a record that would last for about forty years. I ran the mile leg on that relay, although I was a natural two-miler and the mile was too short for my abilities. But right after the meet, Mr. Swanson told me he would be putting me into the steeplechase my senior year.

I was excited for one full year. I thought about that race all the time and continually practiced the event on our school track using hurdles instead of barriers. The steeplechase was a 1.5-mile race — six laps around the track with five high barriers on each lap that every runner had to clear. It was my event. I knew it the first time I ran it.

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It was the spring of my senior year, and the day had finally arrived. I'd been planning and anticipating and dreaming about this race for two years, ever since I first ran the steeplechase as a sophomore. I couldn't wait for the gun to go off.

There were supposed to be three heats. But this was the only meet held at night all year, and the steeplechase was one of the last events. The football lights were on. Then an official came racing over, huffing and puffing and looking like he was about to have a heart attack, and called all fifty of us scheduled for the steeplechase to the starting line.

He gave us the bad news: there would only be two heats instead of three. They were far behind schedule and needed to speed things up. He yelled out the top twenty-five runners on his list for heat one, and me and the other twenty-four would run heat two.

Twenty-five inexperienced high school kids crammed into one race, six laps, five high barriers per lap. That's dangerous. But I thought to myself, don't let that disturb you. And I didn't.

The first heat lined up. Five minutes to go.

But then the same official came sprinting back, looking even worse than before. "Stop!" he yelled. They had to speed things up even

more. There would be only one heat. All fifty runners would race at once.

Fifty kids. One race. Six laps. Thirty barriers. Under the football lights. It was a disaster waiting to happen.

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Bang.

The gun went off for the most anticipated race of my life. But now I was more nervous than usual. Because of my asthma, I had to warm up extensively before a race, and then I had to pace myself almost perfectly to run well. If I went out even a little too fast, I would die. So, like I did in all my races, I went out at the pace I thought I might be able to hold for all six laps if I ran a perfect race.

After the first lap, I was in dead last. Fiftieth out of fifty.

But the other forty-nine runners had a problem they didn't know about yet. They had very little experience with the steeplechase, and as they approached each barrier, many of them would stop dead in their tracks, grab the barrier with both hands, and climb over it. So as I'm closing in on each barrier at full stride, the runner just ahead of me is suddenly not moving. I had to pivot instantly to the right and hurdle the barrier in one swift motion without losing momentum.

I was a much better natural athlete than most of my competitors. I had played basketball a great deal on the Philly playgrounds, and you quickly learned how to change directions while dribbling in a split second. That basketball instinct paid enormous dividends in this race. Every barrier, every pass — pivot right, clear it, keep

moving. My body knew what to do because the Philly playgrounds had taught it to react without thinking.

I passed about ten runners on the second lap. And ten more on the third. And ten more on the fourth. And ten more on the fifth. Like clockwork. Lap one: fiftieth. Lap two: fortieth. Lap three: thirtieth. Lap four: twentieth. Lap five: tenth. Picking them off one by one while they fell apart around me.

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It was dark out. The lights were on but not very bright. And I loved running at night. Back in Philly, every time my mom would send me to the store, which was often, I would time myself from start to finish. And my best times were always at night — by a long shot.

For this race and this race only, and only this one time all year, the announcer called the race like a horse race. He was outstanding, and he usually announced only the top five runners by name. I could hear him the whole time, and I used his voice like a compass. By announcing who the leaders were and how far apart they were, I knew exactly what was happening in front of me without ever looking up. I could concentrate on one barrier at a time.

Tenth place. One lap to go. The gun fired for the gun lap.

Now it was time to look up. Instead of focusing on barriers, I locked my eyes on the runners ahead of me. This got the adrenaline pumping even harder, but I was taking a risk — with my eyes on them instead of the barriers, one bad step could send me sprawling.

I immediately passed one runner. Then another. Then a third. Three hundred yards to go and I was in seventh. Then sixth.

And that's when the announcer lost his mind.

*"Who the hell is that in sixth place and where did he come from?!"*

He looked up my racing number on my jersey and exclaimed for the entire stadium to hear:

*"That is Mike Exton of Clearview!"*

Now the adrenaline was pumping through my body like never before. The whole stadium was staring at me. And the announcer had stopped calling the race. From that point on, he only mentioned the other runners in context with me.

*"Wow, do you think Exton can catch the fifth-place runner? Yes, he just did! Now the Clearview senior is in fifth but he's quickly reeling in the fourth-place runner. And now he's passing the number four runner. There are only three ahead of him now. But they still have quite a lead and there are only 150 yards left in the race! Can he possibly pull out a miracle and win? But his biggest challenge will be catching Mike Bonnett of Highland, who is currently in first. I don't think Exton will ever catch him, but he could finish second — or who knows, maybe even—"*

Third place. Gone. Second place. Gone.

Just one barrier left and fifty yards to go, and I was catching up to Bonnett exactly as we approached the final barrier together. Bonnett in lane one. Me in lane two. Everyone in the stadium was on their feet. It was so loud you could barely hear the announcer anymore.

And then total silence. A huge gasp.

Bonnett was down. He'd hit the barrier and toppled over.

The announcer, stunned: “It looks like Exton is going to be our winner!”

But the race was not over. As Yogi Berra famously said, it ain’t over till it’s over. Fifty yards still separated me from the finish line. And the instant I thought the race was won, all the adrenaline vaporized into the air. My legs stiffened up like a robot. I could barely move. I was running at a snail’s pace.

And then Bonnett leaped back up. I didn’t see it. I heard it. His footsteps behind me, getting closer and closer. Forty yards to go. Then thirty. Then twenty. I could hear him breathing. I could almost smell his breath, he was so close to me.

Ten yards from the finish line, I still thought I might be in first. But I wasn’t sure. So I did the only thing my body had left to give.

I dove headfirst across the finish line.

The crowd went silent. Everyone knew a Mike had won the race. But which Mike? Was it Bonnett? Exton? Was it a tie?

And then the announcer broke the silence:

*“Mike Exton is declared the winner!”*

The crowd roared. Coach Swanson came sprinting over to congratulate me. And in the meantime, Bonnett — the other Mike, my best competitor and my best running friend — was helping me get up off the track. Along with the official who had decided that instead of three heats of seventeen, there would be one heat of fifty.

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My time was 7:41. A new school record.

It is still the school record. Fifty-three years later. Every runner who has come through Clearview Regional since 1973 — not one has touched it.

To put that in perspective: the year before, the race had been won in 7:30 by about seventy yards. And who won it? Another Mike — Mike Butynes, who happened to be one of the very best, if not the best, two-miler in the United States. He even went under nine minutes in the two-mile. So to finish just eleven seconds behind his South Jersey record, with severe asthma, limited training, starting dead last in a fifty-man field, and diving across the finish line — that was an incredible accomplishment for me.

A reporter from the Courier-Post in Camden asked me about the race afterward. My quote: “It was fun because there were so many people to pass.”

I still have that newspaper clipping. The photograph shows me lying on the track, with Bonnett and the official helping me to my feet. I’ve kept it for over fifty years.

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That race was my best race ever. I would run faster times as I got older, as all runners do. But nothing ever compared to that night under the football lights in South Jersey.

And everything I later taught my runners for thirty-seven years came from that race. Patience on the first lap. Trust your pace. Don’t panic when you’re last. Let them come back to you. Run your race, not theirs. Focus on one barrier at a time. And when the gun lap fires, look up and hunt.

It all started at Olympic Day in Downingtown, on a camp field where a city kid discovered he could run. And it crystallized under

the lights at a night meet in South Jersey, where a boy with bad lungs and a two-year dream dove headfirst across a finish line and set a record that has stood for over half a century.

After graduation, I headed to Montclair State College in northern New Jersey, where I ran cross country and track. I wasn't going to break any records there — the asthma saw to that. But I competed, I trained, and I kept running. It was at Montclair State that my life would take a turn I never saw coming — but that's a story for another chapter.

## CHAPTER 6

### *Debbie*

*Blackwood, New Jersey, 1974–1975*

I had just completed my freshman year at Montclair State College and was living for the summer with my brother Jack at his apartment in Blackwood, New Jersey — Cedar Ridge Apartments, right across the street from Camden County Community College. A runner named Ed McGowan, who was the same age as Jack and had run for Highland High School in Blackwood, also lived in the complex with his family. I'd known Ed from high school. He helped me get a summer job as the lifeguard at the apartment swimming pool.

What a job that was. My best job ever up to that point, especially for a young single guy. It seemed like all of a sudden there were lots of girls magically attracted to me. But I was only the second most popular guy at Cedar Ridge. The first was Bob Larney — a few years older than me, tall, handsome, with the kind of personality girls just couldn't resist. Plus he always had a very nice big car and a good high-paying job. I met Bob through the McGowan family, as he'd once dated Ed's older sister Michelle. He and I hit it off immediately and became best friends that summer and for several summers after.

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Debbie was a freshman in high school. She worked at the snack bar next to the pool, selling hotdogs and other things. Her twin sister also worked there, and perhaps a friend or two of theirs. She would always give me free hotdogs. She and her twin were gorgeous. But what set Debbie apart was her extremely friendly,

outgoing, positive attitude that radiated joy. We only talked briefly at first.

Then one night, around mid-June, I threw a party at the apartment. It was a strange evening. Two girls I hadn't known before spent the entire night fighting over me. One would come over and start kissing me, and then a few minutes later the other would push her away and start kissing me instead. This went on all night while the whole apartment watched in amazement. And of course, I loved every second of it. I was told much later in life, completely unbeknownst to me at the time, that I was a great kisser.

But the whole evening, while this circus was happening, Debbie was there too. She'd walked in with Kevin McGowan, one of Ed's younger brothers. She spent the night talking with Kevin and others, watching the show like everyone else.

Finally, later in the evening, I escaped from the two girls. And there was Debbie, sitting on the couch by herself. I jumped into action and started talking to her for really the first time.

Now, at this point I had a lot of confidence, to say the least. So I told Debbie how crazy it always was at the apartment every night with lots of people coming and going, and that I wished I had somewhere calmer and more relaxing to go. She immediately told me she would be babysitting for someone the next evening, and that I could stop by if I wanted.

Smooth on both sides. She knew exactly what she was doing. And so did I.

• • •

I showed up the next night, and that was it. We became inseparable from that day forward.

Debbie became my first real girlfriend. And the only girl I ever dated that I couldn't wait to introduce to my mother, who was living in Sharon Hill, Pennsylvania, at the time. Before the summer was over, I brought Debbie to meet her. My mom just loved her and was delighted. Out of every woman who would ever come through my life, Debbie was the only one I brought home to meet my mother. That tells you everything.

We were together every day, every evening. The lifeguard and the hotdog girl. It was the kind of summer you never forget — eighteen years old, your first real love, a girl whose smile could light up an entire apartment complex. Everything felt right. Everything felt permanent.

But summer ends.

• • •

I went back to Montclair State College, and I should have never gone back. I should have enrolled at the community college right across the street from the apartment, or transferred to Glassboro State College. But I loved Montclair and had a lot of very good friends there, and my freshman cross-country season had been incredible. So I went back.

But I couldn't stop thinking about Debbie every second of every day. And calling long distance in those days was extremely expensive — far more than I could afford. Then I was elected president of the Residence Hall Federation, which came with my own office above the student rec room. And the office came with a phone. I called Debbie frequently after that, and it was great. I went back to my brother's apartment on weekends when I could, though not as often as I would have liked. I made it back for the Christmas break, and that was wonderful. I think I spent every penny I had on Debbie. And her on me.

And every time I made it back to Blackwood was the same beautiful routine. I would first stop by her apartment, but her mom would usually tell me she wasn't home. Then I'd stop by the apartment where she babysat, but still no Debbie. So I'd just drive very slowly around the apartment complex looking for her — straight ahead, to the left, to the right, and behind me through the rearview mirror.

And then there she was. In my rearview mirror. Racing as fast as she could in a beeline heading straight toward my car. I would quickly put my car in park, jump out, and wait for her to arrive. But I never had to wait long. She would leap into my arms, and we would hold each other so tight for the longest time.

This happened over and over again, every single visit. The same search through the complex, the same glimpse in the mirror, the same sprint, the same leap, the same embrace. Oh, how I miss those moments with Debbie.

• • •

But I was gone too long. A whole year. And Debbie was in high school — absolutely gorgeous, with an even better personality than she'd had the summer before, and many boys were constantly wanting to date her. At one point I'd foolishly suggested that since she was so young, it might be better for her to see what other guys were like rather than spend her whole life with the same person. I was trying to be noble about it. I thought I was doing the right thing.

Then in the spring, I found out she'd been dating someone else. I did not handle it well. And so our relationship ended.

Sort of.

• • •

That next summer I stayed at Jack's apartment again and got the lifeguard job back. Bob Larney was still there. He and I went out frequently hitting the nightclubs, where girls would flock to him like bears to honey — the same thing that had happened to me at that party, except with Bob it happened everywhere he went.

And Debbie was working the food stand again.

Slowly, I started talking to her casually until we both felt comfortable. Then she started coming over to my apartment all the time. We talked about everything and laughed endlessly — we could talk to each other forever without ever getting tired of it. But she was still dating the other guy, so nothing got serious. We just talked and laughed all summer long in my apartment with no one else around. It was very nice. But how I missed the relationship we'd had the previous summer.

Going out with Bob Larney most nights helped me deal with it somewhat. But it wasn't the same. Nothing was the same.

• • •

Then the last weekend of the summer arrived before I headed back to Montclair.

Debbie came over one final time. But this time she was dressed beautifully. And she was wearing perfume — for the first time that entire summer. No makeup, because she hated makeup as much as I did. Just a beautiful girl in a beautiful outfit who smelled like she'd spent the afternoon getting ready for this one visit.

We talked the whole time and laughed as usual. But I was too nervous and too shy to do anything more than talk. This was the girl who'd been my first real love. This was the girl I'd brought

home to meet my mother. And something about having her right there, dressed like that, smelling like that, looking at me like that — I couldn't move.

It was time for her to leave. We slowly walked to the door. And then she just stopped. And she gave me the biggest hug I had ever received in my life.

She was waiting for me to kiss her.

And I froze.

I don't know why. I've asked myself a thousand times. The guy who had two girls fighting over him at a party. The guy who went out with Bob Larney every night without an ounce of hesitation. The guy who walked right up to her on that couch the first night they met and made his move without thinking twice. That guy — froze. Because this time it actually mattered. The other girls were easy precisely because they didn't mean anything. Debbie meant everything. And that's exactly why I couldn't move.

If I had kissed her, that would have been it. I would have had her as my girlfriend once again. And this time I would have transferred to Glassboro State, a college close to her home. I know this. I've known it for fifty years.

But I never kissed her. She walked out the door. And I have been kicking myself ever since.

• • •

The following summer, my brother Jack moved to another apartment complex much further away. So I never really saw Debbie again. I passed her briefly at the beach one time — I was with a friend and she was with a group of hers, but they were in a hurry and had to rush off.

Several years later, I mentioned Debbie to Mrs. McGowan. She said, “Wow, did she become a beautiful woman!” I wasn’t surprised.

Even years after that, I still couldn’t stop thinking about her. She and her family had moved away from the apartment complex, so I had no way of contacting her. But I tried. I couldn’t find her phone number, but I found her twin sister Donna’s. So one day I called Donna and told her I’d like to contact Debbie, if she wasn’t married or in a serious relationship. Donna told me that Debbie had a boyfriend she was living with, but that he wasn’t good for her. That I would be much better for her. She gave me Debbie’s phone number and encouraged me to call.

But I didn’t. She was in a relationship, and that was that. I couldn’t do to another man what had been done to me.

And here’s the part that still gets me. Donna told me the name of the apartment complex where Debbie was living. It was the same exact place where Bob Larney now lived. Of all the apartments in South Jersey, the girl I couldn’t kiss and the best friend I’d spent those summers with ended up in the same complex. Life has a strange sense of humor.

• • •

Debbie is one of two women I wish I’d married. Not because of what might have been, but because of what I already knew. I knew how she made me feel. I knew how my mother felt about her. I knew that we could talk forever and never get tired of each other. I knew that she’d waited for me at that door with perfume on and a hug that said everything her words didn’t.

I just couldn’t do the one simple thing that would have changed everything.

One kiss. One frozen moment at a doorway in Blackwood, New Jersey. And fifty years of wondering what my life would have looked like if I'd just leaned in.

## CHAPTER 7

### *Mai*

*Bay Area, California, 1981–1982*

*Certain names and identifying details in this chapter have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals. The emotions and events are exactly as they happened.*

• • •

I had moved to California from New Jersey in September of 1979. About a year later, I went out to a nightclub in the Bay Area one evening. And that's when I spotted her.

A Vietnamese woman was standing on the other side of the dance floor with a couple of friends, and I couldn't take my eyes off of her. I got the courage and went straight over to ask her to dance.

Wow, was she beautiful.

But then she politely said no. And that was it. I went back to where I'd been standing and was about to go home.

And then she came over to me. She said she would like to dance with me, if I still wanted to.

Did I still want to? You better believe it.

So we danced and talked all night long, both of us having a wonderful time. She told me it was the very first time she had ever gone to a nightclub. Her two friends from work, Karen and Cindy, had talked her into it. Eventually they came over and she introduced me. We talked briefly, and then they said it was late and had to go.

But before leaving, Mai wrote down her work phone number and told me the best time to call her.

And so I did.

• • •

We went on many dates, and we became closer and closer as time went on. Later she would confess to me how she loved the way I looked at her — as if I was looking at the most beautiful woman in the world. And she was exactly right, because that is exactly what I felt every single time I saw her. I couldn't stop myself from looking at her with great intensity. I wasn't putting on an act. I wasn't trying to impress her with smooth lines. I just couldn't help it.

Mai was a few years older than me, which was very unusual, as I was normally only attracted to younger women. But she looked younger than me. I remember someone once asking me why I was dating someone so young — that she had to be much too young for me. I definitely enjoyed hearing that. But the person was actually putting me down, accusing me of robbing the cradle. Meanwhile, Mai was the older one. She just had one of those faces that time seemed to forget.

She also had young children — the most wonderful kids imaginable. And she was separated from her husband. Her family had come to America from Vietnam after the fall of Saigon in 1975, when the communists took over and they had to get out. But after arriving in America, her husband started having affairs. So she separated from him.

Here was a woman who had lost her country, rebuilt her life in a new one, and then watched her marriage fall apart through no fault

of her own. And through all of it, she was raising those children with more love and devotion than I had ever seen.

• • •

Eventually the children became the stumbling block to us ever getting married. Not because I didn't love them — I did. But Mai would never take the risk of marrying again, because she needed to protect her children above all else. She had already been betrayed by one husband. She would not put her kids through the possibility of that happening a second time. Her children came first. Period.

And that is precisely why I loved her so much.

To put her children first in her life, even above her own wants and desires, was so wonderful to me. Because I knew exactly what it looked like when a mother doesn't do that. I had lived it. I was the kid whose mother had let the con artist into the house — who had chosen a man over her children's safety and well-being. Mai looked at her situation and made the opposite choice. She would never let anything or anyone threaten her children. Not even a man she loved.

The con artist's stepson fell in love with a woman who would have never let a con artist anywhere near her kids. She was the mother I wished I'd had. And the very quality that drew me to her the most was the one that meant I could never fully have her.

• • •

Eventually, one evening, she started crying uncontrollably. She told me she could no longer see me anymore. That by us dating but never being able to get married, she had to end it — so that I could meet someone else and get married and have children of my own.

She didn't end it for herself. She ended it for me.

She was crying because this was destroying her. But she loved me enough to let me go. She knew she could never marry me because of her children, and she refused to hold me in a relationship that would cost me the chance to have a family of my own. First she put her children above her own wants. Then she put my future above her own heart. This woman never once put herself first.

It had to be one of the worst days of my life.

There was nobody to be angry at. Nobody cheated. Nobody lied. Nobody walked away because the love had run out. The love was the very reason she ended it. That's a kind of pain that almost doesn't make sense.

• • •

Eventually I found out that her husband came back and promised to never cheat on her again. And she allowed him to come back — so that her children would have their father with them.

Of course she did. That was who she was. Every decision she ever made was for those kids. Every single one.

• • •

Mai is one of two women I wish I'd married. With Debbie, the heartbreak was a kiss that never happened — a frozen moment at a doorway that I've replayed for fifty years. With Mai, the heartbreak was different. There was no moment I could point to and say, "If only I'd done this." She made the decision for both of us, and she made it out of love — love for her children and love for me.

She looked at me one last time with those eyes I could never stop staring into, and she let me go so I could have the life she couldn't give me.

I never forgot the way she loved those kids. I never forgot the way she sacrificed everything for them. And decades later, when I spent thirty-seven years coaching other people's children, pouring myself into their lives the way a parent should, I think some part of me was still trying to be the kind of person Mai already was — someone who puts the children first, no matter what it costs.

## CHAPTER 8

### *Dennis And The Plain Truth*

1975–1984

At Montclair State College in northern New Jersey, I had a track teammate named Dennis. He was one of the most striking men I've ever known — extremely handsome, with the kind of presence that turned every head in the room. Any time I walked into a place with Dennis, every single female noticed. He was also a genuinely good person, and we became friends.

In 1975, Dennis handed me a magazine called *The Plain Truth*. It was published by a man named Herbert W. Armstrong and his organization, the Worldwide Church of God. The magazine made bold claims about what the Bible actually taught — claims that contradicted just about everything mainstream Christianity believed.

But my reaction was not what Dennis probably expected. I didn't join anything. I didn't get excited. What I said to myself was this: That's it. I am not believing anything that anyone says about the Bible until I read it for myself.

I was twenty years old, and I didn't trust anyone to tell me what the Bible said. Not Herbert Armstrong. Not any church. Not any preacher on television. If God wrote a book, I was going to read it myself and make up my own mind.

But I wasn't ready yet. Not for a few more years.

• • •

In early January of 1979, I was driving home to South Jersey from Montclair State. I had just graduated from college. It was about a

two-hour drive on the New Jersey Turnpike, late at night, on a very cold winter night.

Halfway home, my car broke down.

There were no cell phones in 1979. No roadside assistance apps. No way to call anyone. I was sitting in a dead car on the side of the Turnpike in the freezing cold in the middle of the night, and I didn't know what to do.

So I prayed. I asked God to please get my car working again so I could make it home. And I made Him a promise: if He got my car running, I would read the entire Bible that winter.

My car started right up.

I drove the rest of the way home without a single problem. And that winter, I kept my end of the deal. The kid who had hated reading his entire life sat down and read the Bible from cover to cover. Every book. Every chapter. Every verse. Genesis to Revelation.

It was a covenant moment. I made a promise to God on the side of the New Jersey Turnpike, and He answered immediately. And then I did what would become a habit with me from that point forward.

I wrote.

• • •

What came out of that first read-through was a small booklet I called “Do Christians Really Follow the Bible?” It was my raw, unpolished voice — a twenty-three-year-old with no theological training who had simply read the Book and discovered that mainstream Christianity wasn't actually following what it said.

I found seven major teachings that the churches had gotten completely wrong: Christmas, Easter, Sunday worship, going to heaven at death, hell as eternal torment, infant baptism, and salvation by faith alone. Seven. And I laid them all out in that little booklet with the same approach I'd used on a research paper back at Clearview High School — logic, evidence, and common sense. No fancy degrees. No seminary training. Just a guy who read the Bible and said, wait a minute.

That booklet was written in 1979 — five full years before I ever set foot inside the Worldwide Church of God. This is important. I was already a biblical researcher before any church organization shaped my thinking. The Plain Truth had opened a door, but I walked through it on my own, with the Bible in my hands, and came to my own conclusions. Nobody told me what to believe. Nobody coached me. I read it and I wrote about it, and that's how it's been ever since.

• • •

For the next five years, I continued studying on my own. I wasn't ready for the commitment of joining a church. I was in my twenties, living my life — the lifeguard summers in Blackwood, the move to California in 1979, the relationship with Mai. The Bible was always there, but it was simmering in the background, not yet the driving force it would become.

It wasn't until January of 1984 that I finally walked through the door. I started attending a very small Worldwide Church of God congregation in Vineland, New Jersey. We met in an upstairs room at the Vineland YMCA — about thirty people, including children. It was small, it was humble, and it felt right.

Nine years. From the moment Dennis put The Plain Truth in my hands to the moment I sat down in that little YMCA meeting room,

nine years had passed. I didn't rush into anything. I read, I studied, I tested, I wrote, and when I was finally ready, I committed. That's who I am. That's how I've always been.

• • •

As for Dennis — he eventually married a beautiful woman who happened to be a twin and a graduate of Ambassador College, the Worldwide Church of God's own institution. He even tried to fix me up with his wife's twin sister. That didn't work out, but it tells you how close we were.

Dennis is still in the church. It has a new name now — Grace Communion International — but it's the same organization, or what's left of it. And Dennis isn't the only one. His wife, her twin sister, their parents, his kids, his grandkids — the entire extended family, both sides, all still in. When your whole world is inside those walls, leaving isn't just a theological decision. It's a decision to lose everyone. Every holiday, every family gathering, every relationship. Dennis may see the truth. He may not. I honestly don't know, because we never talk about it.

We're still friends on Facebook. He's become a very good artist — he paints beautiful pictures, mostly of the Jersey Shore. I like seeing them. And I still like Dennis. Over fifty years since he handed me that magazine, and I still respect the man.

He gave me the most important gift anyone has ever given me, even if he doesn't know it. He didn't give me a church. He didn't give me a set of doctrines. He gave me a reason to open the Bible. And once I opened it, God took it from there.

# **PART TWO**

## **THE CHURCH**

*1984–2010*

## CHAPTER 9

### *Vineland And Lisa*

1984–1986

In January of 1984, I walked into a small upstairs meeting room at the Vineland YMCA in southern New Jersey. About thirty people were there, including children. This was my first Sabbath service with the Worldwide Church of God.

The very first thing I noticed — before the sermon, before the hymns, before anyone spoke to me — was the coffee and donuts. They were serving coffee and donuts. And yet the Worldwide Church of God, according to its own literature, was very much against this kind of junk food. I hadn't even sat down yet and I was already spotting an inconsistency. That's been the pattern of my entire life. I walk into a room and I see what doesn't belong.

But then I noticed something else. A pretty young girl came right over to me and greeted me. She was bubbling all over with energy, enthusiasm, and excitement. Her name was Lisa, and she was a senior in high school, just about to turn eighteen. She didn't wait for me to introduce myself. She came straight to me.

After services we talked for a long time. I was starting to sense that she might be attracted to me. And being single and never married, I was excited about the potential — much further down the road, of course. I wasn't going to rush anything.

• • •

My experiences at Vineland were wonderful. I got to know all of the people in time, and they were so friendly and kind. They would

often invite me to their homes for dinner. But Lisa was the first one to do so — probably that very evening, at her parents' house.

Over the next year or so, Lisa and I just couldn't stop talking to each other. Every Sabbath, every church event, we gravitated toward each other. It was natural and effortless, the way the best connections always are.

And I had already scheduled my baptism. The Worldwide Church of God required you to wait several months before they would baptize you, which I understood. But then I found out about a rule I hadn't known existed: baptized members could not date unbaptized members.

I was devastated.

Lisa wasn't ready for baptism yet — she was still very young. So now I was caught. Do I put off the most important spiritual commitment of my life to keep the door open with this girl? Or do I go ahead with the baptism and accept that I can barely speak to her?

For several reasons, I was strongly against this church policy. I couldn't find it anywhere in Scripture. It was a man-made rule, and it was about to do real damage.

I got baptized. I put God first. But the consequences were immediate.

• • •

After my baptism, I could barely talk to Lisa, and it was driving both of us crazy. We tried to wait patiently. She started baptism counseling in preparation for her own baptism. But that created another serious problem: was she truly ready, or was she doing it just so we could start talking again? Another reason I hated that

rule — it put people in impossible positions. Was a young woman seeking God, or seeking the only path back to the man she cared about? How could anyone know for sure?

The minister went very slowly with her counseling, which made everything even worse. And in the meantime, other guys in the congregation — unbaptized guys who weren't bound by the rule — started talking to her and asking her out on dates. They were free to pursue her while I sat there with my hands tied, watching it happen. The very rule that was supposed to protect the sanctity of baptism was actually punishing me for doing the right thing and rewarding the guys who hadn't committed yet.

• • •

I needed to get away. So I took a long trip to Big Sandy, Texas, where the Worldwide Church of God had its second Ambassador College campus. Rod Meredith was the college president at the time.

I got a job on campus mowing lawns. It was a terrible, boring job. But I didn't care, because everything else was incredible. I ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner in the school cafeteria every day, meeting dozens of students who shared my beliefs. I attended Bible studies and Sabbath services. For a single guy in his late twenties who'd been attending a tiny congregation in a YMCA meeting room, this felt like a whole new world.

I didn't know it then, but this was the first time I was around Rod Meredith. Years before the Glendora visits, before the prophecy paper, before the Global Church of God. I was just a young member mowing lawns on his campus, soaking it all in. He was the college president and I was nobody special in his eyes. He had no idea that the lawn mower guy would someday help open his eyes to what was happening inside the church.

• • •

Eventually I went back to South Jersey. But by this time, Lisa was dating someone regularly. They were both baptized together shortly thereafter. And probably just a couple of months later, they got married.

Just like that. The girl who'd come bubbling over to me on my very first Sabbath, the girl I'd talked to endlessly for a year, the girl I'd given up for the sake of doing things the right way — married to someone else. And it had happened fast. Too fast.

I packed up my pickup truck and headed back to California. To the San Francisco Bay Area.

Much later, I found out their marriage didn't last. They divorced, probably within twelve months. The rushed baptism, the rushed marriage — it all fell apart. Which confirmed everything I'd already felt about that dating policy. It didn't protect anyone. It pushed Lisa toward a hasty decision with the wrong person instead of allowing a real relationship to develop naturally.

I did everything right. I put God first. I got baptized. I waited. And a man-made rule cost me the girl and sent her into a marriage that was over before it started.

• • •

But here's what I couldn't see at the time: God was steering me west. If Lisa had waited, if I'd married her in South Jersey, I probably never end up in California. I never join the Bay Area congregation. I never meet Russ or Martha. I never start coaching. I never become part of the story the way God intended.

He closed that door hard. But He was pointing me toward something I couldn't imagine yet. The pickup truck was heading to

California, and everything that mattered most in my life was waiting for me there.

## CHAPTER 10

### *San Jose And Kathy*

*1985–1988*

After packing up my pickup truck and leaving South Jersey, I didn't go straight to San Francisco, or Oakland, or San Jose. I went to Pasadena in southern California instead — the headquarters of the Worldwide Church of God itself, where Herbert W. Armstrong had run everything.

I found a great place to live with a great roommate named Robert Curry, who owned his own home. I started a landscape business there as well, but it was much harder to get clients in Pasadena than it had been in northern California. Still, I had a wonderful time. I attended Friday night Bible studies at the Ambassador Auditorium on campus — the magnificent concert hall that Armstrong had built.

I was in Pasadena for about a year. And I was there when Herbert W. Armstrong died in January of 1986. I attended his funeral. It was enormous. He was buried next to his first wife and his eldest son, Richard David Armstrong, who had died in a head-on collision in 1958 at only twenty-nine years old. By all accounts, Richard would have been the natural successor — not Garner Ted, and certainly not Joseph Tkach. But God had other plans.

I saw the whole transition firsthand. Tkach gave a very good talk at the auditorium where he said he could never fill Armstrong's shoes but pledged to follow in his footsteps. I didn't know it at the time, but men like Meredith and McNair already had misgivings about Tkach and were keeping a close eye on him. Within a year, everything would start to unravel. But standing in that auditorium, none of us could see what was coming.

Eventually the landscape business told me what I already knew — I needed to be in San Jose, where it was easy to build a client base. So I moved north.

• • •

The San Jose congregation was a different world from Vineland. About four hundred people attended, compared to the thirty I'd been used to. I met Russ almost immediately, and we became close friends. He was friendly, sincere, and would later attend Ambassador College in Big Sandy.

Then came Martha. She walked into her very first Sabbath service with about three kids in tow and a husband at her side. But her husband wasn't there because he was interested in God's truth. He was there because his wife was pretty and had a nice figure, and he wanted to make sure nobody in a room of four hundred people got any ideas. That told you everything about him. Martha's husband was apparently involved in an affair, and they would eventually divorce. After the divorce, the three of us — Russ, Martha, and I — hit it off from the start and became a tight group.

• • •

And then it happened again. Another pretty young girl who was a senior in high school, with a wonderful personality, was attracted to me. And I was attracted to her.

Her name was Kathy. And just like Lisa back in Vineland, I'd met her through coaching. The Worldwide Church of God had its own track team, and I coached it. That's where I first met both Lisa and Kathy — coaching, church, and my personal life all operating in the same orbit.

But this time was different. The San Jose congregation wasn't nearly as strict about the baptism dating rule. Kathy and I could actually talk like normal people. We could go out on double dates. We could get to know each other without sneaking around or pretending the other person didn't exist. After the nightmare of Vineland, this was a relief.

Kathy was planning to spend at least a year attending college in Mexico. We were both starting to really like each other, but we figured it was no problem. She'd go to Mexico, have her college experience, probably get baptized while she was there, and when she returned we'd pick up right where we left off. It seemed like a good plan.

• • •

But I was gone too long, and so was she.

In 1988, the second makeup article came out and everything changed. I saw through the con immediately. I sold my landscaping business and launched a one-man investigation across the country — back to Pasadena to copy everything I could from the Ambassador College library before Tkach erased it all, then on to Big Sandy to test Meredith, then to Vineland, then to Philadelphia to see my mother. That story belongs in the next chapter. But while all of this was happening, I wrote to Kathy about what I'd discovered.

Her response made my heart jump. She said, "Why don't you take me with you!" She was totally on board — nervous but excited about what I was telling her. It only made her admire me more. But I decided I needed to do the investigating alone. It would be better that way.

It was the wrong decision.

When I finally reconnected with Kathy, something had changed. She'd been in Mexico, a fair-skinned girl with light hair in a country where the models were all dark. Shrewd, handsome men had been telling her how beautiful she was, that she should be a model in Mexico City. That sweet young girl from the San Jose track team was being charmed by people who saw an opportunity, and I could hear it in her voice.

I knew immediately that she was never going to say "Take me with you" again.

After Mexico, Kathy went to Europe for a year I believe. And somehow, I completely lost track of her. She just slipped away. That happens in a church that was scattering in every direction during those years. People got lost in the shuffle.

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Two women in the Worldwide Church of God. Both high school seniors when I met them. Both on the track team I coached. Both attracted to me, and I to them. Both lost — Lisa to a man-made rule, Kathy to my own mission.

With Lisa, I did everything right and a church policy punished me for it. With Kathy, I chose God's work over romance, and by the time I came back, she was gone. I don't know which one hurts more — losing someone because you followed the rules, or losing someone because you followed your calling.

But here's what I do know. In both cases, I put God first. I got baptized when I should have, even though it cost me Lisa. I went on that cross-country mission when I had to, even though it cost me Kathy. I wasn't perfect, but I wasn't a coward either. And as the next chapter will show, the mission I chose over Kathy was about to change everything.



## CHAPTER 11

### *The Anonymous Letter*

1986–1992

The first time God opened my eyes to something the Worldwide Church of God was teaching incorrectly, it had nothing to do with makeup. It was Divorce and Remarriage.

Around 1986, shortly after the death of Herbert Armstrong, our pastor Bill Jacobs gave a sermon on D&R in San Jose. He was worried that now that Armstrong was dead, members might start running out to get divorced. As was my custom, I took careful notes. After services I went over to Bill Jacobs and thanked him, telling him I had always wanted to understand the church's position on this subject but could never find a booklet or article about it. Now I finally had it. I was satisfied.

But when I got home, a persistent nagging feeling would not let up. I was tired. I did not want to study anymore. But the feeling kept pushing. Finally I gave in. OK, I will go over my notes.

And sure enough, good old Bill Jacobs' sermon was a disaster. The very scriptures the church used to support their D&R teaching did not prove what they thought it proved. Those scriptures proved the exact opposite. Not only was their teaching wrong, but their own proof texts actually established what the correct teaching was. I could not believe it. They thought they were proving one thing when in fact they were proving something completely different.

That was the moment. The first crack in the wall. If the church was wrong on D&R, what else might they be wrong about? I did not know it yet, but God was preparing me for what was coming. He was teaching me to trust Scripture over any man or any

organization — and He was giving me a trial run before the real test arrived.

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Herbert W. Armstrong died on January 16, 1986. Just a year later, rumors were already circulating worldwide that the church's teaching on makeup was about to change. Those rumors did not come from nowhere. They came from inside headquarters, from men who were already planning the overhaul. Someone had talked too early, and Joseph Tkach was furious — not because the doctrine was sacred to him, but because the timetable had been blown. He was not ready yet.

So Tkach overcompensated. He wrote what I believe was the only article he ever personally authored — a passionate, emotional defense of the makeup ban. He praised how beautiful God's women looked without cosmetics. He insisted the church would never change this teaching. He overplayed his hand, and it was very well written, full of conviction. But from what he was planning to do in the near future, he probably should have let someone else write it.

One year later, in 1988, we received our monthly church newspaper. And there in the Personal column was another article about makeup. But this time it had taken a complete 180. Tkach now explained that the women in the church looked terrible without makeup. Not only should they wear it, he was practically saying they had to. And if you did not wear makeup, you did not have faith in God. You were not behind "God's Apostle" in these end times.

I almost fainted. I read it a second time, then a third, then a fourth. Every time I reread it I picked up on something new. Then I immediately remembered the article from the previous year, which

I had stored away. I went and got it and examined the two articles very closely, side by side.

And that is when the con artist's stepson saw what nobody else in the church could see.

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I had watched Mike Cipriano argue both sides of anything with equal conviction. I had watched him look a customer in the eye with complete sincerity and tell them one thing on Monday, then tell them the exact opposite on Tuesday with the same passionate certainty. That was his gift — the ability to make you believe whatever he needed you to believe in the moment, because he believed it himself while he was saying it.

And now I was holding two articles by the same man, written twelve months apart, making completely opposite arguments with equal passion and equal certainty. I had seen this trick before. I had grown up with it. What tens of thousands of church members could not see, I recognized instantly — because I had been trained by a professional.

I knew immediately what the Worldwide Church of God was up to and where it was all leading. Not gradually. Not after years of study. Instantly — in March of 1988, the moment that second article appeared. And I told many people so. Most of whom are still alive today and who would probably still remember and confirm all of this in a second.

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I sent Joseph Tkach an anonymous letter. In it, I quoted from both of his articles, laid them side by side, and showed from his own

words that he was a con man deceiving the membership. It was a very strong rebuke.

Tkach responded in his Personal column in the next church newspaper. He knew I read the newspaper — the letter itself proved that — so he used his column to fire back. He called me a coward for not giving my name. He called me a heretic. He said all manner of terrible things about me. But he could not answer the evidence. He could not explain why two articles under his name said the exact opposite. So he attacked the messenger instead.

He also knew from the postmark that the letter had come from the San Francisco Bay Area. That detail would matter very soon.

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Around the same time, I went to our two local ministers with the evidence. Brian Orchard pastored the Oakland congregation, and Bill Jacobs pastored San Jose. I showed them both articles, side by side. Neither of them had read the 1986 article. The men who stood up every Sabbath delivering Pasadena's doctrinal changes to their congregations had not even read the church's own publications. They were preaching what they were told to preach without doing any independent homework.

I went to both of their homes later that week. Orchard was patient and listened to everything. He was very hard to read — ministers in the Worldwide Church of God were not emotional people. But my conclusion was that he heard it, he had concerns, and he was not going to let it end there. Jacobs was more open, more American in his approach, and I could see genuine concern on his face when he looked at the two articles laid out before him.

But headquarters was already spooked. They knew someone in the Bay Area was onto them. The anonymous letter with the SF

postmark, and now two ministers asking uncomfortable questions about the makeup articles. Tkach had to be connecting the dots.

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I could not sit still. I quickly sold my entire landscaping business, packed up my truck, and launched a one-man investigation across the country.

In the meantime I had written to Kathy about everything I had discovered, and her response made my heart jump. She said, “Why don’t you take me with you!” She was totally on board — nervous but excited about what I was telling her. But I decided I needed to do the investigating alone. It would be better that way.

My first stop was Pasadena — the Ambassador College library. I had a sneaky suspicion that everything Herbert Armstrong had ever taught was about to be deleted and become impossible to find. So I spent several days copying everything I could get my hands on. Robert Curry, my old roommate from my Pasadena days, had graduated from Ambassador College and was now working full-time as the librarian. God had put him right where I needed him, and I did not even have to plan it.

From Pasadena I drove to Big Sandy, Texas, where Rod Meredith was now the provost of the Ambassador College campus there. Like my previous stay in Big Sandy, I stayed in one of those extremely small places on campus where many of the freshman guys also lived. Russ was a student at Big Sandy, so we could finally talk face to face about the makeup articles and everything I had discovered.

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Then I did something bold. I walked into Meredith's office and asked to see him. The secretary said of course — when would I like to set the appointment? I could not believe it. I was going to sit right at his desk, just across from him.

The meeting was for the next day. Meredith had no idea why I was there. He figured I must be an old student of his just stopping by to say hello since I would be in the area for a few days. So the secretary called Meredith, and he came out of his office to greet me personally, then escorted me inside. We both sat down and he said casually, "So what brings you here today, Mike?"

The first thing I did was pull out a long sheet of paper with all of my questions written down. When he saw that, he was in shock. But he graciously let me proceed.

I started with easy questions — softballs — and then slowly worked toward the more serious, pointed ones. The whole time I was reading his body language, constantly gauging whether I was going too far or whether I could continue. Where did I learn to do that? From watching Cipriano work people. Except I took those same observation skills and used them for the opposite purpose — not to deceive, but to get to the truth.

He was definitely guarded and did not want to say much, even when he seemed to agree with what I was bringing up. But the whole reason I was there was not to warn him or share information. It was to test him. To see what kind of man he really was. To see how he reacted to controversial things thrown his way. The Bible tells us to test the spirits to see if they are from God. That is exactly what I was doing. I was testing his spirit.

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The verdict was yes and no. No, because he had no idea where the church was headed or how serious things had become. He actually liked the new makeup policy — but just like all the other ministers, he had no idea that it was the exact opposite of what Tkach had written the previous year. And that was a huge red flag. He was completely in the dark. I was years ahead of him. Back in San Jose I was already telling everyone a split was coming and that it would almost surely be Meredith leading the charge. But the man himself had no clue.

But yes, because underneath all that caution, I could see the raw material. He had convictions. He had a line he would not cross. He just had not been pushed to it yet. I could see that when the moment came, he would eventually wake up and — in the words of his wife — grow a pair. And what I found was a man who was not ready yet but who would be when God pushed him there.

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Russ was right there at Big Sandy because he was a student. He knew I had set up the meeting that day and he could not wait for the verdict. And when I told him, he was ecstatic, because he really liked Meredith. That was a great moment between the two of us.

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But I was not done. My next stop was South Jersey to see what was happening with the little Vineland congregation where it all started for me. And what I found was very disappointing. Almost all of them were packed in makeup. Including Lisa. I could not believe it, and I thought she looked much worse. The very thing that had cracked the whole deception open for me — they had embraced it without a second thought. They did not keep the two articles. They did not compare them. They just went along with whatever Tkach told them.

And I could tell right away I needed to be quiet there, otherwise the gig was up. If I spoke up in South Jersey, word gets back to Pasadena, and my ability to work behind the scenes and prepare people for what was coming is finished.

So I went back to Philly for a few days to visit my mom and siblings. I told my mother everything. And her reaction was pure Philly, pure street smarts, and one hundred percent accurate. She said, “That’s right, Michael. They are all a bunch of lying hypocrites, just like most of the world. It does not matter if they are religious or not, they are basically the same with the same human nature. Money and power is what drives just about all men in these top-level jobs. And wow, you are the only one who sees right through the BS. And yes, I am sure it will turn out just the way you explained it all to me.”

No theological training. No church membership. But my mother understood human nature better than any minister in the Worldwide Church of God. She cut right through it.

So yep — driving all the way across the country again. And I would do this a bunch more times before it was all over.

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Back in San Jose, Russ eventually returned from Big Sandy. And now a pattern began that would last for years. Russ and I started regularly driving from San Jose down to the Glendale and Glendora area so that I could attend Rod Meredith’s Sabbath church services and talk with him in person, as he was no longer living in Big Sandy, Texas.

Now, I need to set something straight, because people got this wrong for years — and even Meredith himself got it wrong. Whenever people heard that I had been driving down to see

Meredith all those times, they would always say the same thing: “So you went down to see RCM for guidance on what was happening to the Worldwide Church of God.” And even Meredith, when he would retell the story, would always say that I was coming to see him for counseling about the situation.

But that is NOT what happened. Not at all. I went to see Meredith to help him. To guide him. To counsel him. He did not help me. I helped and taught him. I had known what was happening since March of 1988 — over five years before Meredith was finally pushed out the door. I had sent the anonymous letter. I had tested the man at Big Sandy. I had written the paper that would end up on his kitchen table. I was years ahead of him. Every single time I drove south, I was the one bringing the information, the analysis, and the urgency. He was the one who needed to hear it.

Now, with Meredith I gave him a pass. If that is what he thought, then fine. He could think so. But I was not going to let others flip it around.

On Friday nights, Russ and I would attend the Worldwide Church of God’s Friday night Bible studies at the Ambassador Auditorium in Pasadena — the magnificent concert hall that Armstrong had built. At one of those Bible studies, I struck up a conversation with a lovely woman who asked me all sorts of questions. When I mentioned I had driven down from San Jose and was hoping to go to the Glendale church service the following day to talk to Rod Meredith, her face lit up with a huge smile. Rod was her brother. She was married to Raymond McNair, one of the church’s top evangelists. I had no idea at the time how significant that connection would become.

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During this same period, the fallout from the anonymous letter and the two ministers was swift and devastating.

Both Bill Jacobs and Brian Orchard were sent to Pasadena for brainwashing sessions — Jacobs from San Jose and Orchard from Oakland. Yes-men were assigned to replace them in both congregations. Our peaceful little corner of the Bay Area was suddenly under direct control from headquarters.

Then headquarters started sending Joseph Tkach Jr. and Mike Fezell to the Bay Area to give sermons. I found out quickly that both of them were atrocious speakers. Boring. Dull. Boring. Dull. But they were not there to inspire anyone. They were on a reconnaissance mission to find the traitor. We would also receive recorded video sermons from Pasadena, and both Joe Tkach Sr. and his son Joe Jr. would mention that there was someone in the San Francisco Bay Area they needed to find.

They were looking for me.

I never kept quiet — that is not who I am. But I was wise about it. I did not stand up in the middle of a sermon and scream that Tkach was a fraud. Instead, I talked to one person here and one person there, testing the waters. I was very good at instantly knowing who was receptive by asking a simple, innocent question. Based on their answer, I knew whether they were approachable or not. Very few were.

Almost everyone was totally blind. But slowly I found a friend here and a friend there who listened and wanted to learn more. Almost all of them were younger adults in their twenties whom I already knew well. Eventually, I started meeting with four of them — three guys and one girl — at the girl's home or my apartment. We would spend hours talking about the deception happening right in front of our eyes.

Russ. Rob. Mike S. And Martha. The original four. They would stay with me through everything that was about to come.

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In August of 1992, I sat down and wrote a fifty-page paper I titled “The Startling Prophecy of God’s True Church.” In it, I laid out exactly what was going to happen: where the church was headed, when the split would likely occur, and how God would probably use Rod Meredith to lead the faithful remnant — the “Philadelphians.”

I shared it with Russ, who was now back from Big Sandy. I shared it with Martha and the rest of the group. And eventually, a copy of that paper would end up on the one table where it could change everything.

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That fall, Russ and I went to the same Feast of Tabernacles location as the Merediths, which was in Palm Springs, California. We were hoping for a chance to really talk with Meredith, but all week he was surrounded by old friends, fellow ministers, and former students. We could not get close. The clock was ticking.

Then the opening appeared. Rod and his wife wanted Russ and me to watch their two sons one evening while they went out alone. We had been waiting the whole time for exactly this kind of moment.

They came back much later than expected. Meredith apologized and said it was getting too late to talk. Why don’t you come see us in Glendale sometime? I said of course, and then as casually as I could manage, I mentioned on my way out the door: “Oh, by the way, I left a little paper on the kitchen table.”

Meredith stopped me. “Paper? What kind of paper? A small paper you say?” He walked over to the kitchen table and picked it up. His expression changed when he saw it was at least fifty pages. He read the title: “The Startling Prophecy of God’s True Church.” He said the Feast was ending tomorrow and he would never have time to read it. But he said he would try his best when he returned to Glendale.

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The next day at services, Russ came sprinting up to me, full of excitement: “Rod Meredith read your paper!” Then he told me that the Merediths wanted us to join them for lunch — and we were the only ones invited. So Russ and I drove to the restaurant, probably a Mexican restaurant because Rod Meredith always went to a Mexican restaurant. I think he liked both the food and the prices. During the whole drive Russ and I were so nervous. Was he going to give me a harsh stern lecture? But when we sat down, midway through the lunch, Meredith looked me in the eye and informed me that he had read my paper, and that it was well written and well thought out. And that I had a knack for writing.

A few weeks later, Russ and I drove down to Glendale again. Same scene — another Mexican restaurant. And Meredith repeated the same things that he had told me in Palm Springs, that my paper was well written, well thought out, and that I had a knack for writing.

But this time Meredith added six words I will never forget: “And it helped me a lot.”

A week or two after that, I went back down alone this time and stayed at the Merediths’ home for the weekend. His wife baked cookies for my drive home. That woman had fire in her. She was the one who told Rod he needed to grow a pair and confront Tkach

head on. Between my paper and his wife's words, the man did not stand a chance of staying put.

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By this time I had grown tired of waiting for Meredith to finally leave the Worldwide Church of God and do something. I had been telling people since 1988 that a split was coming and that Meredith would lead it. It was now late 1992 — almost five years later — and he still had not moved. So I made my decision independently, without knowing what was about to happen to Meredith: I was just going to walk away. On my own. With or without him.

On my second-to-last Sabbath with the Worldwide Church of God, I told all my close friends that the following week would be my very last time. I was done.

And then that final Sabbath came. I went to the San Jose service, and that is when they made the announcement: Rod Meredith had been blackballed. He was out. I found out later that Meredith had not decided to leave until the Thursday before, when he met with Joe Jr. and Mike Feazell. Actually the meeting was not with Joe Senior, as he was apparently too much of a coward to take on Rod Meredith himself. So he sent his two attack dogs instead. Meredith was pushed out at the last minute.

But I had already made my decision before that Thursday. I was already walking out the door on my own when God arranged it so that Meredith got pushed out at the exact same time. The con artist's stepson was not just ahead of the church members. He was not just ahead of just about every minister. He was ahead of Rod Meredith himself. The man I predicted would lead the split — I beat him out the door.

That evening, the Oakland congregation was having a party. I went. And the moment I walked in, something happened that caught me completely off guard. Several people — people I had completely forgotten I had ever spoken to about any of this — came rushing over to me. Not walking. Rushing. Their eyes were wide.

“How did you know this?!” they demanded. “You told us a year or two ago this would happen and we thought you were crazy! And yet it happened. Meredith is no longer in the Worldwide Church of God!”

These were not Russ, Rob, Mike S., and Martha. My inner circle already knew. These were other people — casual conversations from a year or two earlier that I did not even remember having. I had planted seeds and forgotten about them. But they did not forget. They had thought I was out of my mind at the time. And the moment it happened, every word I had told them came flooding back, and they made a beeline for me at that party.

The one person I remember the most from that evening was a girl named Josefa. She was so convinced by what she had witnessed — that I had called it years in advance — that she left the Worldwide Church of God and joined the Global Church of God right along with me.

That was my last night as a member of the Worldwide Church of God. And God gave me one final confirmation on the way out the door.

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Shortly after that, the new yes-man minister made it official. I was “marked” and disfellowshipped from the congregation. I am proud of the fact that I was the first person disfellowshipped in the entire

northern California area. The first one. While thousands of members sat quietly and accepted whatever they were told, I was the one who stood up and said, “This man is a fraud, and here is the proof.”

I was told that when the new minister stood before the congregation to announce my disfellowshipment, he was soaking wet with crocodile tears. A real performance. The con goes on.

But it did not matter. By then I was already gone. They did not throw me out — I had already left. They just made it official after the fact.

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This is the moment the whole book has been building toward. Everything connects here. A boy grows up watching a professional con man deceive people for five years. That boy grows into a man who can spot deception the way other people spot the color red — instantly, effortlessly, without trying. That man joins a church, reads two contradictory articles in March of 1988, and recognizes the technique immediately because he has seen it a thousand times before.

He sends an anonymous letter. He goes to the ministers. He sells his business and drives across the country. He tests Rod Meredith and finds him wanting but redeemable. He visits South Jersey and sees how blind the members are. He drives home to Philly and his mother — with no church membership and no theological training — sees right through the whole thing. He drives back to California and starts making regular trips south to help Meredith, to teach him, to guide him — not the other way around. He writes a fifty-page paper and plants it on Meredith’s kitchen table. And then, almost five years after he first saw through the con, he gets tired of

waiting and decides to walk away on his own — beating Meredith himself out the door by days.

The con artist's stepson became the first person in NorCal to see through the con and do something about it.

God did not waste those five years with Cipriano. He was training me. I just did not know it yet.

## CHAPTER 12

### *The Global Church Of God*

1993–1998

A few weeks after Joe Tkach Jr. and Mike Feazell blackballed Rod Meredith from the Worldwide Church of God, a beautiful white card arrived in my mailbox. It looked like a wedding invitation. In a way, that is exactly what it was.

Rod Meredith was starting the Global Church of God, and the inaugural Sabbath service would be held the first Saturday of January 1993 in a rented hall near Pasadena. Possibly Glendora. Wherever it was, it was very close to where the Worldwide Church of God was holding their own services in Pasadena. Meredith had planted his flag practically in Tkach's backyard. That was no accident. This was not a man running away. This was a man standing his ground.

Tkach Sr., I believe, never had the guts to face Meredith himself. He sent Joe Jr. and Feazell to do it — the same two boring speakers who had been dispatched to the Bay Area on a reconnaissance mission to hunt for the author of the anonymous letter. Two against one. It is a very common tactic in this world. You always show up with a second person in order to gang up on the other guy. The meeting was never meant to be a fair discussion. The decision had already been made before Meredith sat down. But they were ganging up on Rod Meredith — one of the original evangelists, a man who had been preaching since the 1950s, a man who had a fifty-page paper burning in his mind and his wife's words ringing in his ears. They could blackball him, but they could not break him.

Russ and I drove down from the Bay Area for that inaugural service. Rob V came with us, and maybe even Mike S. The drive was long but the anticipation was electric. We were about to be part of something historic and we knew it.

There were forty-two people in that room. Forty-two, including the children. That was it. The entire Global Church of God. After Herbert Armstrong's death, after the doctrinal destruction under Tkach, after the anonymous letters and the disfellowshippings and the underground study groups and the fifty-page paper on Meredith's kitchen table and his wife telling him to grow a pair — after all of that, it came down to forty-two people in a rented hall.

And the room was ecstatic. Everyone was so thrilled we could not hide our excitement even if we wanted to. These were people who had the courage to walk away from everything they knew — their friends, their congregations, their entire spiritual lives — and start over from nothing. And when you looked around that room at those forty-one other faces, you could see it in every single one of them. Joy. Relief. Hope.

Rod Meredith had a right-hand couple helping him with everything from the very beginning: Don Davis and his wife Sandy. Don gave the announcements and the sermonette that first Sabbath. Rod gave the sermon. I do not remember the exact subject, but knowing Meredith, it was probably about how God usually starts things very small and if you follow His lead it grows very big in time. He probably also spoke about how it is perfectly fine to leave a corrupt church that has turned its back on God in order to join a small church that is focused on following God exclusively.

A few interesting things about some of the adults in attendance that day. At least one person, and probably a few, had not actually left the Worldwide Church of God yet. The WWCG held a morning

service and an afternoon service. The Global Church of God held their service in the afternoon. So these people went to their regular WWCG morning service in Pasadena, and then drove over to Meredith's hall in the afternoon to hear what he had to say and make their decision partly based on that. They had one foot in each door, waiting to see which way to jump.

And then there was the heretic. Every new movement seems to attract one. Here we are at the very first service of this brand new church and already there is a very strange man going around trying to tell everyone how he supposedly had proof that Herbert Armstrong had committed immoral acts with his own daughter when they traveled the world on church business. Nobody there wanted to hear that, regardless of whether it was true or not. He was ridiculous. But then he kept saying it did not mean Armstrong was not an apostle. Which is total nonsense. First of all, Armstrong was not an apostle. But even if he was, that kind of behavior would have absolutely disqualified him based on the biblical standards for church leadership. This man was confused on every level.

So there it was. The joy, the spies from the morning service, and the resident oddball — all in one room of forty-two people.

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From that point on, Don Davis and Sandy did just about everything. They ran the operations, handled the logistics, managed the membership, and took care of the behind-the-scenes work that keeps a church organization functioning. Rod Meredith focused on what he did best — preparing sermons, conducting Bible studies, and writing booklets.

And he had to write everything from scratch. That was a bitter reality. Meredith had spent decades writing for the Radio Church of God and the Worldwide Church of God — booklets, articles,

correspondence courses, an enormous body of work. But the WWCG owned the copyrights to all of it. Every word. He could not use a single sentence of what he had produced over a lifetime of ministry. So he sat down and started over, rebuilding an entire library of biblical literature one booklet at a time.

The very first booklet came out quickly because Meredith had started working on it before he even left the Worldwide Church of God. The subject was church government.

Now, this was fascinating to me. For decades, Herbert Armstrong had taught that you could never leave the church without losing your salvation. That was one of the most powerful control mechanisms the WWCG had. Fear. Stay or be damned. And Rod Meredith had enforced that teaching for his entire ministry. He never taught anything differently.

But now he was the one who had left. So suddenly he needed a booklet explaining why it was perfectly acceptable to leave a corrupt church organization. And the booklet was actually pretty good. Pretty accurate. He made a solid biblical case.

But I found myself asking a critical question: Was Meredith writing this new church government booklet because he had genuinely changed his mind on the subject? Or was he mostly interested in giving people theological permission to leave the WWCG and join his little group?

It was actually an old playbook. I discovered that Armstrong himself had written an article back in the 1930s where he ripped centralized church government apart. He called centralized government as opposed to local autonomy the “image” of the Beast. Now he was wrong that it was the “image” of the Beast since that is a statue. But he just went on and on tearing that type

of teaching to shreds, and all in all it was very good and very powerful.

But then years later, once the Radio Church of God grew big enough, Armstrong flipped on the issue completely. Centralized government became top-down, hierarchical, absolute authority — and if you try to leave, you lose your salvation. The very door Armstrong walked through to get out of the church that he was attending in the 1930's, he slammed shut behind him so nobody else could use it.

Here is the interesting part. Just recently I browsed through Meredith's first church government booklet from the GCG era, and Meredith himself wrote that it was he and Herman Hoeh who authored the first articles about church government in the WWCG back in the 1950s — articles that pushed a more centralized form of government. I do not think Meredith even knew about Armstrong's 1930s article where Armstrong ripped centralized government to shreds. So the very system that Meredith was now writing against was a system that he himself had helped build decades earlier.

I am bringing all of this up intentionally, because it would prove to be a critical point as time went on.

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Slowly but surely the work began to grow and the church membership along with it. But the growth could have been so much faster if not for the cowardice of the ministers.

Here is what happened. Dozens of ministers inside the Worldwide Church of God knew that Tkach was destroying the church. They could see it. They agreed with what Meredith was doing. But did they leave and join the GCG right away? No. They strung

Meredith along for years, watching from the sidelines, only leaving the WWCG and joining the GCG once the money was safe — once the organization was big enough and established enough that their paychecks would be secure.

Think about what their cowardice cost. If those ministers had all left the WWCG together, all at once, it would have been an earthquake. Thousands of members would have woken up overnight and said, “Wait a minute, why are all these ministers leaving?” It would have been a massive wake-up call. But instead, by trickling out one at a time over the course of years, each departure barely made a ripple. No avalanche. No wake-up call for the membership. The WWCG could handle losing one minister here, one there. They could not have handled losing ten or fifteen at once.

So the ministers’ cowardice did not just disappoint God. It actually hurt the very people still trapped in the WWCG who needed to see the truth. Those ministers had the power to open thousands of eyes overnight, and they squandered it to protect their paychecks.

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As the GCG started getting bigger and bigger and eventually got on television, I started noticing some bad decisions that Rod Meredith was making.

One of the biggest problems was his infatuation with Ambassador College graduates. Just about everyone in the church at the time shared that same infatuation. When Meredith wanted to hire someone, or ordain a new minister, or fill any important position, he leaned heavily on whether they were a graduate of Ambassador College. If you had those two letters on your resume, you were in. If you did not, good luck.

In that system, there were really only three ways to matter. You were either an Ambassador College graduate. Or you were related to someone important — Meredith, Ogwyn, McNair, Fall, Winnail, and so on. Or you were already at headquarters with connections to those at the top. If you did not have at least one of those three tickets, you were invisible. It did not matter what you had sacrificed, what you had risked, or what you had done for the truth. Without one of those credentials, the system could not see you.

And many of these AC graduates were just Johnnies-come-lately. They had not been there at the beginning. They had not risked anything. They had not spotted the con or written the papers or driven across the state to sit in a room with forty-two people when nobody knew if this thing would survive. They just showed up once the organization was established enough to be safe.

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We now had our own small group in San Jose in the San Francisco Bay Area. I was the host and I ran everything — the studies, the hymns, the fellowship. It was a good group and I was proud of what we had built.

Then something happened that I did not expect. Kathy L joined our little group, along with her husband and her parents. It was the first time I remember meeting her husband. Kathy had two children by then. The last time I had seen Kathy, she was heading off to Ambassador College in Mexico, then Europe, pleading “Take me with you!” as I drove away on my cross-country mission. I had turned her down. And now here she was, years later, married with two kids, sitting in my little group in San Jose.

And Kathy still looked at me with those very intense eyes of hers, with great admiration and respect. I loved when she looked at me

like that. But I always wondered if others noticed it, especially her husband. And if he did notice, what did he think about it?

But the real trouble came with Jack Hendren. Hendren was a local minister who joined our group, and immediately he was put in charge. Just like that. I was pushed aside. And who did he put second in command? His own twenty-five-year-old son-in-law, who did not seem to be converted at all. I could not believe it.

But I did not say a word. I figured, let us just see where this ends up.

What I did not know yet was that Hendren had not just decided on his own to join our little group. He had been sent there by a man named Larry Salyer.

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Larry Salyer had been a major player in the Worldwide Church of God during the changes. He was one of the last to leave the WWCG and join the GCG. The main reason Meredith brought him on was because Salyer was so well known and so well liked by everyone that he could help convince people to leave the WWCG and come over to the GCG. And sure enough, it worked. That is the only reason Jack Hendren joined our group — because Salyer told him he should.

Salyer was a natural-born salesman. And Meredith put him on the GCG's board of directors, which consisted of about seven people or so. Raymond McNair was also on the board, which I thought was a mistake. But Salyer was the real danger.

One Sabbath, Salyer came to the Bay Area and during his visit he started teaching something that was clearly incorrect regarding the

holy days. I cannot remember the specific issue, but I was furious and went immediately to talk to him about it after services.

Now, I have to give him this much — he was very gracious. And I immediately noticed that he had that salesman quality about him. The expert salesman that everyone loves initially. Very pleasant to talk with. He said he considered it just a very small point, and if I did not like it, then he would never mention it again when he was in the Bay Area.

That is the difference between a teacher and a salesman. A genuine teacher stands by what he believes and discusses it openly. A salesman reads the room and adjusts his pitch based on the audience. I knew exactly what I was looking at. The con artist's stepson had been trained to spot that kind of thing from a mile away.

After that encounter I called Don Davis directly and told him what had happened. And Don basically brushed it off. Something along the lines of, "Do not worry about it." Don Davis, who had been Meredith's right-hand man from day one, who had stood by him through everything, who had been on the losing side of the vote that was coming — Don Davis had become a yes man. Not was becoming. Had become.

• • •

Around this time I went back to visit Meredith on my own, without Russ, and stayed at the Meredith home for a weekend. His wife baked me some delicious cookies for the ride home. She was a wonderful wife and mother. We had a great time, but Rod was extremely busy getting everything organized for the growing church.

But something troubled me. Despite everything I had done — despite the anonymous letter, despite the paper that Meredith himself told me helped him a lot, despite driving down for the inaugural service, despite building the Bay Area group from nothing — Meredith barely seemed to remember me. Or if he did, I was not particularly important to him.

I did not have any of the three tickets. I was not an Ambassador College graduate. I was not related to anyone important. I was not at headquarters with connections to those at the top. I was just a guy hosting a little group in San Jose, three hundred miles north of everything that mattered in their eyes.

But God knew what I had done. Even if Meredith forgot.

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I should mention something here, because it becomes relevant to this part of the story. Even though I have said before that I am not much of a talker — nothing like my mom who always spoke perfectly — that does not mean I was not a good speaker. There is a huge difference between the two.

Back in the Worldwide Church of God they had what was called the Spokesman Club, a public speaking program for male members. And like always with me, I started off terrible. But I took it very seriously and worked very hard, and before I knew it I was winning all of the awards. Best Speaker. Most Improved. Most Helpful Evaluator. One night I won all three awards in the same evening.

That skill carried over directly into my time in the GCG. Because our congregation was small — too small to ever have a Spokesman Club of our own — I was now giving sermonettes and split sermons at our local Sabbath services. And everyone loved them.

As you can probably guess, I was enthusiastic, well prepared, crystal clear, and powerful. The congregation was always begging me to speak again.

There is a big difference between being a great talker and being a great speaker. My mom spoke perfectly in conversation — effortless, natural. But a great speaker is something different. A great speaker is prepared, passionate, clear, and powerful. That is craft. That is work. That is studying your material until you own it and then delivering it with conviction. And I brought that Philadelphia fire every single time.

The headquarters three hundred miles to the south never knew anything about it. But the people sitting in those chairs every Sabbath did.

• • •

Rod Meredith had left the Worldwide Church of God. But many of the bad things about the Worldwide Church of God, he took right with him. He never left those things behind.

The Ambassador College favoritism. The nepotism. The hierarchy. The old boys' network. The measuring of a man's worth by his credentials instead of his faithfulness. The unquestioning loyalty expected from the membership while the leadership did whatever it pleased. The GCG was supposed to be different. It was supposed to be a fresh start, a return to truth, a church built on what was right rather than what was comfortable.

But the same disease was already creeping in. And I could see it, because seeing it was the one thing God had spent my entire childhood training me to do.

The con artist's stepson was watching. And what he saw made him very uneasy.

## CHAPTER 13

### *The Salyer Coup*

*December 1998*

I am almost positive it was a deal. I heard Rod Meredith himself mention something along those lines. When Salyer finally left the Worldwide Church of God and agreed to join the Global Church of God, the price of his participation was a governing role in the organization. Meredith was so desperate for Salyer's popularity and recruiting power that he essentially handed him the keys to the kingdom.

And it was not just Salyer. Meredith had assembled a board of directors of about seven people, and the names on that board made my stomach turn. Raymond McNair was on it — Rod Meredith's own brother-in-law, married to his sister. A lawyer, possibly Edwin Pope, was on it. And Larry Salyer, the natural-born salesman who had been part of the machine that was destroying the Worldwide Church of God from the inside, was on it. These were the people Rod Meredith trusted with the future of God's work.

In December of 1998, Larry Salyer made his move. He had been quietly working Raymond McNair, the lawyer, and apparently one more board member. When the votes were counted, Salyer had the majority. On the other side were Rod Meredith and faithful Don Davis I believe. And just like that, Rod Meredith was kicked out of his own church!

Think about what happened in that room. A man who had left the Worldwide Church of God on principle. A man who had started the Global Church of God from scratch in a rented hall with forty-two people. A man who had rewritten an entire library of biblical literature because the WWCG owned the copyrights to everything

he had ever produced. A man who had built the GCG into something big enough to be on television. That man was removed from his own organization by three or four people who had contributed almost nothing compared to what he had sacrificed.

And the betrayal from Raymond McNair was deeply personal. This was not just a board member voting against the chairman. This was a man voting to throw out his own wife's brother. The same sister who had been so kind and welcoming at the Ambassador Auditorium Bible studies. The same family that had opened their home to people. And her husband stabbed her brother in the back in a board vote.

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They completely took over the Global Church of God. And with it, they took all of the copyrights.

Every booklet Meredith had rewritten from scratch. Every Bible study. Every article. Every piece of telecast content. The magazine. The entire intellectual property of the organization — the lifeblood of the work — now belonged to Salyer and his coup. Meredith's written work had been stolen from him for the second time. First the Worldwide Church of God kept everything he had written over decades of ministry. Then he rebuilt it all from nothing, and Salyer and McNair and the rest walked away with that too.

And here is what I could not understand. Why on earth did Rod Meredith assign those copyrights to the corporation instead of keeping them in his own name? If he had retained personal ownership of his intellectual property, the coup would have gotten the organization but not the content. They would have had an empty shell — a church name with no booklets, no telecasts, no magazine, nothing. But because the copyrights belonged to the

GCG corporation, and Salyer now controlled the corporation, Salyer controlled everything.

Maybe it had something to do with tax exempt status. Maybe it was a financial decision. I do not know. But whatever the reason, it was a catastrophically foolish mistake. And it was the same mistake twice. You would think that after losing everything to the WWCG the first time, Meredith would have protected himself. But he did not. He trusted human beings. He really should have known better.

I could not believe it. The same playbook, over and over. Build something from nothing. Trust the wrong people. Watch them position themselves on the board. And then lose everything — including the copyrights — when they turn on you. It was the WWCG all over again, just on a smaller scale and in a shorter amount of time.

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A formal letter arrived in my mailbox from Rod Meredith. It had been sent to everyone on the GCG mailing list. The letter informed us of what had happened and encouraged us to join him with the establishment of a new organization: the Living Church of God.

My first reaction was shock. But then again, was it really a surprise? I had watched Salyer move in. I had confronted him personally when he taught something incorrect in the Bay Area and watched him turn on that smooth salesman charm. I had watched Jack Hendren — Salyer's man — take over my group. I had called Don Davis about it and been brushed off. I had seen the Johnnies-come-lately getting positions of power while the people who had been there from the beginning were pushed aside. The signs had been there all along.

But what was truly mind-boggling was finding out for the first time exactly how Meredith had set up the organization. How he had appointed Salyer and Pope and Raymond McNair to the board. How he had almost certainly made a deal with Salyer to give him a governing role in exchange for his participation. After everything that had happened with the Worldwide Church of God — after watching Armstrong’s organization get hijacked by Tkach and his people — Meredith turned around and set up the exact same structure that made a takeover possible. It was naivety on a level I could not comprehend.

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When the split happened, Jack Hendren showed his true colors. He was Salyer’s man. Salyer had sent him to my group in the first place. And when the coup went down, Hendren stayed loyal to Salyer and the GCG. He took part of the Bay Area group with him.

I experienced on a small scale exactly what Meredith had experienced on a large scale. I had built that group from nothing. I was the host. I ran the studies, the hymns, the fellowship. Then an outsider was put in charge over me, and when the split came, he walked away with part of what I had built. Different scale. Same story.

But the people who mattered stayed. The original four — Russ, Rob, Mike S, and Martha — the same crew from the underground study group back in the WWCG days, the ones who had met secretly while Tkach’s headquarters was hunting for the author of the anonymous letter. They stayed with me then, and they stayed with me now. Every single time. No titles. No paychecks. No Ambassador College degrees. Just regular people who recognized truth and stuck with the man who had shown it to them.

Kathy L stayed with me too, along with her husband, their children, and her parents. A wonderful Filipino couple that I liked very much also came with us. And about one other family. So we were not big, but we were faithful. And I was back to hosting again.

Everyone else could be swayed by titles and credentials and whoever had the official church name. But not these people. They knew who they could trust.

• • •

A big percentage of the GCG membership left with Meredith. And without the members, the Global Church of God soon went belly up. Salyer and his coup were all out of a job. They had stolen an organization, but the people walked out the door and followed Meredith.

A new church had recently begun called the United Church of God, which had started with about a hundred ministers and many evangelists. Salyer and Pope joined that group. But that was a big mistake on the part of the UCG to invite them, because they would eventually be up to their old tricks again. A snake does not change its nature.

And then came the most unbelievable part of all. Raymond McNair — the man who had voted to kick Meredith out of his own church, who had betrayed his own wife's brother in a board vote — came crawling back to Meredith and the Living Church of God. And Meredith took him back. Because it was family. Because McNair had the name and the credential. Because Meredith, for all of his strengths as a teacher and a preacher, had a blind spot for big names that he never could overcome.

• • •

With the help of Don Davis and company, Meredith immediately started the Living Church of God. From scratch. For the third time. Rewriting copyrights for the third time. Rebuilding a library of biblical literature for the third time. The man was seventy years old and starting over yet again, and he did it without hesitation.

I noticed the name right away. The Living Church of God. Living. And I thought of Revelation 3:1, the message to the church at Sardis: “You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.” Of all the names Rod Meredith could have chosen for his new organization, he chose the one that echoed the very rebuke Christ delivered to a dead church that thought it was alive. He was completely oblivious to the connection.

Jeff Fall was quickly assigned as pastor over our area and took charge of the group. Fall had joined the GCG in 1995 I believe — about two years after it began. Another person put in a position of authority over people who had been there from the start. The pattern never changed.

And so there I was again. A new church name. A new organization. A new leader assigned over my head. The same original crew by my side. The same disease creeping in. History was not just rhyming. It was repeating word for word.

The con artist’s stepson had seen this movie before. And he already knew how it was going to end.

## CHAPTER 14

### *The Living Church Of God*

1999–2000

Things grew swiftly. Television. Booklets. Radio. Rod Meredith's main goal was always to get the church as big as possible as quickly as possible. And on that front, he was succeeding. The Living Church of God was growing faster than the Global Church of God ever had.

But as the organization grew, the same old system grew right along with it. They were hiring all relatives of the ministers — the children of Meredith, the McNairs, Winnail, John Ogwyn, Jeff Fall, and so on. And if you were not related to a minister, you had better be an Ambassador College graduate. It was a closed system. An old boys' club with a new name on the door.

And what a name it was. The Living Church of God. Living. I noticed it right away. In the book of Revelation, chapter three and verse one, Christ sends a message to the church at Sardis: "You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead." Of all the names Rod Meredith could have chosen, he picked the one that echoed the very rebuke Christ delivered to a spiritually dead church. He was completely oblivious to the connection.

Raymond McNair, who had crawled back to Meredith after the coup he helped engineer, was a subdued man now. Everyone was giving him bad looks and he knew it. He eventually left the LCG altogether. But his return and his departure were both quiet affairs. The damage he had done was already behind him.

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And then Rod Meredith did the one thing I had been dreading.

He rewrote the church government booklet.

The very first booklet he had written for the GCG — the one that gave people biblical permission to leave a corrupt church — was now rewritten to say the exact opposite. Top-down. Hierarchical. Centralized authority. Do not leave. The door he had opened to let people out, he slammed shut behind them. Just like Armstrong had done decades before him.

I was absolutely furious. I could not believe what I was reading. It was the exact opposite of the previous version. And Rod Meredith was such a great writer and so convincing that he could persuade you one way years ago and then persuade you of the opposite years later. The average member would read the new booklet and never even realize it contradicted everything the earlier version had taught. That is how good he was.

Back in Chapter 12, I raised a critical question: Did Meredith genuinely change his mind on church government when he started the GCG, or was he mostly interested in giving people theological permission to leave the WWCG and join his little group? Now I had my answer. The moment the LCG got big enough, he put the lock back on the door. Armstrong did it. Meredith did it. Same playbook, same pattern, different decade.

Now, I believe his intentions were genuinely good. Rod Meredith was not a Tkach. He was not a con man. He sincerely believed that building the church as fast as possible was doing God's work, and he sincerely believed that strong centralized government was the way to do it. But as the old saying goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

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Somewhere around this time we got our own minister: Jeff Fall, a retired dentist. For the most part he was a fine man, and he had an exemplary family. A wonderful wife, two sons I believe, and maybe a daughter. As a matter of fact, I always considered his family the best family I ever witnessed. His sons were great — simply amazing and fun to speak with. So even though I would wind up disagreeing with Jeff Fall on some things, no one could ever disagree with how he raised his family.

Fall covered groups across the greater Bay Area, all the way up to Sacramento, so he was only with our group personally once every two or three weeks. When he was not there, he needed someone to run things. And who did he assign as host? A man named Richard.

Now, who was Richard? Richard was for the most part a novice who had just been called into the LCG through the television telecast. He was brand new to the faith. And Richard could quote Rod Meredith as well as Rob could quote the Bible. But I noticed something very telling. Richard never quoted the Bible. He never talked about the Bible. It was always “Rod Meredith said this” and “Rod Meredith said that.” His faith was not in God or in Scripture. His faith was in a man.

So there it was again. On one hand, you had me — decades of study, the man who had seen through Tkach before anyone else, who had written the paper that Meredith himself said helped him, who had been in God’s truth since the 1980s. On the other hand, you had Richard — a novice who could not quote a single Scripture but could recite Meredith chapter and verse. Richard got the position.

But I will confide something. I actually welcomed it. I had a little chuckle over it, to be honest. Why did I welcome it? Because I had had enough of the nonsense and it was time for me to move ahead,

alone if need be. Appointing Richard just helped me get out of there that much faster.

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Around this same time, my friend Mike S started questioning whether tithing was required for Christians. Mike S was still attending church at that point. And I was certain he was wrong. Absolutely certain. So in my zeal to prove to him that the Bible indeed requires Christians to tithe, I went to each and every scripture that the Churches of God used to support the tithing doctrine.

And I read them in their proper context.

What I discovered shocked me to my core. The Churches of God had been teaching tithing wrongly. When you actually read the scriptures they used — not just the cherry-picked verses but the full context surrounding them — it became crystal clear that tithing was most certainly not required to be paid by Christians to the church. I had gone in to prove Mike S wrong and came out realizing he was right.

That was a humbling moment. But it was also a familiar one. It was the same thing that had happened with the makeup articles, the same thing that had happened with Tkach's doctrinal changes — the con artist's stepson studied it out honestly and followed the truth wherever it led, even when it proved the opposite of what he expected. I had never been afraid of the truth. And I was not about to start now.

I stopped tithing immediately. But I did not stop giving. Paul teaches in the New Testament about freewill offerings — giving from the heart, generously but voluntarily, not under compulsion.

That is what I did from that point on. I gave freewill offerings. But the mandatory three tithes were over.

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And that brings me to something that had been bothering me for a long time. The money.

The ministry — Rod Meredith, Jeff Fall, Don Davis, and others — gave constant sermons on tithing. And these were not gentle reminders. They were extremely strong and extremely inaccurate. They would accuse anyone who was not paying their tithes of “stealing from God,” and then they would remind you that no thief will enter God’s Kingdom. Think about that. They were telling members that if they did not pay up, they would lose their salvation. Fear. The same control mechanism that had been used since the days of Herbert Armstrong.

And it was not just one tithe. It was three tithes. First tithe. Second tithe. Third tithe. Plus seven mandatory holy day offerings every year. Plus freewill offerings “above and beyond” all three tithes, the seven holy day offerings, and above and beyond regular offerings. The financial burden on the membership was crushing.

It finally dawned on me how much money played a part in the LCG — just like it had with the Worldwide Church of God and the Global Church of God before it. Rod Meredith would budget the coming year’s expenses not based on the money he had actually received from the members, but based on the money he projected he hoped to receive. That is a wrong way to do things. You do not spend money you do not have based on what you hope will come in.

As a result, Meredith would practically beg the members for money. He needed this amount for this project and that amount for

that project. And why did he do it? Because it worked. Just like it had worked in the WWCG. People would send in money — often money they did not have, often money they could not really afford, often charged to their credit cards — because “the work of God” needed it. And nobody wanted to be the one who let God’s work fail.

They did not care about the members. They cared about “the work” and their own paychecks, which almost surely were substantial. And on top of everything else, they would try to get the members to make out their wills or living trusts to the church. Now, they did not word it as replacing your family and loved ones. They were too smart for that. But in reality, that is precisely what they were asking people to do — disinherit their own children and grandchildren and leave their estate to the organization.

Even Don Davis, the most faithful man in the entire organization, had loaned a substantial amount of his own money to the GCG back during the early days. When the Salyer coup happened and the split occurred, Don was initially told he would not get a penny of it back. I believe he eventually did. But think about what that says. The most loyal man in the building, the man who had been at Meredith’s side since the forty-two people in that rented hall, and they almost stiffed him on his own loan.

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By this point I had already started writing my own booklets. True Church History. False Church History. Revelation Comes Alive. And others. I did not hide the fact that I was writing them, and I do not think the leadership liked it one bit. Because in their system, everything had to come from headquarters. All truth flowed from the top down. A regular member writing his own biblical material was a direct challenge to the authority structure — especially now

that Meredith had rewritten the church government booklet to lock everyone in.

But I was not writing to challenge anyone. I was writing because God had given me understanding and I felt a responsibility to share it. If headquarters did not like it, that was their problem. I answered to God, not to Charlotte.

• • •

By this time, Mike S had already left the LCG. He was anxious to marry and settle down, but there was very little chance of that happening in the small LCG. Mike S was exactly what girls always talk about — tall, dark, and handsome. But much more than that, he was a genuinely very humble person whom I liked very much. It was sad to see him go. I have not heard from him since.

Rob was being trained for the ministry at this point, since he spoke Spanish as his first language. He was living in southern California, or perhaps even Central or South America. I liked Rob very much too. But his story would take a different turn later on.

As for me, I had seen enough. The rewritten church government booklet. The tithing sermons that accused faithful people of stealing from God. The nepotism. The Ambassador College favoritism. The headquarters-only approach to truth. Richard the novice running my group because he was quoting Meredith. The money machine that bled the members dry and then asked for their inheritance too. The cumulative weight of it all had been building for years.

I think I just walked away. After I left, Jeff Fall kept calling me up wanting to talk about it. But I basically told him there was nothing he could say that would stop me. I had given this much thought over the last few years and was just waiting for the right time. Now

was the right time. This was not an impulsive decision. I had already made it in my heart long before my feet walked out the door.

Russ left with me. Martha left with me. Josefa may not have made it that far — either before or shortly after this point, she started learning about some strange theological things and got swept away with it. But Russ and Martha were faithful. They had been with me from the very beginning, from those private meetings back in the WWCG days, and they were with me now.

So there we were. No organization. No headquarters. No minister assigned to us. No tithing demands. No church government booklet telling us we could not leave. Just a small group of believers who had finally walked away from the last church that was supposed to be different and turned out to be the same.

The con artist's stepson was done with organizations. But he was not done with God. Not even close.

## CHAPTER 15

### *The Small Flock Scatters*

2000–2019

After leaving the Living Church of God, the three of us — Russ, Martha, and I — started meeting at Martha’s place for Sabbath fellowship. She lived in between Russ and me, so it made sense. And for a while, it was good. Really good.

There was no headquarters. No hierarchy. No minister flying in every three weeks to appoint a novice over me. No tithing demands. No one telling me what I could or could not write. Just the Bible, prayer, discussion, and fellowship. It was the most peaceful worship I had experienced since this whole journey began.

Martha had seven children, and I got along with all of them. Her brother Rick would sometimes join us. I would call Rick a partial believer. But he was a wonderful person — soft calm voice, not very emotional, kind, generous. He still lived at home with his parents in the same house they had all grown up in, and it was only a couple of miles from Martha’s condominium.

Martha stayed very close to me during this time, and there were two reasons for that. First, she had paid close attention to everything I taught over the years, and when things happened exactly the way I said they would, she was convinced she needed to stay close. Second, she definitely liked me. A lot. And I will not pretend otherwise — I was attracted to her too. But she was married, separated from her second husband Greg for many years but never divorced. And quite frankly, I did not really think she was converted. Now, that is not always a person’s fault. God has to first call you into the truth, and if He decides not to do so at this

time, there is nothing you can do about it. Most people think God is trying to save everyone today. But that is not what the Bible teaches. God calls everyone at the time that is best for them.

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Rob was the first to go.

He had eventually moved back to the Bay Area with his wife from Central or South America, and it was great to see him again. Rob was a genuinely great person — kind, sincere, and not dishonest in any way. But he had one quality that would prove to be his undoing: he was overconfident in his own ability to figure out the Bible on his own.

Rob had a near-photographic memory of Scripture. He could instantly quote just about any verse you threw at him. But here is the thing I have learned over the years — just because you memorize Scripture does not mean you understand the Scriptures or can put them together properly. It is like having all the pieces of a puzzle. You may have every single piece, but figuring out where they go is the challenge.

And so Rob started trying to work out all the Bible's doctrines on his own, using that incredible memory. And he started to believe in some false things. I tried to show him why he was wrong. But by that point he had too much confidence in his own ability and would not even consider what I was saying to him. Around 2002, Rob drifted away. I liked him very much. It was hard to watch.

• • •

Then came Russ.

During this time I had just gotten a new teaching job at a middle school in San Leandro, teaching sixth grade math and coaching

track and cross country. I was working from eight in the morning until nine at night. So when the Sabbath came, I needed rest and real fellowship — not a lecture.

But Russ had discovered the calendar.

Now, a little background. Back in the Worldwide Church of God in Vineland, NJ one winter, the minister held a few Wednesday night Bible studies where he would explain the Jewish calendar with its postponement rules. These were some of the most boring Bible studies I ever attended. Everyone was half asleep except me and one local elder who I believe may have had a doctorate in mathematics. I actually found it fascinating.

The biggest problem with the Jewish calendar and its postponement rules is simple: under those rules, you can never have a holy day fall on a Friday. And yet in the New Testament, there was a holy day on a Friday. That is all anyone really needs to know. The answer is no, we should not be following the Jewish calendar. There are many other problems with it, but that one fact settles the question.

So I showed Russ the answer directly from the Scriptures. He loved it. But then instead of accepting the answer and moving on, Russ wanted to prove it through the Talmud, through historical records, through every outside source he could find. And he persisted for a year or longer. Every single week. Every single Sabbath. The calendar, the calendar, the calendar.

Now, Russ was a very social person who loved discussing the truth. Tall and handsome with reddish blond hair. He loved breakfast — he would already be planning his breakfast the night before. And he loved burritos. But Russ could also be very aggressive when he was convinced of something. When he explained something to you and you disagreed, he simply could

not understand how that was possible. So he would re-explain the whole thing again in a slightly different way, thinking now you would get it. And then a third time. A fourth time. A fifth time. It was very odd. Who cares if someone does not agree with you on something?

After about a year of the calendar, Russ apparently figured he needed other people to tell about it, so he started looking into other groups — the Seventh Day Adventists, Jewish-based Christian groups, and so on. And this is where the real trouble began. Russ discovered the Messianic Jews and the Hebrew Roots movement, and he became absolutely infatuated. The switch was pulled without him having a clue.

Along the way he met a very pretty divorced woman who was substantially older than him with two teenagers. The kids were awesome and I loved talking to them. But his wife seemed to be jealous or envious of me for some reason, and that definitely caused problems between Russ and me. They got married and had a daughter together. Unfortunately, the marriage was a disaster. Russ wound up in and out of court for eighteen years trying to maintain visitation rights. He would win in court, and then months later his ex-wife would be back with new allegations. This just went on and on until their daughter turned eighteen. I definitely felt sorry for Russ to have to go through all of that.

Eventually Russ went off on his own and tried to start his own group. He appeared to be drifting all the way into Judaism. A few months ago I called him up for probably the first time in years, just to see if he was paying attention to the news and how it related to biblical end-time events. But he was not interested at all. He made a few comments and I cannot remember exactly what he said, but it was obvious that he had done a 180 when it came to sound biblical prophecy.

Like the Bible says: always learning but never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. And: tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine.

For the most part, that seemed to be Russ now. And it was the saddest loss of all, because he had been with me from the very beginning — from those private meetings back in the late 1980s, through the WWCG, the GCG, the LCG, and out the other side.

• • •

Josefa was another loss, though a quieter one. Either before or shortly after we left the LCG, she started learning about some strange theological things and got swept away with them. It was similar to what happened to Rob, just different “new truths.”

I still run into Josefa from time to time at a park or a supermarket, and both of us are always so happy to see each other in those moments. But like everyone who finds “new truth,” she feels it is her responsibility to convince everyone else. Which can be a pain in the neck. And boring.

• • •

And then there were two.

After Russ left around 2004, it was just me and Martha. Her kids were there, and Rick would sometimes join us. But essentially it was down to the two of us carrying on Sabbath fellowship. And that is how it stayed for about fourteen years.

During all of those years, Martha had a problem that she could never seem to fix. She would sometimes wear very revealing clothing, and when I came over to her apartment I would tell her that what she was wearing was definitely not appropriate. She would say OK and dress better for a while. But then eventually she

would go right back to dressing inappropriately. And then I would tell her about it again. This went on year after year after year.

Especially since I was not married, it was torture. Absolute torture. And I kept hoping she would understand that and take it seriously. But she never did — at least not permanently.

As I said, I did not really think Martha was converted. And I want to be careful here, because that is not always a person's fault. God calls everyone at the time that is best for them, and for most people that time is after Christ returns in the second resurrection. God is only concerned today with making sure He has the number of leaders He will need when Jesus first returns to help Him rule the world. So if Martha was not called at this time, that will be no big deal in the long run, because she will eventually be resurrected and given God's Holy Spirit and have her first real opportunity for eternal life.

• • •

Around 2018, Martha called me. Her daughter Rachel was in the San Jose jail.

I did not ask what happened. I did not ask what she did. I did not weigh the pros and cons. I just immediately said, "That's enough. I am headed there right now." And I drove straight to San Jose.

Rachel. My little neutralizing Rachel. When she was a little girl and I was driving my truck, she would sit right next to me. And when I would say "Neutralize!" she would reach over and put the gear into neutral. She loved doing this so much. And so did I. She grew up during all those years of Sabbath fellowship at Martha's house, and she became a stunningly beautiful woman. As beautiful as anyone else in the world.

At the jail I found out what had happened. Rachel had been working at one of those new legal marijuana stores, and unfortunately she started using some of the product herself. And it was destroying her mind. The effects were almost hallucinogenic. This was not the mild stuff people smoked decades ago. This was something far more potent, and it was breaking her.

She definitely recognized me, and we had a great time talking and laughing about old memories, especially about “neutralizing.” But she was no longer the happy girl I had always known. She was sad and she needed some serious help.

I immediately got her out of jail. I do not remember if I paid the bail or not, but probably. I was hoping she would want to come back with me to my apartment, but I lived about thirty minutes north of San Jose and she had a young son, so she did not want to do that. Then I tried to get her to at least stay with Martha and her younger sister for a while.

A few days later I called Martha back and told her to contact Rachel immediately. Tell her that she and her son can live with me as long as she wants. It will not cost her a penny. I will pay the rent, the food, the utilities, everything. Rachel said yes. She and her son would move in with me, at least for a little while.

But something happened. And she never came.

I have thought about this many times since. Why did Rick not get Rachel out of jail? Martha’s kids loved Rick. And why did Rick and his parents not let Rachel and her young son live with them? They owned a very nice big house. That seems like it would have been ideal. But I do not think I even thought about any of that at the time. My only concern was for me to help her. Most people care. Rick cared. Martha cared. But caring and acting are two very different things.

A few years later, I got a call.

Rachel had been murdered. Found by a railroad track. Strangled.

And that was the end of my little neutralizing Rachel. Who may have been the most beautiful woman in the world.

But God willing, I will see her again. And this time, things will hopefully wind up much better.

• • •

After I returned from New Jersey and Philadelphia, where I had been for a few years, I went over to Martha's apartment to see her. She had gained some weight since I had last seen her. Martha was often too skinny because she was constantly worrying about something. But now, several years later, she had put on just enough weight that her figure was perfect.

And she was wearing a loose top and tight body-fitting shorts that clung to her body. The whole evening I was going insane. It was absolute torture. The same problem I had told her about year after year after year, and she still had not changed.

When I drove home that evening, I said to myself: that is enough. I will never see her again.

And I have not.

That took discipline. Real discipline. After all those years of fellowship, all those Sabbaths together, all those conversations about the Bible, all those memories with her children — to just cut it off completely. But it was not anger. It was self-preservation. I had told her for years and she would not change, and I could not keep putting myself in a position that conflicted with my convictions. Sometimes the hardest thing you can do is walk away

from someone you care about. But sometimes it is the only thing you can do.

• • •

And so I thought about all of them. The original group. The people who had been with me through the most extraordinary spiritual journey of my life.

Rob. A great person with a near-photographic memory of the Bible, who got overconfident in his own ability to figure out the truth and drifted into false doctrines.

Mike S. Tall, dark, and handsome, but more importantly one of the most genuinely humble people I have ever known. He chose a wife over the calling, and I have not heard from him since. I miss him.

Josefa. Swept into strange theological teachings, just like Rob but a different flavor. We still smile when we run into each other at the park. But the truth she once held is gone.

Russ. My closest friend for the longest time. The calendar obsession led to the Messianic Jews, which led to the Hebrew Roots movement, which led to Judaism. The switch was pulled without him having a clue. Always learning but never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. The saddest loss of all.

Martha. Fourteen years of Sabbath fellowship, and I had to walk away to protect myself. She would not change. And her daughter Rachel — my little neutralizing Rachel — strangled and left by a railroad track.

Every single one of them fell away. In one form or another, for one reason or another, they all left the truth that God had shown them. Some were pulled away by false doctrines. Some by overconfidence. Some by loneliness.

And then there was one.

The con artist's stepson. Still keeping the Sabbath. Still studying the Bible. Still writing. Still standing. A small flock of one.

But God's truth does not need a crowd to be true. And a small flock of one is still a flock that belongs to God.

# **PART THREE**

## **THE JOURNEY**

*2000–2016*

## CHAPTER 16

### *The Teacher*

#### *The Teacher*

When I came back to California in 1988, I had a decision to make. I could start another landscape maintenance business, which is what I had been doing before, or I could try something completely different. I chose something different. I decided to substitute teach while looking for a full-time teaching position.

It didn't take long. Around 1989, I landed a full-time job teaching PE at Lorenzo Manor Elementary School in San Lorenzo, California. The school was about a mile from my apartment, and from the very first day, I knew this was where I was supposed to be.

It was the best job I ever had.

I loved those kids. I loved watching them run and play and compete and laugh. I loved being outside with them every single day, teaching them how to throw and catch and jump and move their bodies. Elementary school PE is pure joy because the kids haven't learned to be self-conscious yet. They just go. They give you everything they've got, and they smile the whole time they're doing it.

And it wasn't just the PE classes. It was the relationships. I got to know those kids. I knew their names, their personalities, what made them laugh, what frustrated them. I watched them grow from year to year. When you teach elementary school, you don't just have a student for one period — you have every kid in the school. They all come through your gym. And they all become yours.

To this day, I still run into some of those kids — though of course they're not kids anymore. I don't always recognize them because they've grown up and their faces have changed. But they know me. If not from what I look like now, but from my voice. The second they hear me speak, they light up and say, "Hey, that's Mr. Exton!" And boy, is that fun.

During those years at Lorenzo Manor, a Vietnamese couple moved into the apartment right next door to mine, and their daughter Katherine became one of the most meaningful relationships of my life. Her full story—and the story of another very special person named Grace—is told in Chapter 29.

### *The Computer Lab*

Eventually the district made the decision to cut its elementary PE program, and just like that, the best job I ever had was gone. I went back to substitute teaching for a while, which was fine but not the same. You don't build the same relationships as a sub. You're there for a day or two and then you move on.

Then in 1995, I got a full-time position teaching computer classes to students from first through seventh grade at Parkmont Elementary School in Fremont, California. It was a different kind of teaching — a computer lab instead of a gym — but the best part was the same: the kids.

The first time I saw this cute little Asian girl, probably in first grade, sitting at one of the computers in the lab, I got the biggest smile on my face. I must have just watched her for the next ten minutes or so. And then I went over to talk to her.

Her name was Lily. And she was so adorable. And the amazing thing was, she reacted to me the same way I reacted to her. There was an instant connection, the kind you can't manufacture or

explain. From that point onward, we became best friends. Lily would come to the computer lab every single day to eat lunch with me. Every single day.

Oh, do I miss Lily. And her wonderful older sister, Kimee.

I still have something on my refrigerator that Lily gave me. It was a huge cutout with a large snowman — or snowwoman — on it, holding a cutout red heart that she had pasted onto its hand. She had made it at school for Valentine’s Day, and she was supposed to give it to her mom. But as she was leaving school that day, she decided to stop by the computer lab to say goodbye. And instead of taking that Valentine home to her mother, she gave it to me.

A first grader. She chose to give it to Mr. Exton instead of her own mom. You can’t teach a child to do that. That came straight from her heart.

It’s still on my refrigerator.

### ***Sixth Grade Math***

In 2000, I got a teaching position at a middle school in San Leandro, California, teaching sixth grade math. I also coached the school’s track and cross country teams. Boy, was I busy. Between teaching all day and coaching after school, there wasn’t a lot of free time. But I loved it.

Teaching math to sixth graders is a different world from teaching PE to elementary kids or computers in a lab. You’re working with eleven- and twelve-year-olds who are right at that age where they’re starting to figure out who they are. Some of them are scared of math. Some of them are bored by it. And some of them just need someone to believe in them. The job of a teacher isn’t

just to explain fractions and decimals. It's to make every kid in that room feel like they can do it.

During this time, Katherine had grown up. She was now twelve years old and in the sixth grade herself. And every school day that year, I tutored Katherine for about an hour in math. It was like the old days in a way — instead of snail hunts after school, it was math at Uncle Mike's apartment. The routine changed, but the bond was the same.

She did fine in math and showed good improvement over the year. And she hadn't lost her sense of humor. One time, just months after her family had moved from that little apartment in San Lorenzo, I asked her how the old apartment compared to her new home. And referring to the old apartment, wouldn't you know it, she replied, "Yuck!" and started to laugh. She also wasn't done with the old "BBBB-LACK" and "BBBB-LUE" jokes from when I was teaching her how to pronounce the letter B as a toddler. Now she'd add the exaggerated B to other words just to make us both laugh.

When the school year was almost up and our tutoring sessions were about to end, Katherine called me one evening, but I wasn't home. So she left a message on my answering machine. I recently found that old answering machine and played the messages from many years ago. And there was Katherine's twelve-year-old voice saying, "Oh, Uncle Mike, tomorrow will be my last day at your home. Oh, I don't know what I am going to do. I will be so bored. I won't have anything to do. But at least I have one more time with you tomorrow. Oh, Uncle Mike... See you tomorrow. Now don't forget!"

As if I could ever forget.

She left two other messages on that machine. In one of them she said, “Hello, Uncle Mike. I am having a birthday party next weekend, and guess what? You are invited!” I am planning on taking that answering machine over to Katherine’s home very soon for her and her parents to listen to.

I retired from teaching in 2010 after twenty-one years in the classroom.

### *The Price of Caring*

Throughout my teaching years—and indeed throughout my entire life—I noticed a pattern. I would form deep connections with the kids I taught and coached, and then they would move on. Every August at the end of camp, every June at the end of the school year, the same sadness would settle over me for about a week. It was the price of caring. I paid it gladly every time. That pattern, and what I eventually came to understand about it, is explored in Chapter 30.

## CHAPTER 17

### *The Dark Night*

#### *The Dark Night*

To understand what happened to me in New Jersey, you first have to understand what had been happening to my body for the previous twenty-seven years.

In 1985, while jogging through an intersection, a car ran the stop sign and crashed right into me. My back was severely injured — the ligaments in my lower back were terribly torn. After a few months I recovered enough to resume my normal activities, but my back was now dreadfully weak and vulnerable to future injury.

Sure enough, five years later, while playing in a basketball tournament, I reinjured my lower back. But here is where I made a huge, foolish mistake. I slightly injured my back at the beginning of the tournament, but instead of stopping, I played through the pain for the rest of the tournament. By the time I got home, my back was in worse shape than the first time. It was one of the worst decisions I have ever made.

I recovered again, but now my back was so weak that it could no longer absorb the normal shock of jogging. My hip joints had to take the impact instead. Slowly but surely, the cartilage in my hips began to wear out. By 1995, at the age of forty, I could no longer run at all. No more jogging. No more basketball. No more softball. I even had to stop lifting weights just to keep the pain at bay.

For the first time in my life, I was sidelined from the physical activities I loved. So I turned to biking, and that worked well for the next ten years. Until 2005.

## *The Misdiagnosis*

One morning in 2005, I woke up, sat down for breakfast, and immediately jumped right back up in agony. I had a sharp, electric-shock pain in my groin area. I could not sit down. Not for a day, not for a week, not for a month.

I went to a doctor. He told me I had an infection and prescribed a powerful, broad-spectrum antibiotic. I went to a second doctor. Same diagnosis. Same prescription.

It had absolutely nothing to do with an infection. Nothing.

I knew it sounded illogical. I knew it sounded irrational. But the doctor looked me in the eye and promised me that in just three days I would be able to sit down again. So against my better judgment, I took the pills.

Did they work? No. After five days, I still could not sit. But something far worse had happened.

Before that antibiotic, my digestive system was perfect. I would often have two to three full bowel movements each day, which is ideal. But after I took that antibiotic, for the *first time in my entire life*, I went a full day without a single bowel movement. Then two days. Then three. Then four. For five straight days I had zero bowel movements.

I knew right then and there that I was in serious trouble. I knew that my digestive system would never be the same. And I knew, almost surely, that it would get worse and worse over time.

I was right. That powerful, broad-spectrum antibiotic had destroyed every bit of good bacteria in my digestive system — from my mouth to my anus. It was like a scorched-earth chemical strike on my own body. And from 2005 to the present day, the

damage has never stopped getting worse. It has progressively worsened year after year, and today it is very severe, causing me great pain and other terrible problems that I have to fight every single day of my life.

When I later told specialist after specialist after specialist what those first two doctors had diagnosed, they just shook their heads in disbelief. They could not believe anyone would have prescribed what was prescribed for the symptoms I described. Why I didn't sue those two doctors for careless negligence I will never know.

Eventually, I figured it out myself. It was nerve damage from riding my bike every single day for ten years. This is a well-documented condition that occurs in approximately five percent of male cyclists. When I brought this to my next specialist, he confirmed it immediately. "Yep," he said. "That is the answer to the puzzle. It's nerve damage." But then he said something I did not want to hear: it would probably take years to heal, if it ever healed at all.

It took fifteen years. From 2005 to 2020, I could not sit down. But in 2020, the nerve damage finally healed, and for the first time in a decade and a half, I was able to sit again.

But let me make this crystal clear. The nerve damage healed. The antibiotic damage never did. Because of what that powerful antibiotic did to my digestive system, the problems have continued to get worse and worse, year after year, and they show no signs of ever stopping.

I also have no cartilage whatsoever in either hip joint. That has been the case since 2005. But remarkably, I am in no pain at all from the hips. The real source of my daily suffering is the colon and rectum damage caused by that one reckless prescription.

Today I cannot walk without assistance. Depending on the situation, I use either two canes, a walker, or an electric wheelchair. I am in constant pain — sometimes extremely painful. I sleep about eight hours each night, but it is broken into roughly five segments spread across about ten hours, because I wake up every one to two hours and it takes me about thirty minutes to fall back asleep each time. This has been going on for about six years now. I must admit it is torture. But somehow I keep going.

And I do not take a single painkiller or any drug. Not one. Not ever. Despite being tempted constantly. I wrote a book about natural health, and I live by it — even when living by it means enduring pain that most people would never tolerate without medication. Everything I have accomplished since 2005 — the books, the coaching, *ROMAN*, this autobiography — was done in this condition.

### *South Jersey*

I retired from teaching in 2010 at the age of fifty-five. After twenty-one years in the classroom, I was finally free to write and coach full time. For two years I did exactly that, and life was good.

Then in 2012, I made what turned out to be a terrible decision. I moved back to South Jersey.

On paper, it made sense. I bought a beautiful brand-new home. Some of my old friends lived very close by. My family members weren't far away, just outside Philly. And I found a wonderful little congregation of the Living Church of God in Hammonton, New Jersey. The people there were terrific, and we liked each other very much. Many of them were the same people I had known years earlier in the Vineland group. They even let me donate some of the books I had written to their church library, which was

remarkable given the LCG's headquarters-only approach to publications.

If my older sister Vicki, who was having financial difficulties, hadn't been a chain smoker, I would have offered to let her live in my home with me rent-free. She would have had her own bedroom and her own bathroom. But the cigarettes made that impossible.

For a little while, everything seemed fine. And then something very strange happened.

### *The Sleep Episode*

Just months after moving into my new home, I went to bed at the same time I always did. Normally, I would sleep eight or nine hours and wake up a little groggy, like most people do. But one morning I woke up after exactly seven hours. Not approximately seven hours. Exactly seven. And I was wide awake, full of energy, completely alert the second my eyes opened. No grogginess at all.

I thought it was strange, but I wasn't complaining. Seven hours of sleep is perfectly fine, especially when you feel great.

But then the next night, the same thing happened. And the night after that. And the night after that. For about two straight weeks, I slept exactly seven hours every single night and woke up full of energy each time.

And then it changed. Instead of seven hours, it dropped to exactly five. Not six. Five. And for the next week or so, it was precisely five hours every single night. Now I was starting to think this wasn't just strange. This was crazy. What happened to the number six? Why was it bypassed?

Then after about one week, it immediately dropped to exactly three hours. Now I was in panic mode. Because I could survive on five hours of sleep, but three? And I was thinking — what happened to the even numbers? Why were six and four both skipped? Plus, the seven hours had lasted about two weeks, but the five hours lasted only one week. The duration was shrinking too.

After only about three or four days at three hours, sure enough, it dropped to just one hour. And yet, just like every other level, I woke up full of energy and completely alert.

I started calling everyone I knew. Friends, church members, the minister in Hammonton. I asked if I could stay at someone's home for even a few days, just to see if a change of environment might help. Not a single person said yes. Excuse after excuse after excuse. Some of these people had spare bedrooms in their homes and lived alone. But nothing. It seemed like no one realized just how dangerous this was.

And then it happened. Zero. I could not sleep at all.

The human body cannot survive without sleep. After several days of no sleep, the brain begins to deteriorate. And that is exactly what started happening to me. I couldn't think straight. I could not think logically. I could not reason. I could not make decisions. And the frightening part was, I knew it. I could see my own mind malfunctioning in real time, and I was powerless to stop it. Every decision I made was awful, and I knew it was awful even as I was making it.

Vicki would have been the perfect person to stay with. She would have said yes in a heartbeat. But she was a chain smoker and her house was always full of cigarette smoke. Whenever I visited her, we would sit outside on her back patio, and I would always make

sure I was sitting upwind. There was no way I could sleep in that house.

Eventually, my half-brother Nick said I could come stay with him for a couple of days. His wife would not allow anything longer than that. Nick lived just outside Philadelphia. At his house, I was able to sleep for about one hour. But that was it.

My brain was still struggling. The fog was thick, and it was getting worse.

### *The Aftermath*

I believe God eventually said, “Enough is enough. Leave him alone.” And so, gradually, over a fairly long period of time, I got back to normal.

But the damage was done. While my mind had been broken, I had made one terrible decision after another. I had sold my beautiful new home in South Jersey. I had thrown away many things that I had kept and cherished for years and years. I was now stuck living in a city that I despised. And I was furious with myself for having ever left California.

A deep sadness settled over me, and it would not lift.

### *Vicki’s Six Words*

One day I went over to Vicki’s house. We sat out on her back patio as always, me positioning myself upwind of the smoke. And I told her how sad I was. I told her everything. I told her that if I had to do it all over again, I never would have left California.

And my big sister — the woman who had been like a second mother to me — she looked at me and said six words:

“Michael, just move back to California.”

Not a lecture. Not a list of pros and cons. Not “Well, you shouldn’t have left in the first place.” Just the simple truth, spoken by the one person on earth who could cut through everything with one sentence.

And just like that, the fog lifted. And I was finally able to think straight.

*Of course.* That was the answer. That was always the answer. I had been so deep in the sadness and the aftermath of the sleep episode that I could not see the most obvious solution in the world. But Vicki could. She always could.

But I wasn’t ready to go yet. My pension was small, and I probably wouldn’t be able to qualify for an apartment in California. Plus, I didn’t think I could handle the drive across the country in the condition I was in. So I waited. And waited. Until I knew I was fully back to normal.

And then one day, I was. The real me was back.

I packed up my car and headed out. But I didn’t head west. Not yet. I had never taken a real vacation in my entire life. Not once. In over fifty years, I had never stopped working, studying, writing, coaching, or teaching long enough to simply rest. And I decided that before I went home to California, I was going to take the first real vacation I had ever had.

So I pointed the car south.

## CHAPTER 18

### *Myrtle Beach And Charlotte*

#### *Myrtle Beach and Charlotte*

On December 25, 2015, I packed up my car and headed south. I had never taken a real vacation in my entire life. In over fifty years, I had never stopped working, studying, writing, coaching, or teaching long enough to simply rest. But after everything I had been through — the terrifying sleep episode, the sadness, selling my home, the brain fog, the terrible decisions I had made while my mind was broken — I knew I needed to heal. And I knew I could not do it in a city I had come to despise.

Vicki's six words had given me the answer. California. But I wasn't ready for that drive yet. So instead of heading west, I headed south to a popular beach area in South Carolina that I had heard about but had never visited.

Myrtle Beach.

I drove straight through and got there quickly. And then I found an amazing hotel right along the beach. The room was on the twelfth floor, facing the ocean. The moment I walked in and saw that view, I knew this was where I was supposed to be.

The first thing I did was open the balcony sliding glass door. And I never closed it. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for the entire time I was there, that door stayed open and the curtain stayed drawn back. Fresh, healthy ocean air poured into my room every second of every day. And the sound — the constant, powerful roar of the waves crashing down onto the sand — it was so invigorating. I loved every second of it.

The water was still warm enough to swim in, even in late December. It was a beautiful beach. I went swimming as often as I could. I went to many very nice restaurants every day. I even found a place that made fresh whole wheat pizza, which is incredibly hard to find. And I discovered a great health food store nearby that also made healthy, delicious sandwiches. Between the ocean, the fresh air, the sunshine, the swimming, the good food, and the rest, I was living my seven natural pillars of health without even thinking about it. My body and my mind were healing on their own.

And the price? I could not believe how cheap it was. Four hundred and fifty dollars a month. Not per day. Not per week. Per month. Twelfth floor, oceanfront, balcony facing the Atlantic Ocean. Why so cheap? Because it was the off season and there were many vacancies. It seemed like I was ripping them off, but they didn't seem to mind.

I wound up staying for four months, from December all the way to May. It was not just a vacation. It was the most restorative experience of my life. Four months of ocean air, crashing waves, warm water, good food, and for the first time ever, genuine rest. Life was good.

### *Charlotte*

While I was in Myrtle Beach, I realized that I wasn't very far from Charlotte, North Carolina. And what was in Charlotte? The headquarters of the Living Church of God. Roderick C. Meredith himself was right up the road.

So one Friday I drove up to Charlotte and stayed at a hotel. The next day, on the Sabbath afternoon, I walked into their church services completely unannounced. Nobody expected me. I wasn't sure if anyone there would even know who I was.

But wow, were they friendly. They treated me — and all visitors — like a king or a long-forgotten friend. I had a wonderful time. The person I spent the most time with was Sandy Davis, the wife of Don Davis, who had been at Meredith's side from the very beginning. Sandy was so happy to see me. She took me around the room introducing me to everyone, including a very friendly woman named Kathy Williams.

Then the services began. I didn't see Meredith before the sermon because he usually stayed by himself in a side room to prepare. And after services, I couldn't find him anywhere. So I told one of the ushers that I wanted to talk to him, that we were old friends and that I hadn't seen him in many years. The usher smiled and explained that Meredith usually took a short twenty-minute nap in a side room before joining the potluck. They always had a potluck right after services.

So I waited. And after about twenty minutes, I could see the usher escorting Meredith across the room, walking him right toward the table where I was sitting.

He recognized me instantly. He sat down right beside me, and we had a very casual, light, pleasant conversation for a few minutes. It was good to see him. He was older now, and I could tell he knew he didn't have much time left on this earth. I thought so too.

His wonderful wife had died a few years earlier of cancer. I wish she had been there that day. She almost surely would have invited me to their home. She was the warmth in that family — the one who made the personal connections. Without her, Meredith had his brief pleasant chat with me and then had to move on.

## *The Tour*

After everyone was leaving that evening, Sandy Davis came over to me and asked if she could take me on a tour of their headquarters, which was just a few miles away. Of course I said yes.

The headquarters was nothing fancy or expensive. Just several functional buildings used for the different operations of the LCG. Sandy showed me the TV recording room where they filmed the Tomorrow's World program. She showed me the rooms where the writers worked, the ministers' offices, and Meredith's own office. There were people in some of the buildings that evening — I think they had several Spokesman Clubs going on.

As we walked through those buildings, Sandy and I talked about the old days. We talked about that very first church service of the Global Church of God, back in California, when just forty-two people had shown up to a hotel room on the first Saturday of January 1993. Sandy and her husband Don had been there. I had been there. Meredith had been there. And now, over twenty years later, here we were in Charlotte.

She said she didn't think many of those original forty-two were still alive. And perhaps none of us would still be alive when Christ returns.

Don Davis wasn't at services that day. He was sick and had stayed home. I was sorry I didn't get to see him. Don had been there from the very beginning — handling announcements and the sermonette at that first service, standing right beside Meredith as they built the GCG from scratch.

Recently, I contacted Kathy Williams on Facebook, and she told me that both Sandy and Don Davis are now in bad health. When I

heard that, I thought about that evening in Charlotte — Sandy's big smile as she showed me around those buildings, her excitement at seeing an old friend still walking the path. I am glad I made that trip. I am glad I got to see her when I did.

The next morning I headed back to Myrtle Beach, back to the twelfth floor, back to the ocean air and the crashing waves. I had a few more weeks of healing left before I would pack up the car one final time and point it toward Colorado — and then, at last, toward home.

## CHAPTER 19

### *Colorado*

### *Colorado*

I had driven through Colorado many times in my life but had never once stopped. This time would be different. After five healing months in Myrtle Beach and a visit to Charlotte that stirred up memories of a lifetime, I pointed my car west with one planned stop along the way — Boulder, Colorado.

My cousin Paula Newcomer lived in Boulder. She was one of six daughters born to my father's sister and her husband. I had not seen any of these cousins since I was about four years old — over fifty years. But Paula and I had been in touch for a few months, and when I called her during my drive from Myrtle Beach and told her I was coming, she invited me to stay at her home for as long as I liked and to meet all of her sisters.

I stayed for about two weeks. Paula was terrific. She took me to each of her sisters' homes so I could meet all six of them. It was a lot of fun getting to know these women who shared my blood but whom I had never really known.

Their father, I was told, was a wonderful man. He was in the military — a high-ranking officer and a great pilot who broke at least one flying record for speed. The cousins showed me newspaper clippings about their dad and his military achievements. Eventually the family had settled in Colorado, far from the Philadelphia area where they had originally lived.

But the most remarkable thing I learned during that visit was something that happened when I was about five years old and my

brother Jack was six. Their father — my father’s brother-in-law — had desperately wanted a son. After six daughters, he had given up on having one of his own. So he went to my mother and tried to convince her to let him and his wife raise me and Jack. At the time, both families were still living in or near Philadelphia.

My mother said no. She would never give up any of her children.

I have thought about that many times since learning of it. If my mother had said yes, I would have grown up in a military household in Colorado instead of on the streets of Philadelphia with a con artist stepfather. There would have been no Cipriano sharpening my instincts, no Philly toughness, probably no Church of God. My entire life — everything in this book — pivots on my mother saying that one word. No.

During the visit, I also went to my father’s sister’s grave. I stood there and looked at the gravestone with the name “Exton” carved into it. I took a photograph of it. There was something powerful about seeing my own last name on a headstone in Colorado, so far from Philadelphia, so far from everything I had known. It was a reminder that my father’s family had a life and a story of their own, even though I had missed almost all of it.

### *Vicki’s Letters*

One of the most fascinating discoveries of those two weeks had nothing to do with Colorado at all. It had to do with Philadelphia — and with my big sister Vicki.

It turned out that when Paula and Vicki were young, they had lived close to each other in the Philadelphia area. The two girls had become pen pals, writing letters back and forth to each other. And here was the astonishing part — Paula still had those letters. She had kept them for over sixty years.

I sat in Paula's living room and read every one of them. They were in my sister's handwriting — the handwriting of an eight- or nine-year-old girl. Vicki wrote about everyday things. She wrote about how Jack and Michael were now walking to school all by themselves. She wrote about little moments in the life of our family before Cipriano. Just a young girl writing about her two little brothers. It was truly fascinating.

Paula also had lots of photographs from those days. Between the letters and the photos, I was looking through a window into a time I could barely remember — a time when I was just a little boy in Philadelphia with a big sister who loved him.

And guess what? It turned out that Vicki had the letters too. She had Paula's letters from all those years ago, tucked away somewhere, kept for a lifetime. But she had never mentioned them to anyone.

That was Vicki. She treasured things quietly, privately, without needing anyone to know. Two women on opposite ends of the country, both holding onto the same childhood letters for over sixty years. Neither one knowing the other still had them.

### *Billy*

Boulder is a nice place — kind of ritzy — and the University of Colorado is located there. One day during my visit, I drove over to the campus on my own. I asked around for a man named Billy, who was one of the track and cross country coaches at the university. They told me where to find him, and so I went.

Billy was one of the great competitors that my runner Yong-Sung Leal had raced against years earlier. I had never met Billy in person, but I knew him through the sport, and I wanted to say hello.

He was surprised and delighted to see me. He took me out to the track, where I was able to watch some of the university's top distance runners train. Billy was very hospitable and made me feel genuinely welcomed. I could see immediately why Yong-Sung had always liked him so much. There is a brotherhood among distance runners and their coaches, and Billy was the kind of person who embodied it.

It was a good visit. A brief one, but good. The coaching world is a small one, and sometimes all it takes is showing up and saying, "I coached the kid who used to race against you." And just like that, you're family.

After two wonderful weeks in Boulder, it was time to go. I had reconnected with family I hadn't seen in over fifty years. I had read my sister's childhood letters. I had stood at a gravestone with my name on it. I had watched college runners fly around a track in the Colorado sunshine.

And now, at last, I was ready to go home. I packed up the car and pointed it west — toward California.

## CHAPTER 20

### *Back To California*

#### *Back to California*

I drove from Colorado to California with no apartment waiting for me. I had no lease, no address, no plan. My pension was too small to qualify for an apartment anywhere in the Bay Area. On paper, I had no business even trying.

But I had Yong-Sung.

I drove straight to the apartment complex in San Leandro where Yong-Sung Leal was living. He was one of the first elite runner I had ever coached — the kid who won the California State High School Championship in both cross country and track as a sophomore, who broke the national sophomore record in the 5,000 meters, whose photo in the newspaper showed me riding my bicycle alongside him during training. Years earlier, I had poured everything I had into him as his coach. And now, when I needed help the most, he was the one who got me home.

Yong-Sung was friends with the apartment manager, a man named Rob. They attended the same church as Yong-Sung's parents and had known each other for years. Yong-Sung asked Rob to let me move in regardless of my income. And Rob said yes. No hesitation. No paperwork drama. No waiting period. Yong-Sung vouched for me, and that was enough.

Minutes later — not days, not weeks, but minutes — Rob had one of the apartment workers helping me carry my things from the car into my new home. Apartment 304. Yong-Sung was right down the hall in apartment 322.

That's the kind of loyalty you don't get from a church headquarters or a corporate organization. You get it from real relationships built on mutual respect. I had invested in Yong-Sung as a coach, and years later he invested in me when I needed it most. And God was looking out for me again, just as He had at Myrtle Beach.

### *Apartment 304*

The apartment complex was set up more like a hotel than a typical apartment building. There were four floors on one side and three floors on my side, and all of the apartments faced outward toward a central courtyard with a pool, a basketball court, and a grass area. It was an open, community-style layout where you could walk out your door and see life happening right in front of you.

And there were kids. Lots of kids. Playing by the pool, running around the courtyard, shooting baskets. For a retired PE teacher and track coach, it was close to paradise. I got to know many of those children. I watched them play, learned their names, built friendships with them the way I always have.

But the one big problem was that families with children were constantly moving in and out. I would develop these wonderful friendships with kids, and then one day their family would pack up and they would be gone. It happened over and over again.

It was the same pattern that had followed me my entire life. At Paradise Farms, every August the buses came and the friends I had spent the summer with were gone. In teaching, every June the school year ended and the kids moved on. And now at the apartment complex, the cycle continued. Wherever there were children, I connected with them. And wherever there was a goodbye, it cost me something.

But I never stopped. I never held back. Because the alternative — keeping my distance to avoid the sadness — was never an option for me.

### *Rebuilding*

In the fall of 2016, I immediately started coaching again. Each year my runners would do well, and often one or two of them would do extremely well. I had already built a legacy with Yong-Sung and Chris Dominic and others, and there was more to come in the years ahead.

I was also writing again. I had been writing books and booklets on biblical topics since 1979, and by the time I settled back into San Leandro, I had produced over twenty works. My website, [TheBibleComesAlive.org](http://TheBibleComesAlive.org), had been running for nearly twenty years. The work never stopped. The studying never stopped.

In 2025, I moved from apartment 304 to a first-floor apartment in the same complex. It had recently been renovated and looked brand new. More importantly, it was right next to the parking lot — no more stairs, no more elevator. For a man who gets around on two canes, a walker, or an electric wheelchair, that move made a real difference in my daily life.

I am still here. Still in the same complex. Still coaching, though now from a wheelchair instead of from a bicycle alongside my runners. Still writing. Still studying the Bible.

The dark night in New Jersey is long behind me. The five months at Myrtle Beach put me back together. The two weeks in Colorado reconnected me with family I thought I had lost. And Yong-Sung — the kid I coached on the streets of San Leandro all those years ago — made sure I had a place to come home to.

I have learned that God does not abandon His people, even when it feels like the whole world has. He put Myrtle Beach at four hundred and fifty dollars a month on the twelfth floor. He put Vicki on her back patio with six perfect words. He put Yong-Sung in an apartment complex with a manager who did him a favor. And He put me right back where I belong.

# **PART FOUR**

## **THE COACH**

*1989–Present*

## CHAPTER 21

### *The California Grizzlies*

1989–2026

In the fall of 1989, I started coaching. I had just landed my first full-time teaching position—PE at an elementary school in San Lorenzo, California—and coaching was a natural extension of who I was. I had been a competitive runner my entire life, from Bartram HS and East River Drive in Philadelphia to the steeplechase at Clearview HS to running at Montclair State. Running was in my blood. Teaching kids was in my blood. Coaching combined both.

In those early years, I didn't have a club. I coached kids individually, or I'd team up with the Pleasanton Heat, whose coaches were all CYO guys I knew well. They were great people and it worked out well. My runners would compete unattached or under the Heat's name, and a few of them made All-American.

But even back then, the philosophy was already formed. It was the same philosophy I would use for the next thirty-seven years, and it never changed. Not once.

• • •

Whatever I told a runner to do, there was a reason for it. I never assigned a workout just to assign a workout. Every run, every distance, every pace had a purpose that fit into a long-term plan. The kids who trusted that plan and followed it became the best they could be. The ones who didn't—the ones who got impatient, or whose parents tried to override the system with their own ideas—it never worked out. I'll say that again. It never worked out. Not once in thirty-seven years.

• • •

Over those first two decades of coaching, I produced some of the most talented young distance runners this country has ever seen. You'll read about a few of them in the chapters that follow—Yong-Sung Leal, who won the California State Championship in both cross country and track as a sophomore and broke the national high school record in the 5,000 meters. Chris Dominic, who won approximately ten national titles and held world records in both the 800 and the mile—one of which stood for twenty-five years. Both of them on magazine covers. Both of them in newspaper articles all over the Bay Area. Both of them trained by the same system: build the base, trust the coach, do the work.

And both of them robbed of the potential of Olympic gold by things neither they nor I could control. Bad kidneys. Bad feet. You'll read those stories too.

But the point here is that the system worked. It worked in the 1990s with Yong-Sung and Chris. It worked in the 2000s and 2010s with dozens of other runners who made All-American or won state and regional titles. And it would work again, spectacularly, starting in the spring of 2022.

• • •

For years, I was just a coach with a handful of runners. Everybody knew me in the Bay Area youth running scene, but I didn't have an official team. My kids wore California Grizzlies uniforms—I liked the name—but they competed unattached. It was me, a park, a stopwatch, and whoever showed up ready to work.

Then something happened in the summer of 2022 that changed everything. A sixth-grade girl named Ava Padilla showed up at one of my practices with her father Lance, watched my 7<sup>th</sup> grade runner

fly around the park at 5:30 pace, for 5 miles. She then asked if she could give it a try. She had never run competitively in her life. Four months later, she won the triple crown at the national championships in Sacramento—the 3000, the 800, and the 1500—all in one weekend. Her story is a chapter of its own.

But what Ava’s success did was put the California Grizzlies on the map. Word got around. Parents started calling. Kids started showing up at practice wanting to run with us. The numbers grew fast, and it became clear that this wasn’t a handful of runners anymore. This was a real team.

So I made it official. I founded the **California Grizzlies Running Club**.

After more than thirty years of coaching individual runners and producing national champions and world record holders, I was now building something different. Not just developing one or two elite athletes at a time, but building a program from the ground up—a team, with depth, with culture, with kids pushing each other every day at practice. The same principles that had guided Yong-Sung to state HS championships and national record, Chris to world records, and Ava to a triple crown would now be the foundation for an entire club.

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The fall of 2022 was the California Grizzlies’ first year competing as a team. And what a debut it was.

My eleven-to-twelve-year-old girls’ cross-country team was the best in all of Northern California, Central California, and Nevada. We placed first in the Association Championships. First in the Regional Championships. And then at the USATF Junior

Olympics National Championships, in our very first year as a team, we finished fourth in the entire country.

Fourth in the nation. *Year one.* Most running clubs spend years building up to even qualify runners for nationals, let alone place as a team. And here we were, a brand-new club from the San Francisco Bay Area, standing on the national stage in our first season.

Then in January of 2023, I got a phone call telling me I had been selected by the Positive Coaching Alliance as one of the Top 25 Coaches in the Nation for 2022. And this wasn't just track and cross country. This was all sports—football, basketball, baseball, soccer, swimming, everything. Every sport in the country. And somehow, I was blessed to be chosen with the other 24 recipients.

The awards banquet was held at the Chase Center in San Francisco—the same arena where the Golden State Warriors play their home games. I brought Yong-Sung with me. It was a beautiful evening, and an honor I never expected.

• • •

Then came December of 2023. The USATF Junior Olympics National Cross-Country Championships in Tallahassee, Florida. Only our second year competing as a team.

The weather that day was something else. Severe storms rolled in and caused an almost two-hour delay because of lightning. When the races finally started, the course had turned into a swamp. Rain was pouring down. Standing water covered parts of the course. Most kids had never raced in conditions like that in their lives.

My nine-to-ten-year-old boys didn't care. Maximilian Och, Vihaan Sharma, Max Kullar, Cameron Owsley, Carrick Zhang, and

Adithya Nalluri went out there and fought through the mud, the water, and the torrential rain—and they came out on top. **National Champions.** In only our second year as a team.

Our girls' team finished sixth in the nation. And across the board, eleven Grizzlies earned All-American honors—top twenty-five in the entire country: Rosalind Fennelly, Charlene Evangelista, Zichun Shen, Diya Nalluri, Harish Paschapur, Maximilian Och, Vihaan Sharma, Max Kullar, Cameron Owsley, Carrick Zhang, and Krish Shah.

Two days later, the California Grizzlies were on ABC Sports News.

In our first year, we finished fourth at nationals. In our second year, we won the whole thing. I had spent over three decades coaching individual runners to national titles and world records. But there was something different about watching a team of kids—kids who trained together, pushed each other, and believed in each other—stand at the top of the mountain together. It wasn't one runner crossing the finish line first. It was six boys, soaking wet and covered in mud, celebrating together in the rain in Tallahassee. National Champions.

• • •

People sometimes ask me how I've done all of this at my age, from a wheelchair, with continual interrupted sleep every night, in constant pain. The answer is simple. I love it. I love watching a kid show up at their first practice not knowing what a warm-up is, and then a year later they're standing on a podium at nationals with a medal around their neck. I love the look on their face when they realize what they just did. I love the parents crying in the stands. I love being the guy who saw it coming when nobody else did.

And the philosophy that made all of it possible can be said in three sentences. Build the base first. Trust the system. And never, ever quit.

That's how a retired PE teacher from Philadelphia built a national championship running club in a public park in northern California.

## CHAPTER 22

*Yong-Sung*

When I got the PE job at Lorenzo Manor Elementary School, one of the first things I did was create an annual school cross-country race. It turned out to be the event of the year. The kids just loved it and couldn't wait for the day to arrive. There were four races—fourth and fifth grade boys, fourth and fifth grade girls, sixth and seventh grade boys, and sixth and seventh grade girls. The whole school came out for it. Even after I was no longer teaching at Lorenzo Manor, I would still go back every year to put on that race. That's how much it meant to the kids, and how much it meant to me.

One year, something very unusual happened in the fourth and fifth grade boys' race. Normally, the fifth graders would take the top five or more places. They were a year older, a year bigger, and a year stronger. That's just how it worked. But not this year. This year, the top three finishers were all fourth graders. And it was the closest race I had ever seen—the first three runners crossed the finish line just a few feet from each other.

After the race, I walked over to those three boys and asked them a question. Would they like to run in the Junior Olympic competition against the best runners in the country? It was a big step up from a school race around the playground, but I could see what these kids had.

The second-place finisher took me up on that offer. His name was Yong-Sung Leal.

• • •

What made Yong-Sung special had nothing to do with his body. Yes, he was talented. Yes, he could run. But the thing that separated him from every other runner I ever coached was something you can't measure with a stopwatch.

Whatever I told him, he did. Not after thinking about it for a while. Not after checking with someone else. Not after looking up what some other coach was doing on the internet. Whatever I told him, he did it immediately. Without hesitation. Without question. Every single time.

If I said run eight miles, he ran eight miles. If I said don't run for a month, he didn't run for a month. He never once did anything different from what I told him, and he would never even *consider* it. The second I told him something, that was it. Case closed. The only thing he ever said back to me was eight words: "When do you want me to begin, Coach?"

That trust is the rarest thing in sports. I've coached hundreds of kids over thirty-seven years, and I can count on one hand the ones who gave me that kind of complete, unquestioning faith in the system. Yong-Sung was the first.

In middle school, his training partner was a boy named Chris Dominic, whose story is the next chapter. The two of them pushed each other every day, and both of them trusted the program completely. Those are the two who became legends.

In those early years, there was no track, no facility, no weight room. I trained Yong-Sung on the streets of San Leandro. He would run and I would ride alongside him on my bicycle, keeping pace so I could coach him in real time—watching his form, calling out splits, adjusting the workout on the fly. The San Leandro Times ran a photo of us doing exactly that, with the caption: "Yong-Sung Leal runs alongside his coach, Mike Exton, who

pedals a bicycle in order to keep up with the young runner.” That photo is one of my favorites. No fancy equipment. No sponsorships. Just a kid running on a neighborhood street and his coach on a bike beside him.

• • •

By the time Yong-Sung reached Arroyo High School, the aerobic base I had been building in him for years was ready to pay off. And it paid off in a way that nobody saw coming—except me.

As a *sophomore*, Yong-Sung won the California State Championship in cross country. Then he turned around and won the California State Championship in track and field in the 3,200 meters. As far as I know, he is the only runner in California history to sweep both state titles as a sophomore. The San Leandro Times headline said it all: “Leal Makes It All Look Easy.” His quote in the paper was pure Yong-Sung: “I just go out hard and push myself toward the best time possible.”

His toughest competitor was a runner named Billy, who was a year older. Billy was talented and tough, and the two of them had some great races. Years later, I would visit Billy at the University of Colorado, where he had become a track and cross-country coach. He took me to the track and let me watch his distance runners train. Billy was a good man, and I could see why Yong-Sung liked him so much.

But the moment that announced Yong-Sung to the entire country came in July of 2001, in Sacramento. It was a hot day. There was no competition to push him. He was running the 5,000 meters completely alone, with nobody anywhere near him. And he ran 14:27—breaking the national age group record. He broke a record that had been set in 1984, five months before he was even born. He also broke the high school sophomore record from 1973. Two

national records in a single race, on a hot day, with nobody pushing him.

• • •

Here is why that 14:27 matters so much, and why it still keeps me up at night.

The following year, another sophomore in America ran the 5,000 meters. His name was Galen Rupp. Rupp ran 14:31—four seconds slower than Yong-Sung. But here's the difference. Rupp ran his race at the Under-20 National Track Championships, in a stacked field with great competition pushing him every step, with ideal weather. Yong-Sung ran his race alone on a very hot day in Sacramento with nobody near him. Four seconds faster, under far worse conditions.

And Rupp had way more natural speed than Yong-Sung. On paper, Rupp should have destroyed him in the 5,000. So how did Yong-Sung do it? Perfect workouts each and every day and an unbelievable pain threshold. I thought I could endure a lot of pain in my life. But nothing compared to Yong-Sung.

Now follow the logic. Yong-Sung was not really a 5K runner. He was not even a 10K runner. He was born to run the marathon and the marathon only. In a 5,000, speed still matters. In a 10,000, it matters less. But in a marathon—26.2 miles—speed becomes almost irrelevant. Endurance and pain threshold become *everything*. And those were Yong-Sung's two greatest gifts. Every mile longer the race gets, the more the advantage swings to Yong-Sung and away from a runner like Rupp.

Galen Rupp went on to win the bronze medal in the Olympic marathon. Third in the world. If the kid who had more speed and ran four seconds slower than Yong-Sung at the same age could

finish third at the Olympics in the marathon, what would Yong-Sung have done? You're not talking about a bronze medal. You're talking about gold.

• • •

In March of 2002, Yong-Sung competed for the United States team for the World Cross-Country Under-20 Championships in Ireland. He was only one of six runners who qualified for the entire country—and yet he was still in the eleventh grade. But he got injured during the race, and it sidelined him for several months.

When he came back and started training again, after only about two months the foot problems returned. So he went to the best running specialist foot doctor he could find. The diagnosis was devastating.

You were born with the wrong feet for distance running. The doctor told him he really needed to do something else. From that point forward, Yong-Sung could only run for about three months before the pain became unbearable, then he had to stop for about three months to let his feet recover. Three months on, three months off. You can't become a world-class marathoner on that schedule. You can't build the uninterrupted base that the marathon demands. The kid who was born to run 26.2 miles was also born with feet that wouldn't let him.

• • •

But here is what Yong-Sung Leal did even while training half the time that every other elite runner in the state was training.

That November, he finished third at the California State Cross-Country Championship. Then in June, he ran under nine minutes to finish third at the California State Track and Field Championship

in the 3,200 meters. And then he won the most prestigious award given out at the entire state meet—the Sportsmanship Award. It was given to just one person, and the judges chose Yong-Sung.

Think about that. He couldn't train consistently. His feet wouldn't let him. Every other runner in that field had been training without interruption for months. And Yong-Sung still finished third in the state in both cross country and track, and then won the character award on top of it. That tells you everything you need to know about who he was.

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In December of 2019, two of my younger runners—Gabe Heule, an eleven-year-old, and Shaun Mathew, a ten-year-old—set world records in the four-mile run. When Yong-Sung heard the news, he sent me a message.

*“This is great news! Wow—very impressive times. This is so great that you are still finding kids to coach. Honestly, running was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. I take the same discipline that I learned from you and running and I apply those principles to other aspects of my life. I became the person I am with your guidance and from the greatest sport in the world. Thanks again for keeping in touch with me and even more thanks for your love and guidance growing up through running. God Bless you, coach. Amen!”*

That message meant more to me than any trophy ever could. Because it told me that what I had poured into Yong-Sung all those years ago hadn't just made him a faster runner. It had made him a better person.

And that's the whole point.

## CHAPTER 23

*Chris Dominic*

I spotted Chris Dominic on the playground at Bay School. I was coaching his school's track team and we had a great team that year but we still needed someone who was good in the mile.

So, I was there trying to recruit a 7<sup>th</sup> grader for our big championship meet that was coming up. But then this scrawny 4<sup>th</sup> grader came running up to me, asking if he could give it a try. So, I said, sure kid, stop by the track later that day for a tryout. So he shows up with several other boys, all 7<sup>th</sup> graders, to compete for the last spot on our team. And wouldn't you know, he came in first place.

• • •

Chris and Yong-Sung became training partners that summer and throughout middle school. The two of them pushed each other every single day at practice, and together they became extraordinary.

What Chris and Yong-Sung had in common went beyond talent. They both trusted me completely. No second-guessing. Whatever I told them, they did. No outside opinions. No parents trying to override the plan. Just two kids who showed up every day, ran the workout to the best of their ability, and trusted their coach.

Those are the two who became legends. And that's not a coincidence.

• • •

By 1998, Chris Dominic was in the sixth grade. He entered three events at the national championships that year: the 3000, the 800, and the 1500. What happened over that weekend is still hard to believe, even for me.

In the 3000, he broke the national age group record. In the 800, he missed the national record by just one second. And in the 1500, he broke the national meet record. Three events. Three races. Three national championship titles. A national record, a near-miss national record, and a meet record. All in one weekend. As a sixth grader.

My quote in the newspaper after that weekend said it all: “His times were incredible. I was in shock. I still can’t believe it.”

As far as I know, he was the only one—boy or girl—to have ever won all three distance events at the national championships in the same weekend. And it wouldn’t be for another 24 years that someone else would repeat the same thing in winning the triple crown at the nationals.

• • •

But what made Chris Dominic unlike any runner I have ever seen—before or since—was his finishing kick.

He could be running side by side with the second fastest miler in the nation. Both of them shoulder to shoulder with a hundred meters to go. And they could both start their final sprint at the exact same time—and Chris would win by ten meters or more.

Ten meters. In a hundred-meter sprint to the finish. That’s not just a kick. That’s a completely different gear that nobody else in the nation had. It was unparalleled and simply unheard of.

And that kind of finishing speed is exactly how Olympic 1500-meter finals are decided. The best runners in the world sit on each other for most of the race, and then the last 100 meters becomes a dead sprint. The runner with the best kick wins the gold medal. Chris Dominic had the best kick I have ever seen in my life. I think without any doubt that he would have won Olympic gold in the 1500 meters. Not competed. Not medaled. Won.

• • •

In the fall of 1998, Chris Dominic appeared on the cover of *Youth Runner Magazine*. Number 1920 on his jersey, out in front, nobody even close to him. A twelve-year-old kid from the Bay Area on the cover of a national running magazine.

Inside was a feature article: “Athlete Focus: Chris Dominic.” Multiple action shots. The article told the whole story—how I spotted him on the playground as a fourth grader, the basketball shoes, the mile time, the national records.

A kid I found on a playground was now on the cover of a national magazine. Both Chris and Yong-Sung had articles written about them in newspapers all over the Bay Area. Both of them appeared in magazines. Both of them were on magazine covers. And both of them trained the same way, giving everything that they had at every single practice.

• • •

Chris won approximately ten national titles. He set world age group records in both the 800 meters and the mile. He was the most talented middle-distance runner I have ever seen.

But Chris was born with bad kidneys. He would swell up like a balloon, and when that happened he couldn’t run for about a

month. There was no warning and no way to prevent it. He would be dominating everything in sight, and then one day his body would shut him down. And he wouldn't be able to run again for at least a month.

By eighth grade, it became too much, and he had to quit.

I coached two runners who I believe would have eventually won Olympic gold medals. Yong-Sung Leal—bad feet. Chris Dominic—bad kidneys.

• • •

This is a story I never expected to tell, because until 2024, I didn't know there was a story to tell.

On May 15, 1999, at James Logan High School in Union City, California, Chris ran the 800 meters at a USATF-sanctioned meet. He was born in June of 1986, which made him twelve years old with just a few weeks to spare. His time that day was 2:02.

Nobody reported it. In 1999, the internet was not being used for youth running records. If someone broke a world record at a meet, somebody had to contact the people who kept the records and let them know so they could investigate it. I knew nothing about any of this at the time. So Chris's 2:02 was never submitted. It just sat there in my coaching logs, written in my own handwriting, and was forgotten.

Meanwhile, another kid somewhere else was listed as the world record holder in the 800 for twelve-year-old boys with a time of 2:03—a full second slower than what Chris had actually run. That wrong record stood for twenty-five years. A quarter century. And nobody knew it was wrong.

Then in June of 2024, a kid ran a 2:00 in the 800 at Franklin Field in Philadelphia—my hometown, the same track where I used to race. They announced that he had broken the “world record” of 2:03. When I read about it, I immediately pulled out all of my old coaching logs—the same notebooks I had kept for over twenty-five years through every move and every apartment—and I found the entry. Written in my own hand:

*“May 15, 1999: Cris runs the 800 in 2:02.”*

I drove straight to Chris’s house and told him I had good news and bad news.

“The good news: you’ve had the world record in the 800 for twelve-year-olds since 1999!”

“The bad news: your world record was finally broken a few weeks ago in Philly. My hometown.”

Chris was in shock. He had no idea he held the record. I had no idea he held the record. For twenty-five years (from 1999-2024), the real world-record holder in the 800 meters for twelve-year-old boys didn’t even know he had it.

If Chris had run that 2:02 even five years later, it would have been all over the internet, automatically uploaded to every database, and officially recognized. But in 1999, meet results lived on paper. And if nobody sent them in, they simply didn’t exist as far as the record keepers were concerned.

And the same thing happened in the mile. For seven years, Chris also held the world record for 12-year-olds in the mile. From 1999-2006. But no one ever knew about that world record either.

• • •

Chris still lives in the Bay Area, only about two miles from where I live. I pop in from time to time to visit him and his family, and we are always happy and excited to see each other. His health is still not great, but he's doing fine.

A few months ago, I sent Chris a message on Facebook telling him how amazing he is. Not was. Is. Present tense. Because a man who won ten national titles and held a world record for twenty-five years doesn't stop being amazing just because the running stopped.

Chris wrote back: "No Coach, YOU are the amazing one and the greatest coach ever!"

Both Chris and Yong-Sung gave me one of their gold medals from winning the national championship and setting the national record. I still have them. And every year, on the first day of practice, I show those medals to my new runners. I show them the newspaper articles and the magazine covers. I show them what Chris and Yong-Sung accomplished. And I tell them the same thing I've been telling kids for decades.

*If Chris and Yong-Sung could achieve such tremendous results from practicing hard, so can you—if you just do what I tell you to do and give it your all.*

## CHAPTER 24

### *The Triple Crown*

In the fall of 2022, a sixth-grade girl named Ava Padilla and her father Lance came to one of my practices to check us out. At the time I had a few great male runners, but the best was a boy named Gabe, a seventh grader whose younger brother Jackson also ran with us. Gabe was doing a five-mile workout on the one-mile trail course around a park, and he was flying—averaging about five minutes and thirty seconds per mile. Ava and Lance watched in astonishment.

Ava had never run competitively in her life. But Lance had a background in track as a discus thrower, and he knew his daughter had great natural athletic ability. She was already excelling in basketball, karate, and dance. They were curious about how she would do in distance running. And she loved to run, she promptly told me.

When Gabe finished his workout, we all stood around talking—Gabe, his father who attended every single workout and race, Lance, and some of the other runners.

And then Ava blurted out: “Can I give it a try?”

So I had her jog slowly on the one-mile loop, led by one of the girls on my team. The second she finished the jog, she asked another question that surprised me, because this had never happened with me before.

“Now can I run it fast!?”

I said OK, let's give it a try. She walked up to the starting line with great determination in her eyes, staring down the path. I yelled "Go!" and she started running.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. After she got about fifty meters down the path, I looked over at Gabe, his father, Lance, and the others, and I said it out loud.

"She is going to be great!"

Then I looked directly at Gabe—my best runner—and I said:

"Even better than you."

Gabe wasn't so sure about that. "Even better than me?"

"Yes."

• • •

In the middle of that first track season, I had separate conversations with both Ava and her teammate Charlene Evangelista. Both Ava and Charlene are Filipino, and both of them were running amazing workouts.

I told each of them the same thing. If you continue to train the way you're currently training, you will qualify for the nationals. But then I said something else.

"But if you want to do something more than just *run* in the nationals—if you want to do something spectacular and *win* the nationals—we would have to practice a little bit more than what we are now doing. What do you want to do?"

Both of them said the same thing: "No problem! Let's get started right away."

And so we did.

• • •

Exactly four months after that first day at the park, Ava was about to compete in her very first national championships in Sacramento, California—the same track where Yong-Sung had set his national high school record years earlier. And just like Chris Dominic in 1998, Ava had qualified for all three distance events: the 800, the 1500, and the 3000.

I wasn't sure at first if I wanted her to run the 800, because it was scheduled on the same day as the 3000. But fortunately the 800 trials were held on Wednesday, a few days before the finals. The top eight times from three separate heats would determine who ran in the 800 final on Saturday. So I figured we'd let her run it and see what happened.

Her best 800 time going in was 2:28—solid, but not elite. A girl from LA had already run 2:18 a few weeks earlier. But Ava and Charlene had been running amazing workouts the last three to four weeks, and I knew Ava could possibly make the top eight, which would require a 2:23 or better.

Before the race I ran into some of the other coaches from the Bay Area. They always asked me the same question: “How do you think Ava will run this week?” She was the fastest runner in the Bay Area, so they all knew her well and couldn't wait to watch her. And I always gave them the same answer.

“You do not want to miss any of her races. She is about to explode.”

In the 800 she was ranked about twelfth in the nation. The LA girl was in one of the other two heats. The gun went off—and Ava

went out flying. She crushed everyone in her heat with a time of 2:18. The fastest time of the day. She was now the number one seed in the nation, and the LA girl—who had gone out at a suicidal sixty-second first-lap pace and barely survived her heat—was second with a 2:19.

After that race, I made the final decision. Ava would compete in all three events that weekend.

• • •

We all arrived at the Sacramento track early Saturday morning: me, Ava, Lance, Maryann—Ava’s mom—Charlene, and Charlene’s parents. The 3000 was first.

Going into the race, Ava was ranked about tenth in the nation. Her best time was about 11:20. Charlene was ranked about twentieth, with a best time of about 11:45. Right before the gun went off I yelled to Charlene from my spot in the stands: “Charlene, get a good start!”

The 3000 is seven and a half laps around a 400-meter track. And Charlene, to everyone’s amazement—even mine—stayed right with Ava. Lap after lap after lap, the two of them ran together while the rest of the field fell away. The whole stadium had its eyes glued on the top two runners. Charlene stayed right with Ava until the gun lap—the bell that signals the final lap. And then Ava started to pull away.

She eventually opened up about a twenty-meter lead. But if you didn’t know Charlene, you would have counted her out. And that would have been a mistake. With 150 meters to go, Charlene started sprinting. Then she was fifteen meters behind. Then ten. Then five. And then, with about fifty meters to go, she pulled right up beside Ava. Not on her shoulder. Side by side.

If you've seen the movie about the great racehorse Seabiscuit from the 1930s, then you know what happened next. In the movie, Seabiscuit is in a one-on-one race against War Admiral, the top-ranked horse in the nation. Seabiscuit is leading, but War Admiral pulls up beside him down the final stretch. And Seabiscuit looks over to his right, stares War Admiral in the eye for a split second, and then takes off sprinting to win the race.

Ava did the exact same thing. She took a quick glance at Charlene—in shock that Charlene had pulled up beside her—and then she sprinted to the finish line. Ava first. Charlene second. Less than half a second apart.

Both of them broke eleven minutes for the very first time in their lives. Both of them were just sixth graders. And both of them ran 10:25.

Ava came in with a personal record of 11:20 and ran 10:25—a fifty-five-second PR. But Charlene—Charlene came in at 11:45 and ran 10:25. That's an eighty-second personal record at a national championship. As a sixth grader.

I told those coaches Ava was about to explode—and to watch out for Charlene too. And both of them detonated in the same race.

• • •

The stadium was buzzing. The parents were ecstatic. I was overwhelmed. But we couldn't celebrate too long—we still had the 800 final to run that same day. And the whole stadium knew about the amazing runner from LA.

Ava was at a disadvantage in the 800. The LA girl also ran the 400 and had tremendous short-distance speed—her best 400 time was about fifty-six seconds, while Ava's best was only about sixty-

three. That's a massive difference for such a short race. And the LA girl had run 2:19 in the prelims after going out way too fast. If she ran a smart race this time, she could be very dangerous.

If I were her coach, I would have told her to watch what Charlene did in the 3000—sit right on Ava's shoulder, never let her pull away, and then with a hundred meters to go, explode with that tremendous 400 speed and sprint to the finish line. With a seven-second advantage in the 400, she wins that race every time if she runs it smart.

The stadium was packed. Standing room only. Most of the audience was from LA—they're a big city and they traditionally produce a lot of great track athletes. The Bay Area had a nice group too, but the LA crowd was immense. The LA girl was the heavy favorite. Just like War Admiral.

The gun went off. All eight girls went out together. It looked like it was going to be anyone's race. But then Ava quickly made a move to take the lead—and the LA girl did not go with her. I couldn't believe it. She went out way too fast in the prelims, so apparently she was being cautious this time. But you don't let Ava go. That's the one thing you don't do.

Ava slowly and gradually extended her lead. With about 300 meters to go, the LA girl made her move and passed the other girls to take second place. With 200 meters to go she was about thirty meters behind Ava. Then twenty-five. Then twenty. Then fifteen. Then ten. Then five. The LA crowd was going crazy. But the rest of the stadium had gone completely silent. You could hear a pin hit the ground.

Then with fifty meters left, the silence shattered as the LA girl pulled right up beside Ava, just to her right. The uproar was deafening.

And for the second time that day, Seabiscuit was having none of it. Ava took a quick glance at her opponent—and then she exploded in one of the greatest kicks I have ever witnessed. She won the race in 2:16, and the LA girl finished a full second behind in 2:17.

Two national championships in one day. The 3000 and the 800. As a sixth grader. Four months after her first run ever.

• • •

We celebrated that night, but not too much. We still had the 1500 the following day on Sunday.

Ava's legs were shot. Heavy. Tight. Stiff. She went into the jacuzzi at the hotel for about twenty minutes to loosen up her muscles, and afterward—and again the next morning—Lance worked on her legs for about an hour, trying his best to get the lactic acid out.

Sunday morning we arrived at the track early. The 1500 final was the second event of the day. I talked with Ava and she told me her legs did not feel very good, but she should be fine.

The LA girl only ran the 800 and shorter distances. Ava only ran the 800 and up. So the LA girl was not in this race. But the number one ranked 1500 runner in the nation was—and she was also from LA. A 1500 specialist. Fresh. Focused. Ready to go.

At the beginning it looked like it was going to be anyone's race. But after one lap, Ava figured it was time to quit fooling around and take the lead. Nobody went with her. The number one ranked 1500 runner in the nation just let Ava walk away.

Eventually the rest of the field fell about thirty meters behind, and it stayed that way with one lap to go. Then the LA girl moved into second place.

After the race, I asked Ava what she was thinking at that point—with the LA girl moving up and one lap to go. She replied immediately.

*“I wasn’t going to let this be a repeat of a repeat. No. I decided to run the last 300 very hard so no one would even get close to me. Those other races were too scary. I need a little less drama in this one.”*

She won easily. Her best time going in was about 5:00, but on this day she crossed the finish line in 4:48—a twelve-second personal record on dead legs. She finished the season undefeated. And she became, as far as I know, the only girl in history to win all three distance events at the national championships in the same weekend.

She was only the second runner ever—boy or girl—to accomplish such a performance. The other was Christopher Dominic in 1998.

## CHAPTER 25

### *Bad Decisions*

That fall, Ava ran at the national cross-country championships for the very first time. She was leading the race until about 200 meters to go. And no one beats Ava with 200 meters to go—not normally. But Ava was not suffering from tired legs this time. She was suffering from heat exhaustion, and she was on the verge of having a full heat stroke.

Those last 200 meters were painful to watch. She staggered toward the finish line, barely able to keep her feet under her. She collapsed the moment she crossed the line. The race ended in a virtual dead heat for second place. She could have won that race. She should have won that race. But her body was shutting down, and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

• • •

Indoor track season came in early 2023, and everything was going amazingly. Ava was crushing her 2022 times. On Friday, she won the 800 at the national championships. On Saturday, she won the 1500. She was going for the triple crown again—just like sixth grade, just like Chris Dominic. Two down, one to go.

Sunday. The 3000. With about 100 meters to go, Ava was in position to win her third national title of the weekend. But then a girl from New York made a move that should have ended her day—not Ava's.

The New York girl blatantly cut right in front of Ava, stepping directly into her path and badly spiking her. It wasn't incidental contact. It wasn't a racing accident. She cut Ava off so

aggressively that Ava was thrown completely off stride and forced to come to a dead stop to avoid crashing into her. Blood started pouring from the spike wound on Ava's leg.

With blood running down her leg and her momentum completely destroyed, Ava made a valiant effort to close the gap. She gained a lot of ground on the girl who had fouled her, but it wasn't quite enough. She had to settle for second.

The New York girl should have been disqualified. It was as clear a foul as you will ever see in a distance race. And she would have been disqualified—except for one thing.

The official who was assigned to determine if a foul occurred was texting someone on his smart phone at that exact moment. He never saw it. He later confessed this when he was confronted about it.

We had a video recording of the entire incident. It showed everything—the cut-off, the spiking, the dead stop, the blood. But USATF refused to even consider it. They had a rule for youth races that no video recordings and no eyewitness testimonies could be used in determining whether a foul took place. The only thing that mattered was what the assigned official saw. And in this case, the assigned official saw nothing—because he was looking at his phone.

Ava should have been a back-to-back triple crown champion. Instead, a cheater stole it from her, and the system that was supposed to protect athletes failed because a grown man couldn't put down his phone for two minutes.

• • •

Despite all of that, the early part of outdoor track in 2023 was still going superbly. Ava ran the 800 in 2:12 and the mile in about 4:55. She was improving at an incredible rate, and the summer nationals were still months away.

But then something changed.

Ava became infatuated with the internet. She started looking up what other runners were doing—the workouts they were posting, the interval sessions that looked impressive on social media. And then one day at practice, she told me she wanted to do eight 400s in 1:15 with a minute rest between each one.

I was not pleased with this, to say the least. I explained to her that she would do these types of workouts when the right time came—perhaps the following year, in eighth grade. But not now. My system was built on building the aerobic base first and adding speed work later, when the body was ready for it. That’s how I produced Yong-Sung. That’s how I produced Chris Dominic. That’s how Ava went from her first jog to a national triple crown champion in four months.

But she kept bringing it up. Over and over and over. So finally I said OK, let’s do interval workouts. But I warned her: she would probably stop improving at the rate she was currently improving, and she would have a much greater chance of getting injured. She wanted to do it anyway and was willing to take the chance.

And then I told her: it’s your running career. If you want to take the chance of ruining your season, then that’s your decision. But if it doesn’t work out, then that’s on you.

And then exactly what I told her would happen, happened. She stopped improving. And she got injured. The season ended mid-way through. There would be no triple crown defense at the

summer nationals. There would be no rematch with the girl from New York.

• • •

After the injury I warned Ava over and over and over again: do not come back too early. I pointed at my own body—my two canes, my walker, my wheelchair. I said, “Look at me. Look at my body today because of one dumb decision I made when I was young. Because I wanted to have fun and play more basketball instead of letting my back heal. Now I cannot walk. Do you want to go through the same thing?”

I told her exactly what to do. Do not listen to anyone else—I don’t care who they are. Wait until the injury is 100 percent healed. Not 90 percent. Not 95 percent. Not even 99 percent. Wait until it is 100 percent healed, and then wait an extra two weeks of total rest on top of that. Then you should be fine.

But she tried to come back too early. And she reinjured it immediately.

Then she rested for several weeks, and made the same mistake again.

And then a third time.

Finally, after the third reinjury, she listened to me. She did exactly what I had told her from the very beginning: no running, no sports at all, no PE class, no basketball, no karate, nothing. Absolutely nothing.

The injury finally healed completely. But she had missed seven and a half months of doing nothing. Seven and a half months that were almost entirely unnecessary. If she had listened to me the first

time, she probably would have missed just one month. Instead she lost more than half a year.

• • •

In February of 2024, Ava started running again. She started slowly, but she slowly and surely worked her way back toward her amazing seventh-grade times. By May, she was within about one second of her best times in both the 800 and the mile. And it was only May—we still had two solid months to go, and she was just getting started.

I told her the truth. If she continued training with me for the rest of the track season, she would almost surely go under 2:10 in the 800, under 4:50 in the mile, and under 10:00 in the 3,000. She would have four full years of high school ahead of her after that. There was no rush.

When Ava came along, I had thought to myself: here is someone with good kidneys and good feet. Maybe she's the one. Maybe she's the runner who finally makes it to the Olympics in the mile. I had been so close before—Yong-Sung, whose bad feet robbed him. Chris Dominic, whose bad kidneys stopped him. But Ava had everything. The talent. The body. The drive. All she had to do was listen to me.

• • •

But Ava decided to end the track season right there and begin training with the high school she would be attending in August for cross country. Technically speaking, this was illegal in California—but that didn't stop her.

Her soon-to-be high school coach was promising her all kinds of things. How he was going to make her into an Olympic champion.

How his program was going to take her to the next level. He sounded like a car salesman to me, and he sounded like a car salesman to her parents. Lance and Maryann both advised against it. I advised against it. But Ava was in awe of her new coach and how great he was going to make her. The shiny new voice was louder than the people who had been telling her the truth all along.

• • •

Her freshman cross-country season was a disaster. Not only did she start the season running terrible, but each race she got worse, not better. Instead of being the best freshman runner in the nation—which is exactly what she should have been—by the season’s end, two freshmen on her own team were beating her.

At the end of that season, she was on the verge of telling her high school coach that I would now coach her instead. But the salesman quickly jumped into action and sold her a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. And once again, she went for the pitch. Her parents and I were devastated and couldn’t believe it.

In track, she did virtually nothing—except in the last meet of the year, when she finally beat her seventh-grade 800 time of 2:12 with a 2:09 clocking at the California State Meet semifinals. Her first personal record in two years. Everyone was expecting a better time in the final, but she ran much slower—about 2:14. What happened? She said she was too tired from the 800 semi, which had been run the day before.

Too tired. To run the 800 the day after running the 800. Think about what this girl did in sixth grade after just four months of training under me. She won the 3000, the 800, and the 1500 in one weekend at nationals—on dead legs—setting massive personal records in every single race. And now, two years later, she was too tired to race well two days in a row. That’s not a fitness problem.

That's an aerobic base problem. And it was caused by the way she was training.

Her mile time was virtually identical to her seventh-grade time. Her two-mile time was actually slower than her seventh-grade time. The longer the race, the worse she performed compared to two years earlier. That is the classic signature of a runner who has lost her aerobic base—the very foundation my system was designed to build.

Her sophomore cross-country season was slightly better, but the same two girls on her own team were still beating her.

• • •

I coached three runners in my life who I believe had the talent to win Olympic gold medals.

Yong-Sung Leal—bad feet.

Chris Dominic—bad kidneys.

Ava Padilla—bad decisions.

Three different athletes. Three different obstacles. Three different tragedies.

The Olympics slipped away every single time.

But Ava is still just a sophomore in high school. So, there is still time for her to start making the right decisions that will get her going in the right direction once again.

## CHAPTER 26

### *The Chase Center Award*

In January of 2023, I received a phone call telling me that I had been selected by the Positive Coaching Alliance as one of the Top 25 Coaches in the Nation for 2022. And this was not just track and cross country—this was *all* sports. Football, basketball, baseball, soccer, swimming—every sport in the country. And somehow, I was selected.

• • •

The awards banquet was held at the Chase Center in San Francisco—the same arena where the Golden State Warriors play their home basketball games. I asked Yong-Sung to come with me. He drove because driving in San Francisco has always been very confusing for me, and this was not the night to get lost.

When we walked in, we knew right away we were not in Kansas anymore. The place was filled with famous athletes and well-known media personalities. These were the kinds of people you see on television, not the kinds of people you bump into at a track meet in Hayward. Yong-Sung and I were just taking it all in, trying not to look like two guys who had wandered into the wrong building.

And then there was the dinner. Course after course of food that neither one of us had ever seen before, let alone tasted. Yong-Sung and I looked at each other and said what we were both thinking: “So, this is how the other half eats.”

It was an incredible evening. Humbling and unforgettable. A retired PE teacher and a former middle school runner, sitting in the home of the Golden State Warriors, surrounded by famous faces,

eating food we could not even pronounce. If you had told me forty years earlier that this is where coaching would take me, I would not have believed you.

• • •

But as great as the banquet was, the best part of the night was the drive home.

Now, before I get to that, I need to explain something. Yong-Sung and I share a pet peeve that has been building for years. If you watch enough television—especially news broadcasts and sports coverage—you will notice something that once you see it, you can never unsee it. The media, and just about everyone on television, latches onto certain words and phrases and then beats them to death. One person says it, then another picks it up, and before you know it every anchor, reporter, analyst, and athlete in the country is using the same word like they all got the same memo.

Take the word “*certainly*.” Turn on any interview and count how many times you hear it. It adds nothing. It means nothing. But people cannot stop saying it. Or “*obviously*”—if it were so obvious, you would not need to say it. Or “*literally*,” which is almost never used to mean literally. Or “*moving forward*,” which is corporate-speak for nothing at all. Or “*at the end of the day*,” which is supposed to sound deep but is just filler.

So on the drive home that night, heading back across the bridge from San Francisco, we started a game. The goal was simple: cram as many of these buzzwords as possible into one sentence, pile them on top of each other, but still have it make some kind of sense.

Something like: “*Well obviously, moving forward, I literally and certainly think that at the end of the day, the physicality was elite.*”

And then the other person had to top it.

We were cracking each other up for the entire drive home, each sentence more ridiculous than the last. Yong-Sung could barely keep his eyes on the road. We were laughing so hard that if a police officer had pulled us over, he probably would have thought we had been drinking. We had not. We were just two guys who had spent the evening surrounded by famous people and fancy food, and now we were being exactly who we are—a coach and his former athlete, having fun on the Bay Bridge and loving every second of it.

• • •

That is the thing about coaching that people do not always see. Yes, there are the awards and the records and the championships. Those are wonderful, and I am grateful for every one of them. But the moments that stick with you—the ones you carry with you forever—are the ones like this. A coach and his former athlete, driving home from a banquet in San Francisco, laughing their heads off over buzzwords. No cameras, no trophies, no audience. Just two people who have been through a lot together, being themselves.

## CHAPTER 27

### *The Last Two Years*

After Ava and Charlene moved on to high school, the California Grizzlies were still doing well, but not at the level of those remarkable years. We had good runners. We had kids qualifying for nationals and earning All-American honors. But I hadn't seen anyone with that rare, once-in-a-generation talent—the kind I had seen in Yong-Sung, in Chris, in Ava.

Still, the talent kept showing up. And as always, I kept my eye out for the special ones.

• • •

I gave him the nickname “Little Gazelle.” I named him after his big sister, whom I had already named “Gazelle.” Both of them are extremely talented runners, but both of them are also extremely talented soccer players.

Little Gazelle, when he was just in third grade, ran two miles in practice several times under 12:09. His best time was 12:01—and no one was even close to him. That is an incredible time for a third grader. To put it in perspective, that is much faster than either Chris Dominic or Yong-Sung started out at that age. Much faster.

But since then, he and his older sister have mostly been concentrating on soccer. I understand it—they're talented at that too, and kids have to follow what they love. But I am hoping they will rejoin the Grizzlies soon, because what Little Gazelle showed me in those practices was something you don't see very often. And I've been at this for thirty-seven years.

• • •

Then there is Max—a seventh grader that all of the other teams have no idea how fast he really is. And why would they? He is also a soccer star and trains very little for running. But when he does practice with me, he does not play around. He gives it everything he has, every single time. And the results are staggering.

His practice times are just as fast as Chris Dominic ran in his seventh-grade practices. Same distances. Same times. Let that sink in for a moment. Chris Dominic—the kid who won approximately ten national titles and held world records in both the 800 and the mile. And Max is matching his practice times while barely training for running.

This past year, Max ran for his middle school cross-country team, which got him training five times a week for the first time because that's what the school required. The practices were right after school at three o'clock, so they never interfered with his soccer. Things were going great. But when the school's cross-country season ended, his family decided not to go to the national championships. So Max stopped running.

He didn't run for three weeks. And then, three weeks before the end of the club season, the family changed their mind. Max would go to the nationals after all. So he still had three weeks to get ready. But then he got really sick—badly sick—and couldn't work out for two straight weeks. Finally, just days before the nationals, he was well enough to run.

I think he would have made the top five in the nation. There was a boy from our area who finished about eighth at the nationals, and that boy would never have beaten Max. Not even close. But you can't take three weeks off, get sick for two more weeks, and then show up at the national championships and perform at your best. Long distance racing doesn't work that way.

• • •

And then there is Luca—a sixth grader in his first year of running who has enormous talent. He came out flying from the very beginning. But Luca also plays soccer, and he got hurt near the start of the cross-country season from a soccer injury. He couldn't run for four weeks. Then he started running again, but there were just a few weeks left in the season. It looked like he would finally be ready to go at the nationals—and then he got another soccer injury.

If Luca listens to me and allows me to train him the same way I trained Yong-Sung and Chris Dominic, there is no reason in the world why he can't become just as good as them. He just has to stop getting hurt at soccer.

But there is another potential problem, and it's one I've seen many times over my thirty-seven years of coaching. Luca's father is awesome—a great guy, one hundred percent behind his son's running. But his father was also a runner. And in my experience, when a kid shows up with a parent who was a runner himself—especially if he was a fast runner—the parent often interferes with my coaching. He wants his son to do the workouts that he did when he was a runner. Or he'll come up with this special workout his son should do this week, and that other special workout next week, and so on.

And when that occurs—which is quite often—it never works out. I'll say that again. It *never* works out. Not once in thirty-seven years. The kids whose parents step back and let the coach do his job become champions. The kids whose parents try to override the system with their own ideas don't. It's that simple.

• • •

I have several more amazing runners on both the boys' side and the girls' side. Especially promising are two sixth grade girls from Fremont: Vibha (“Cat”) who is the longest running member of the Cal Grizzlies and who has been with the team since first grade; and Vibha’s training partner and classmate, Audrey. They are best friends and push each other every day at practice. And as a result, they have improved dramatically over the last year.

People look at me—seventy years old, two canes, constant pain, sleeping one or two hours at a time—and they wonder how I’m still doing this. The answer is the same as it’s always been. I love kids and I love running. It’s as simple as that.

The California Grizzlies aren’t done yet. And God willing neither am I.

# **PART FIVE**

## **THE WRITER**

*1979–Present*

## CHAPTER 28

### *The Books*

People who know me well assume that coaching is my first love. And I understand why. I have spent thirty-seven years on the track, in the parks, and at national championships. I have coached three runners who I believe had the talent to win Olympic gold medals. I have built a running club that won a national championship in only its second year as a team. Coaching is a huge part of who I am.

But it is not my first love. Writing about the Bible is my first love. I love it even more than coaching.

The person I admire the most in the entire Bible—other than Jesus Christ—is not Noah, or Job, or Abraham, or David, or Elijah, or Peter, or John. It is the Apostle Paul. The Apostle to the Gentiles.

I am not entirely sure why Paul is my favorite. Perhaps it is because of his work ethic—as it is stated in the New Testament that he worked harder than any of the other apostles. Or perhaps it is because he was not married, which I can identify with. Or perhaps it is because he was apparently a fan of the Olympic events, especially running. He once wrote words to the effect of “Run the race to win!” comparing the Christian race to a physical running race. And then he compared what a boxer goes through in his grueling training regimen to win a temporary crown—but how that was nothing compared to the eternal crown that awaited those who fought the spiritual fight with the same intensity and determination as a champion boxer.

But actually, it is none of those things. Not really.

What stands out the most to me about Paul is his never-ending love for those he met and who became his friends. His love for others was extraordinary. But he was not weak. He was not a wimp. When anyone crossed the line, he was right there pointing it out to them. And he did not care who the person was. It could have been a lowly slave or a great apostle—it made no difference to this amazing man. He once rebuked the Apostle Peter—the Apostle to the Israelites—to his face, as is recorded in the Scriptures. And to Peter’s credit, he did not take offense at Paul’s criticism of him.

So I suppose it was all of these things combined that make Paul so loved and admired by me. But two things stand out the most: his incredible love for others, and his boldness and courage to speak up when it was called for—regardless of who needed to be corrected.

That is the spirit in which I have tried my best to write every book, every article, and every word on my website for the past forty-seven years.

• • •

In Chapter 8, I told the story of how my car broke down on the New Jersey Turnpike on a freezing night in January of 1979. I was twenty-three years old. I prayed and made God a promise: if He got my car running, I would read the entire Bible that winter. My car started right up. I kept my promise. And then I did what would become a habit with me from that point forward.

I wrote.

What came out of that first read-through was a small booklet I called “*Do Christians Really Follow the Bible?*” It was written in 1979—five full years before I ever set foot inside the Worldwide Church of God. I was already a biblical researcher before any

church organization shaped my thinking. Nobody told me what to believe. Nobody coached me. I simply read the Book and wrote down what I found.

That habit never stopped. Over the next forty-seven years, I would write twenty-five books on biblical prophecy, church history, natural health, and one end-times thriller. This is the story of those books.

• • •

After that first booklet in 1979, I did not publish again until 1992, when I wrote *The Startling PROPHECY of God's True Church*. Then in 1994, two more came in rapid succession: *Revelation Comes Alive!* and *The Astonishing HISTORY of God's True Church*.

These early works were all written while I was still teaching full-time. I wrote at night, on weekends, during summers. Teaching kids all day and then coming home and writing about biblical prophecy and church history until I couldn't keep my eyes open. But I enjoyed it. I had something to say, and I loved saying it.

• • •

I should explain how I write, because it is a little unusual. I cannot memorize scripture references. I never could. If you asked me to quote a specific verse and give you the book, chapter, and verse number, I would not be able to do it.

But what I did instead was build a research system. Over the course of many years, I went through the entire Bible and categorized every verse by topic. Every verse on prophecy, on the Sabbath, on tithing, on the holy days, on the nature of God, on death and the afterlife—every subject you can think of—I

organized and filed so that I could find any verse on any subject in a matter of seconds.

That system is why I can produce articles and booklets so rapidly. It is why my website eventually grew to contain over two hundred documents and an estimated half a million words. I may not be able to quote chapter and verse from memory, but I can find what I need faster than most people who can.

• • •

In 2008, I published *When Was Jesus Crucified?*, and in 2009, *Tithing: Fact or Fiction?*. I was still teaching at the time.

Then in 2010, I retired from teaching. And the books kept coming.

In 2011 alone, I published four books: *The Shocking History of the Great False Church and Her Whoredom with the Kings of the Earth*, *The Middle East in Prophecy*, *USA & Britain in Prophecy*, and *The Antichrist*. In 2012, two more: *Teachings of the Bible Parts 1 & 2* and *History of the World & Beyond*. And in 2013, *The Final Seven Years & Beyond*.

Seven books in three years. I was very pleased.

• • •

The writing continued. In 2017, I published *The 4 Beasts & 10 Horns of Daniel* and then something I had been working toward for a very long time: *The Exton Study Bible: The First 5 Books — Genesis–Deuteronomy*. In 2018 came *Prophecy Comes ALIVE!*, and in 2019, *The Exton Study Bible: New Testament*.

The study Bibles represent the culmination of decades of verse-by-verse research. Every note, every cross-reference, every explanation came from my system—the same system I had been

building since I first read the Bible cover to cover in 1979. Forty years of work distilled into two volumes.

• • •

Around 2007, I launched my website: [TheBibleComesAlive.com](http://TheBibleComesAlive.com). I built it using Apple's iWeb program—a simple website builder that came free with every Mac. Apple eventually discontinued iWeb around 2011, but my site kept running. Nearly twenty years later, it is still standing on that same discontinued platform, hosted by GoDaddy. Sometimes the simplest tools last the longest.

Eventually I added a second website—[TheBibleComesAlive.org](http://TheBibleComesAlive.org)—built by Landingsite AI as a modern companion to the original. Between the two sites, my entire body of work is available to anyone in the world with an internet connection. Every book, every article, every study—all of it free and accessible.

• • •

In the late 1990s, I read a book called *Windswept House* by the late Malachi Martin. It was a thriller about intrigue and corruption inside the Vatican, written in a dramatic, suspenseful style that gripped you from the first page. The moment I finished it, a dream was planted in my mind: I wanted to write a book about the end times in that same suspenseful, dramatic style.

That dream took over twenty-five years to fulfill. By 2013 I wrote the nonfiction version first—*The Antichrist & The Final Seven Years*. Now I just had to put it into a story—the dramatized, thriller version that would make people actually want to turn the page—that took time. Fifty-one chapters. Multiple characters spanning three continents. Ancient prophecy unfolding with devastating precision through the eyes of ordinary people caught in extraordinary events.

The book is called *ROMAN: The Counterfeit Messiah*. And in March of 2026, it was finally finished.

I also released several other books in 2026: *The Secret to Vibrant, Radiant Health!* — drawing on over forty years of living by natural health principles; *The Sickness Industry: How They Profit from Your Pain — And How to Break Free* — a book that pulls back the curtain on the pharmaceutical and medical industries; *Depths of Satan* — a book about the wolves who devoured one of the most influential Christian churches of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; *From God's Church to Satan's Church* — a book about the greatest apostasy in history; and my autobiography which you are reading now.

Twenty-five books over forty-seven years. And God willing I hope to write a few more, such as *What About the Dinosaurs & the Cavemen?*

It all started with a broken-down car on the New Jersey Turnpike, a promise to God, and a young man who hated reading picking up the Bible for the first time. And it has never stopped. Because once God opens your eyes, you cannot close them. And once He gives you something to say, you have to say it.

## CHAPTER 29

### *The People Along The Way*

When I was living in San Lorenzo, California, I served as the apartment manager of a small ten-unit complex. One day a Vietnamese couple knocked on my door and told me they would

like to apply for an apartment. I showed them the available unit, they liked it, and I brought the application to the owner.

The owner did not want to let them move in. He said they would probably eventually have children, and he did not want children living there.

I was furious. First of all, that is against the law—even if they did have children. But they had no children. They were a young couple looking for a place to live, and the owner was discriminating against them based on something that had not even happened. I was able to convince him that they would make great tenants. So, he backed down, and the couple moved in.

That Vietnamese couple moved into the apartment right next door to mine. And their daughter and I would become best friends.

• • •

Katherine was born in January of 1996. The day her parents brought her home from the hospital, I was waiting to greet the little baby. And from that day forward, I saw Katherine just about every single day for the next several years.

Her parents always spoke to her in Vietnamese at home, so I wound up teaching her a lot of the English she was learning. She especially loved the words “yuck” and “eww.” There was something about those two words that struck her as hilarious, and she would giggle every time I said them.

One day I was trying to teach her to pronounce the word “blue.” She was having trouble with the B sound, so I kept saying it slowly: “BBBB-LUE. BBBB-LUE.” Over and over again, and she would repeat it. Finally she started to get it. So I said, “OK, let’s work on some more words.” And she immediately yells out:

“BBBB-LACK!” And then she started laughing—and so did I, especially when I realized that this was the very first joke she had ever made up. So from that point on, “BBBB-LACK” and “BBBB-LUE” was how we pronounced these two words.

Our favorite activity together was hunting for snails. We would go looking for them in the bushes and along the walkways around the apartment complex. But when we found some, Katherine would never want to touch them. She would want me to pick one up and carry it upstairs—we lived on the second floor—so we could play with it. And then when we were done, we would put the snail back exactly where we found it and say: “See you later. Be good!”

• • •

Every school day, when I came home from teaching PE at Lorenzo Manor Elementary School about a mile away, Katherine would be standing at her front door. The door was open, but the screen door was shut, and she would be standing right there behind it, watching and waiting for me to come home.

“Uncle Mike! Uncle Mike!”

She did this every single school day. Then after I climbed the one flight of stairs, she would ask: “Are you going to play with me today, Uncle Mike?”

And my answer was always the same: “Of course, Katherine. You know I will. I need to have some fun too!”

Then we would be off looking for snails.

After we finished playing, Katherine would ask: “Is Uncle Mike going exercising now?” She knew my whole routine. And unlike most kids her age, she never protested or begged me to stay longer. She understood that Uncle Mike loved his bike rides, and so now it

was time for Uncle Mike to go exercising. I would carry my bike down the stairs, and Katherine would wave goodbye to me as I pedaled down the road. She was content with that. She got her snail time with Uncle Mike, and now Uncle Mike got his bike time. That kind of awareness and unselfishness is rare in anyone, let alone a little girl.

• • •

One time Katherine followed me into my apartment for the very first time. I looked down and noticed she was not wearing her shoes. So I said: “Katherine, what happened to your shoes?” She grabbed me by the hand, led me out to the hallway, pointed at her shoes lined up right next to mine, and exclaimed: “Like Uncle Mike!”

She had seen me take my shoes off at the door and done the same. And she was so proud of it. She was not just imitating me—she was telling me she wanted to be like me. That is about the highest compliment a little kid can give.

One scary moment happened when Katherine and her parents had just returned from shopping. I was outside, and I noticed them parking across the street. When Katherine got out of the car, I called out: “Hi, Katherine!” That was a big mistake. She put her head down and started sprinting across the street to see me—without looking. My heart stopped. Thankfully, no cars were coming. After that, I was very careful about when and where I called out to her.

And then there was the snail tragedy. One day Katherine and I were playing with a snail on the second floor, right next to where our families lived. Her father came walking up the stairs, returning from work. He did not see the snail. He stepped on it. Poor Katherine started crying, and I must admit I was very sad too. For

the next two weeks, she did not want to play with snails. But after about two weeks, we were back at it.

• • •

Eventually the parents bought a very nice home a couple of miles away. I do not think I was there on moving day. But I was told that once they got to the new house, the first thing Katherine said was: “Where’s Uncle Mike?”

I would ride my bike over to visit. One time when I arrived, Katherine was in the front yard with her father looking at some flowers that he had planted. Upon seeing me, she pleaded: “Uncle Mike! Uncle Mike! Stop! Stop! Please don’t exercise now! Please come play with me first!” She hadn’t realized that I wasn’t on my daily exercise ride but that I had rode my bike over to her house to play with her.

The visits continued, and they were terrific—but not the same as the apartments. The family would always invite me over, especially for special events with their relatives. Barbecues, dinners, lunches, birthday parties.

Now, about birthday parties. I do not celebrate birthdays. I have not celebrated my own birthday in over forty years, and my four sisters—all of whom have children—have given me a hard time about it for just as long. But with Katherine, I made an exception. She has been the *only* person whose birthday I have celebrated in all these years. But do not tell anyone. My sisters will really be upset with me if they find out.

• • •

When Katherine was in the sixth grade, her parents were looking for a math tutor. And I just happened to be a sixth-grade math

teacher at the time. So the parents would drop Katherine off at my apartment in San Leandro—the same city Katherine lived in—and every school day that year, I tutored her for about an hour in math.

She did fine and showed good improvement over the year. And she was not done with our old jokes. When I asked her how the old apartment compared to her new home, she replied—referring to the old apartment—“Yuk!” and started laughing. And she still loved working “BBBB” into any word that began with the letter B. Inside jokes that only Uncle Mike and Katherine shared, going all the way back to when she was a toddler learning English.

• • •

The school year was almost up, and Katherine was now twelve years old. We still had one more tutoring session scheduled for the next day. She called me, but I was not home, so she left a message on my answering machine.

“Oh, Uncle Mike. Tomorrow will be my last day at your home. Oh, I don’t know what I am going to do. I will be so bored. I won’t have anything to do. But at least I have one more time with you tomorrow. Oh, Uncle Mike... See you tomorrow. Now don’t forget!”

As if I could ever forget.

She left two other messages on that machine. In one, she said: “Hello, Uncle Mike. I am having a birthday party next weekend, and guess what? You are invited!”

I recently found that old answering machine. I played those messages for the first time in many years, and there was twelve-year-old Katherine’s voice, just as I remembered it. I am planning to bring the machine over to her home soon so that she and her

parents can hear it. I imagine there will not be a dry eye in the house.

• • •

Katherine is thirty years old now. She still lives with her parents, about a mile from my current apartment in San Leandro. She works as a nurse. The gentle little girl who would not touch a snail but cared about every one of them is now taking care of people for a living. That makes all the sense in the world.

When I was writing my novel *ROMAN*, I needed a name for one of the main characters—a brilliant young woman with a good heart. I combined Katherine's last name, Pham, with the first name of another very special person in my life. And that is how the character Grace Pham was born.

• • •

Grace was a little girl in the Philippines. I began sponsoring her through a children's organization when she was about four years old, and the sponsorship continued for about fourteen or fifteen years.

Grace had about a dozen brothers and sisters. Her family was struggling, and the sponsorship helped provide for her basic needs. But what I remember most are the letters. Grace wrote to me faithfully over all those years, and her letters always had the same beautiful spirit. She would tell me what she was learning in school and how she was trying so hard to please her parents by getting good grades. She had an amazing attitude—never complaining, always grateful, always trying her best.

Each year I would ask the organization what Grace or her family really needed, and then I would buy it for her. One time I bought

her a bed. It was not expensive—everything is much cheaper there—but she loved it. She drew a picture of herself sleeping in it, enjoying a nice peaceful sleep, with little Z's coming out of her mouth. Sometimes it was toys that she would use when playing with her friends. Small things from this side of the world, but to her, they meant so much.

Her letters always included the cutest drawings. Over the years I watched her grow through those letters and pictures—from a little girl drawing stick figures to a young woman writing thoughtful, articulate letters. It was like watching someone grow up from a distance, one letter at a time.

Then when Grace turned eighteen or nineteen, the organization cut off communication. No forwarding address. No way to stay in touch. I thought that was wrong. After fourteen or fifteen years of building a bond with this girl—watching her grow, writing back and forth, buying her things she needed—they just severed the connection. I tried repeatedly to find a way to reach her, but I could not.

I thought that was it. I would never hear from Grace again.

Then my nephew Anthony back in the Philadelphia area talked me into joining Facebook. And one day I received a message from a woman named Grace from the Philippines. It was my little Grace. She had found me. After all those years of trying to reconnect with no success, she had discovered a way to track me down. I could not believe it. That tells you everything about what our friendship meant to her. She remembered. She thought about me. And when she finally had a way to find me, she did.

I have kept every letter she ever wrote me. They are all preserved and digitized. Those letters are not just correspondence. They are fifteen years of a relationship between a man in California and a

little girl in the Philippines who never met face to face but loved each other all the same.

• • •

Katherine. Grace. The kids at Paradise Farms. The students at Lorenzo Manor Elementary School: Amber, Angela, Jason, Eleanor, JoAnn, and so many others. Parkmont Elementary School: especially first grader Lily who ate lunch with me every school day, and Kimee her older sister. And John Muir MS: Jacquelyn, John, Ashley, and a whole lot more. Plus, all of the runners on my track and cross-country teams since 1990.

Throughout my entire life, the deepest connections I have made have been with young people—teaching them, coaching them, talking with them, playing with them, reading with them. It is the thread that runs through everything. From a seven-year-old camper at Paradise Farms to a seventy-year-old running coach in San Leandro, that thread has never broken.

And I would not trade a single one of those connections for anything in the world.

**PART SIX**  
**THEMES & CLOSING**

## CHAPTER 30

### *The Pattern*

My entire life has been a series of deep connections formed and then severed.

Seven summers at Paradise Farms—the greatest experience of my life by far—and each August when I arrived back home, a week of sadness before I could snap out of it. Then decades later, the same thing as a teacher. Every June when the school year ended and those kids I loved walked out the door for the last time, the same week of sadness settled over me like a weight. The same pattern. Different people, different years, same emptiness.

Debbie in Blackwood. Mai in the SF Bay Area. Lisa at Vineland. Kathy in San Jose.

Russ, Rob, Mike, Martha, Josefa.

The pattern is always the same. Wonderful friendships. And then they are gone.

• • •

There is a verse in the Bible that I have carried with me for most of my life. Romans 8:28: *“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”*

ALL things. Not just the good things. All of them.

I did not always see it while I was living it. But looking back now, I can see the pattern clearly. And it is not a pattern of loss.

It is a pattern of purpose.

## CHAPTER 31

### *Where I Stand Today*

I am seventy years old. I get around with two canes, a walker, or an electric wheelchair, depending on the situation. I have had no cartilage in my hips since 2005, but remarkably, that causes me no pain whatsoever.

The real enemy is something else entirely. In January of 2020, a colon and rectum problem that had been building for years got dramatically worse, and it has been getting progressively worse ever since. I am in constant pain. Sometimes the pain is extreme. It never fully goes away. The only relief I get is when I am sleeping—but sleep itself has become its own battle. I can only sleep for about one to two hours before I wake up and have to use the restroom. Then it takes me about thirty minutes to fall back asleep, and the cycle starts again. All night long, every night, for the past six years. I get about eight hours of sleep total, but it is broken into roughly five segments spread across ten hours. It is not rest. It is survival.

And I do not take a single painkiller. Not one. No drugs of any kind. I am often tempted—but I refuse. I have lived by natural health principles for over forty years, and I am not going to abandon them now, no matter how much it hurts. I wrote the book on it. I intend to live it as long as I can.

• • •

I am still writing. Twenty-five books and counting. My website called [TheBibleComesAlive.com](http://TheBibleComesAlive.com) is still standing after nearly

twenty years on a discontinued Apple platform, and somehow it is still functioning. TheBibleComesAlive.org is the new modern companion site. Between the two of them, my entire body of work is available to anyone in the world with an internet connection. Decades of biblical research, now available to anyone in the world. And God willing, I will write some more.

I am still a small flock of one. I keep the Sabbath as best as I can. I study the Bible on my own, using the same research system I have been building since 1979.

• • •

Three verses from the Bible define the life I have lived.

The first is 1 Thessalonians 5:21: *“Prove ALL things; hold fast that which is good.”*

From the moment a twenty-three-year-old kid who hated reading sat down and read the Bible cover to cover on a promise made on the New Jersey Turnpike, I have never accepted anyone else’s word for what the Bible says. Not Herbert Armstrong’s. Not Rod Meredith’s. Not any minister, any denomination, or any preacher on television. I proved it for myself from the Bible and the Bible only. And what I found to be good, I held fast to—even when it cost me every church, every fellowship, and every friend.

The second is 2 Timothy 2:15: *“Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”*

The research system. Every verse in the Bible categorized by topic. Two dozen books. A study Bible. Over two hundred articles. Five decades I have spent my life rightly dividing the word of truth to the best of my ability and with the help of God.

The third is Matthew 25:21: *“Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord.”*

Those are the words I hope to hear one day, along with everyone else who loves God and is called according to His purpose.

• • •

The kid from Bartram Village in Philadelphia. The camper at Paradise Farms. The runner in Philly, New Jersey, and California. The teacher. The coach. The writer. The watchman.

Still standing. Still writing. Still coaching. Still proving all things and holding fast to that which is good.

## APPENDIX A

### *My Pet Peeves*

**“I MEAN...”** – Starting a conversation or sentence with “I mean” when nothing was previously said. You have not said anything yet—so what exactly do you “mean”?

**“RIGHT?”** – People who constantly say “right?” at the end of just about every sentence as a filler or rhetorical tag question. They do not really want you to answer—it is just a mindless verbal tic. I predicted this trend years ago after watching an interview with Janet Yellen, who said “right?” after nearly every sentence. I told myself it would spread like wildfire within a year—and sure enough, it did. I was hoping that someday I would meet her and get in a conversation with her. And then every single time when she said “right?” I would immediately blurt out: “No, that is incorrect.”

**“CERTAINLY”** – A filler word that people use to sound authoritative or agreeable without actually adding anything to the sentence. Almost all the time you could just remove it and the sentence would mean the exact same thing. Turn on any news broadcast or interview and you will hear it dropped in constantly.

**“OBVIOUSLY”** – If something were truly obvious, you would not need to say it! People use “obviously” to make whatever they are about to say sound like it is beyond question. I have heard them say things like, “Obviously Babe Ruth hit 34 homers in 1917.” Obviously? Who the heck knows that?!

**“LITERALLY”** – This word has taken on a meaning of its own because of its overuse. People misuse it as a substitute for “figuratively”—“I literally died when I heard that.” No you did not! But it has also replaced the word “actually.” Instead of saying

“I actually went to that game,” they say “I literally went to that game.” One word doing the job of two words it was never meant to replace.

**“MOVING FORWARD”** – Corporate-speak that leaked out of the boardroom and infected everything. A little while ago this woman was being interviewed on TV. In the five-minute interview she started off every single sentence with “moving forward.” Finally the interview is about to end and she says her final sentence without saying it. But then she starts to get up and about two or three seconds later she turns around and blurts out: “Moving forward!”

**“AT THE END OF THE DAY”** – Every postgame interview, every halftime analysis, every pundit on every channel. It is a meaningless phrase that people use to sound like they are about to deliver some deep wisdom, but what follows is usually anything but profound.

**“HORRIFIC”** – This word did not exist until a few years ago—at least I never heard it until then. It is a combination of two opposite-meaning words: horrible and terrific. So on that alone, it is a stupid word. Secondly, no one uses the rest of the perfectly good words anymore: terrible, horrible, horrendous, dreadful, ghastly, atrocious. No, it is one word used exclusively—horrific.

**“ARGUABLY”** – So overused that pundits will say something like: “Babe Ruth is arguably one of the best baseball players ever.” Arguably? Who is arguing?! When you use “arguably” in front of something that is universally accepted, you are actually weakening it. It is the opposite of what they are trying to do.

**“SURREAL”** – “It was just surreal.” You hear it in every postgame interview, every awards show, every time someone does something they have been training their whole life to do. You won

the race. You got the trophy. You knew this was possible—that is why you worked for it. There is nothing surreal about it. The word means dreamlike, bizarre, otherworldly—not “I am really happy right now.” But nobody bothers to look it up. They just heard someone else say it, and now it is on autopilot.

**“CONCERNING”** – Everything is concerning nowadays. Every news story, every press conference, every interview. It used to be that things were “worrisome” or “troubling” or “disturbing.” Now there is only one word for all of it—concerning. It has taken over the English language like a virus.

**“UNACCEPTABLE”** – This began with teachers many years ago but has now spread outside to the politicians, law enforcement, and everyone else. Even middle school students realize how this is an empty word. When people use it, what they are really saying is: I do not like your behavior, but I am not going to do a thing about it.

**“UNCERTAIN TIMES”** – Every year it is the same thing: we live in uncertain times. Really? Tell me, when is life not uncertain? Plus, they love saying this when the stock market starts to go down. Some “expert” will come on and say how investors stop investing when they are living in “uncertain times.” What a bunch of nonsense. Investors invest when they think they can make money from the investment. And they pull back when they think otherwise. And that is about it.

**“MADE A PLAY”** – Most sports announcers never say he made a great catch, tackle, interception, kick, or pass. No, everything is “he made a play.” The whole job of an announcer is to describe what is happening! If you are not watching the game but only listening to it, you have no idea what just happened. And yet they are all using it—except for the very best announcers.

**“NAVIGATE THE TURN”** – Ato Boldon, the former sprinter turned NBC track analyst, started this one. For years he has said “navigate the turn” in every single 200-meter race. For a long time nobody else repeated it. But now many others do. Just say “run the curve” or “come off the turn” like announcers have been doing for decades. It is a footrace, not a ship at sea.

**“HE KNOWS THAT...”** – Kara Goucher, the former distance runner turned NBC track analyst, constantly says things like: “He knows that he has to run hard.” “She knows that she has been doing the training.” “He knows that if he stays in front the gold medal is his.” Every single observation begins with “he knows” or “she knows.” You do not know what they know! Just tell us what is happening on the track!

**AMERICAN TRACK ANNOUNCERS VS. BRITISH** – Most of the American track announcers are terrible. They are mostly ex-athletes who got hired because of their name, not because they learned how to broadcast. The British announcers are much better. The one good American track announcer is Paul Swangard—a professional broadcaster, not an ex-athlete—who is widely regarded as one of the best in the business. He lets the race breathe, describes what is actually happening, and does not fall back on recycled phrases. Somebody needs to step up and school the others.

**EX-ATHLETES WHO SHOULD BE EX-ANNOUNCERS** – Just because you were great at playing the game does not mean you are great at talking about it. Tony Romo and Chris Collingsworth in the booth are painful. It’s “he made a play,” over and over again. Then there’s “certainly” stated a hundred times, and “obviously,” and “right,” and all of the other meaningless jargon spoken of elsewhere in this appendix. Meanwhile, Tom Brady proved it can work—but he is the exception, not the rule.

Most ex-athletes turned announcers make you want to hit the mute button. And then there is Rowdy Gaines—NBC’s Olympic swimming analyst who sounds like he is being electrocuted every time an American touches the wall. The man screams, shrieks, and practically hyperventilates during every single race as if it is the most important moment in human history. It is swimming, Rowdy. Calm down.

**HIGH PITCH AT END OF SENTENCE** – In the English language, when you ask a question it is normal to raise the pitch in your voice at the end of the question. It started off with just a few women but now many women do it when they are not asking a question and are just making a statement. And lately even men are starting to do this. It makes everything they say sound like a question, even when it is not. It is one of the most annoying speech habits to come along in years. Even worse than saying “are” when you should be saying “our.” It’s “our” country – not “are” country.

**TV WEATHER SEGMENTS** – They tell you the weather roughly eighteen times per hour. Count them for yourself someday and see if I am wrong. And each time, the weather person is up there doing Broadway hand gestures like they are performing a one-person show. It is 72 and sunny. We got it the first time. We do not need a dramatic reenactment.

**WEATHER FORECASTERS AS YOUR MOTHER** – The patronizing “you are going to want to dress in layers” and “make sure you bring your umbrella” nonsense. We are adults. We can look outside. Without these people telling us how to dress, somehow the human race managed to survive for thousands of years. Just give us the temperature and move on.

**NEWSCASTERS AS YOUR DOCTOR** – The anchors who play health advisor, telling us to “get your flu shot” and “make sure you

are washing your hands” and “don’t forget to put on your sun screen” as if reading a teleprompter qualifies them to practice medicine. Just report the news and let us make our own decisions.

**THE MEDIA AS JUDGE AND JURY** – When a professional athlete praises Jesus Christ during an interview, you can feel the reporter just dying to change the subject and move on to something else. And then the following days that athlete gets ripped apart by the media for bringing up God. No matter who you are—if you step outside the approved narrative, they are coming for you. Tim Tebow won a Heisman Trophy and a national championship at Florida, and the media turned his faith into a punchline. “Tebowing” became a nationwide joke—all because the man knelt in prayer and thanked his Savior. Aaron Rodgers got raked over the coals for having his own opinion about vaccines. And Kyrie Irving got hammered for refusing the COVID vaccine with the Brooklyn Nets. Jonathan Isaac of the Orlando Magic stood alone and refused to kneel during the national anthem, openly declaring his Christian faith, and the media went after him too. The media does not report the news anymore. They tell you what to think about it.

**“THE SKY IS FALLING!”** – Every year the media predicts total collapse that never comes. The economy is going to crash. The housing market is going to implode. The stock market is going to zero. And every single year, the world somehow keeps spinning. But they never go back and admit they were wrong. They just move on to the next catastrophe that is never going to happen. This is especially true with their reporting of Donald Trump. No matter what he does, the media is quick to jump in with all kinds of “experts” who predict doom and gloom for whatever he comes up. Do you remember what all of the so-called experts and pundits were saying immediately after he announced his tariffs on foreign nations. So, what happened? Did the sky fall? Has inflation

skyrocketed? Has the unemployment rate soared? Of course not!  
Not even close!

**AGREE TO DISAGREE** — This expression makes no sense whatsoever. Who needs to agree to disagree with someone? You just disagree. Period. No agreement required. The whole phrase is absurd.

## APPENDIX B

### *Teachings*

#### **TEACHINGS WHERE I DIFFER FROM HWA, RCM, AND MOST OF THE COG<sub>s</sub>**

**TITHING – FACT OR FICTION?** – Fiction, as it does NOT apply to Christians!

**DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE** – Only if your mate commits adultery can you divorce and remarry.

**WHEN WAS JESUS CRUCIFIED & RESURRECTED?** – Thursday and Sunday. Not Wednesday and Saturday. Not Friday and Sunday.

**CALENDAR** – The Jewish Calendar is NOT the Biblical Calendar.

**CHURCH GOVERNMENT** – Mostly localized and not a “Pope” type of centralized government.

**MR. (MASTER)** – Ministers are NOT to be addressed as “Mr.” Instead they should be addressed as “Brother” or simply by their first name. They should NOT be addressed differently than everyone else in the church.

**MARK OF THE BEAST** – A physical mark such as a tattoo or stamp marked on the forehead or right hand with the number of the Antichrist (666) or the name of the Antichrist (e.g. “Roman”). It is NOT Sunday worship.

**IMAGE OF THE BEAST** – A statue of the Antichrist. It is NOT false government.

**ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION** – A statue of the Antichrist.

**DEADLY WOUND HEALED** – The Antichrist will be killed but then he comes back to life!

**DOOR-TO-DOOR** – It is perfectly fine for people to spread the gospel by going door-to-door.

**ELIJAH-TO-COME** – HWA? No! The Church of God? No! But an end-time individual who “restores all things” of the truth of the Bible to those willing to listen.

**FOOD SACRIFICED TO IDOLS** – Is it okay to eat food sacrificed to idols? NO, it is NOT okay.

**THE GREAT MULTITUDE** – Those who become converted during the Great Tribulation but who become martyrs.

**THE 144,000** – Those protected during the Day of the Lord. They are NOT protected during the Great Tribulation, but they somehow survive the Great Tribulation nevertheless and live on into the Day of the Lord, where they are protected from God’s end-time plagues.

**DID THE PHARISEES KEEP THE LAW?** – NO, they did NOT keep the law of God! They kept their own traditions and lacked love, but the common teaching that they “kept the law but lacked love” is incorrect.

**BAPTISM** – Repentant adults should be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, NOT in the name of “the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

**TEMPLE IN THE END-TIME?** – Absolutely! There will be a temple built in Jerusalem before Christ returns.

**LOCATION OF THE WEDDING OF CHRIST** – Heaven.  
NOT Earth.

**THE FALSE PROPHET** – This secondary beast of Revelation 13 is NOT the “Antichrist” and he also is NOT the “Man of Sin.”

**THE FIRST AND PRIMARY BEAST OF REVELATION** –  
The first and primary beast of Revelation 13 is the “Antichrist”  
AND the “Man of Sin.” They are one and the same person.

## APPENDIX C

### *Photo Index*

Approximately 50 photos, letters, and documents are referenced throughout this book. Below is a catalog organized by era.

#### **Childhood & Family**

Baby Mike (6 months, spring 1956)

Santa photo (childhood)

Apartment exterior, Bartram Village, Philadelphia

Siblings

Mom's 1939 family photo with dad and his two sisters

#### **Paradise Farms Summer Camp (1963-69; 1976)**

Camp photos (camper years, ages 7–13)

Doc Savage raid photo (1976)

Counselor year (1976)

#### **Running Career**

Steeplechase (high school)

College running

#### **Adult Life**

Weightlifting photo

Apartment photo

## **Teaching Career**

Lily's Valentine (snowman with red heart, still on refrigerator)

## **Coaching — The California Grizzlies**

1996 Daily Review newspaper article (Yong-Sung)

Yong-Sung — color photo at regionals

Yong-Sung — bicycle training photo

Chris Dominic — newspaper articles

Chris Dominic — Youth Runner Magazine cover and feature

Chris Dominic — state championship and record-breaking articles

Ava — competition photos

Team photos

## **Grace — The Philippines**

Letter from Grace (childhood)

Letter from Grace (later years)

## **Katherine**

Young Katherine (worn, scratched photo)

## APPENDIX D

*Books By Michael H. Exton*

### **Books by Michael H. Exton**

*25 Books • 47 Years • 1979–2026*

1. *Do Christians Really Follow The Bible?* (1979)
2. *The Startling Prophecy of God's True Church* (1992)
3. *Revelation Comes Alive!* (1994)
4. *The Astonishing History of God's True Church!* (1994)
5. *When Was Jesus Crucified?* (2008)
6. *Tithing: Fact or Fiction?* (2009)
7. *The Shocking History of the Great False Church And Her Whoredom With the Kings of the Earth* (2011)
8. *The Middle East in Prophecy* (2011)
9. *USA & Britain & Israel In Prophecy* (2011)
10. *The Antichrist* (2011)
11. *Teachings of the Bible Part 1 & 2* (2012)
12. *History of the World & Beyond* (2012)
13. *The Final Seven Years* (2013)
14. *Bigotry* (2016)
15. *The 4 Beasts & 10 Horns of Daniel* (2017)

16. *Exton Study Bible: The First 5 Books — Genesis–Deuteronomy* (2017)
17. *Prophecy Comes ALIVE!* (2018)
18. *Exton Study Bible: New Testament* (2019)
19. *The Secret to Vibrant, Radiant Health!* (2026)
20. *Antichrist & Man’s Final 7 Years: When Prophecy Comes Alive!* (2026)
21. *The Sickness Industry: How They Profit from Your Pain – And How to Break Free* (2026)
22. *ROMAN: The Counterfeit Messiah* (2026)
23. *From the Projects to the Podium* (2026)
24. *The Depths of Satan* (2026)
25. *From God’s Church to Satan’s Church: The Greatest Apostasy in History* (2026)

Plus, scores of articles on biblical prophecy, church history, natural health, and more.

**[www.TheBibleComesAlive.org](http://www.TheBibleComesAlive.org)**

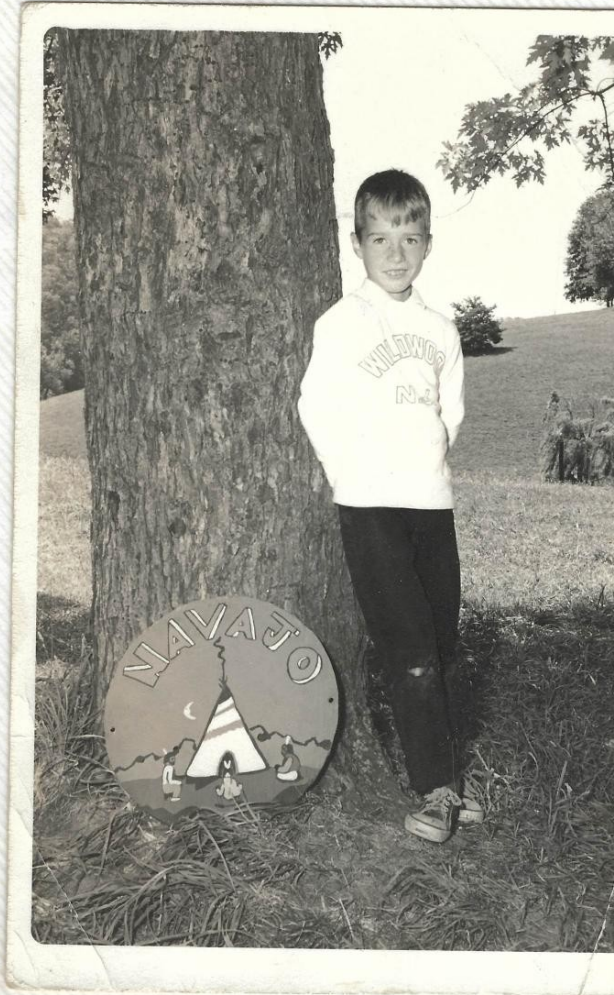
## **Romans 8:28**

*“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”*

Summer of 1963



4961



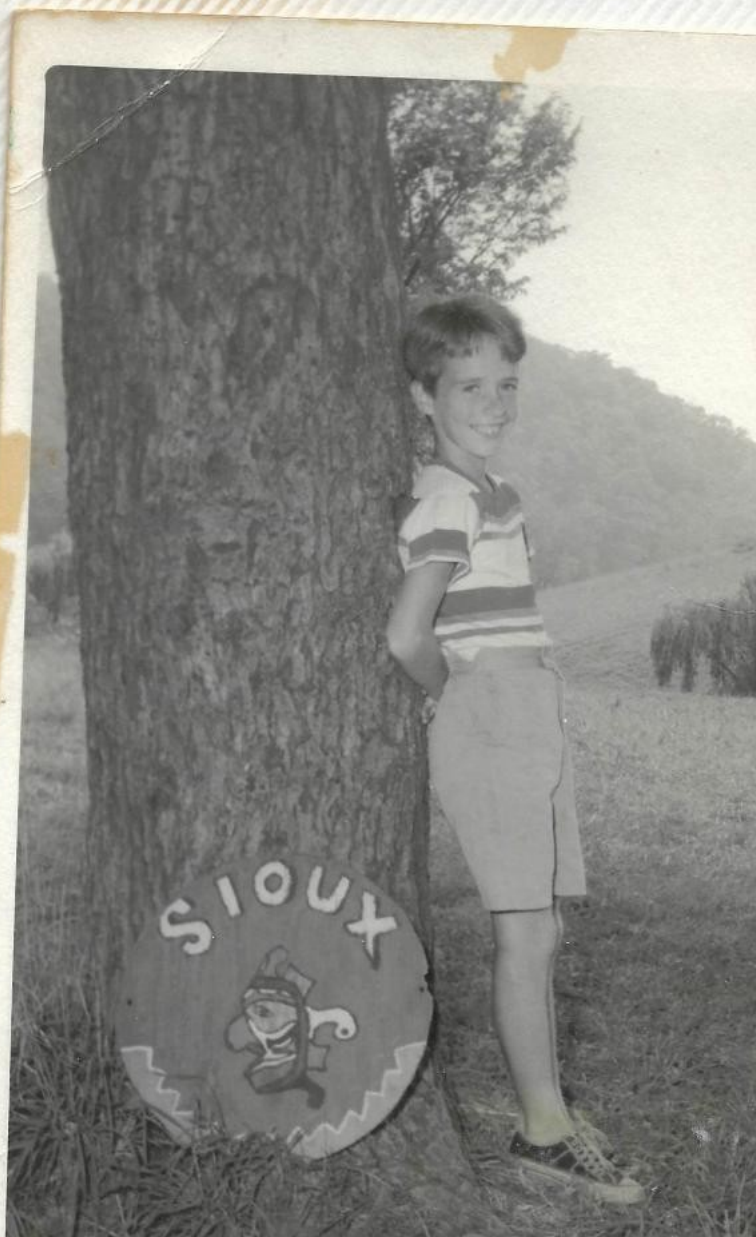


1965



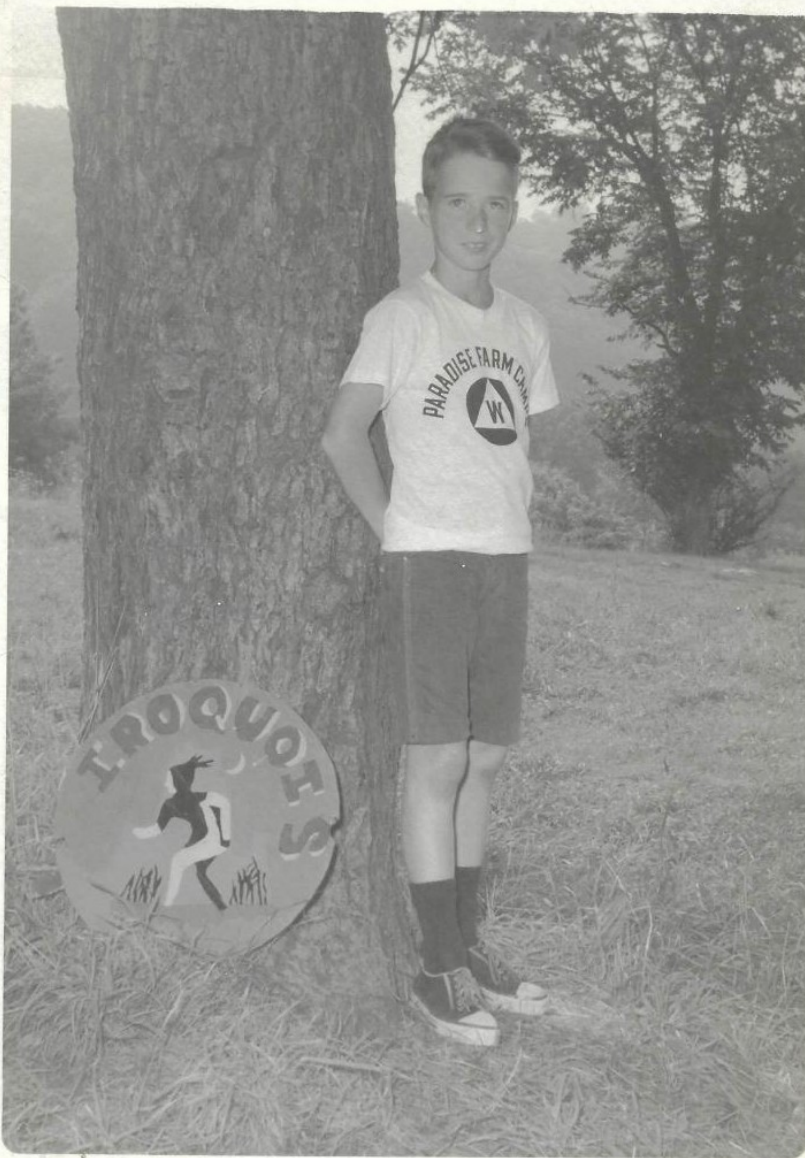


( 1963 )



1966



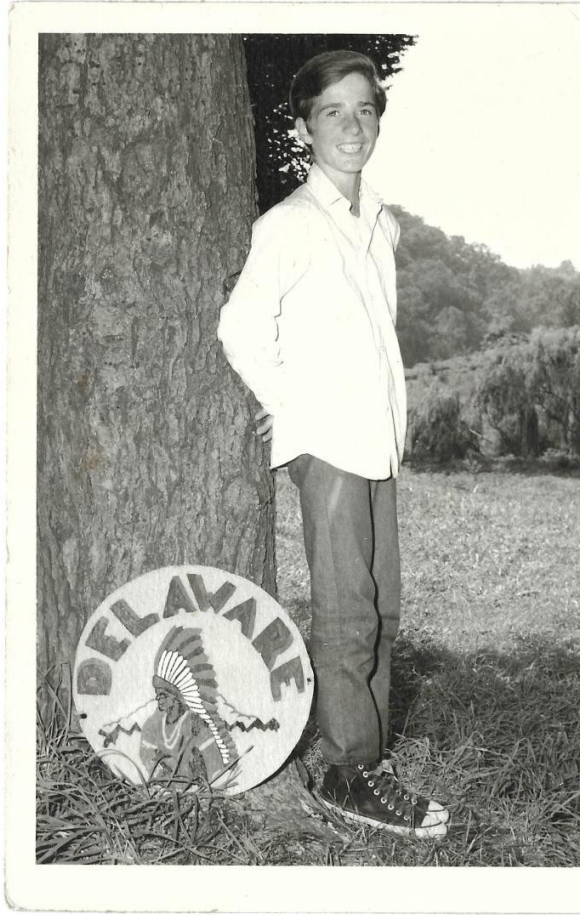


1967

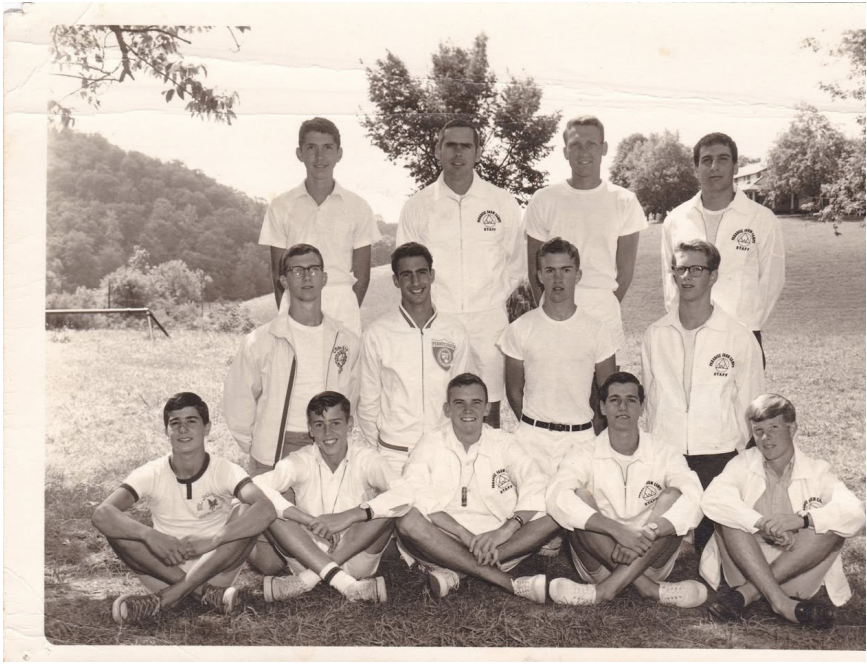




1968



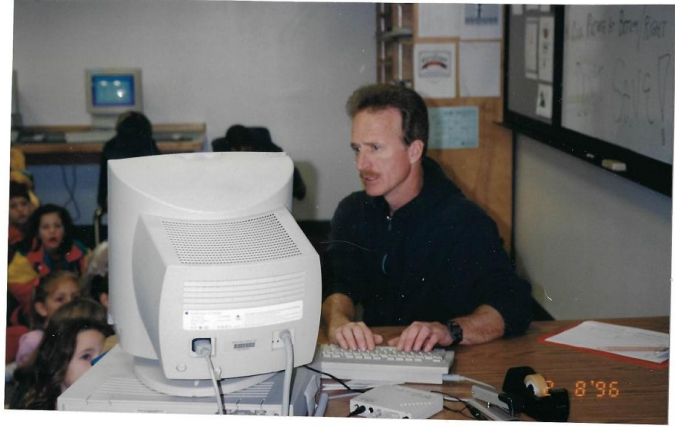














## Leal and Dominic pick up the pace

By Melissa Fields  
CORRESPONDENT

**Y**ONG-SUNG Leal may not have as much natural running ability as Chris Dominic, but he makes up for it with incredible determination, according to the boys' cross-country coach Mike Exton.

Plus, Leal, 11, and Dominic, 10, know what it means to excel. They ran well in the USA Track and Field Regional Cross Country Championship Nov. 24 in Fresno and qualified for the Junior Olympics nationals in Lexington, Ken., Dec. 14.

The top 20 runners from each division qualified for the Junior Olympics. Leal placed fifth in the Midget Boys Division (11-12 years old) in a time of 10 minutes, 51 seconds, and Dominic was first in the Bantam Boys Division (9-10 years old) in 11:01.

"Both have a shot to make All-American (by placing in the top 25) in the Junior Olympics," said Exton, a teacher at Parkmont Elementary School in Fremont who coaches nearly 100 kids each summer in Catholic Youth Organization track.

### They've improved steadily

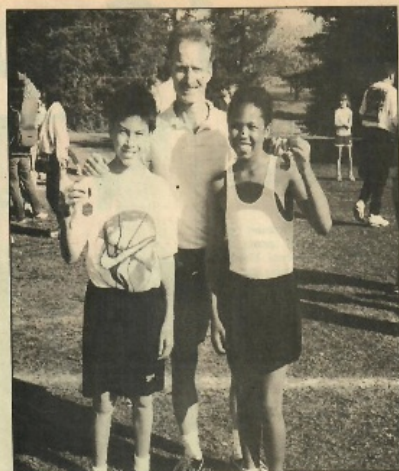
Both boys just started running competitively this year and have impressed their parents with their rapid development.

"They both ran their best times (at Regionals)," said Yong-Sung's father, Bento Leal. "They've been improving every week."

Runners from Northern and Central California and Nevada participated in the Regionals. To qualify, Leal and Dominic had to place in the top 25 of an Association, or Northern California, meet.

Leal's love of running started with annual half-mile races Lorenzo Manor Elementary School, where he was noticed by Exton.

Dominic, who won the Regional easily, was also discovered by Exton at his Day School track tryout. Exton entered them into CYO competitions.



TOM GALLAGHER/SUN

Yong-Sung Leal (left) of Hayward and Chris Dominic (right) of San Lorenzo pose with coach Mike Exton at the Regional meet.



### PROFILE

Name: Yong-Sung Leal  
Age: 11  
Sports here: Michael Johnson  
Residence: Hayward  
Sport: Running

Name: Chris Dominic  
Age: 10  
Sports here: Jerry Rice  
Residence: San Lorenzo  
Sport: Running

Although both boys have similar habits of winning, they attack races very differently.

"I start out fast and keep up with the leaders. I like to stay in the lead, and then at the end I sprint," Dominic said.

Leal starts out steady and passes other runners to finish in the ribbons. Leal feels nervous before a race, while Do-

minic is confident.

### A ribbon after muddy run

In one meet for Leal, the ground was muddy and the competition was fierce, and he tripped over a matress in the middle of the course. Yet, the resilient Leal still won a ribbon. The boys run four miles

three days a week while Exton follows on a bike. Leal and Dominic are good friends and get along great although they are competitive among themselves. Dominic's aggressive style dominated at first, but as they both improved they began to battle and encourage one another. "As the year wears on the boys become more eager to beat each other," Exton said.

Exton feels good about the Junior Olympics and thinks Leal or Dominic could achieve All-American status.

"These boys are awesome. I'm very proud of both of them," he said. "They've worked very hard and have been improving race by race all year. They both have excellent chances to place very high in the nationals."

"We usually just run four miles a day," Exton said. "A couple of weeks ago, we started interval training, doing mile intervals. Yong-Sung had never broken six minutes in the mile, then he did 5:37 in practice and he came back and ran a 5:42 five minutes later."

### Unofficial records

The practice marks by Leal would have broken the school record of 5:52 and the overall San Lorenzo elementary schools record of 5:45.

"If you really think about it, it's incredible," Exton said. "He's only in fifth grade and it (the previous record) goes up to seventh grade."

Along with training, the boys are trying to raise about \$500 each to fund their trip to Kentucky. Contributions can be mailed to: "Leal & Dominic Junior Olympics Fund", 553 Shirley Ave., Hayward, CA, 94541. For more information, contact Bento Leal at 278-5880.

LOCAL STARS is a feature in the Alameda Newspaper Group about active people in the East Bay. If you know of a special coach, athlete, sports celebrity, or sports volunteer who is setting a high standard, please call The Daily Review sports desk: (510) 293-2485, or write: The Daily Review ( attn: sports), 118 West Winona Avenue, Hayward, CA, 94544.

www.youthrunner.com

# YOUTH RUNNER<sup>™</sup> MAGAZINE

FALL  
1998

**JUNIOR  
OLYMPIC  
RESULTS**

**FROM  
THE  
COACH**

**GOLDEN WEST  
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# ATHLETE FOCUS

## CHRIS DOMINIC



YR Staff



YR Staff



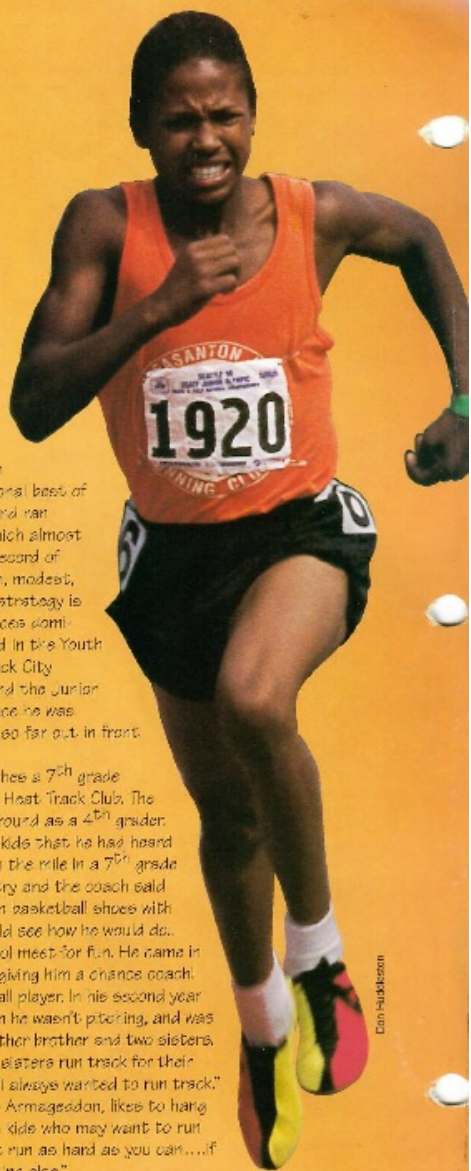
YR Staff

If you met Chris for the first time off the track, you would never guess that he had just broken the "Midget" national record in the 3000m record in 9:33.52, ran a personal best of 4:33.50 in the 1500 meter, and ran 2:09.02 in the 800 meter which almost broke Obba Moore's national record of 2:07.90. Chris is soft spoken, modest, and seems shy, but his race strategy is calculated and his performances dominate. In July/August he raced in the Youth Nationals in Spokane, the Track City International in Eugene, Or, and the Junior Olympics in Seattle...each race he was faster...and in some, he was so far out in front that he ran by himself.

His coach Mike Exton, coaches a 7<sup>th</sup> grade team beside the Pleasanton Heat Track Club. The coach met Chris on the playground as a 4<sup>th</sup> grader. He was looking for some fast kids that he had heard about that might want to run the mile in a 7<sup>th</sup> grade meet. Chris said he'd like to try and the coach said "sure." Chris ran a 6:15 mile in basketball shoes with no warm-up so the coach could see how he would do. They let him run in the 7 school meet for fun. He came in 2<sup>nd</sup> with a 6:02. Thanks for giving him a chance coach!

Chris is also a great baseball player. In his second year he started at centerfield when he wasn't pitching, and was the 4<sup>th</sup> batter. He has one other brother and two sisters. They all play baseball, and his sisters run track for their school also. But Chris says, "I always wanted to run track."

His favorite movie lately is Armageddon, likes to hang out with friends, and says to kids who may want to run track, "Try it out, if you like it run as hard as you can...if you don't, try something else."



Don Huppelton

















STATE TRACK & FIELD CHAMPIONSHIPS

# yo's Leal wins



Arroyo High's Yong-Sung Leal leads the pack during the boys 3,200 meter run at the state meet Saturday.

RON LEWIS — Staff

## SPORTS

# Leal Makes It All Look Easy



PHOTO BY MAGGIE LENNON

As part of his training for upcoming races, Yong-Sung Leal runs alongside his coach, Mike Exton, who pedals a bicycle in order to keep up with the young runner.

# SPORTS

## Leal Wins State Championship in 3,200

### Arroyo runner sets personal best time in Sacramento

*By Jed Silver  
San Leandro Times*

Arroyo's Yong-Sung Leal continued his amazing run towards greatness, winning the State championship in the 3,200 meters in Sacramento on Saturday night.

Leading from start to finish, Leal refused to succumb to the pain or the stiff competition.

"It's not always my plan to go out and lead the entire race," said Leal. "I just go out hard and push myself toward the best time possible."



PHOTO BY BRYON LEAL

Yong-Sung Leal caught his breath when he crossed the finish line after winning in the regionals last week in Berkeley. He finished in an even faster time Saturday in Sacramento.

## Leal Breaks 5,000 Meter Record at Jr. Olympics

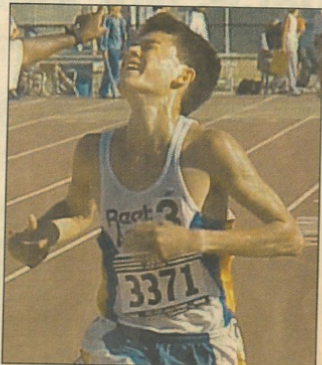
Yong-Sung Leal set a new young men's 5,000 meter national record at the United States Track & Field Junior Olympics in Sacramento on Saturday.

The Arroyo High School student's time of 14:27.14 beat the old record of 14:39.66 set in 1984, five months before Leal was born.

Leal also broke the record for the fastest U.S. sophomore at 5,000 meters, set in 1973 by Eric Hulst.

The night before the race in Sacramento, Leal said he was feeling especially good and wanted to "crush" the record, according to his father, Bento Leal.

Leal is taking a week off from running, but next week he's going to start training for the upcoming cross country season, seeking to defend his Division 2 state title.



Yong-Sung Leal grimaces as he crosses the finish line with a record-breaking time.

## Review Local Sports

# San Lorenzo's Dominic dominates distances at Junior Olympic finals

By Nathan Mollat  
STAFF WRITER

When his classmates ask Chris Dominic what he did this summer, they'd better sit down because he will have a lot to tell them.

Dominic, a 12-year-old incoming seventh grader at Bockman Middle School in San Lorenzo, dominated the distance races at the 32nd annual USA Track & Field Junior Olympic National Championships in Seattle, Wash. last week.

Dominic returned to San Lorenzo a three-time national champion, setting a national record in the 3,000 meters and just missing records in winning the 800 and 1,500 in the boys Midget Division (11-12-year-olds).

"His times were incredible," said coach Mike Exton. "I was in shock. I still can't believe it."

On Saturday morning, Dominic destroyed the field in the 3,000, beating his nearest competitor by 27 seconds. He set the record with a time of 9 minutes, 38.52 seconds. The old record of 9:43.01 was set in 1991.

"At the beginning of the year, I told him if he did what I said and trained hard, I knew he could set the national record," Exton said.

Later in the day, Dominic came back to win the 800 in 2:09.02, just missing the national record of 2:07.90 which was also set in 1991.

But Dominic was not done. On Sunday, he came back and won the 1,500 in 4:33.50, a little more than one second shy of the meet record.

"I don't think he realizes how hard it was (to triple)," Exton

“*His times were incredible. I was in shock. I still can't believe it.*”

**Mike Exton**

track coach

— ” —  
said. "On that kind of level, I've never heard of anyone doing it. We've heard of doubling, but not tripling."

What may be even more amazing is Dominic's training schedule. One would think that he must be training all the time. But the fact is, he trains about two hours a week. Dominic runs five miles a day, four days a week. He can cover those five miles in about 30 minutes.

"Then that's it," Exton said.

Exton also credits Dominic's training partner for his success. Yong-Sung Leal, who finished fifth in the 3,000 in the 13-14-year-old division at the national championships, lives across the street from Dominic. Though they are a year apart, the two run at about the same pace so it makes for competitive training sessions.

"If it wasn't for Yong-Sung, (Dominic) would not have gotten so fast so quick," Exton said.

In other track action, Hayward High's Jessica Marr was part of the Mission Valley Track Club relay team that won the national championship in the

4x800 for 17-18-year-old girls at the same meet. Dantelle Price, Marr, Terri O'Brien and Sky Baumbach took first with a time of 9:15.

# Leal breaks 28-year-old record in winning 5,000

STAFF REPORT

SACRAMENTO — As if his resume needed to be improved, Yong-Sung Leal added a national championship and two national records to his list of accomplishments over the weekend.

Leal won the 5,000 meters in the USA Track and Field Junior Olympics at Sacramento State with a career-best

time of 14 minutes, 27.14 seconds.

In the process of winning, Leal also broke the 28-year-old record for high school sophomores and the Junior Olympic mark, which was set five months before Leal was born in 1984.

The previous sophomore record of 14:39.66 set by Eric Hulst in 1973. Leal will be a junior this fall at Arroyo,

where he is the defending state cross country and 3,200-meter champion.

Leal's closest competitor was Ben Ortega of the UNA team, finishing 14 seconds back at 14:41.41.

Talia Stewart of James Logan set a freshman division record in the women's 400 meter hurdles, blazing across the finish line with a time of 58.84 seconds.







Courier-Post Photos by Ron Karaffin

*IT HURTS* even when you win when you run in the 1½-mile steeplechase. Clearview's Mike Exton, who later said, "It was fun because there were so many people to pass," found out it wasn't so much fun at the end after winning. Runnerup Mike Bonnette of Highland and official Carl Rickershauser help the winner to his feet.

**Pole Vault Relay**

Grades 9-12, Glassboro, 10:4; Fenix 11:2; 2-4; 3, Edgewood, 11:4; 2, Bishop Eustace, 12:2; 4, Haddon Township, 13:2; 5, Pennsville, 15:4.  
 Grades 3-4-1, Kennedy (Montgomery) 11:4; Castana 11:2; 2-4; 2, Riverside 22:4; 2, Bancroft Valley, 22:4; 4, Dextford, 21:4; 5, Marlton, 21:0.

Top individual performances—Mottus, Bishop Eustace 12:6; Davis, Bancroft 11:4; Lomon, Chippieson, 11:4; Colley, Moorestown, 11:4; Post, Glassboro, 11:4; Castana, Kennedy, 11:2; Pacific, Sterling, 11:2; Pennel, Riverside, 11:2; Wiley, Marlton, 11:2; DeMason, Haddon, Haddon Twp., 11:2; Darcompton, Edgewood, 11:2.

**1½ Mile Steeplechase**

1, Mike Exton, Clearview, 7:11.4; 2, Bonnette, Highland, 7:27.7; 3, Goggin, Paul VI, 7:31; 4, Johnson, Burlington, 7:35.4.

**330 Intermediate Hurdles**

1, Mike Brown, Holy Cross, 41.2; 2, Merich, Woodbury, 41.8; 3, Benson, Dextford, 43.2; 4, Goudis, Shownee, 43.2.

**Girls 400 Relay**

1, Woodbury (Cindy Criss, Mimi Gough, Julie Adams, Vennis Coker) 54.2; 2, Overbrook, 54.7; 3, Harnsouken, 55.5; 4, Glassboro, 55.4; 5, Absegami, 55.8.

**Triple Jump**

1, Jeff Thornton, Woodbury, 42.4½; 2, Lichten, Cherry Hill East, 41.8; 3, Peliers, Highland, 40.5½; 4, Hoops, Woodbury, 39.15½; 5, Cox, Paulsboro, 38.4.



HEART OF THE CITY 5K

San Jose, CA August 30, 1989









**Henrietta R. Bruhel McNamara, 70,**  
Longtime waitress; enjoyed antique shopping

Henrietta R. Bruhel McNamara, 70, of Glenolden, died May 20 at home.

Born in Philadelphia, she was a waitress for 55 years. She last worked at the Court Diner in Media.



She volunteered her time to make meals for the homeless for many years. She enjoyed antique shopping.

**Survivors:** Sons, Jack and Michael Exton, both of California, Nick Cipriano of Norwood, Joe Cipriano of Drexel Hill, Nino Cipriano of Sharon Hill; daughters, Vicki McNamara of Boothwyn, Sandy Bellosi of Aston, Tina Cleary of Drexel Hill, Lisa O'Brien of Florida; 16 grandchildren; seven great-grandchildren.

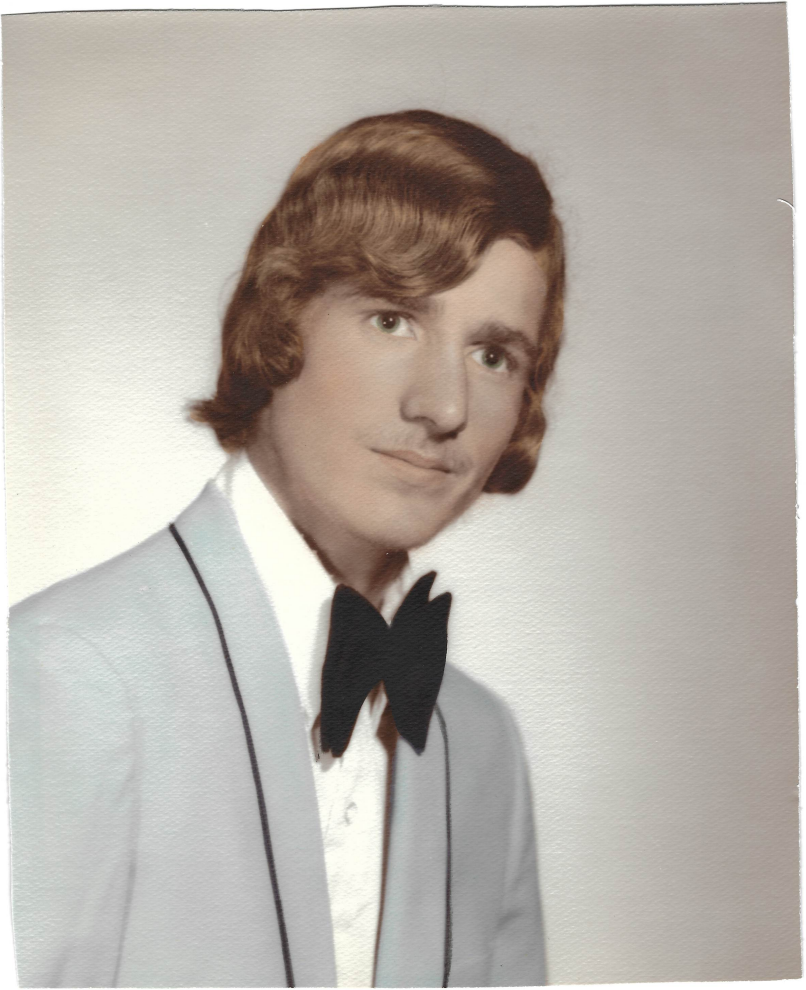
**McNAMARA**

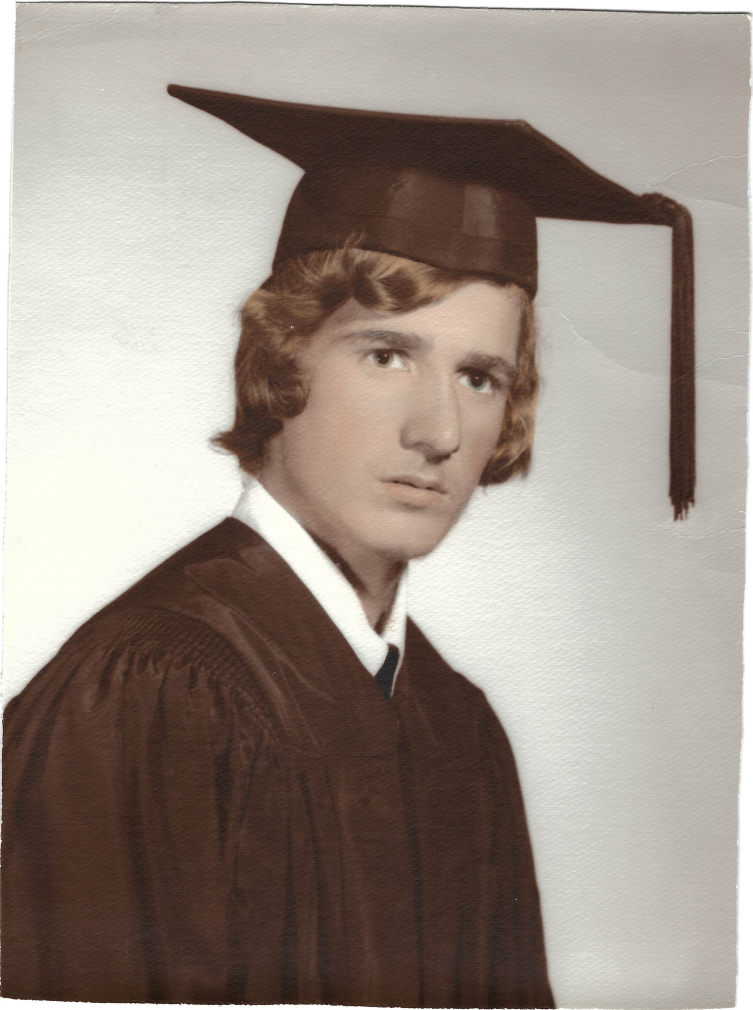
**Service:** 8 p.m. Tuesday at the Cavanagh Family Funeral Home, 301 Chester Pike, Norwood.

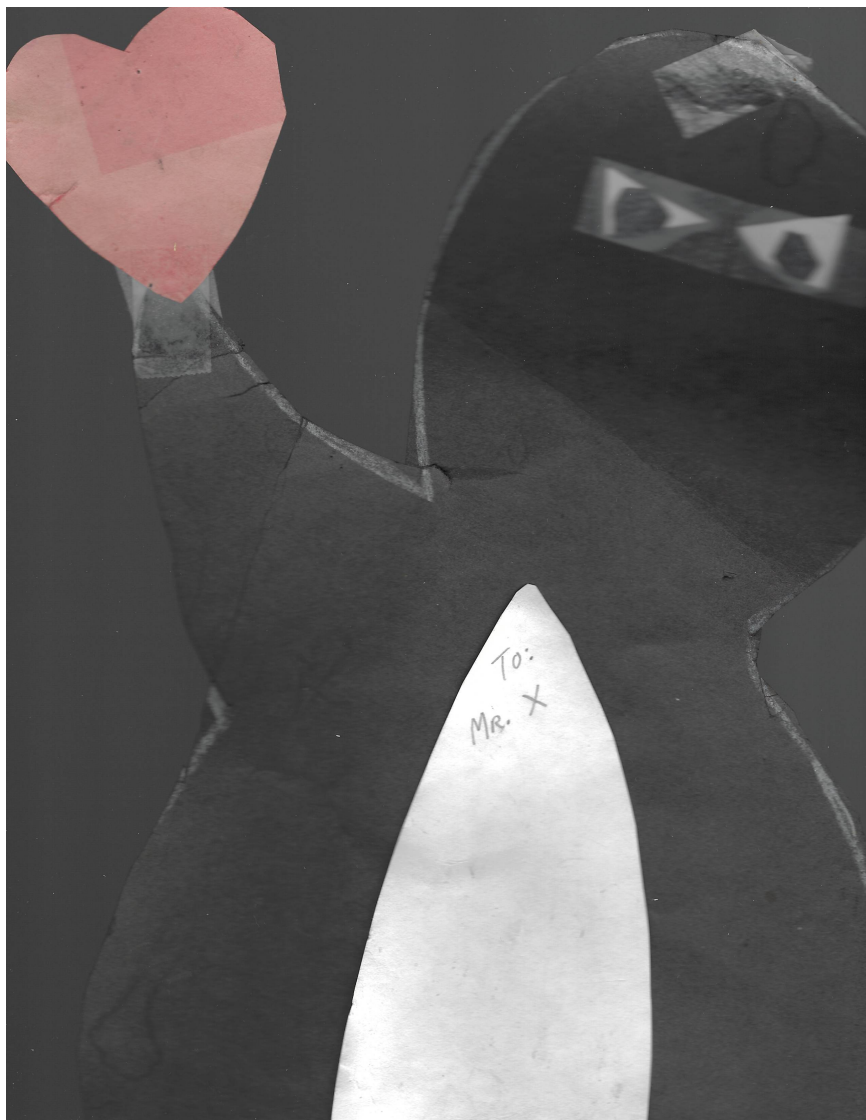
**Visitation:** 6-8 p.m. Tuesday at the funeral home.

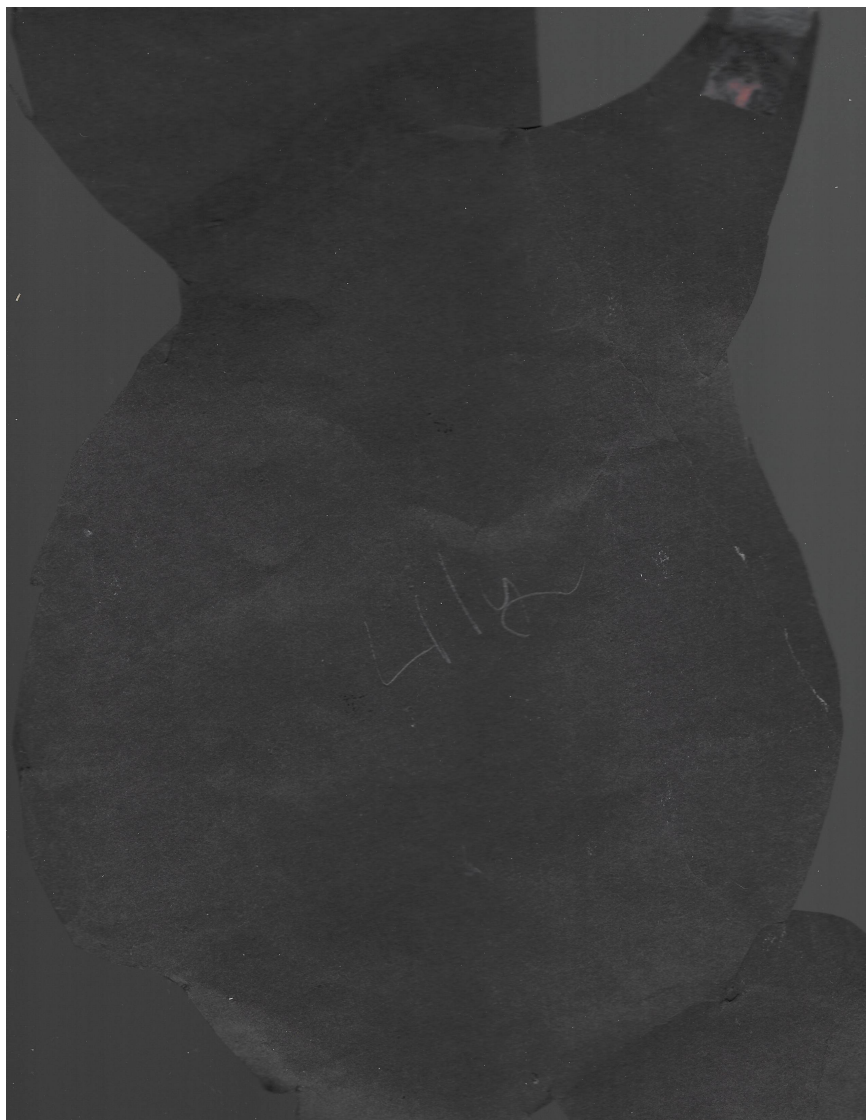
**Burial:** Private.











Mary Grace B. Mendoza  
Philippines J F1  
0000697 010 0604CF  
Mi Exto (F) 776269

Dear Sponsor,

Surprise! How are you? How's your family? My family and I are all happy and fine.

The game I always play is hide & seek. I really love to play this game because it makes me happy. I really enjoy playing this.

Thank you for the support and gifts I have received from you. Take care! God bless you always!

Your sponsored child,  
Mary Grace Mendoza



Mary Grace B. Mendoza  
Philippines  
0013121  
Mi Exto

J F1  
010 0804C1  
(F) 776269

Dear Sponsor,

Hello! How are you? I hope you are doing fine.

I would like to tell you something about my talent. My talent are dancing and singing. I hope I can develop these talent more. I am really thankful that God gave me these talent.

Thank you for the benefits that you have given me. It helps me a lot. God bless you always!

Your sponsored child,  
Mary Grace Mendoza

























April 21, 1939

