# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forward</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XI</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XII</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Everyone has a story. Not everyone has to tell it, of course, and most people have the good sense not to. But if you’re in my line of work, and the time arrives when you start imagining a big promotion, and you let your imagination get the better of you, you are by custom expected to give a general account of your life. The thought is that somewhere in the story of your early life, your people and place, your achievements and setbacks, hides the key to understanding how you acquired such a notion in the first place.

I didn’t try to produce an exhaustive account of my life. That would try the patience of readers more than necessary. I thought it was better to take a more impressionistic approach to the material, so to speak, just a glance back at the experiences that most influenced the course of my life for good or ill. I haven’t included an account of my congressional career. I’ve produced only what you might call my backstory, which ends with my election to Congress. From that point on,
most of my life is a matter of public record, and falls under the heading of “recent events,” as most of the issues I’ve been involved with in Congress remain the subject of debate today.

I believe I’ve gotten better at the job over the years. I enjoy the work and am grateful to have it. But I’m pretty sure I was a fully developed human being before I got to Washington. I think a person’s story should point the reader to the why, and less so to the who. I’m a U.S. Senator, but that’s not my story, it’s my job. It doesn’t tell you much about me really. It doesn’t tell you why I became a senator other than I convinced the voters of South Carolina to grant me the privilege. People have seen me on TV or met me on a campaign. Maybe they’ve just heard my name abused from time to time. They know I’m Lindsey Graham, senator from South Carolina. But they don’t know how I came to be that guy.

What follows is that story, the important parts of it anyway. It’s not a tale of woe or of triumph. It’s a story of the people and places I was lucky to know, and the life I’ve been lucky to live. I don’t propose that it’s a better story than anyone else’s. It’s just my story, and paraphrasing Mark Twain, it’s the truth, mainly.

Lindsey Graham

Seneca, South Carolina
I'm from the Upstate, the northwest corner of South Carolina. It’s a fast growing region in the state, both in terms of economic development and population growth, as commercial investment continues to proliferate along the I-85 corridor. The Greenville-Spartanburg-Anderson metro area is home to regional offices for Fortune 500 manufacturers and financial institutions and the North American operations of foreign investors such as BMW and Michelin. But when I was growing up there in the second half of the last century, the Upstate was mostly farming and textile mill country.

It’s beautiful country, too. Rising and falling in the foothills and valleys of the Blue Ridge Mountains, a landscape of wild rivers, waterfalls and mountain lakes, state parks, national forests and quiet country crossroads within a few minutes drive of busy cities, commercial hubs, and prominent universities. Take a drive on Highway 11, the old Cherokee Foothills Scenic Highway, through scenery as grand as the most popular natural attractions in the eastern United States.
My dad took me fishing in Lake Hartwell and on the Chattooga River. He took me hunting on my grandparents’ farm. Like any other boy would have, I concentrated my attention on the fun of catching a fish or getting a rabbit. But I remember being aware, too, of the beauty of my surroundings, sunlight filtered through treetops, morning mist in the hollows, birdsong at the lakeshore. I’ve always known it’s a special place to grow up.

Most of my growing up, though, happened on the main street of a small mill town, in my parents’ business establishment, a combination beer joint, restaurant, liquor store and pool hall, the Sanitary Cafe, my childhood home.

I was born in Seneca in Oconee County, in the same hospital, Oconee Memorial, where former senator and presidential candidate John Edwards was born. I’ve joked that John and I were born in different wings of the hospital, he in the left wing and I in the right. I could also joke that I never went very far in life. I live in Seneca today, just a few miles from that hospital.

I grew up in the town of Central in Pickens County, about ten miles east of Seneca. Central was a railroad town founded by Scots-Irish settlers ten years after the Civil War ended. It’s located exactly halfway between Charlotte and Atlanta on the old Atlantic and Richmond Line, and the railway built its maintenance depot, Central Station, there. The busy tracks run right through downtown Central today. By the end of the 19th century, the maintenance operation had moved to Greenville. But Central was spared extinction by the arrival early in the 20th Century of the soon to be dominant industry of the Upstate, textile mills, and the Southern Wesleyan University.

Issaqueena Mills set up shop in Central in 1906. It went bust in the Depression. But Cannon Mills purchased the plant in 1936, and still owned it when I was growing up in the sixties and seventies. It was the main employer in town, and the center of the local economy.

Central was organized like a medieval village. The plant was the castle. The executives and shift
supervisors lived in the best houses closest to the castle, which were surrounded by successive rings of company owned homes that mill workers rented by the month. It seemed like every place in Central that wasn’t named after the town was named Cannon. There was Cannon Memorial Baptist Church, where I went to Bible school, and Cannon Field, where I played baseball, and Cannon Memorial Hospital in the neighboring town of Pickens. We might have named the bar after the place, too, since most of our customers worked there or at the grain mill just across the railroad tracks from the bar.

My mother’s people, the Walters, were farmers. When my mother, Millie, was a young girl, her family left their farm near Elbert County, Georgia and bought a hundred acres of Upstate red clay and rolling hills in Earl’s Grove near Seneca. They raised cattle and hogs, and grew cotton and corn. Once a month when I was young, my folks would take me on a Sunday to visit my grandmother at the old homestead. When my father had a heart attack in his fifties, my mother sent me to the farm to live with my grandmother while he recuperated. I have only dim memories of my grandfather, who died before I started kindergarten. I have a picture of him holding me when I was must have been about two, and I faintly recall attending his wake at the farm. I inherited his double barrel shotgun when I was a kid. I still own it today. It’s one of my most cherished possessions. I remember my grandmother vividly and fondly, a very slight, stooped, hardworking woman. She was quiet, rarely raising her voice, uncomplaining, tough minded and loving. My mother was very much like her.

While I can’t say farming’s endless chores and constant attention to the whims of nature ever appealed to me, I loved the farm itself. I loved hunting rabbits and birds in its fields and hills with my Dad and uncles, and enjoyed spending time outdoors with my cousins, especially Jerry, Marlene and Gail, who were close to my age.
Starting from Top clockwise: The Walters family, with Millie on far right. Lindsey, age 12, with friends in drug store dressed for a town festival. Lindsey and Darline, 1964.
My Mom had four sisters and five brothers, my aunts Sis, Verna Mae, Nell and Jean, and my uncles, Stewart, Zell, Tom, Lloyd, and Bobby, the much loved youngest child of the family, who died in a boating accident when he was hardly older than a boy, and whose loss his surviving siblings still grieve. My Uncle Zell married my dad’s sister, my Aunt Mildred, so their children, Jerry, Gail, Wayne and Rainey, are my double first cousins and were almost like brothers and sister to me when I was growing up. Zell stayed in farming, and he and Mildred bought a place near the family farm. Rainey still farms there today.

My mother and her other siblings had to leave farming in their teens in search of gainful employment in town. The farm had produced a living but not much income. It really hadn’t amounted to more than subsistence farming. The Walters were part of a generation of southern country folks that saw most children in large families seek occupations other than farming.

Most of my aunts and uncles, like thousands of other people in the area, found jobs in the textile mills. For them and for many people in similar circumstances, the mills were the first place that paid them an hourly wage, a steady income that wasn’t affected by weather or insects or any of the variables that spell success or catastrophe for farming families.

My dad, Florence James “F.J.” Graham, wasn’t raised on a farm. His people were small business operators from northeast Georgia. His father, Lindsey Vaughn Graham, for whom I’m named, was the son of an immigrant from the border region of Scotland. He owned a dry goods store in Elbert County. His mother, Estee Maddox Graham, was half Cherokee. I never met either paternal grandparent. They both died before I was born. Estee had died very young, in her twenties. The family moved to South Carolina after her death, where my grandfather remarried. My dad had three siblings, my uncles Cleo and Jake, and my Aunt Mildred, the product of my grandfather’s second marriage.

Neither of my parents finished high school. But they were hardworking and determined their children would surpass their achievements. My dad was born in 1908. He was only a few years
old when his mother passed. He was a teenager when he got a mill job in Calhoun Falls, South Carolina. He didn't like the work. Like his father, he preferred the autonomy of running his own business. He joined the Army Air Corps in the summer of 1942, when he was thirty-three, and served in the New Guinea campaign. He sent his paychecks to his father to save for him, and after he mustered out in 1946, he used the money to open a small restaurant with his brother, Jake, in the town of Walhalla in Oconee County.

My mother was working on the floor of a textile plant in Seneca in 1948 when she met and became friends with my dad’s sister, Mildred, who worked in the mill’s canteen. She introduced Mildred to her brother, Zell. Mildred and Zell had been dating a while when Mildred returned the favor. She invited my mother to the Graham home, and introduced her to my dad. A double date was proposed, a day trip to the mountains, where my parents began to fall in love.
They married on Christmas Eve in 1951, three years after they first met. My mom was hesitant to leave her family home. She was helping raise her youngest siblings, and using her pay to help support the family. Eventually her younger brothers and sisters were old enough to mind themselves, and with her conscience unburdened, my mom agreed to marry my dad. He was almost seventeen years older, but they were a good match in every way.

The first year of their marriage my parents lived with Zell and Mildred, who had married a couple years earlier. They moved to Central three years before I was born, when they bought the Sanitary Cafe in 1952. It occupied two-thirds of a low, one-story building with approximately eighteen hundred square feet of floor space that it shared with the liquor store next door. I don’t know where the bar got its name, just that it was called the Sanitary Cafe when my folks bought it, and they kept the name. They served beer and soft drinks but not hard liquor. My mother cooked hamburgers and hot dogs for our customers, but it was more beer joint than cafe.
It was one of two bars in town. The other, Yank's Place, was situated just across the railroad tracks near the roller mill. My dad and Yank were friendly, and occasionally visited each other's establishments. But they were wary competitors, too. I can remember my dad looking out the window many nights, and counting the number of cars in Yank's parking lot. Both bars had a steady clientele. The mills employed enough people to provide each with plenty of loyal customers.

Then as now, about twenty percent of Central’s population was African American. Times being what they were, most of our customers were white. My folks sold beer to anyone of legal age, but, I’m sorry to say, for many of the years my parents operated the bar, black people were expected to drink the beer they purchased from us off the premises. “It’s just the way it is,” my Dad explained to me. That eventually changed, but not until the early seventies, much later than it should have.

In my child’s eye the place was immense. In reality, of course, it was pretty confining. There were about a dozen stools at the bar, and six booths along the wall. Behind the bar were a couple coolers for beer and soda pop. A pinball machine was located just to the left of the front door, and the “Piccolo,” which is what we called the jukebox, sat next to the opposite wall. My mom’s rocking chair was placed at the end of the bar. She used it to get a few minutes off her feet when she could. A curtain separated the bar from the kitchen, where she cooked for the customers and the family. The kitchen had a big gas stove and a restaurant sink and refrigerator, glass-door cabinets where the dishes were kept, shelves for the glassware, and a little table where the family ate together. There were three pool tables in the basement reached by a separate door on Main Street.

A door in the back of the bar opened to our living quarters, one good-sized room with two beds, a large one for my parents and a twin bed for me, a green Naugahyde couch and recliner, a TV set, a dresser, a makeshift closet, and my mother’s wooden sewing machine. We shared the bathroom with the customers. We used a metal washtub to bathe, drawing water from the sink and heating it on the stove. When my sister came along in 1964, my folks bought a singlewide trailer, which we kept in the building’s back lot. The family stayed in the trailer on the weekends, and we would
bathe there. But during the week, we lived in that backroom. When I wasn’t in the back watching TV, I was in the bar or on the sidewalk out front entertaining our customers and myself.

I was born on July 9, 1955. In those times your thirties were considered late in life to start a family. My mom was thirty-one when I was born. My dad was in his late forties. My sister, Darline, wouldn’t come along for another nine years. Suffice it to say that for those first nine years, I was about the most loved child on the planet, and I never doubted it for a minute.

My folks doted on us. We were always made to feel we were the center of their lives. Owning a small business means you can never take a vacation or get sick without worrying about keeping the store open and whether the person you found to mind the business knows what they're doing. So my parents rarely took a day off except Sundays, when bars were closed. But as hardworking and attentive to the business as they were, they made time to do what we wanted, to take us places we wanted to go, to attend our school pageants and sports games, and to make us feel as cared for as our friends were.

They were generous and indulgent. At an early age, my wishes and opinions were given unusual deference by my mom and dad. I often decided how the family would spend our Sunday, for example. And if there were an object or experience I thought important to my childhood development, they tried to see that I had it. My mother took care of the household and business accounts. She started a Christmas account in the beginning of every year, faithfully depositing a few dollars into it at the end of every week. She made sure we always had as a good a Christmas as other families in town had.

My folks might not have appeared to others to be demonstrative people, at least when compared to my behavior. I was a precocious kid, and kind of bossy at times. I talked non-stop, and my parents must have seemed taciturn in comparison. But they were the most loving parents, always sensitive to our feelings and wishes, and rarely concerned with their own comforts. Their attentiveness gave me confidence, which I have always had in abundance.
They were kind-hearted. They had natural empathy for people who were suffering misfortune, and did what they could to help. My dad hired an indigent World War Two veteran, Fred, to help out in the pool hall. I never knew his last name. He didn’t talk much. I knew only that he was homeless, and needed our help. So my dad let him live in the basement. My mom cooked his meals. And he lived with us until he passed away.

I never felt I was missing out on something because I didn’t live in a house like my friends did. From my point of view, I lived in bountiful circumstances. I could have anything we sold in the bar for a snack: Coca Cola, crackers, potato chips, hot sausages, pigs’ feet, eggs, candy bars, anything I wanted, anytime I wanted it, a luxury that greatly impressed my school friends.

My home was interesting, exciting and fun. Our regular customers were like a big extended family. Many were good friends, people you could turn to in times of trouble. It was like having extra aunts and uncles to do stuff with. I hunted and fished with them. When I started playing sports, they came to my games and matches. I might not have liked every single person who patronized the bar. There were some I actively disliked, especially folks who got mean when they drank. But few people are fond of every member of their extended family. I liked and was friendly with most of our customers, and most of them took a shine to me.

I was one of the main attractions at the bar when I was between the ages of four and seven. I might not have been as big a draw as the beer or the Piccolo, but folks seemed to be amused by my antics. I was always kind of a little guy. My wrestling weight in high school was one-hundred-and-two pounds. I was really small at four, five and six, and very animated. I talked my head off to anyone who would listen to me. People apparently found the combination of my slight stature and gabby nature comical.

I took a great deal of pleasure in mischief, which came as naturally to me as verbosity did. But I think I was conscious, too, that I was giving a performance, that I was expected to entertain folks. And I knew the more audacious I was the more entertaining I would be. I spent a lot of time just
Starting from Top clockwise: Lindsey and classmates in 1st Grade at Central Elementary School, 1961-1962. Lindsey on top of bar in family restaurant, age 4. Lindsey playing baseball on Main Street in Central.
playing pinball, standing on an overturned Coca Cola crate. When I wasn’t playing pinball, I liked to sit at the bar with my dad or help mom stock the cooler with beer. But when the place started to fill in and liven up, I would get my act going. I would strut around the place, sometimes dressed as a cowboy — hat, vest and plastic six shooters. I might get up on the bar and walk up and down it while talking to folks. When customers went to the restroom, I might steal their beer and chug it. I might smoke their cigarette, too, if they left it burning in the ashtray. Those were antics that earned me the nickname, “Stinkball,” which everyone in the bar except my parents called me.

My mom and dad didn’t exactly approve of my behavior. “Lindsey, quit it,” they would order me when they caught me getting up to no good. But as I noted, they were a little indulgent, and there was rarely sharpness in their rebuke nor, it’s fair to say, much expectation that I would comply. In truth, I think they probably thought my act as funny as everyone else did.

When I wasn’t in the bar, my playground was the sidewalk and street in front of our building. I’d ride my bike or skateboard up and down the block for hours. I’ve been told I would engage most passersby in conversation, whether I knew them by name or not. I greeted folks as they came into the bar. Parents would probably lose custody of their children today if they let them behave as independently and as rascally as I did. But it was a great way to grow up. It was a great life. Really. Every once in a while someone hearing my story for the first time, will offer their sympathies for what they consider my deprived childhood. Here’s what I say in response. Home is not a structure. It doesn’t matter how big a house or how fine a neighborhood you live in. Home might not even be in a house. Home is what happens inside those walls. My home was a bar, and a crowded backroom. I was loved inside those walls, as much as any child could be loved, by two devoted parents, by a little sister, by aunts and uncles and cousins, and by people whose patronage was our livelihood and whose friendship was a blessing. I was privileged. I knew it then, and I know it even better now.
We opened up mid morning and stayed open until ten or eleven at night. The first shift at the mill ended at three, and minutes later the bar would start to fill up. Most of the men were covered in lint, and more than a few were missing fingers, lost to accidents with mill machinery that seemed to happen a lot in those days. So many characters, most of them gone now. Friendly, malodorous Stink Roland. Carl, the house painter. Local businessman, Ramsey Clayton had bird dogs and he often took my dad and me bird hunting. Ray Cantrell, a mill worker who drank more beer than the others but never seemed the worse for wear. Harold Mann was the father of one of my closest high school friends. Everyone liked Harold but they looked at him a little differently. He was a salaried employee at the mill, a big shot. Most patrons of the Sanitary Cafe made an hourly wage. Many of them were veterans, like my dad. Some had served on New Guinea at the same time he had. They told stories of headhunters, and Japanese snipers in the trees using wooden bullets to wound GIs intentionally because it took more men to help a wounded soldier than to retrieve the body of a dead one.

They were our regulars, and were almost as close as kin. They brought their wives in on Saturday nights, but the place was pretty much a men’s club during the week. Not all the wives were thrilled with the hours their husbands spent in our establishment.

Fred Merck must have been 6’4. He looked like a giant to me. He had a pack of beagles we used for rabbit hunting. I learned my first lesson in diplomacy from Fred. His wife didn’t like him spending so much time and money at our place, and she often called the phone in our backroom and instructed whoever answered to tell Fred to come home. One night I answered her call. I was probably six or seven years old. I set the phone down and went to find Fred to tell him he was wanted.

“Tell her I’m not here,” he instructed.

“He said to tell you he’s not here,” I dutifully informed Mrs. Merck.

“What!” she shouted.
“What did you tell her?” Fred asked.

“I told her you said you weren’t here,” I answered.

With that Fred ran out the door and hurried home. “Lindsey, don’t ever do that again,” my dad corrected me; although he didn’t explain to me what I had done wrong and he seemed as amused as the others were over the incident.

The Piccolo offered only country-western music. Claude King’s “Wolverton Mountain,” was a favorite. For a time in the early 1970s, one song got more play than any other. After his fourth beer, one of our regulars would start plugging dimes into the Piccolo and playing a Jeanne Pruett song over and over again, for hours.

Satin sheets to lie on, satin pillows to cry on

Still, I’m not happy don’t you see

Big long Cadillac, tailor-mades upon my back

Still, I want you to set me free.

I don’t know if he imagined himself like the singer, rich but lonely, or if he just liked the melody, but he could not get enough of “Satin Sheets.” One night, some of the other regulars took up a collection and paid my dad to remove the song from the Piccolo, which he did the following day. The poor guy was inconsolable.

Most of our customers were regulars although we would get few people in we didn’t know or didn’t know well. The beverage of choice was Pabst Blue Ribbon, kept ice cold in our coolers. A
few freethinkers would ask for Budweiser or Miller, so we kept a small amount of those beers stocked as well.

Most of our regulars were good people and good company, and not the type to cause trouble. They came to drink some beer and have a good time with their co-workers, friends and neighbors. They talked about work or hunting or Clemson football. They might talk a little politics now and then, but most folks steered clear of truly controversial topics. They liked to rib each other, but seldom did so maliciously.

There were some people who had less pleasant personalities. Every bar has a few. Drinking changed them, made them mean and volatile. I drink very little, which I attribute to witnessing as a child how drinking could turn to trash an otherwise likeable person. Not everybody is changed for the worse, of course. Some folks might be quiet by nature, and become more outgoing after a few beers. And some folks are just born ornery, and act that way drunk or sober. We’d see that type in the bar, too, once in a while.

More often than not, the people who caused problems at the Sanitary Cafe weren’t regulars. My folks wouldn’t tolerate habitual troublemakers frequenting their establishment. Those who crossed the line usually received a swift and unmistakable rebuke they were unlikely to risk experiencing again.

Running a bar is good training for politics. My dad always explained you had to be friendly enough to pull people in, make them want to talk and keep buying beer, and firm enough to keep control of people who are drinking away their inhibitions. My dad wasn’t a particularly demonstrative guy. He wasn’t hot tempered or outspoken or noticeably opinionated. He could be pretty quiet, and you had the feeling he was very observant. But he was friendly and funny, too. He wasn’t one for telling jokes, but he was clever at situational humor, making a crack about something in the news or overheard in the bar. People liked talking with him. He was a good listener. A good bartender has to be part tough guy, part comedian and part psychologist. My dad could tell by the way his customers were talking
too much or too little, which of them were having trouble at home.

Everyone called him “Dude,” even my mom, although she called him Daddy in front of Darline and me. He had played a little baseball when he was younger, and was remembered to have been pretty talented, which is how he got the nickname. One of the best ballplayers in the Upstate, who had played on a team sponsored by one of the mills, was called Dude.

My Dad used to drink a bit. He quit one day after I got upset seeing him drunk. He told my mom, “I can’t drink no more. It tears the boy up too much.” He quit smoking cold turkey, too, after he had a heart attack, and his doctor told him he could keep smoking Lucky Strikes or he could watch his son grow up. Before that, I used to watch him balance his cigarettes on the edge of the bar, smoke curling toward the ceiling, and count the burn marks they left.

Dude ran a friendly establishment, but as I noted, if you crossed a line, he made sure you knew it. He kept my Little League football helmet on a shelf behind the bar, and he occasionally put it to practical use. I remember one such occasion vividly.

Every now and again, someone – usually not a regular — would hassle a black customer until my dad put a stop to it. Mr. Jake was a regular customer, a big guy, who worked construction, a nice, friendly fellow. I enjoyed talking to him, and my dad really liked him. We went hunting with him occasionally. On one particular occasion, some loudmouth I didn’t recognize started giving Mr. Jake a hard time, poking him and calling him the N word. He had been at it for less than a minute when suddenly my dad cracked my helmet hard against the guy’s skull, and laid him out cold.

He wasn’t the first or the last troublemaker my dad introduced to my helmet. He kept the thing there just for that purpose. When someone looked like they were starting a fight or just mouthing off and giving offense, my dad would sweep it off the shelf and in one motion bring it crashing down on the offender’s head. I saw him do it many times. It always made a big impression on me and on everyone who saw it, especially the unfortunate fellow who had been the object of
his disapproval. My dad wasn’t a big man. He was only 5’6 and didn’t weigh very much. But few regulars risked suffering his wrath. They wouldn’t have remained regulars if they did. And the fellows who did get crosswise with him, if they ever came back to the bar again, usually behaved themselves.

My dad could appear fearsome when the situation warranted it. In reality, though, he was a sentimental, almost softhearted man. He was predisposed to like people, and he had to have a good reason to alter his favorable opinion. He wouldn’t stand for anyone taking advantage of his good nature or mistreating someone in his presence. But he wasn’t some kind of swaggering tough guy. He tried to run his business with a minimum of fuss, make his customers feel at home, and take care of his family.

As I noted, what little time he could spare from work, he usually spent doing whatever I decided we should do. I had a reputation when I was a kid for getting people to do what I wanted to do by making it seem more fun and less hassle than something they wanted to do. Larry “Cleo” Hendrix is one of my oldest friends. We were friends in kindergarten. We were in Bible school together, and the Cub Scouts, and we played on the same Little League baseball team. I used to spend a lot of time at his house. We remained friends in high school, and after I left for college and law school. We’re still friends today. Cleo likes to tell the story of the time in the first grade when we moved out of the old Central Elementary into a new school building across the street. Our teacher told us to carry our desks from our old classroom to our new one. “Lindsey got me to carry his,” Cleo remembers. “He always used his imagination to get around doing things he didn’t want to do.”

I’m not sure it was my imagination as much as it was my insistent nature. I didn’t always get my own way, but I usually tried to. I was never shy about making clear what I liked and disliked. One thing I’ve always disliked is getting up early in the morning, and I’ve mostly managed to avoid doing so. I’m hard working, but I like to get a late start and pick up steam as the day goes along.
Cleo will testify to that, too. We had two practices a day in Little League, one in the morning and another in the afternoon. He claims he never saw me make a single morning practice. When we were teenagers, Cleo worked part time for a funeral director, the business he’s in today. He occasionally had to spend the night in the funeral home when a deceased was on the premises. I agreed to stay there with him once. It was too eerie for comfort. I kept asking Cleo the time, and warning him I had things to do very early the next morning. “Lindsey,” he laughed, “you’ve never been up early a day in your life.” But I was up and out early that morning.

I might have been clever at convincing people to see things from my point of view, but that was seldom necessary with my folks. It was enough for me just to state my preferences, and if my wishes weren’t unreasonable, my parents usually deferred to them.

What I liked to do most was go hunting or fishing, and my dad would take me whenever he could. I was eight years old when he first started hunting with me. He gave me a .410 shotgun, and showed me how to use it. My high school friends allege I have a tendency to exaggerate my skills as a sportsman. I played four sports in high school. I’ve got a decent golf game, and I was a passable wrestler. But I was never so good at any sport that I could resist celebrating any minor success. Shooting is the one skill I don’t exaggerate. My dad taught me to be a crack shot just like he was.

We always hunted together on Thanksgiving Day. Sometimes we went out Christmas Day if the weather wasn’t too bad. But we always hunted on Thanksgiving, no matter what. It was my favorite tradition.

We sometimes hunted just the two of us, but usually we had company. My Uncle Hollis, who had married my mother’s sister, Verna Mae, went hunting with us. So did my Uncle Tip, Nell’s husband. We went hunting with friends from the bar. We used Fred Merck’s beagles for rabbits. We did quite a bit of bird hunting, too, in season, quail usually. But I liked hunting rabbits best. I could do it for hours, tramping through fields and woods, up and down hills in all kinds of weather, until Fred’s dogs picked up a scent and jumped a rabbit. We formed a picket line and
listened for the noise of their barking to draw closer. Rabbits will run in a big circle but always come back to where the dogs jumped them. You stretch out in a line near that spot and wait to intercept them. When I was little, I stood next to my dad, shaking with nervous anticipation. I could hardly stand it when the barking started getting louder. There’s no bigger thrill for me than that sound. It signals the beagles are running back to you and they’re driving a rabbit in front of them. I loved it. I can close my eyes and hear those dogs running today.

We fished for crappie in Lake Hartwell and for trout on the Chattooga River. Hartwell is a fifty-mile long reservoir on South Carolina’s border with Georgia created by a dam on the Savannah River. It’s one of the largest and most popular lakes in the state and the southeast. One of the lake’s arms extends into Clemson. Death Valley, Clemson University’s football stadium, looks down on it. My Uncle Hollis had a flat bottom boat, and on many warm weather nights after work, my dad, Hollis and I would tie up the boat under a bridge in Clemson, and fish for crappie until midnight. We’d catch so many fish we would run out of room in the boat. Those nights, too, made for fond memories, the sharp tug on the line, laughing as we reeled in our catch.
I suppose many people’s memories recall their childhoods as idyllic. I swear mine was. It wasn’t conventional in many respects, and it was not without its hard times. But I wouldn’t trade it for anyone else’s, honestly.

I came along late in my dad’s life, and he made the most of our time together. I think he must have known he wouldn’t be around for long. He took me everywhere with him. Whatever he did, he did it with me. He took me to the car races with my uncles when I was little, to Darlington Raceway — “The Track Too Tough To Tame” — for the Southern 500. I saw Richard Petty race there, and the great Fireball Roberts, who won the 500 in 1958, and died in a crash in 1964. We parked our car in the infield, and I’d sit on top of it to watch the race. The adults drank beer all night and got pretty drunk. There were fights and all kinds of crazy behavior happening all over the place. Debris from crashes sometimes came flying into the crowd. We brought sleeping bags and spent the whole night there. I loved it.

I love playing golf. I got that mostly from my dad, too. When I had just started high school, I mentioned to him one day that I would like to start playing golf. A few days later I came home from school and there was a starter set of clubs waiting for me, a driver, three wood, putter, and three, five, seven and nine irons. He bought a set for himself, too, and one for my Uncle Hollis.

He also bought a family membership in the Oconee County Country Club, a small town club with a decent course. It wasn’t expensive or fancy by anyone’s standards, but we spent a lot of happy Sundays there playing a round. Sometimes we played with Hollis. Other times I brought high school friends to play with us. Greg Bauld was one of my closest friends then, and still is. He and his wife, Denise, who works with me, and their four children, are family. I met Greg on the golf course one Sunday, when he was playing with a group in front of us. After we became friends, Greg often played with my dad and me. He and my dad kept playing when I was at college in Columbia and Greg was attending nearby Clemson. When she was old enough, I arranged for
Darline to have lessons and she would play with us sometimes. Or she and my mom would relax at the club pool while dad and I played.

For parents who worked long hours all the time as my mom and dad did, time spent just enjoying life with their children is a precious expense. But it was time my parents spent as generously as they could. I never felt underprivileged because we weren’t underprivileged. We had everything we needed. Most importantly, we had our parents’ attention and affection. All my childhood I had the sense I was lucky and loved.

My dad took us to Clemson football and basketball games, and once or twice a season he drove us to Atlanta to see the Braves play. Keeping youngsters amused wasn’t the easiest thing for a guy with coronary disease. I remember seeing him slip little nitroglycerin pills under his tongue after he became winded climbing the stadium stairs. But he never let the strain of it prevent him from enjoying those outings with his children and our friends. He was a considerate man, who worked hard and put others before himself.

On my sixteenth birthday, he gave me a brand new Browning Automatic, Belgian made, Sweet 16 shotgun. It was right out of the box. I had to assemble it. Of all the presents my parents gave me, of all the gifts I’ve received in my life, nothing meant more to me than that shotgun. I was just bowled over to get it. I don’t know what it must have cost. More than they could afford, I’m sure. That gun means the world to me to this day.
The biggest event in our family’s life was Darline’s arrival on June 12, 1964. I had been an only child for nine years, and the focus of my parents’ attention. I might have been expected to resent sharing them with a new baby. But I didn’t. Not a bit. I adored her as much as my mom and dad did, and they loved her like crazy. She had us all charmed from day one. I couldn’t wait to get home from school every afternoon to see her. Not long after she was born, my folks bought the singlewide trailer so we could live in more normal and private accommodations at least on the weekends. Most weeknights we still stayed in the backroom even after I started high school. We liked it there, liked being close to our mom and dad and to the customers who were like family to us. We were close in case our parents needed us. I liked stocking the coolers with my mom. Or I liked it until Darline was old enough to do it, and then I liked telling her to help mama stock the coolers.

I mostly retired my act after Darline was born, or toned it down anyway. I stopped spending every afternoon and evening in the bar. I stayed in the backroom looking after her while my parents
worked. I played games with her, watched TV with her, brought her along when I met up with school friends. I took care of her when she was sick. I told her stories and helped her with her homework. We argued about what television programs to watch. I took her to the movies. We both loved James Bond movies. She cried when I left for school in the morning and when I went off with Cleo or other friends and didn’t take her with us. I brought her with me so often it hurt her feelings when I didn’t and she would beg my mom to make me take her. Cleo and I got her to take her first steps, toddling back and forth between the two of us. I taught her how to ride a bike when she was five, and gave her a turquoise blue bicycle for her ninth birthday. I talked my parents into buying her a miniature organ one Christmas and was more excited for her than she was. We are as close as siblings can be, a bond that was nurtured in the security of a happy home with loving parents, and strengthened when we lost them.

Around the time Darline was born my dad bought a liquor store in Seneca. The store was open from sunup to sundown. He had to leave home before dawn six days a week to make the twenty minute trip to Seneca. My mom hated having him away from home so much. She wanted him to stick close to us. He would have preferred that, too, but the liquor store was an indispensible source of income for the family, and so for several years he made the commute to Seneca every day, to everyone’s dissatisfaction.

Then, around the time I started high school, the owner of the liquor store on the corner, a fellow named Rabbit Martin, decided to retire, and sold the business to my dad. My mom still ran the bar day and night mostly on her own, while my dad ran the store. But we were all back in the same building again.

We didn’t have many vacations. They are hard to come by when you own a small business and have to pay someone to run things in your absence. I don’t remember taking a real vacation until I was in college. Every once in a while, though, my parents would get someone to mind the bar and liquor store on Saturday and we would head to Cherokee, North Carolina for the weekend.
It was an hour-and-a-half drive away near the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. We rented a cabin on the Oconaluftee River, where we fished and ate tomato sandwiches my mom brought from home. There’s a casino today where an amusement park, Frontier Land, was located when we visited. We spent much of our time there and in trinket shops that sold all kinds of souvenirs.

The most fascinating place in the world I grew up in was the poolroom in the basement of the bar, the scene of afterhours stake games on Saturday nights in the spring and summer. The games lasted from midnight until dawn and attracted the greatest collection of characters I’d ever seen assembled in one place. For a time, we were a regular stop on the southern pool circuit, the domain of professionals, hustlers who carried their cue sticks in cases and shot pool with style and an eye for suckers with money to lose. By the time I was twelve, my dad had me running the poolroom, but he took charge on those special Saturday nights when the professionals came to play.

The basement was a big room with three tables and it would fill up completely. The players paid my dad a hundred bucks in rent. He closed the bar and fetched the beer downstairs. My mom cooked hamburgers. Darline stayed down there with us until it got really late, then she and my mom went upstairs to bed.

We charged a dime a rack. I did the racking, taking care to do it correctly, with every ball tight against the next. Sometimes my dad held the stakes money. Some players would stick hundred dollar bills in each of the table pockets. They played nine-ball most of the night until they wanted to hurry things along by playing five-ball. That’s when things would really heat up, when the room felt charged by an electric current of fear and aggression. The stakes got higher the later it was. Some nights they got a lot higher. I saw car titles change hands after some of those games.

Gambling was illegal, of course. But Central’s Chief of Police was a friend of my dad’s and a pool enthusiast. He never a missed a Saturday, and declined to take a professional interest in the sums changing hands. He was just there for the pool. So were a lot of folks who crowded into that basement. Many of our customers liked to shoot pool, and some of them were pretty
good. But most of them knew they were in the company of professionals. They came to admire their craftsmanship not to play against them. Most of them, anyway. There were always enough confident amateurs willing to try their luck to keep the professionals coming back.

It was a lively scene, and the presence of law enforcement was welcomed by the proprietors. Fights are pretty common any place where you have a lot of men competing with one another, and quantities of beer are being consumed. My dad was pretty good at keeping a lid on that kind of thing, and Fred, who lived in the poolroom, helped maintain order, too. On nights when I ran the place, those two were enough to handle any trouble from locals. But during those all night stakes games, the police chief was our best deterrent against serious misbehavior.

The professionals who played in our poolroom were some of the most interesting characters I’ve ever met. I can’t remember all their names now, but I can see their faces. One of the regulars was a circuit legend, a fellow named “Calhoun” Kelleher. I think his Christian name was William, but he hailed from Calhoun, Texas. Some guys just called him Tex. You could tell he was a special player by the respect the other professionals paid him. They weren’t in a hurry to play him, and they were all business when they did. Every hustler had his own corner guy, like fighters have, giving them advice and encouragement. It was funny watching them conspire, but instructive, too. They took their work seriously, as every professional should, no matter that the work was a game.

There were a few guys who were missing an important body part. There was “One Eyed Jack,” and a one-legged player called “Stumpy.” The player who impressed me the most was a guy we called “Crooked Stick.” He had a lost an arm somehow, and held the stick with one hand. He didn’t rest it on the cushions. He held it firmly and jabbed at the ball really hard. He could hit it as well as most two armed players. He could jump the ball better than any other player, too. He taught me how to put English on the ball. He and some of the other pros turned me into a pretty decent player. They taught me before the night’s activities got underway. They showed me that shooting
pool was about controlling the cue ball, and thinking two, three and four shots ahead. I was so little then, I had to stand on a crate to play. But I paid attention, did as they instructed, and I got pretty good. And when I got good, they started betting on me.

They would evaluate the locals through the course of the night, and during one of the breaks they would suggest to one of them, “why don’t you play the kid?” They knew their business, and inevitably the person they approached wasn’t good enough to beat me. They liked me well enough, and they were good teachers. But they didn’t line up games for me out of affection. Self-interest was the main priority in their profession as much as it is in any other. I made a little money, too, in time. I was still shooting pool regularly when I went to college, and was, thanks to the experts who taught me, skilled enough to keep myself in pocket money through my undergraduate years.

Some people might worry that a poolroom isn’t a suitable environment for an impressionable young mind, especially a poolroom frequented by professional gamblers. I don’t think it did me any harm. Actually, it taught me valuable lessons about human nature and how to make a living from understanding it. That’s been a useful skill in most things I’ve done since. If nothing else, those nights were an awful lot of fun.

The fun was mostly played out by the time I was in high school. The police chief retired and his successor wasn’t a fan of the sport. Neither was he likely to take a live-and-let-live approach to unlicensed gaming in his jurisdiction. Darline and I were getting older, and our parents had started worrying a little about the kinds of behavior we were exposed to and decided we needed a more structured home life. The circuit started dying out, too, as some of its more colorful denizens passed away or got too old to continue. We started keeping the poolroom open only a couple days a week. The afterhours scene stopped entirely. That’s life. Things change, as hard as that is to accept sometimes, and that was one of several big changes in my life that I did not welcome.
I enjoyed high school, which made the poolroom’s decline seem less of a blow to my social life. I made lifelong friends there. Cleo Hendrix and I stayed close, and we acquired new friends, among them, Greg Bauld, Tom Mann, Tom Von Kaenel and Chip Bailey, most of whom I got to know playing sports.

D.W. Daniel High School was located on the outskirts of Central but it served three communities, each with a different demographic makeup. The students from Central were mostly millworkers’ kids. Six Mile was a rural community, and most of the kids from there came from farming families. Clemson was the third and most affluent community that sent students to Daniel, which was named for a widely respected former dean of the university. Most of their parents were on Clemson’s faculty or staff. Greg’s dad taught mechanical engineering. I might never have gone to college had I not become good friends with Clemson kids and gotten to know their families. I know my parents hoped I would go to college, but I don’t recall seriously entertaining the notion until I started hanging out with college bound friends.
Although my horizons were broadening and I was starting to think about life after high school, I didn’t really apply myself academically at Daniel. My grades were okay. I made Cs mostly. I was usually engaged and talkative in the classroom. But I was never going to put a scare into the class valedictorian.

I was, however, starting to acquire ambitions. Greg recalls our freshman year civics teacher going around the room on the first day of school and asking each of us what we wanted to be when we grew up. She got the usual answers, “baseball player,” “fireman,” “racecar driver,” etc., until she got to me. “I want to be governor,” I told her. Now, I might have started imagining in the 9th grade doing something interesting with my life, but I don’t really think I had a political career in mind that early in my life. I think I had just wanted to say something that would get my classmates’ attention and make them laugh. Although that’s just the sort of thing a politician would want to do.

Sports are where I really wanted to make my mark in high school. But my estimation of my athletic ability exceeded others’ assessment. My friends often start their recollections with, “he was kind of scrappy, but . . . “ Superlatives don’t usually follow the “but.” Granted, I wasn’t an elite
athlete. I might not have been as talented as some of my friends were. Greg was the quarterback of the football team. But, as I like to remind my friends frequently, I was the only four sport letterman at the time, and I believe I was the last one at D.W. Daniel High School.

I played on the golf team, the tennis team, the football team and I wrestled. I was a little guy, and awfully skinny. But while I might not have been the most imposing physical presence, I was game. I had the heart to compete. If you pass me the basketball, I won’t want to pass it back. I’ll want to shoot it. I talked a good game, too, and sometimes when you talk a good game you make a believer out of yourself if no one else. I try not to take much notice of my defeats. Maybe that explains why my record of wins and losses is more favorable in my memory than in the memories of other witnesses. Any win deserves a good celebration, and time commiserating after a loss is wasted. I think that’s the right attitude for a successful life.

I was a backup holder on the football team. That didn’t involve a lot of playing time, obviously. But it did produce one of the more memorable moments of my athletic career.

It was after the final touchdown in a game we were winning handily. Coach put me in to hold for the extra point. I fumbled the snap. All I could do was pick up the ball, and try to figure out some way to get it across the goal line. I ran to my left, and when the defenders were closing in on me, I lofted it toward the end zone. Somehow one of my teammates got to it, and caught it for a two point conversion. I was so excited. I ran to the end zone, and jumped up and down. It was the only pass I threw in high school. I was walking on air all night, acting, according to Greg, like I was Joe Namath. I was still in a state of elation the next morning, when I hurried to get hold of the local newspaper, which I expected would have a detailed account of my heroics. But the paper gave only a brief mention of the play, which it credited to Greg. The memory still stings. Greg and I are as close as brothers, and as competitive as brothers, too.

I probably got more out of playing high school sports than I put into it. That’s not to say I didn’t give each sport I played my best effort. I believe I did. I just think my best might have had a lower
ceiling than guys with more athleticism had. But I enjoyed competing and being part of a team, and I valued the friendships I made. I valued one relationship in particular, the bond I had with Al Curtis, who coached Daniel’s football, wrestling and baseball teams.

I suspect Coach Curtis’ regard for me was based more in his secret amusement over my behavior than in his appreciation of my athletic abilities. From my earliest days, I knew how to draw attention to myself. I had the gift of gab, and I could make people laugh. I did it in high school, too, and I think Coach, probably against his better judgment, had a soft spot for me. He might have seen something more in me, too. I like to think so anyway, because I valued his opinion, and count our association among the more fortunate ones in my life.

Alpheus Lee, “A.L.” Curtis had been a standout athlete on his high school football, baseball and wrestling teams in Gaffney, South Carolina and in college at Duke University and Furman University. He had pitched in the major leagues for the Red Sox and the Washington Senators. He was really competitive, and a tough, demanding coach. But you could tell he wanted us to succeed for our own sake as much as his. He brought out the best in his players.

We had a funny relationship. He thought I was a character, and liked having me around. But we always played our respective roles. He would shake his head and tell me to knock it off when I started clowning around. I knew he thought I was funny. And even though he kept that to himself, it gave me license that other players wouldn’t have dared taken.

Greg and I and a few other guys were playing improvised handball games in the gym one afternoon. We put tape on the wall and the floor and used a tennis ball. Coach wanted to play. Greg and the others, out of wary respect for his competitive temperament, let him win. I didn’t. When I played him, I played to beat him. And when I did, I started dancing around like Mohammed Ali, singing, “I’m the greatest, I’m the greatest.” Coach demanded another game. I beat him again, and did my same Ali routine. His face reddened as he got angrier. The other guys were nervously watching. Eventually, he stormed off and shut the door to his office. He came back a few minutes later.
“Graham, we’re playing again,” he barked.

“Not until you say, I’m the greatest,” I insisted.

I could see the look of shock on Greg’s face. Coach said, “C’mon, Graham, let’s play.” But I repeated my demand until he went back to his office. He emerged again soon after, came up to me and whispered, “You’re the greatest.” I looked over at the others, smiled, turned back to him and said, “I couldn’t hear that, what did you say?” “Let’s play!” he exploded. So we played again. I think he might have won that last game.

I took some liberties with Coach that others wouldn’t have, but he put me in my place from time to time just to make sure I hadn’t forgotten our different positions in the school power structure. Greg had played baseball for him all four years, and was one of the team’s stars. Chip Bailey and I decided we would join him our senior year, and tried out for the team. Both Chip and I were on the wrestling team. Chip was one of our best wrestlers, and Coach liked him. Coach also liked to build a team through the years, and by the time we were seniors his baseball roster was pretty well set. We tried out anyway. On the day the roster was announced, Coach made the rounds in the locker room breaking the news tactfully to the kids who hadn’t made the team, to most of them anyway. “I really appreciate it,” he thanked Chip, “I just don’t have room for you. I wish you’d tried out sooner.” He must have spent five full minutes with him. When he reached my locker, “Graham, you’re gone,” was all he said.

Our occasional one-upmanship not withstanding, Coach Curtis’ respect mattered to me. He was a fine man, who helped me become a better athlete if never an exemplary one. He gave me confidence, and in his own way encouraged me to do something more with my life than I had imagined possible. I didn’t want to disappoint him then or later.

I often remember a wrestling match that I was losing to a shorter but stronger opponent. Coach kept shouting to me what to do to come back and get control of the match. Either I wasn’t listening
or I didn’t think I had the strength to do what he was telling me to do. My opponent kept piling up the points. Eventually, Coach just walked away from the mat, and left me there. That put a fire in me. I started wrestling furiously, and mounted a comeback that had the whole gym cheering. It fell just short. I was too far behind to win the match. But I came close. When it was over, I looked at coach, and he was smiling.

We had a great relationship. I loved the guy. He coached at Daniel until 1980, when he returned to his hometown, Gaffney, and coached at the high school there for another ten years. He coached their football team to a state championship in 1985. We stayed in touch through the years. I visited him just weeks before he passed away last August.

Early in my high school years I started imagining a career as an Air Force pilot. I took flying lessons at little Oconee County Airport, and soloed for the first time on my seventeenth birthday. I don’t know if I really had an aptitude for flying or not, but after I received my pilot’s license I was serious about joining the Air Force.

I worked a couple jobs in high school. My Uncle Stan, Sis’ husband, got me a job as a carpenter’s helper at a construction site in Anderson one summer. He was superintendent of a crew building the Michelin plant there. The next summer, Cleo Hendrix worked on the janitorial staff at Clemson’s physical plant, and he helped me get a job there. We were the only two high school kids on the crew, and the only white kids. Everybody else was an adult, some of them with families, and African American. Rather than resent us for taking jobs that might have gone to other family men, they treated us with kindness.

I think I amused them. I remember asking to run the buffer, a big, self-propelled contraption used to polish the floors. My co-workers refused at first, observing that at barely more than a hundred pounds, I wasn’t big enough to handle the machine. But I insisted and they gave in. As soon as I started it and pressed on the release, the buffer dragged me down the hallway like a runaway horse and we crashed into a bookcase, damaging it. Another time, trying to avoid some
unpleasant task, I put my hand up when the superintendent asked for a volunteer. He dispatched me to a storage room where a fifty gallon drum of liquid soap had exploded, and told me to clean it up. The stuff was up to my knees, and when the job was finished some hours later, I was covered head to toe in soap causing howls of laughter from the rest of the crew.

While I was in high school, my parents decided to end the informal discrimination we had tolerated at the bar. The schools in our county had been integrated when I was in the sixth grade. I remember the day very well when two African American girls and a boy entered my classroom and took their seats. They looked frightened, and when I remember them today, I imagine how worried their parents must have been.

By the time I was in high school in the 1970s, integration was complete throughout the school system. Unlike other places in the south, integration in Pickens County and in most counties in the Upstate hadn’t triggered white flight to private academies. I went to school with black kids. I had black teammates. My dad and I went hunting with black friends. It wasn’t right that we expected friends to buy beer from us but not sit and enjoy it at the bar to observe a custom that wasn’t lawful and that your sense of fairness told you was wrong.

My parents were a product of their time, and were certainly no one’s idea of progressives. But the practice didn’t sit well with them either. They couldn’t abide mistreating people, believing all folks were entitled to courtesy and decent treatment in general unless they gave you a reason to feel otherwise. They knew the way things were in the bar was wrong, and behind the times. And I think we all knew that allowing it to continue corrupted not just the folks who wanted it to stay that way, or who quietly accepted the inequity but also those who were innocently exposed to it.

Darline was just a little kid at the time, probably no more than seven, and she was being infected by the degrading treatment of African Americans. I heard her use the N word one day. She didn’t even think the term was offensive. She had heard it used so often. I told her to not say it again,
and a little while later, I went to my parents and asked them to make a change. They agreed. The next time a black customer came into the place, my mom opened a bottle of beer, set it down on the bar, and motioned for him to take a stool. She did the same with every subsequent customer who came in expecting to take their beer home with them.

Word of our new policy spread quickly through the African American community, and we attracted some new customers. Word spread quickly among our white customers, too, and, regrettably, as more African Americans began to patronize the bar, many of our white regulars took their business elsewhere. The bar was segregated again in reverse, and it seemed to happen in a flash. There was nothing to be done, though, but to make welcome the people whose trade we now depended on. In my memory, the Piccolo changed overnight from playing country music to playing nothing but R&B.

We eventually regained some of our lost customers, and the bar finally caught up to the times. The Piccolo boasted a more varied catalogue, and everybody seemed to get along just fine or at least no worse than our patrons had in previous years. We had always run a convivial place where people could enjoy themselves among friends, and my family could make an honest living. It was a relief when it seemed the bar could be that place again after it was integrated. But by then an illness in the family marked the beginning of the end of my family’s ownership of the Sanitary Cafe.
applied to the University of South Carolina in Columbia my senior year in high school. I chose Carolina for a few reasons. First, they would take me. My grades were only average and my SAT score was 800. I wasn’t a math wiz, to put it charitably. I had only taken pre-algebra and business math in high school. I didn’t care for the subject in any iteration, and I think I might have set a record for low scores on the math part of the SAT.

Second, I loved Carolina basketball. Frank McGuire coached the team. He recruited his best players from New York, where he had played for St. Johns and coached their baseball and basketball teams. Bobby Cremins, Tom Riker, Tom Owens, John Roche, Kevin Joyce, all Catholic kids from New York. They made the sign of the cross before they shot free throws, an exotic gesture in my predominately Baptist neck of the woods.

Third, we could afford the in state tuition. I didn’t have to take out a loan or apply for grants. My parents paid for most of it, and I contributed what I earned during the summer. I also joined
the Air Force ROTC program. I did it because I wanted to be an Air Force pilot, not to get a scholarship, but the Air Force did pay me a small stipend.

Finally, Carolina was close to home, which I was in no hurry to leave. Columbia was only a two hour drive, a route I would travel many times over the next eight years.

My folks and Darline drove me to Columbia that fall. It was a huge event in the family, and a pretty emotional experience for all of us. My feelings were mixed and in conflict. I was excited to start college. I was nervous, too, not only because I would be living away from home among strangers. I was more curious than anxious about that prospect. I was nervous that I wouldn’t prove equal to the challenge. Self-doubt isn’t usually one of my flaws. But I doubted myself then. I was worried I wasn’t ready for the academic rigors of a college education, that I would fail, be expelled and crush my parents’ dreams. I was worried I wouldn’t be able to talk and joke my way through college as I had in high school.

I’m not certain why I experienced a sudden loss of confidence. My SAT scores probably had something to do with it. Even though I made decent grades in college, it would take the better part of two years for me to stop worrying so much. But once I got my confidence back, I never experienced that kind of doubt again. I think the thought of upsetting my parents, picturing their crestfallen faces if I didn’t live up to their faith in me had unnerved me. They were so proud of me. I couldn’t bear to let them down.

We were such a close family. We meant the world to each other. No one has ever meant as much to me since. Our happiness depended on the happiness and well being of each other. No one in my extended family had ever gone to college. Many of them, including my parents, hadn’t even finished high school. My mom and dad worked so hard from such a young age, and they had done everything they could to make sure their children knew we were secure and loved. They saw my admission to the University of South Carolina as the great success in their lives. It was the biggest
reward they would have for their years of toil and sacrifice. They were so sure I would become someone important. I needed to make good on my promise, for their sake as well as mine.

We weren’t typically publicly demonstrative with our feelings, though not one of us ever doubted our affection for each other. That day, though, was tough on us. My mom and dad cried when we said our good-byes. I had seen my father cry on only one occasion before then, when his brother, Cleo, died. Darline grabbed my leg and wouldn’t let go until my dad pried her loose. I cried, too, and spent a miserable first night in my dormitory.

I might have been anxious about doing well, but that didn’t prevent me from enjoying my undergraduate years. I made friends quickly. I liked most of my classes and professors. I declared my major in my sophomore year. I chose psychology because it didn’t require any math classes. I applied myself to my studies more than I had in high school, and I got good grades.

I didn’t join a fraternity. I went home too often to make any extensive social commitments. I did live one year on an independent floor of a fraternity building. Members of an African American fraternity lived down the hall, and I became friends with most of them. We played intramural sports together, and I went to their parties. I was even allowed into one of their initiation ceremonies, when they branded each other with heated clothes hangars. I felt honored and a little freaked out at the same time. I’m pretty sociable and I liked a good time as much as the next college kid. But I can’t think of a party I enjoyed so much I would have agreed to being branded for the fun of attending it. That’s not my idea of a good time. I’ve always believed keeping physical pain to the minimum necessary is one of the keys to a happy life.

I enjoyed ROTC. I wasn’t too crazy about the drilling, probably because I was terrible at it. I liked and admired the head of the Air Force ROTC at Carolina, Colonel Pete Sercer, a veteran of the Vietnam War. I confided in him, and he helped me a great deal later on in what would become a very difficult time in my life. My dream of being a pilot had to be abandoned, though. In my freshman year in high school, I had had an operation in my left ear to remove a calcium deposit.
Some of the fine bones of the inner ear were removed as well, and the resulting hearing loss disqualified me from pilot training. I wasn’t too dejected. I had begun by then to sense the law might be a more suitable occupation for me than flying.

I went home most weekends that first year, catching a Greyhound Bus after my last class on Friday. Darline was always waiting for me at the bus stop. My mom was often there, too, both of them as excited to see me as I was to see them.

By May 1975, the end of my sophomore year, my confidence had returned. I made the dean’s list, and had accumulated more college credits than required to qualify as an upperclassman. I was feeling good about my fortunes, and looking forward to going home for the summer. I persuaded my parents we should take Darline to Disney World. It would be our family’s first big vacation. My mom set a little money aside for the trip each week. I did all the planning and made all the travel and hotel arrangements. We flew to Orlando, a first experience with air travel for my mother, Darline and me. We stayed five days at a very nice Howard Johnson that had a big pool. We made it to all the major attractions in the Magic Kingdom, and took in Sea World, too. We played golf. We had a wonderful time.

I sat next to my mother on our return flight to Greenville. We hit some turbulence, which scared her. “I’m worried,” she told me. I assured her we’d be fine. “Well, at least we’re all together,” she said to console herself.

My parents had recently purchased our first house. They were fixing it up that summer and ordering new furniture from Sears in anticipation of moving into it in the fall. I had never minded where we lived. But Darline had always talked about living in a real house. She was almost eleven, and would soon enter middle school. I think my folks wanted her to have her dream before she reached her teenage years. When the little house next door to the business came up for sale, they bought it.
I was happy at school, doing well. We had the time of our lives in Florida, doing things I never imagined we could afford to do. Going to Disney World. Traveling by air. We bought a house. The business was prospering. These were big things to us. I still remember like it was yesterday the first time my family dined at a Red Lobster. It had been such a special and expensive occasion for us. Now, we were living on top of the world.

Life was good. Then it wasn’t. And I have never taken anything for granted again.
Not long after we returned from Florida, my mom started complaining that she felt chronically fatigued, and was often nauseous. She was also hemorrhaging sporadically, and had a rash that itched terribly. My aunts suggested she might have gotten it from sand fleas while we were in Florida. My mother rarely complained about anything, and never about feeling poorly, so we were all concerned. We insisted she see a doctor in Seneca, who told her there wasn’t anything seriously wrong with her, and attributed her symptoms to the onset of menopause. I wanted to believe that. We all did. We went about our business trying to think as little as possible about her illness, reminding ourselves when we needed to that she would soon be herself again. And when I returned to Columbia in August for the start of my junior year, I tried to put it out my mind.

But she didn’t get any better. And the sense of foreboding I had been trying to suppress became more pronounced as her symptoms got worse. Dissatisfied with the doctor in Seneca, my dad took her to see Dr. Hunter in Clemson, who must have suspected what was wrong. After physically
examining her, he had one of her lymph nodes biopsied. It was cancerous, and X-rays confirmed the cancer had metastasized.

I was back from school on a Friday in October and working in the liquor store while my parents met with Dr. Hunter. Later that afternoon, I watched my dad, driving erratically, pull his car up abruptly to the curb, and hurry into the store. He was clearly shaken up, crying as he blurted out, “Your mother is dying.”

He followed the declaration with an observation. “It’s going to kill her not to see her kids grow up.” He looked away from me as he spoke, as if he had been talking to someone other than me, to himself, maybe, or to God, or to anyone who would appreciate the terrible unfairness of it, the tragedy of a mother not living to see her children make something of her sacrifices and boundless love for them.

I was stunned, and took a few moments to collect myself and ask my dad the obvious questions. She had been diagnosed with “Hodgkin’s Lymphoma . . . stage 4,” he managed to get out. She hadn’t long to live. She had been told. Despite the pessimistic prognosis, she would begin chemotherapy immediately. She would fight the disease as hard as she could. My dad had already checked her into Oconee Memorial in Seneca.

As I took in the news, I started coming apart, too. We had to tell Darline. I could hardly bear the thought of the sad errand. We asked my Uncle Lloyd, my mom’s brother who was home on a visit, to come with us and fetch her from the school while we waited in the car to break the news to her. Neither of us managed it very well, I’m sorry to recall. She found us both in tears. We told her that her mother was sick with cancer, and by our appearance we likely made it clear just how grave her prognosis was. She became as distraught as we were.

I spoke to Dr. Hunter a couple days later, and he gave me more details, including his best estimate of how much time she had left. She probably had six months, he told me. It’s funny what you fixate
Starting from Top clockwise: Lindsey, mother, and Darline on vacation in FL, 1969. Mother, Darline and Lindsey behind bar, 1967. Lindsey, Darline, mother and father.
on when you’re a kid in order to hold on to a little hope. Six months was longer than I had expected. Given how devastated my dad had appeared, I had assumed she might have only a few weeks, not months to live. Six months is a blink of an eye to me today. But it seemed a much longer time to a twenty-year-old. Anything could happen in six months. A new treatment. A cure. Anything.

I suggested to my parents that I take the semester off to help take care of her and help dad run the store. They refused to consider it. My mom was the most insistent in her rejection of the idea. She wanted to see me graduate from college, more than anything in the world, she told me. So I took on a heavier credit load at school in an attempt to outrun her disease and graduate before we lost her. And she fought ferociously to see that day. Her oncologist told me he had never had a patient who fought harder, who had a stronger will to live. She was fighting for her children’s sake. She knew we couldn’t bear to lose her.

The chemo seemed to work for a while, although she experienced all the awful side effects it produces. She stayed in the hospital for the first few rounds but after that received treatment as an outpatient. She continued going to Oconee Memorial until the late stages of her illness, when she had to be hospitalized again. We took her to a bigger hospital then, Greenville Memorial. She would spend a week or two in the hospital, and then come home for a spell and appear to rally a little, and our hopes would rally with her. I remember at one point while she was still being treated at the hospital in Seneca, her oncologist mentioned a new chemotherapy that showed promise, not just containing the cancer but rolling it back. I was so excited I skipped down the hospital corridor as I left for home that night.

A big family can be a real blessing in times of trouble. Our big extended family, my many aunts and uncles and cousins, were a huge help and comfort to us. They watched over us. Cooked our meals. Looked out for Darline. Stayed close to my mom. They spent hours and hours in the hospital with us. They didn’t try to find just the right thing to say to console us or find something to do to take our minds off our trouble or make us feel obliged in any way. They were just there
whenever we needed them to offer support and love and the comfort of their presence. And we were lucky they were. My cousin, Gail, was especially close to Darline, more of a sister than a cousin to her. Gail was closer to me in age, but she knew better than I did how to help someone so young through the trauma of losing her mother.

We got through Christmas still holding on to hope, and I started a new semester. I came home every Thursday or Friday and started staying until Monday morning. When my mom was in the hospital, we spent most of the day and night with her, and there were usually several of her brothers and sisters there as well. We ate our meals at a nearby diner.

I once overheard my folks talking about me. It was a Sunday and we were all at home. They were in another room, and they didn’t think I could hear them. I was about to walk in the room, but paused when I heard their conversation. I had been full of talk about school that weekend, about all the work I had and about getting into law school if I couldn’t be a pilot. I heard my Dad remark that he was worried about me. “Lindsey’s trying so hard to make something of himself,” he fretted. “We need to make sure he doesn’t push himself too hard,” my mom agreed.

I said nothing in response. I walked into the room as if I hadn’t heard a thing. I meant to say something later, and I should have. I should have assured them I was fine. They were the ones who pushed themselves too hard all their lives. They did it for us. Now, as my mother fought cancer and suffered the effects of the poison we hoped would save her life, and as my dad’s health deteriorated, they were worried I was working too hard.

My dad had hired someone to run the bar. But for as long as she felt up to it, my mom went to work even if she just sat in her rocking chair behind the bar. Her family came first, but the bar was second. She took pride in her work. You don’t have to have a glamorous job to care about doing it well. She lived among people who didn’t have prestigious, high paid jobs, just honest ones that they took care to do well. My mom had worked for a living since she was a child. She wanted to
continue working as long as she could. It felt normal and right to her. She had the will to work. Her strength, though, would eventually fail her.

She seemed much improved when I was home for Easter, giving us all hope that the chemo was working. She cooked a big Easter meal for us, and was so pleased and proud that she could. I think she even worked a few hours in the bar that following week. But soon after, the good days grew scarce and hope was hard to hold on to.

Her decline was quick, and harder for us to accept than it was for her. She fought with all her strength. But her disease was diagnosed too late, and had spread too far to fight for long. She had to go into the hospital in Greenville for longer stretches and the time in between hospitalizations started shrinking. I was afraid every time we took her to Greenville she’d never come home again.

Her pain was getting harder to bear, and she was given bigger doses of morphine to alleviate it. It got so she seemed to be living only for her next shot. My Uncle Tip bought her a watch so she would know the moment she could safely receive another shot of morphine. When she was home she was very frail. She was in pain, ran fevers and was constantly nauseous. She stayed in her bed most of the time, unable to get warm.

I received my class ring that spring. She had wanted me to have it, and was so happy when I showed it to her. It is one of my most prized possessions not for what it means to me, but for what it had meant to her. She knew by then she wouldn’t see me graduate. The ring was a promise that I would, that I would be okay, that I would make something of myself. The joy on her face the day I showed it to her is something I’ll never forget.

My dad got sick that May. He was in his late sixties, and the strain of my mother’s illness seemed to accelerate his aging, made him appear frail. He was diagnosed with prostate cancer, and had surgery in the hospital in Anderson. Darline and I started shuttling between hospitals each day. We were in my dad’s hospital room when his blood pressure dropped suddenly, and hospital staff came rushing
into the room and put blocks under the foot of his bed to elevate his feet above his heart. It was a frightening moment for poor Darline, and for me, too. We could take nothing for granted.

My mom came home before my dad did. I asked a family friend, Miss Ledford, to watch her while Darline and I were in Anderson with dad. Miss Ledford’s ride picked her up before we got home one evening. We found my mom alone and delirious with fever. I tried my best to comfort her. She was in tremendous pain, and wanted to return to the Greenville hospital. I didn’t want her to go. I didn’t think she would come back. “Mama, please, let’s not go to the doctor,” I selfishly pleaded. But she did. She had to.

She received only palliative care after that. Her fight was nearly over. She was moved from Greenville Memorial to Greenville General, an older hospital. The family kept a constant vigil. One of her siblings brought my aged grandmother in to see her. She knew then what was at hand. “Oh, God,” she said, “I’m going to die.” I stayed with her round the clock, sleeping in a chair in her room at night.

Because my dad couldn’t be there, I assumed his role in discussions with her doctors and nurses, and in decisions about her care. I wanted more done to try to save her life. I thought there must be an experimental treatment she could try, anything that might help her continue to fight. I viewed her cancer as a problem, and all problems have solutions. That’s what I believed at twenty, anyway. I was looking for a way to fix it. But we were past that now. She was past it.

One afternoon, a doctor shooed us out of her room so he could examine her. My aunts Sis, Verna Mae, and Nell were there. So were Zell and Mildred, and Gail and Darline. The doctor came out of her room and informed us, “I’m sorry, she’s gone.” Everyone gasped. Sis fainted. I tore into the room in disbelief, scooped her up in my arms and pleaded with her to come back to us. And she did. She revived. She lived another week or so, but she was ready for death. She talked about heaven, and told me, “Lindsey, let me go.”
I asked Gail to take Darline home that day, and I thought she should stay home from then on. It was hard to witness what was happening to our mother, too hard, I reasoned, for a child to bear.

Someone had fetched my dad from Anderson to convalesce at home, and on the afternoon of June 9, I drove home from Greenville Hospital to meet him. The first thing he asked me was, “How’s Mama?” “She’s fighting really hard,” I told him, “as hard as she can.” A few minutes later, Hollis called from the hospital, and told me to return. “She’s slipping away,” he explained.

I owned an old Ford Maverick at the time, and I hadn’t noticed when I started speeding toward Greenville that it was nearly out of gas. I had forgotten my wallet, too. When I realized my predicament, I started praying, asking God to not let me run out of gas. He answered my prayer. I reached the hospital burning fumes.

When I entered my mom’s room she was convulsing. The doctor ordered adrenaline and she came out of it. She opened her eyes, drew a big breath and said, “I’m okay.” Then she squeezed my hand. Moments later the seizures started again. She received another adrenaline shot and again they subsided. When she opened her eyes for the second time, I was fighting tears. “Okay,” I told her, “let go. We’ll be fine. Let go.” She smiled at me, and died five minutes later.

I stayed alone with her for a while, still holding her hand and talking to her. When I left the hospital my Uncle Hollis followed me to a gas station and paid for my gas. The engine sputtered and died as I pulled the car up to the pump. Then I went home to break the news to my poor dad and little sister.

We all took it hard. I woke my dad up, and told him, “Mama died.” I could see the vitality drain right out of him. He was heartbroken and stayed heartbroken. He tried hard for Darline and me to be the dad he had always been, but he never really recovered from the loss of my mother. We told Darline together. I had to help my dad stay on his feet, he was sobbing so hard. I was crying though still able to talk. We weren’t much help to Darline, but we tried. Gail was there, thank
goodness. Darline’s twelfth birthday was just three days later, June 12, so I scheduled the funeral for the 11th, two days after my mom died. Darline wouldn’t have much of a birthday, but at least she wouldn’t share the day with her mother’s funeral. Gail got her a cake and made sure we had a present for her. The party was subdued and our emotions were still raw, but we didn’t let the occasion pass without notice.

Family and friends filled the house in the days before and after my mom’s funeral. I spent many of those hours in my room. I didn’t feel like talking to anyone except my dad and Darline, and I often pulled them into the room with me. I wanted to talk about mama with them. “She’s still with us,” I repeated many times, reassuring myself, I suspect, as much as them. When I wasn’t mourning in my room, I tried to stay busy. I remember cleaning the carpets in the house because I knew my mom would want them cleaned if company were coming. I lost control of my emotions during the funeral and graveside service. I had a hard, hard time accepting that she had truly departed. She was so dear to me.

But life carries us on; our sorrows and dreams seem to hang in rough balance. I went back to school at the end of August, and graduated that December, a semester early, though not early enough, sadly, for my mom to be there. I didn’t attend the graduation ceremony. It wouldn’t have felt right without my mom there.

I was commissioned an officer in the Air Force that day. Darline and my dad pinned my Second Lieutenant’s bars on me. I had known for a while I wouldn’t be trained as a pilot because of my hearing problem. Now, my plan B, law school, wasn’t looking promising either. I had fought another losing battle with standardized testing. My LSAT scores were as poor as my SATs had been, and USC’s law school had rejected my application. The Air Force had agreed to let me postpone my active duty service until after I graduated from law school, after which I would serve in the Judge Advocate General Corps. There were jobs in the Air Force I could have had other
than flying and lawyering, but none that interested me. Now, with my failure to gain admission to law school, my future as an Air Force officer seemed doubtful.

My family was a more important concern than deciding how I would spend four years in the Air Force. I worried that my dad was in such poor health he couldn’t look after my little sister as well as she needed to be cared for. I continued going home every weekend that semester. I called home regularly, too, usually on Wednesday nights, but often more than once a week. I remember one call when Darline answered the phone. She told me she was home alone and wasn’t sure where Daddy was. It turned out to be nothing. He was off running an errand. But I had been worried, and called my aunt and uncle to have them come sit with Darline. I often pressed Darline to tell me if “Daddy isn’t doing alright.” I was very apprehensive, and I didn’t want to be separated from them by too much distance. I needed to make certain they were okay and in the event something happened to be able to get home quickly.

I thought I would have to renege on my commitment, but Colonel Sercer was typically helpful. I told him I intended to enroll in a Master of Public Administration program at USC, and reapply to law school. I had to remain in the area because of my family situation, I explained, so, regrettably, I would need to ask for a hardship discharge. He encouraged me to stay in ROTC, and assured me he would work something out with the Air Force, and he did. The Air Force put off my active duty commitment to accommodate my graduate studies, and Colonel Sercer was confident that whatever happened after that, whether I studied law or served on active duty, would work out fine, too.
I spent the spring and summer after graduation selling pots and pans door to door in Columbia and the surrounding area, and working in the liquor store for my dad on the weekends. I stayed as close to home as possible. It was difficult carrying on without my mom. In her quiet, unassuming way, she had been the family's main strength and caregiver, and all three of us lost some of our sense of well being when we lost her. My dad assumed the roles of provider and homemaker. I looked out for Darline. I tried to be attentive to the concerns of a twelve year old girl to the extent a twenty-one year old brother could understand those concerns. It wasn’t ideal, obviously, but we managed well enough. Yet, I couldn’t escape feeling uneasy. Our situation seemed fragile to me, and I had a sense that our troubles weren’t over.

I knew what had happened the moment I saw my Aunt Sis. I was attending an afternoon class early in my first semester of graduate school. Someone handed the professor a note. He read it, and told me a relative was here to see me. I went to where Sis and my cousin Elaine were waiting.
“Is he dead?” I asked. “Yes,” she answered. I broke down on the spot, and started knocking my forehead against the wall, beside myself in grief.

Darline had gotten herself ready for school that morning. Usually daddy woke up first, but not that morning. She wasn’t worried. She thought he must have shut off the alarm clock and fallen back asleep. He always got out of bed in time to drive her and her two friends to middle school. She made her breakfast and started ironing her school clothes. When her two friends called the house to say they were on their way, she told them she wasn’t dressed and that daddy wasn’t up yet. “You better hurry up,” one of them remarked, “We’ll be late.”

Darline remembers after she hung up the phone having the sense my dad was calling out to her. It wasn’t an audible sound, she said, but his voice registered in her mind. “Baby,” she felt him call. Baby was his name for her. A little while later, her friends were at the door. She still wasn’t dressed. “Why aren’t you ready,” one of them asked. “Daddy still isn’t up,” she answered. “Well, you better go wake him,” they told her.

She said the walk from the bedroom door to his bed felt like a two mile journey. She knew something was very wrong as soon as she entered his room. Everything felt so still. He was lying on his side, facing away from her. “Daddy, wake up,” she called as she approached the bed. She shook him by the shoulder, and he didn’t stir. Then she rolled him on his back. He was unresponsive. He wasn’t cold and still had color, but she knew he was dead. She started pounding on his chest, crying, “Daddy, wake up, wake up.” Her friends begged her to stop. “He’s dead,” they sobbed. Then they called their mother, who called for an ambulance. Darline called my Aunt Mildred’s house. My cousin, Rainey, answered. “Daddy’s dead,” she told him, “Who is this?” he asked not recognizing her voice in her distress. Rainey also called for an ambulance, and the police, and within minutes the house started to fill with paramedics, police and relatives. Dr. Hunter arrived, too, and pronounced my father dead. He had had a massive heart attack, mercifully, while he slept so he would not have experienced pain or fear in his last moments.
Starting from Top clockwise: Lindsey's mother working behind the bar at Sanitary Cafe. Darline with “Buckwheat,” who was a regular patron, 1968. Lindsey with his cousin Marlene and Aunt Nell, 1958.
Dr. Hunter thoughtfully took Darline aside, and explained to her that if she were blaming herself for not checking on daddy sooner, she should stop. She wasn’t in any way responsible for what had happened. “Your daddy has been coming to see me for years with heart problems,” he told her. “And if I had been right here by his side, I couldn’t have saved him.”

The drive home from Columbia with my Sis and Elaine seemed to last an eternity. All I could think about was how upset Darline must be. When Sis pulled her car up to the house, I jumped out before it came to a stop. The house was filled with relatives, and Darline was curled in a ball on the living room couch. When I came through the door, she jumped up and ran into my arms. She clutched me tightly as she said over and over, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” “It’s not your fault,” I told her, and tried to reassure her with promises I would repeat many times in the days ahead. “We’ll be fine. I’ll always need you and you’ll always need me. We’ll take care of each other.” I would never leave her, I promised, “and mom and dad will always be with us, too.”

We made the arrangements for daddy’s funeral. I spent as much time alone with Darline as I could. I cleaned the carpet again. I worried about what we were going to do, and I tried to get accustomed to the idea that we were orphans, and that I would have to be a parent to my sister.

After the funeral, I told Darline I had decided to stay home. I planned to quit school, get a hardship discharge from the Air Force and run the liquor store. We would continue living in the house. Darline, only thirteen and her whole world turned upside down, was quick to say no to the idea. She insisted our parents wouldn’t have wanted that. So we decided she would stay in Seneca with Verna Mae and Hollis while I was in school. I would live with them, too, on the weekends and during breaks. Verna Mae said our mother had asked her to take care of us if something happened to her and daddy. They were very kind to us, as were all our aunts and uncles and cousins. Once again, our extended family did all they could to ease our troubles and help us get through them.

I’ve been fortunate to have friends who were always there for me when I needed them the most. I’ve known Billy Ray Strickland since we were undergraduates, and we roomed together in grad
school. He and his family were so kind and supportive after my dad passed. I’m not sure how I would have managed without them. We became lifelong friends. He’s a school superintendent today, and his son was the backup quarterback on Carolina’s football team.

While Darline and I relied on the support of our relatives and friends, the bond between us was stronger than any other family connection. We had been close before our parents died. Their loss brought us even closer. It was clear to everyone that I was Darline’s guardian. No one had reason to think it should be otherwise. If Darline needed permission for an activity at school or a night out with friends she asked me. When she wanted advice or was worried about something, she came to me. When she needed spending money, I provided it. I could be strict. In Darline’s telling I was too strict. I imposed a curfew when she was in high school, and enforced it. If I thought she was associating with kids who might get in trouble, I said so, and urged her to make other friends. She knew if I smelled tobacco or beer on her breath, I would ground her. Most of all, I made sure she knew every day that I would always care about her and protect her. Like our mother and father, I expected her to live a purposeful and happy life. We were orphans. But our parents had given us all the love we needed before they died, and the right example to emulate to make successes of our lives. We both wanted to live up to those expectations.

I went back to Columbia and resumed my studies a couple weeks after my dad’s funeral. I came home every Friday or earlier if I could manage it. Uncle Hollis ran the liquor store during the week, and I took over on the weekends. Our parents’ insurance had not covered a considerable portion of my mom’s medical expenses. We had inherited debts to doctors and hospitals. I sold the bar and rented out our house. We weren’t living in it and we needed the income. The liquor store’s business started to fall off, too, and I was forced to get a loan from the bank to keep it running. I had to grow up a little quicker than I might otherwise have done to accommodate these sudden responsibilities. But we made it through the tough times with the support of generous and loving relatives, and avoided feeling desperate or overwhelmed. As an orphaned minor,
Darline received a small Social Security check every month, which helped a lot. But a couple times, fearing insolvency, I resolved again to quit school and the Air Force and go to work full time. No one in the family would let me, least of all Darline. So we just kept plugging along until time and effort carried us from our troubles.
To the surprise of my high school friends, I had become a pretty good student. I made the dean’s list the semester my mother was dying. I was doing well in graduate school even though I was only biding my time until I learned whether I would be admitted to law school. I had one conspicuous failure that year, my old nemesis, the Law School Admissions Test. I did a little better than I had the previous year, but not much. My LSAT scores were still lower than the average for students accepted at Carolina’s law school.

My standing as an undergraduate and graduate student indicated I had potential or at least that I wasn’t stupid or lazy. The admissions director for the law school, a retired Navy veteran, called me in to see him. He wanted to help me, he said. The law school had recently instituted a summer program for marginal applicants, the Summer Pre-Admission Trial, commonly referred to by its unfortunate acronym, SPAT. It was rumored a prominent politician’s son had been rejected by the school, and there had been hell to pay. So the administration devised a summer program, a
rigorous one, which would give applicants who possessed not quite sufficient qualifications an additional opportunity to earn admission while weeding out those who really didn’t belong there. SPAT students who maintained at least a 2.0 average in three courses taught over the summer, Criminal Law, Domestic Relations, and Agency and Partnership, would be admitted as a first year law student in the fall. Any student who received lower than a C in any of the classes would be denied admission without exception. He offered me a spot in SPAT. I accepted it, and withdrew from the MPA program.

The classes were difficult and the exams were as challenging as any given in the first year of law school. The program seemed designed to chase off all but the most committed prospective law student. There were about a hundred kids enrolled in the program that summer. I don’t know if more than a third of them made it through.

It was a summer of hell, and I can’t say I enjoyed it much. But I was relieved to discover I had an aptitude for the law, and I applied myself to the task as I never had before. Our first Criminal Law exam was especially challenging. Afterwards, the professor called me into the office. I feared the worst. I thought I had failed it, and would be packing my bags for home that afternoon. As it turned out, the professor had been unable to decipher my bad handwriting, and asked me to read my answers to him. I passed. Another student, a confident fellow, had gotten an A on the exam. A few days later, he and I and a few others were speculating about who would be admitted and who wouldn’t. “Well, I’m in,” he said dismissively, “that’s a given.” It wasn’t. He fell below a 2.0 in one of the other courses, and was rejected.

I still went home every weekend to work in the liquor store and look after Darline, making the two hour drive in my yellow and black Maverick. But for the first time in my life, my studies occupied more of my time and energy than sports or my social life or any other pursuit. And as hard as my classes were, I knew I had found an occupation I would enjoy and be good at. Something in my upbringing had shaped me into a natural trial lawyer. I suspect those early days
in the bar, drawing attention to myself and keeping folks entertained, had something to do with preparing me for the profession.

I met Warren Mowry that summer. We sat next to each other in class and have been friends ever since. Warren is from Aiken, South Carolina horse country, where polo matches and foxhunts give the place a genteel reputation. Warren liked to remind me what a hick I was back then, “real country in his white T shirt and Chuck Taylors.” He also says I was “already talking like a lawyer, getting people to see things his way.”

Warren and I started an intramural basketball team. I was a trash talker in those days. I never said anything too mean, but every so often I’d make a guy mad enough to want to hit me. They didn’t get so mad that they wanted to hit Warren, though, who at 6’5 was usually the biggest kid on the court. I counted on him to step between me and whomever I riled up. One of the opposing players whose skin I once managed to get under was a future governor of the state. More than one of my law school contemporaries became governor, and I won’t name this particular one. We get along fine now. I recall the incident only to suggest that however limited I was as an athlete, I was above average in the psychological part of the game.

The SPAT program ended and Warren and I went to our homes to wait to hear from the law school admissions office. We were both accepted and received the news the same day, but neither of us wanted to mention it to the other in case he hadn’t been as fortunate. We were talking on the phone about everything other than law school, when finally, after hemming and hawing, Warren told me he got in. So did I, I told him.

We ended up sharing a succession of rented apartments, each more disorderly and unsanitary than the previous one, through all three years in law school. We weren’t very tidy, Warren and I, and our reputation for being slobs was widespread. One of the more popular stories about our deficient housekeeping concerned the girl I was going out with at the time, Debbie. She was seated next to me in our living room one night, on a beat up couch we had purchased at a second
hand store. When we got up to leave for our date, I noticed that a peanut butter sandwich that either Warren or I had let fall between the cushions was now stuck to Debbie’s posterior. Several friends who were there noticed it as well, and made sure to circulate the story all over campus.

The Air Force had granted me another academic deferment until I completed law school. Had I not been admitted into the school, I would have likely been headed to a job in a missile silo in Minot, North Dakota, not an attractive billet from my point of view. Now, I would be an Air Force JAG lawyer. I worked hard to become a good one.

I enjoyed law school. It was one of the best social times of my life. My class was divided into three sections, and was much smaller than my undergraduate class. You got to know just about everyone in your section. I made many new friends. In addition to Warren, one of my closest friends in law school was Lee Jedziniak. Lee is from Connecticut and a graduate of the Citadel. He was great company, and played on our intramural basketball teams. He roomed with Warren and me our last year there. Tommy Bright and Les Shayne were also good friends and basketball teammates. We’re all still close friends.

Don Hocker was one of my best friends in law school. He was an older student, married and very focused on getting his law degree. He became one of my study partners and his focus and discipline had a positive affect on my study habits. I doubt I would have done as well as I did in law school without the influence of Don’s example and encouragement. He’s a state court judge today, proving again the importance of good study habits.

Robbie Wilcox, the smartest guy in our class, was another source of encouragement I relied on. He’s the dean of Carolina’s law school today.

I liked my classes too, and found most of the subjects interesting. I was anxious to do well. In the beginning, I briefly experienced a return of the fear of failure I had suffered my freshman year. But I realized quickly I wasn’t going to flunk out, and my studies weren’t going to be so demanding
that they deprived me of an active social life. I was in the top 15% of my class. I even made the
school’s honor society, the Order of Wig and Robe. I had good grades and a good time, and I knew
early on I was going to be a pretty good lawyer. I was starting to get interested in politics, too.
I interned a few semesters for the South Carolina Senate’s General Committee, making a little
pocket money, as well as friends and acquaintances in the capitol, who would be there years later
when I served in the statehouse.

There’s something about the law, particularly trial lawyering, which appealed to me right away.
People assume lawyers with a natural aptitude for the profession must have an especially logical
mind, the kind of people who can do the New York Times crossword puzzle in thirty minutes.
Well, I couldn’t do that puzzle in thirty years using a dictionary. And if proficiency in math is the
sign of a logical mind, then you can safely assume I’m no Mr. Spock.

Here’s what I am good at, though, and what I liked from the beginning about the law. I like
telling a story. I like pulling together a fact pattern. I like deciding which witnesses to call and
in what order. I liked figuring out how much to disclose in an opening statement, mindful never
to reveal something I couldn’t prove, and what to spring on the jury later. I liked working with
witnesses and deciding what they should mention in direct examination, and what to save for
cross-examination, when it might have a greater impact on the jury. I liked injecting a little drama
into the simplest things, like the introduction of evidence, for instance. I won’t just hand an
exhibit over to the clerk, I’ll rummage through my files. “Oh, here it is,” I announce as I retrieve
the item, “Exhibit 21B,” in a voice that suggests an important discovery.

Conducting a trial is like staging a play, and you’re the writer, director and principal actor. I was
born to do it. Two Columbia attorneys, one a defense lawyer and the other a prosecutor, taught
the mock trial course at Carolina. They both told me I had a gift for trial law. My JAG school
instructor, Charlie Dunlap, who serves on the faculty of Duke University Law School, told me
the same thing during my eight week JAG training. So did my superiors in the JAG Corps. I was
a natural, they said, and if I applied myself, I could be very good at the job. It’s a heck of a thing to know when you’re young that you have talent for something that interests you. You feel pretty good about yourself.

But whenever I started feeling good about my situation and my prospects, I thought about home, and started feeling guilty. It never failed. If I did well on an exam or in a mock trial; if I stayed in Columbia for the weekend to go to a ballgame; if I had a good time at a party; I would suddenly stop enjoying myself. I would think of Darline trying to make her way in the world without our parents. She had a home, and a brother and an extended family that loved her. But it’s hard for a thirteen year old to make sense of things and keep her balance when she’s lost the two people she most depended on to show her how to do it.

I’d think about Verna Mae and Hollis, childless their entire marriage, suddenly raising someone else’s child. We turned their lives upside down. Having a safe, loving home for Darline was a relief to both of us. Hollis and Verna Mae stood up and helped two young people at a scary time in our lives. I don’t know what we would have done if they hadn’t. I don’t know what people do when they don’t have a family like ours, when they don’t have aunts and uncles and cousins who don’t need to be asked for help. They’re just there when you need them. I’m sure there are a lot of self-made people in this world. I’m not one. I’m the beneficiary of the love and care of dozens of people who supported me, looked after me, cared about me in good and bad times. My parents, my sister, my aunts and uncles and cousins, my friends, they made me. Or at least they deserve the credit for whatever good I’ve done. I’ll take the blame for the rest.

I would think about the liquor store. It was failing. We weren’t moving inventory quickly enough, and that’s fatal for a small retail business. When you’re not moving some stock you don’t have the funds to replenish the stock that is selling. I’d come home and see empty shelves. My dad had always kept it well stocked and immaculate, and I’d feel lousy that I couldn’t. I’m sure the strain on Hollis, a kind, well-meaning, soft-spoken gentleman, must have been awful.
Top: Lindsey with former law partners Tim Cain, Jerry Fedder and Larry Brandt. Bottom: Lindsey with law school classmates Warren Mowry (left) and Cy Rush (right).
I had to take out loans, a few thousand dollars at a time, from a local banker who lent to us with just my signature on the loan and not much collateral. My Aunt Nell, bless her, also loaned us money to keep the store going. I borrowed money from friends, too. We paid everyone back eventually, but the business was on a downward spiral that we couldn’t reverse.

I was stressed out about it. I can’t imagine how worried Hollis must have been. It wasn’t a complete disaster. Income from the store helped pay for law school. But it was a constant, nagging worry, and would continue to be until I sold the place.

So, however glad I felt in a moment, however pleased with myself I was, I could never savor it. I started feeling I was shirking my responsibilities, and not being as good to my family as they were to me. Then I’d be miserable, and wish I were home. I’ll always remember what it’s like to feel guilty about feeling good. The experience made me understand what people go through when they have responsibilities thrust at them at a young age.

I did go home most weekends. I worked in the store to give Hollis a break, enjoyed being fussed over by Verna Mae, and spent time with Darline, who went through a rough patch in high school. Hard to imagine how it could have been otherwise with all that had happened. But it didn’t last long and she never got into serious trouble. She was a good kid. She couldn’t have been anything less considering the loving parents who had set a moral example for her, and the loving family she still had to support her. It wasn’t one-way support, either. I helped her get through tragedy. And she helped me. I would never have made it without her. She was strong. I knew how badly she missed our parents, and the security and comfort of our lost home life. I could see she was relieved to see me every time I came home. But she always assured me she was fine, and that I should spend more weekends in Columbia enjoying myself.

I wouldn’t sell the liquor store until the late 1980s, long after I graduated from law school. It was still a source of constant worry as I prepared for the bar exam in the summer of 1981. I was in my last months of law school when Darline started struggling a little. She started her senior year
of high school in the fall of ’81, and was applying to colleges. I was feeling especially guilty about
my absences from home. After the bar exam, I was expected to begin four years of active duty
by attending JAG school at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama. The course lasts
eight weeks. I had no idea where the Air Force would send me after that. But the thought of being
separated from home by great distances and for long periods of time worried me.

I was indebted to the Air Force. It had been very considerate of my family’s circumstances. Every
officer in a position to help me had done so. I wasn’t a scholarship ROTC cadet, but the Air Force
had kept its commitments to me, and I wanted to discharge my obligation to it. And I liked being
in the Air Force. I was proud to be an officer, proud to wear the uniform. A stint working in the
legal office at Shaw Air Force Base in Sumter, South Carolina the summer between my second and
third year had given me a taste of military law, and I had enjoyed it.

But after assessing my family situation — the state of the business and Darline’s struggles – I
decided I couldn’t leave South Carolina. I contacted Lieutenant Colonel Don Rasher, who was
in charge of making personnel assignments. I told him it was my intention to seek a hardship
discharge. Don knew my story before I contacted him. He had been paying attention to me since
my first year in law school. He knew my parents had died. He knew I was responsible for my sister.
He knew I was helping run a family business that wasn’t doing well.

I told him sheepishly, “As sorry as I was to let the Air Force down, I can’t see how I can leave my
sister right now.”

“I’ll support a hardship discharge if that’s what you really want,” he responded. “But don’t make
a decision today. Talk to your family, and think about it. I think you’d be making a mistake to
leave.” He said he would see to it that I was assigned to the legal office at Shaw, which was about
an hour’s drive from Columbia and little more than a three hour drive from home. The Judge
Advocate General, Major General Tom Bruton, would have to sign off on the appointment, but
Colonel Rasher felt certain he would. “We can make this work,” he assured me.

I drove home and talked with Darline, Hollis and Verna Mae. They had expected I would serve my active duty commitment, and had always assured me they would manage just fine in my absence. But I wanted to read their expressions when I told them I might leave the Air Force and practice law locally. If they appeared relieved at the prospect, I think I would have proceeded in that direction. But that wasn’t the case. They said they wanted me to stay in the Air Force, and they were happy I would be posted to Shaw.

I made an honest assessment of our financial situation. It wasn’t great, but the increase in pay I would receive with my promotion to captain would help. A captain’s pay is roughly equivalent to the salary I would earn as a first year associate at a local law firm. The benefits I would receive in the Air Force, especially health insurance, were another item on the positive side of the ledger. Darline was entitled to share them as my dependent. It gave me peace of mind to know that if something happened to me, the Air Force would help take care of her.

I think by then I had probably known I would have to sell the business, although I wouldn’t move forward on the decision for several years. We were still paying off my parents’ medical bills. And there were the costs of Darline’s college education to consider. In addition to the tiny income the store could provide and the money I could contribute from my Air Force pay, we would need grants and loans to the cover all her expenses.

I talked to my friends, too, who advised me to stay in the Air Force. Lee Jedziniak was going to clerk for a judge in Columbia after we passed the bar. He and I discussed buying a house on the outskirts of Columbia toward Sumter as an investment, rather than continue to throw our money away on rent. Of course, mortgage interest rates were in the double digits in 1981, and the investment proved to be an unprofitable one. But being able to stay in Columbia and drive to Shaw every day, and drive home when I needed to was probably the final deciding factor in favor of staying in the Air Force.
Once I made the decision, I felt tremendously relieved. I would worry about the business until when we sold it. Darline was never far from my mind either, and I often felt I should be home. But my guilt wasn’t as heavy as it had been during law school, and it didn’t overwhelm the satisfaction I got from serving in the military and from the work.

In fact, the first half of that summer proved to be as relaxing a time as I had had in years. We took a prep course for the bar exam that started at ten every weekday morning and finished at two in the afternoon, after which Lee, Warren and I would play golf or basketball or just goof off. I took the exam in July, and passed. I left for Maxwell a few days later.

During the eight weeks I studied military law at JAG school, it was clear I was best suited to courtroom work. Charlie Dunlap wasn’t the only instructor who made that assessment. Several others told me I needed to be a trial lawyer. But I spent most of my first year in the legal office at Shaw working outside the courtroom. That isn’t unusual for new associates in private practice, who usually don’t see the inside of a courtroom for two or three years while they learn their craft. But things move a lot quicker for military lawyers, many of who don’t make careers in the service.

I mainly worked on preparing administrative discharges. When officers or enlisted service members at Shaw got in enough trouble that the Air Force wanted to kick them out, I was responsible for putting together the brief that substantiated the misconduct and identified grounds for whichever type of discharge the Air Force was seeking. These were all strictly administrative actions. None of the subjects opted for a court martial, which in most cases would likely have resulted in more serious punishment. It wasn’t exactly joyful work. You can’t take pleasure in someone else’s misfortune. But it was interesting and useful, as most of the guys I helped out the door needed to go.

I did pretty well at it. The chief reason for that was that I had had the good sense to get in the good graces of the people who actually run the armed services – the NCOs. I became friends with the staff sergeant who ran the legal office, Dan Garza. Dan was a first rate NCO. He had, in military
parlance, command presence. He looked like he belonged on a recruiting poster. I had an in with him. He had served in Vietnam with Larry Brandt, a lawyer from Walhalla, whom I had clerked for the summer after my first year in law school. Larry and I would end up being law partners after I finished my active duty obligation. He put in a good word with Dan, and I was in business.

Everyone in the military knows NCOs are the heart and soul of the armed services. They can have huge influence not just with enlisted personnel serving under them, but on the careers and lives of the young officers to whom they ostensibly report. If you were a young officer who got on the wrong side of your sergeant, your life was made miserable. Dan had taken a dislike to another captain in our office, and that poor guy couldn’t catch a break. He couldn’t even get supply to give him a pair of boots that fit him. But for young officers who were mentored by a senior NCO, things usually went very smoothly. Your sergeant can make your work a lot easier and make you look good. They make sure your boss — in my case, the Staff Judge Advocate at Shaw, Lt. Colonel Nick Grebeldinger — knows you’re doing a good job. They make the whole experience a lot more enjoyable than it would be if they ignored or disliked you.

Dan and I got along from the jump. He and his wife invited me to their home when I had to spend weekends at the base. They have a beautiful family, and made me feel a part of it. They fed me home-cooked meals, introduced me to their friends, and made sure I was getting along okay. Dan also made sure I learned my job well. He wasn’t a lawyer, but he taught me how to be a better one.
had been at Shaw for about half a year, and preparing administrative discharges had become routine, when a case came across my desk that turned out to be anything but typical. It would lead to my involvement in similar cases, one of which, it’s no exaggeration to claim, would change my life.

On May 26, 1981, a Marine Corps EA-6B “Prowler” attempted a landing on the USS Nimitz, an aircraft carrier cruising the Atlantic off the coast of Florida. The pilot missed on his first approach, and the aircraft was low on fuel as it approached a second time. He landed it too far to the right side of the flight deck, smashed into a parked helicopter, struck six other aircraft, three of which were armed with missiles, and ruptured fuel tanks, before finally coming to a stop. Jet fuel spilled onto the deck, munitions cooked off and the inferno raged for a half hour before it was contained. But not before it had killed fourteen of the crew and injured forty-five others, many of them seriously.

Autopsies performed on six of the victims found traces of marijuana in their blood. Assertions that drug use had played some role in the catastrophe and the ensuing media attention stirred the
Defense Department to launch a zero tolerance drug policy for the military. The new policy was outlined in a memorandum issued the following December by then Deputy Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci. It included random mandatory urinalysis tests for all the armed services. What the Air Force, officers and enlisted alike, called the “golden flow” began. Hundreds of thousands of jars containing urine specimens started leaving bases all around the world en route to a single laboratory for analysis.

That laboratory was located at Brooks Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. It was part of the Epidemiology Section of the medical facilities at the base, which was under the command of an Air Force Colonel. The lab was responsible for testing all specimens provided by Air Force personnel in the continental U.S, and conducted tests for the Army as well. It used a gas chromatography (GC) protocol to detect traces of THC by its molecular weight developed by two scientists at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in Washington, D.C., Army Colonel William Manders, and a civil service chemist, John Whiting. The two had designed the protocol to monitor patients in drug rehabilitation programs. They had not intended it to be used in judicial or administrative proceedings to determine the guilt of a drug offender. Nevertheless, the colonel in command convinced the Air Force Surgeon General that his lab, using gas chromatography, could handle the urinalysis for the entire service. That was an immense undertaking. Over twenty thousand specimens were sent to Brooks for analysis every month. And, as events would soon prove, that big of a job was far beyond the capabilities of a single laboratory.

The Air Force relied on Article 15s, non-judicial punishment, to get rid of service members who tested positive for drug use rather than going to the trouble and expense of a court martial. Typically, the accused was offered an administrative separation other than an honorable discharge, which usually included the loss of pay and benefits. He or she could refuse the Article 15 and demand a court martial. But not many did. As a result of the institution of mandatory urinalysis, there were about two thousand more administrative separations for drug use in the Air Force in 1982 than
there had been the year before. Throughout all the armed services, the number had nearly doubled.

Since I was the guy working administrative discharges at Shaw, I had to make the case for discharging anyone at the base who had tested positive for drug use. My first such case in 1982 was a young lieutenant from one of the squadrons. I was preparing the discharge package for him. Even though non-judicial punishment was the plan, I always thought it was best to prepare as if you were taking the case to trial. The lieutenant hadn’t yet agreed to an Article 15. It was my responsibility to make certain the evidence against him could withstand challenge. So, I flew to Brooks to satisfy myself that the case was sound, and all the rules of evidence had been observed, especially those concerning chain of custody.

Alas, the rules had not been scrupulously followed. In fact, it appeared no one at the lab had the slightest idea what the rules were or that anything they did would later be examined in a court of law. The place was a mess. The stench of urine was overwhelming. Scores of mailbags stuffed with ziplock bags containing full urine cups were piled everywhere. Urine was leaking out of the cups and bags. I asked for the chain of custody for my lieutenant’s specimen. I was given the date it was received, but when I asked for the name of the person who received it, I got blank stares in response. I didn’t get answers to other questions either, such as when was it tested, who handled it after it was received, where the sample was located now. It was a disaster. The lab wasn’t big enough, its personnel weren’t experienced enough and its methods weren’t accurate enough to handle a tenth of the specimens it was responsible for analyzing.

When I got back to Shaw, I informed my superiors and defense counsel for the accused of my discovery. Not everyone was pleased to hear about it. But when the defense counsel informed the legal office his client was tired of the Air Force and would agree to resign if he received an honorable discharge, I advised my superiors to take the deal. “There’s no way we can prove a case against him,” I argued. They dropped the Article 15, and gave him an honorable discharge. For all
I knew, the guy had earned it. He was certainly entitled to have the case against him dismissed given the gross mishandling of the evidence against him.

A few months later, I was made the area defense counselor, which is the equivalent of a public defender for the base. It was an early promotion. I hadn’t been at Shaw a full year yet. I took it as a sign my work preparing discharges had made a favorable impression on my superiors.

One of my first clients as a defense counsel was a tech sergeant with nineteen years of service. His urine had tested positive for marijuana use, and the Air Force wanted him to accept a general discharge as part of an Article 15. He was a year from retirement, and a discharge would cost him his pension and other benefits.

His wife started to cry when they met me the first time. I was in my mid-twenties but I looked like I was twelve. I knew what she was thinking: Oh my God, they gave us a kid for a lawyer. I smiled at her, and said, “If it helps any, I’m free.” I told them I’d help them find a more senior lawyer if that’s what they wanted. But I had some experience with this kind of case, and thought I could probably do well by them. “Let’s see how it goes,” the sergeant suggested. I could tell he wasn’t entirely convinced I was the right guy, but we soon developed a good relationship.

No one in his unit believed he used marijuana. He seemed like such a straight arrow. I met with his squadron commander, a fighter pilot with a career on the fast track. He didn’t believe it was possible. “Everybody loves the guy,” he told me. He was the squadron’s life support NCO. He packed the pilots’ parachutes, took care of their helmets, made sure their oxygen systems were working. He was totally trustworthy. “Our lives depend on him,” his commander told me. “I’m not going to do it,” he continued. “I’m not giving him an Article 15.”

My client wasn’t going to accept an Article 15 either. He wasn’t going to surrender his career, his pension and his reputation. He wanted his day in court. When I informed my superiors my client would refuse the Article 15, they were annoyed, and pushed me to reconsider. “You don’t want a
court martial,” they said, their tone strongly implying that in the new zero tolerance environment they would throw the book at him should he choose a court martial. It wouldn’t be good for me either, they hinted. “Do what you’ve got to do,” I told them. “If you guys insist on going ahead, we’re going to want a court martial.”

They took the authority for issuing the Article 15 from my client’s squadron commander and gave it to a higher command. That was a bold move. It’s pretty irregular to go over the head of a popular commander, and give his authority for managing discipline in his squadron to someone else.

I went to see Lieutenant General Pete Piotrowski, the commanding officer of the 9th Air Force Wing. I explained what I had discovered at Brooks, and said, “Sir, the system’s definitely not working.” He took it all in, and said I seemed sincere. He assured me that the system, meaning the military judicial system, was designed to protect good guys. He said he would issue the Article 15. I replied by saying my client would refuse it. “Fair enough,” he responded, “we’ll have a court martial then.” He wished me and my client good luck, sincerely I think, and we shook hands.

I called Colonel Bob Reed, who was in charge of Air Force defense counsels in the south, and explained the case to him. I told him the Air Force’s procedures for identifying drug use were badly flawed and their results wouldn’t hold water in any court of law. I told him my client’s squadron commander had refused to issue the Article 15, and the legal office had the wing commander do it. “A B.S. move,” I complained. Bob counseled me on how to proceed, and assured me he would back me up.

I made requests for information from the Brooks lab related to the evidence chain of custody, the oversight and efficacy of the testing procedures, and other matters. They either couldn’t or wouldn’t supply the answers. I also wanted to interview Colonel Manders and Dr. Whiting to establish whether they believed the technique they invented was reliably accurate.

The Armed Forces Institute of Pathology (AFIP) was located on the campus of the old Walter Reed Medical Center. I called several times for an appointment, and was refused. I knew I was
being stalled in the expectation I would give up trying to meet with them. I later found out that AFIP’s lawyers were directing the two scientists not to meet with me. I managed to speak by phone with Manders and Whiting before I flew to Washington. They were cautious, but they gave me the impression they had concerns about how their protocol was being used.

I arrived in Washington the day before Thanksgiving, and parked myself on the Institute’s front steps when they wouldn’t let me in the building. I let it be known I was prepared to sit there all day and all weekend if necessary. I wasn’t leaving without seeing the people I had come to interview. “I am an Air Force officer exercising his authority to investigate a matter central to the case against my client,” I said, “and I’m not taking no for an answer.” I called Bob Reed when they wouldn’t let me into the building. He said he would come up and sit with me, and told me to tell the legal affairs people we would get a court order to compel Manders and Whiting to talk to me. Around three o’clock that afternoon, after sitting outside for several hours, I was shown into their office. An AFIP lawyer tried to sit in on the meeting. “No, you’re not,” I told him and showed him the door.

I could tell the scientists were apprehensive. They were reserved in manner and speech early in our discussion. But it wasn’t too long before they started spilling the beans. I had the feeling they had been bothered for a while about what was going on at Brooks. It was clear they didn’t trust the colonel in charge of the Brooks lab. They thought he was trying to make general by cleaning up the Air Force’s drug problem on his own, and had put his lab in an impossible position.

The point they were most insistent about, however, was that their gas chromatography protocol should not have been used as the sole determinant of whether someone was using drugs. A positive result didn’t prove with certainty the presence of THC. Chemicals with a similar molecular weight as THC could produce a false positive. GC was a screening test and not reliable enough to prosecute or discharge someone after one finding. Another technique for identifying chemicals, mass spectrometry, should have been used as well, they said, for the analysis to be
reliably accurate. A mass spec gives you a molecular fingerprint, not just a weight, a forensically sounder approach.

The more they explained their concerns, the more emphatic they were that the Brooks lab was doing the Air Force and all service members who had tested positive for drugs a disservice. I scribbled notes as fast as I could write. When they had finished, I told them I was going to prepare an affidavit for them to sign detailing the concerns they had just stated. They should change it anyway they wished to make certain it accurately represented their views. I wrote it. They read it over and signed it without changing a line.

All hell broke loose after that. The Air Force Surgeon General’s office went into full CYA mode, frantically trying to protect the reputation of the Brooks lab, upon which the service’s entire program for drug use detection and adjudication depended. At times, it seemed they had the entire Defense Department legal infrastructure defending the lab and attacking my witnesses and client. I had only my boss and me pushing back, and Manders and Whiting, bless them. Their consciences were liberated, and they weren’t going to be easy to shut up after that, although folks in the Surgeon General’s sure tried to shut them up. They immediately attempted to marginalize them, saying they didn’t speak for the Air Force or the AFIP, where Manders had worked for twenty-five years. They further alleged that despite having invented the protocol used at Brooks, Manders and Whiting didn’t represent the majority opinion of the scientific community about its reliability.

Manders and Whiting were well respected scientists, recognized experts in their field. They were honest and conscientious. That usually counts for a lot in the military. Not in this instance, unfortunately. Manders would eventually be transferred to McChord Air Force Base in the state of Washington, and assigned a job appropriate for an officer of lower rank.

Despite the frantic dissembling and badmouthing of my witnesses, the Air Force knew it would have to drop the case against my client. They couldn’t put a chain of custody together. They knew Manders and Whiting would be credible witnesses in a court martial. Of course, there would be
no admission that anything was wrong with the system. The charges were just dropped, and I had a friend for life in my sergeant and his wife.

After the case was dismissed, I started hearing from defense attorneys for other accused drug offenders, who requested I join the defense team. I now had a reputation for being an expert on urinalysis. I spent several months in Florida helping out on a couple of cases, one at Homestead and the other at Pearson Air Force Base. I brought Darline with me on the trip to Homestead. We drove through Jacksonville and spent the night at the Navy base there. The next day we went to Disney World. We took in the sites on the weekends. We visited the Keys, went on a day cruise and tried to make the most of our time together.

I went back to Brooks several times, and found the same chain of custody problems and general lack of quality control at the lab. I asked to interview every person at the lab who had handled my clients’ samples, more than two dozen individuals. I also brought Manders and Whiting down to Florida, and intended to call them as witnesses. The Colonel in charge of the lab dismissed the objections of Manders and Whiting because, he said, the two scientists had a personal problem with his lab for using their protocol without their supervision. He accused me of being disruptive, which I certainly was.

I stayed in the visiting officers quarters at Brooks, and one afternoon two armed MPs knocked on the door of my room and produced a barment letter informing me I had until six o’clock to vacate my room and get off the base.

“Seriously?” I asked. “I’m an officer, following lawful orders. I’m staying.”

“Sir, you need to leave the base by six o’clock.”

“Where am I gonna go?”

“Sir, I don’t know, but you gotta leave.”
I called Bob Reed, and explained the situation to him. He asked me if I had been drinking. I assured him I hadn't. “I've been barred from the base.”

“Barred?” he repeated. “They can't bar you from the base. You're doing your job.”

“Well, I got two guys with guns holding a barment letter, and they seem to think they can kick me out of here.”

I had the letter faxed to Reed, who was livid. The other defense counsels vacated their quarters in solidarity with me. So, too, did the prosecution team. After Bob called the Judge Advocate General on my behalf, someone informed the two MPs that we were all to be quartered at the La Quinta Inn near the River Walk. “Sir, We have a room for you downtown,” they told me. I had been sharing a bathroom for a couple days with pilots who had been drinking all night after coming off the line. Now I had a room with its own bathroom in a decent hotel in the nicest part of town. When I got to the room, I called Bob again and asked him not to push to get me back into quarters on the base. “Let’s just see how things play out,” I recommended. I stayed in that hotel for at least a month.

The Air Force dropped the cases against my clients. The prosecutors knew we would have won an acquittal, and that there was a serious problem with the Brooks lab. The problem would soon be even clearer, and would force the Air Force to examine its entire program for identifying illicit drug use and adjudicating offenders.

In August 1983, the Brooks lab tested a urine sample provided by Captain Edward Pearson, a B-52 pilot in the Strategic Air Command at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana. It reported finding traces of THC. The Air Force prepared to discharge Captain Pearson from the service. Pearson refused the Article 15, hired a civilian lawyer, Woodrow Nesbitt, and insisted on a court martial. Then they called me.

While they were assembling their defense, Pearson and Nesbitt saw news coverage of the drug
cases I had defended. I had gained a reputation for blowing up drug test results. Nesbitt hadn’t much experience with this kind of case, and so they asked me to join the team. I flew to Barksdale to meet them, and was instantly impressed with my new client. Pearson is my age, but that’s where the similarities end. He was a graduate of the Air Force Academy, an Eagle Scout from a small town in Mississippi, a SAC pilot trusted with nuclear weapons, and planning on a long career in the Air Force. He had an exemplary record, and his fitness reports hinted at the likelihood that he would be promoted to a major command some day.

He had practically volunteered for the test. His squadron had learned the previous week that they would be required to give samples the following weekend. Pearson was on alert that weekend, practicing take offs and landings, and staying on base. He might have been able to get out of supplying a sample, but he didn’t bother to try. Neither was he too concerned when he learned he had tested positive for marijuana use. He assumed it was a mix up that the Air Force would soon straighten out. Instead, he was threatened with a court martial, the loss of all pay and benefits and two years imprisonment if he didn’t accept an Article 15. That didn’t seem to scare him though. Nor me. I assumed the charges against him were another screw up by the Brooks lab.

The first order of business was to ask for a re-test. Word came back from the lab that his sample had been lost. A little while later, we received word that his sample had been found. Then the lab notified us that a re-test had been completed using mass spectrometry, and a THC fingerprint had been detected. I consulted with Manders and Whiting, who were suspicious of the finding, and identified several ways the result might be flawed. They advised me to have an independent test performed. But when I asked that the rest of Pearson’s sample be sent to another lab for testing, I was told there was nothing left of it. Then lab personnel said they had found the sample but couldn’t produce the cup it had come in, the one with Pearson’s name written on it. All of this was highly improbable and probably improper. Subjects are asked to provide a full cup of urine because of contingencies like this one, when several tests might need to be done. Part of the
Another case was unraveling. I knew it, and I headed for San Antonio to push it along.

I contacted the chemist in charge of quality control at the lab, Joe Whitson, and he had quite a story to tell. He had run tests on samples from drug free control groups that produced false positives. He had tested a sample from the C.O., and it, too, came back positive. Whitson described the lax standards and professional misconduct that permeated the culture in the lab. It would have been comical if people’s reputations and careers weren’t being harmed. Technicians had routinely warmed tacos in the ovens used to dry the glass slides that held the urine specimens during testing. Grease from the tacos would stick to the slides and interfere with test results. It was a mess.

Whitson disclosed something even more important. He told me he had prepared a lengthy quality control report, documenting in detail the history of false positives at the lab. He called it his “out-of-control file.” When his superiors at the lab read his report, they told him he couldn’t submit it. When he refused to change it, they put someone else in his job. But Whitson had kept a copy of the report, and he gave it to me. I felt as if I had landed in an episode of Perry Mason.

The military judge presiding over the case, Lt. Colonel Barton “Black Bart” Spillman, issued an order that same day instructing that I be given access to the drug lab and to witnesses I needed to interview. The commanding colonel or someone else in authority assigned an enlisted guy to follow me around and monitor my actions. It wasn’t much later that I began hearing rumors of people at the lab destroying evidence of false positives.

In a preliminary hearing in April 1984, Major Carter LeFon, who was in charge of confirmation testing at the lab, testified they had numerous findings of false positives in tests conducted from late 1982 to the early 1983. An Army panel headed by Major General David Einsel was authorized to review military drug testing labs. The panel reported that while it found no evidence of personnel being discharged for what turned out to be false positives at Brooks, inadequate chain of custody
procedures rendered thousands of results scientifically and legally unusable. It was speculated that a thousand discharges might be reversed.

In May 1984, a task force of Air Force chemists and lawyers examined over thirty thousand positive urinalysis returns at Brooks between April 1982 and October 1983. They found almost seven thousand of them to be scientifically and legally deficient.

In June 1984, the charges against Captain Pearson were dropped. In a subsequent dismissed drug case, the senior officers at the Brooks drug lab were judged guilty of denying evidence to the defense and exercising command influence.

The Air Force Times and the Associated Press reported about the case. So did CBS’s 60 Minutes after the fact. Diane Sawyer anchored the piece. Captain Pearson and Woody Nesbitt were interviewed. So was I. I was pretty nervous about that. But I thought I owed it to my client and to other service members mistakenly identified as drug users to help make public the failings of the Brooks lab. I worried that some of my superiors might not look favorably on a young officer airing the service’s dirty laundry on a highly rated TV show. Bob Reed supported the idea, and went to bat for me up the chain of command. And so, with some apprehension, I made my debut appearance on a national news program.

I said in the 60 Minutes piece that the Air Force couldn’t admit it had made a mistake. But things did change. As Diane Sawyer observed, labs were shut down, systems reorganized. In an updated piece aired sometime later, 60 Minutes reported that Board of Corrections records for thousands of servicemen and women were set aside. Discharges were changed. Good people were let back into the service.

The Air Force couldn’t admit a mistake, but it took steps to correct one just the same. Drug testing protocols were changed to use mass spectrometry as Manders and Whiting had advised. Those protocols are still in place and working well today. In the battle between Defense Department
lawyers and the Air Force Surgeon General’s office on one side and the JAG defense counsels on the other, we had prevailed. Military justice had, for the most part, prevailed.

Most of the people involved in adjudicating the Pearson case and my previous drug cases had acted honorably, in the interests of justice. Prosecutors dropped cases when they realized the extent of the problems at Brooks, and pushed for charges against those who tried to hide those problems. They showed great character, as did Bart Spillman and other distinguished military jurists who presided over the trials of wrongfully accused service members.

No system is perfect, but these were instances when wrongdoing was exposed, and David defeated the bureaucratic Goliath. It strengthened my conviction that military courts could represent the interests of justice as faithfully as civilian courts could. Many good people in the military justice system as well as people who worked in the military’s medical and scientific communities — Manders, Whiting, Joe Whitson and others — risked their careers to do the right thing, to speak truth to power. They taught me you must be willing to risk your self-interest to tell the truth and serve justice.

The victory was a costly and incomplete one for Captain Pearson, an exemplary officer and patriot. Even though the charges against him were dropped, he was not returned to flying status. His wing commander observed at the time that he was a substantiated drug user. He was ordered to enter a drug rehab program. He worked non-flying jobs for a while, and then left the Air Force, a promising career ended, valuable service to the country lost, and an injustice left uncorrected.

He has lived a useful life since. He went to the University of Mississippi Law School, passed the bar, joined the Mississippi Air National Guard, rose to the rank of Colonel and served as a judge on the Mississippi Court of Military Appeals. He became an Assistant U.S. Attorney. He’s dedicated his life to serving the interests of justice, and helping spare others from the kind of wrong that was done to him.
My time as a defense counsel at Shaw Air Force Base was coming to a close. I would be given a new assignment. The Air Force had to decide what to do with me now that I had gained a measure of notoriety. Some people expected the Air Force to punish me for upsetting the service’s drug policies, and thought my next assignment wouldn’t be an appealing one. I didn’t think that would be the case. I talked with Major John Martinez, who was then in charge of personnel assignments. He told me the Air Force wanted to show it rewarded successful defense counsels, no matter how much trouble they had caused.

He offered to find a job for me close to home if that were what I wanted. But he hoped, and, he added, the Judge Advocate General, Major General Bruton hoped, I would agree to be a circuit
trial counsel in Germany, one of four Air Force prosecutors for all the service’s installations in Europe. Three of the prosecutors are headquartered at Rhein-Main Air Base near Frankfurt, and the other is at Lakenheath in England. It was the best job a JAG captain could have. I enjoyed it so much I would spend four years there, extending my tour twice.

Darline was twenty when I left for Germany, and beginning her junior year in college. I wouldn’t have agreed to the assignment had she not assured me she would be fine. We had a long talk about it when the job was first offered to me. I offered to take her with me to Germany. I thought we could find a school in Europe where she could continue her education. She said she would rather stay in South Carolina, and urged me go and not worry about her. I would worry. That couldn’t be helped. But she had been through tougher experiences than being separated from me. We made plans for her to visit me in Germany, and I called John Martinez to tell him I would take the assignment.

Before I went overseas, I filled out insurance and survivor benefit forms, designating Darline as the beneficiary. I discovered the payouts were less generous to siblings than they were to surviving children. I mentioned the fact to my boss at the time, who suggested I adopt Darline. I didn’t know if I could legally adopt her, and he wasn’t sure either. I was still working in the legal office at Shaw, and had another serviceman at the base proposed such an idea, it would have come to me for review. Since I couldn’t review my own case, I hired a civilian lawyer to ask a judge whether I could adopt my sibling. The judge at first said he didn’t know if I could. He had never issued a ruling on the question. My lawyer said he had never represented anyone asking the question. So a precedent was set when the judge ultimately ruled in my favor, at least in the state of South Carolina, that an older sibling could adopt their younger sister or brother.

Some time later, a young airman approached me for legal advice. His parents had both died, and he wanted to know if he could adopt his little brother. “Buddy, have I got a deal for you,” I told him. “Are you a resident of South Carolina?” I asked. “No, sir,” he replied. “Well, you’re going to be,” I informed him.
It was a fascinating time to be in Europe. It was the last gasp of the Cold War, and a time of considerable political turmoil and violence. President Reagan’s policies would prove to be the final push against the Soviets. We were helping the Afghan resistance fight the Soviet occupiers. NATO was preparing to deploy to Europe Pershing IIs and ground launched cruise missiles, and the nuclear freeze movement was in full voice. Protests outside U.S. air bases were a routine and in some places an almost daily occurrence. Reagan visited Normandy my first year in Europe, for the 40th anniversary of the D-Day landings.

Konstantin Chernenko was General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party in 1984, the last of three Soviet bosses to die in the first half of the decade. Mikhail Gorbachev came to power early in 1985. The first summit between Reagan and his Soviet counterpart was held in Geneva that year. Their second meeting was held in Reykjavik, Iceland the following year, where arms control negotiations between the two leaders seriously broached the zero option that envisioned no nukes in Europe, and deep cuts in both sides’ strategic arsenals before foundering on what proved to be Reagan’s visionary commitment to strategic arms defense.

Terrorist attacks in Europe were frequent occurrences, some of them the handiwork of Western European nihilists and others attributable to Middle Eastern groups and state sponsors. We were conducting a court martial at nearby Ramstein air base with the Honorable Judge Richard Rothenburg presiding, when an offshoot of the Baader-Meinhof gang detonated a car bomb in the headquarters parking lot at Rhein-Main, near the legal department. Two Americans were killed, and twenty others, American and German, were injured. Judge Rothenburg, an excellent jurist and a fine man, had brought his family to Rhein-Main. I still remember the ashen look on his face when we were informed of the attack.

One of my closest friends in Europe was Pete Carey, the chief defense counsel for the Mediterranean region. Pete was assigned to Hellenikon, the U.S. Air Force Base in Athens. He had booked a seat on a TWA flight leaving Athens the morning of June 14, 1985. It was TWA flight 847, hijacked by
Hezbollah terrorists, who murdered a passenger, U.S. Navy diver Robert Stethem. Pete had changed his plans and left Athens a day earlier. You never knew what might happen in Europe in those days.

In April 1986, terrorists planted a bomb in a West Berlin disco, popular with American servicemen and women stationed in Germany. Two Americans were killed, and scores seriously injured. Western intelligence intercepts of communications between Tripoli and Libya’s embassy in East Berlin exposed Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi’s culpability in the attack. I was working a court martial at Lakenheath in England around the time when F-111s from the 48th Tactical Fighter Wing took part in an air assault on targets in Tripoli and Benghazi in retaliation for the disco bombing. After the raid, someone on the base gave me a t-shirt that read: “Libya, Lakenheath is bombing your ass.” I lost the t-shirt somewhere in my subsequent travels, to my great regret. It was my favorite article of clothing.

That wasn’t my only exposure to the conflict Qaddafi was stupidly engaged in with the U.S. I was working a court martial in 1986 at an Air Force intelligence station on the island of Crete, when the Libyan leader threatened missile strikes against NATO installations in southern Europe. He did launch missiles at American bases located on an Italian island, but Crete was assumed to be a likely target as well. All U.S. military on the island were temporarily restricted from traveling. My case was finished, and my colleagues and I were scheduled to return to Rhein-Main. Instead, I called our boss to let him know military flights had been grounded and we were stuck on the island indefinitely. We spent five days on pretty relaxed duty with nothing to do other than hang out on the beach and spend our nights in bars. It was a fun place. Each day we went to the base’s operations center to find out if the travel ban had been lifted, praying that it hadn’t. When we learned we would be “stuck” there another day, we went back to our recreation. The island appeared to be a favorite vacation spot for Norwegians. There were hundreds of them there. We got to know a few of them. Most of them had arrived on Crete very pale and drunk and went home burned to a crisp and drunk.
All members of the trial judiciary at Rhein-Main shared an office in a Quonset hut at the end of the runway, three prosecutors, three defense counsels, and three judges. I got to work with some of the best people I’ve ever known, a great group of lawyers and judges. The chief judge was Colonel Bryan Hawley, a terrific guy with a lovely wife, who later became Judge Advocate General. A senior prosecutor, who became a good friend, Captain Mike Johnson, took time to show me the ropes. He was a meticulous lawyer and a good man. Today, he’s a senior partner at King and Spalding in Atlanta, one of the largest law firms in the country.

My first boss in Germany was Major Michael O’Loughlin, a larger than life character and one of the most skilled trial lawyers I’ve seen in action. Like me, Mike had an affinity for pool. During a break from trial work, Mike and I decided to take an afternoon off at the Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) facility, which housed the base pool hall. We shot pool for hours, enjoying ourselves immensely. The next morning a senior officer summoned Mike to his office, and informed him an airman had complained about a major and a captain who were shooting pool at the MWR rather than doing their job. “I want this airman’s name,” Mike demanded without skipping a beat. “What the hell was he doing in a pool hall in the afternoon?” Mike has since passed away. He was a dear friend, and I miss him.

My next boss was Major Marty Jayne, an Air Force Academy graduate and an outstanding prosecutor, who looked more like a Marine than an Air Force officer. He was very squared away in military bearing and appearance, in other words, everything I was not.

Mitch Ettinger was the prosecutor assigned to England, and an incredibly talented lawyer and gifted athlete. We worked several cases together, and became good friends. Mitch went into private practice after he left the Air Force. As fate would have it, he practiced law at Skadden Arps with Bob Bennett and represented President Clinton in the Paula Jones case. He’s still practicing law at the highest levels in Washington, and making a lot of money, I hope.
Miguel Pereira was the chief defense counsel at Rhein-Main. A Vietnam veteran from Puerto Rico, he regaled us with endless, colorful tales of old San Juan and he was an imposing figure in the courtroom. Miguel had been a rescue helicopter pilot in Vietnam, and was shot down in 1972 just twenty miles from Hanoi. He was wounded in the incident, and part of his right forearm was shot away. He received a Silver Star for his heroism and a Purple Heart for his wound, and he always wore short sleeves during a trial, no matter how cold the courtroom was, so the jury could see that defense counsel was a warrior. He worked for the Justice Department after he left the Air Force, and as a district attorney. In 2012, he was elected to the Puerto Rico Senate.

A lot of us were quartered off base. A couple of my colleagues and I rented a house in the little town of Walldorf a few miles from the base, and were practically adopted by its citizens. I shared meals in excellent company in the homes of welcoming locals, where I developed affinity for the food and the people.

I liked Germany. But we were a traveling road show, like circuit riders in the 19th century. There were twenty-six active air bases and stations in Europe at the time. I flew to most of them, usually on a C-141 although once in a while we were allowed to take commercial flights. One week I’d work a trial in Italy and the next week I’d be in Turkey or Greece or England or Spain. I traveled about everywhere in Western Europe in my four years overseas, and I enjoyed every bit of it.

I had several trials at Incirlik in Turkey, and often visited Istanbul, a fascinating and exciting city. It was also a city that exuded a palpable tenseness. Turkey was under martial law in those years. There had been a coup in 1980. Human rights abuses were rampant. I had to call a couple Turkish cops as witnesses in one court martial, and in other trials I had witnesses who were residing in Turkish jails at the time. So I had experience with Turkey’s prison system, enough to know it isn’t an experience you ever want to have for any length of time. It was a bad, dark world in those days, even in some countries aligned with the West.
Spain was my favorite place to visit. I found the country and the people strikingly beautiful. I was always thrilled when I was assigned a court martial at Torrejon, the NATO air base near Madrid. I treasured every pleasant night I spent in Madrid’s bars and cafes.

I tried several cases in Berlin at Tempelhof air base. One of the espionage trials I prosecuted was held in what was once Hermann Goering’s private dining room. The Luftwaffe had been headquartered at Tempelhof. The place was so enormous it struck me as more dance hall than dining room. It had a balcony where an orchestra had played as Goering dined. On another occasion, the base commander let the judge and me take a helicopter ride along the Berlin Wall. Looking at the tank traps and other barriers to a NATO invasion drove home how precariously the Cold War had avoided escalating into a shooting war that both sides were prepared to fight. And all the impediments to human liberty that the Wall symbolically and literally imposed drove home how essential the success of the West was to the progress of humanity.

Several times when I worked in Berlin, my colleagues and I crossed through Checkpoint Charlie into East Berlin. We were allowed to do that as military officers for one of the four signatories to the 1971 Berlin Agreement, which governed communications and travel between East and West Berlin. We had to be in uniform and we had to return by midnight. We liked to go because it was interesting, and just as important to modestly paid captains and majors, you could spend a whole night in East Berlin trying to spend twenty dollars. We visited department stores that might boast a few interesting items in their windows priced very reasonably, but once you entered you would find very few things of interest for sale.

We always had dinner at the Hotel Stadt, which had a rotating dining room at the top of the hotel. It was the city’s showcase restaurant, and the only place that catered to foreign visitors. Americans were fairly scarce there, however, and we were objects of considerable interest to the Russians that frequented it, as well as the Vietnamese and North Koreans military officers we often saw there. The waiters loved us. We tipped. They hated the Russians, who didn’t. Once, a
North Korean general, inebriated and in a friendly mood, joined our table without an invitation and attempted some awkward small talk in English. “Don’t you agree American culture is dying?” he asked at one point. “I guess it’s not as strong as North Korea’s,” I answered, which, owing to his negligible appreciation for irony, the North Korean took as a sincere admission.

Under the Berlin Agreement we were free to visit East Berlin whenever we wished and we were not supposed to acquiesce to the authority of East German security officials. That was the theory anyway. I was in a car with four or five JAG officers on our way back to Checkpoint Charlie when three East German police officers signaled us to stop. The driver, a defense counsel, followed procedure and kept driving. “We’re not supposed to recognize them,” she reminded us. “Well, I’ll recognize them,” I countered. “There are three guys pointing machine guns at us. Stop the car.” She did. It turned out they didn’t want to arrest or interrogate or ship us off to a gulag. They wanted to let us know we had a headlight out.

Much of the time I was in Europe, I felt the strain of the years after my parents’ deaths had lifted somewhat, though it hadn’t vanished. The failing family business was still a worry. And though she still struggled, Darline had come through harder times and was making her way in the world. Should something have happened to me, she would receive benefits that would help pay for her college and provide for herself. Most days, even when I was busy with work, I had a general feeling of being liberated from heavy responsibilities.

It was in many respects the most carefree time in my life. I was in my twenties, a kid from a mill town in South Carolina, living in an exciting moment in history, traveling to cities that seemed unbelievably exotic to me. I had two serious relationships while I was overseas. I went out with Carol, an Air Force JAG officer working in England, for several months. She was a great lawyer and an even better person and we had a blast together. But tours of duty end and people move on. Such is life in the military. Carol returned to the States, got married, raised a family, and served on Colin Powell’s staff.
One of my roommates, Jim Marlow, a defense counsel, was dating a local girl. She introduced me to her roommate, Sylvia, a Lufthansa flight attendant. The relationship became serious quickly. At one point, I thought I would propose, or at least I entertained the idea. It wasn’t to be, though. She was responsible for an aging mother in Vienna, and I was South Carolina boy, who needed to go home. We stayed in touch for a while after we parted. Before we lost touch, she had married a doctor and was doing quite well, a good move on her part. Jim ended up marrying his girl and leaving the Air Force. He and his wife still live in Germany.

In addition to the definite upgrade my social life experienced, my trial work in Europe was as fascinating as anything I’ve ever done. I was prosecuting the most difficult felony cases. Lawyers from the legal office at whichever base the trial was located assisted me as part of their training. But I led the prosecution in each court martial I worked.

Some of the crimes were awful. An air base is a small town, and like every town, many kinds of people live there, and some of them are capable of some very bad things. I tried murder cases, rape cases, drug cases, and espionage cases. I prosecuted child abusers. One of my more memorable prosecutions was a child abuse case at Torrejon. An airman was accused of breaking his young son’s leg. He testified that the injury had been caused by accident. I tore him apart on cross-examination, and exposed him for the S.O.B. he was. Years later I learned my cross in that case had been used in JAG school as an example of how to handle a lying witness on the stand.

I tried rape cases that still bother me, including the prosecution of several GIs who had gang raped a young German girl. She was just destroyed by it. I learned how much unexpected courage from a deep and hidden place it takes for a rape victim or sexually abused child to testify against their assailants. Trying to get a scared, confused, little kid or a young woman who feels the best part of her life is over to recall a memory that their every psychological impulse is trying to suppress is not something you forget. It has stayed with me ever since. Victims often see the prosecuting attorney as their last hope for something that approaches justice, something that might make
their situation less unbearable. Sometimes I saw a victim look at me with a mix of curiosity and confusion, as if they had just realized I was all they had to help redress the terrible wrong that threatened to destroy them. There are few greater responsibilities, and they can weigh a lot.

Not every moment I spent in courtrooms was solemn and heartbreaking even though most of the crimes I prosecuted were serious ones. Some incidents were downright entertaining. They usually involved translators. I had a case in which an airman was accused of murdering a Pakistani immigrant in Frankfurt. One of the witnesses spoke Urdu and German but not English. I had to find a translator who could speak all three languages. There weren’t many available, but we finally found a guy both the defense and prosecution agreed to use, a local Pakistani who had never translated before but spoke passable English and German.

I wanted to ask a witness a couple questions. The first was the color of a car that was used in the crime. The witness didn’t speak English so I instructed the translator to ask him. He said something in Urdu. The witness responded in Urdu. Then the translator spoke again, then the witness. They went back and forth a few times before the translator turned to me and answered, “red.” I started laughing. “What else did he say,” I asked, noting that he seemed to have offered more than a one word response. “Nothing,” he said, waving his hand to dismiss the question. “Nothing?” I repeated. “He was telling me he thinks his cousin knows my cousin.” Trying not to laugh, I admonished him to “please, just translate what I tell you to.”

On another occasion, one of our regular German translators became ill during a trial, and we pressed the base commander’s assistant, a nice German lady, into service. The witness was a Frankfurt cop, who knew English, but was too nervous to use it. I asked our volunteer translator to ask him what time he had arrived at the crime scene. She turned to him and asked, “what time did you get there?” in English. He answered, “ten” also in English. Everyone in the courtroom, the judge, defense counsel, jury, erupted in laughter, and laughed harder when I told the translator I didn’t need her to translate my southern accent for the witness.
My trial work brought me to some pretty strange places. We were preparing a heavily publicized court martial of two airmen who were involved with a Nigerian drug gang in Frankfurt. Several Frankfurt Polizei officers were going to testify, and I spent a lot of time with them in advance of the trial. They took me to Frankfurt’s guest worker ghetto, inhabited mostly by Turks and Nigerians. One night they stopped and questioned a guy, who suddenly drew a knife and slashed at one of the cops, who grabbed the assailant, handcuffed him to a fence and before you could count to ten beat him senseless.

I had a fraternization case involving airmen from an elephant cage near Brindisi, a not particularly appealing city in southern Italy. An elephant cage is an underground listening station manned by the Air Force Security Service, so called for the telltale circle of antennae above the bunker that resemble the bars of a large, empty cage. Kids with high IQs were below ground listening to phone calls in East Berlin, Budapest and Prague, and other East European capitals. They worked long shifts, all day or all night, over many days. It could get a little weird down there. No sunlight, not much natural stimuli, nothing but humming machines, pasty-faced kids with headsets, eavesdropping on thousands of intercepted phone conversations.

Some of those kids would go a little crazy when they had a couple days leave, and I prosecuted a few of them for the mayhem they caused. At Brindisi, I was allowed to listen to a couple intercepted calls. I couldn’t understand the language spoken, but I was amazed at how clear the conversation was, as if it were going on in the room next door. I nodded as I listened, and noticed some of the kids were nodding with me, and smiling, as if they were sharing their secret lives. I knew I would likely end up prosecuting a few of them the next time they went off the rails on a weekend pass in Naples.

I was good at getting defendants to plead guilty, and when they refused, I was good at winning convictions. It’s much easier being a prosecutor than a defense counsel. I lost one prominent case, a manslaughter trial in England that ended in an acquittal. Some airmen had been drinking
all night, and were walking along a cliff when one of them fell over it. Investigators believed the fall was the result of horseplay that ended in tragedy. The Air Force wanted to send a message that there was responsibility and punishment for misconduct even if the crime was unintended. But it was a hard case to prove.

I knew if I stayed in the Air Force I could have a successful career. I liked the work, and liked living in Europe. I asked Jack Rives to extend my tour twice. Jack was chief of the JAG Corps’ career management division. He was eventually selected the Judge Advocate General. Years later, I served under him again during my reserve duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, Jack is the Executive Director of the American Bar Association, and a friend of thirty years.

I served on active duty two years longer than I had initially planned. Professionally and personally, I was having the time of my life, and I didn’t want to leave. But it was time. I called home every week I was overseas, and returned to South Carolina for the holidays each year. I had hoped for a while that my family situation had stabilized. But things weren’t great there. The liquor store was beyond saving. I was using part of my Air Force salary and still borrowing money to keep it afloat. And now Hollis had reached the end of his rope. Good man though he was, he couldn’t bear the strain of it any longer. I knew I had to sell it. I felt guilty about it. But unless I wanted to make the retail liquor business my career, I had to sell the store for whatever price I could get for it.

Darline was going through a tough time, too. She had left one college, and started at another. I was worried about her, and I missed her. She had come for a two week visit after I had been in Germany for a year. We traveled around Europe, visiting Paris, Vienna, London, and a half dozen other cities. We had a fantastic time, and I cried when she left.

I knew I had found a profession I had a natural talent for and that I loved. I knew I would be able to make a good living after I left the Air Force. I enjoyed Europe. It had certainly broadened my horizons. But South Carolina was where I belonged. I had other ambitions, too, which I was starting to contemplate, and I could only pursue them in South Carolina. I talked to Jack Rives,
and told him I was getting out. He didn’t try seriously to talk me out of it, and was pleased when I told him I planned to stay in the Air Force Reserves.

I initially intended to join the South Carolina Air National Guard station at McEntire Joint National Guard Base near Columbia because it was close to home. There weren’t any vacancies there, so I joined the reserve unit at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in Goldsboro, North Carolina. But as soon as a spot opened at McEntire, I took it. I was recalled to active duty during the Persian Gulf War to brief deploying pilots and crews on the laws of war. I rejoined the Air Force Reserve in 1995, where I serve as a full colonel. I’ll turn sixty this summer. I doubt I’ll feel like celebrating, but the time has come to retire. I will leave the service the end of this month. It has been one of the great honors of my life to serve in the Air Force in some capacity for more than three decades.

Today, I’m a senior advisor to the Air Force Judge Advocate General. Since 2006, I’ve done my annual active duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, where I’ve worked on judicial reform and detainee issues. During these brief reserve tours, I’ve had the privilege of observing our finest patriots serve our country in the most difficult circumstances. I’ve learned much about the military and about patriotism from conversations in chow halls and discussions riding the roads of Iraq and Afghanistan. I’ve also been privileged to work with judges, police, and lawyers in Iraq and Afghanistan work, who risk great danger and sacrifice their lives to transform their countries from rule of gun cultures to rule of law of nations.

I want to tell the story of one individual I met whose service illustrates the dedication to duty and selflessness of Americans serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2007, I was assigned to Colonel Mark Martins, the Command Judge Advocate in Baghdad, who was in charge of the military’s joint legal office there. Mark had graduated from West Point and Harvard Law School. He had served with President Obama on the Harvard Law Review. Mark is a general officer today, and chief prosecutor at Guantanamo. He’s an outstanding officer and attorney, the closest thing to
superman I’ve met in the military.

In April of that year, Mark and I toured the Rusafa Rule of Law Complex, a heavily fortified compound that housed a new courtroom and other legal facilities, a new jail, police training facility and housing for Iraqi judges and their families. The Rusafa District was a very unstable, dangerous neighborhood in those days. The goal was to construct and protect a foothold for the rule of law there, a secure base where judges could administrate justice without fear, detainees couldn’t escape the jail, and police could learn their profession. We visited the place the day before it was to be officially dedicated, and spent several hours meeting with Iraqi judges and police officials. I was impressed. It was the gold standard for Iraqi justice.

A Commander in the Navy Supply Corps, Philip Murphy-Sweet, showed us around the facilities. Phil was in charge of constructing the complex, and he had extended his tour in Iraq to see the project through to completion. He could have gone home, but he put his country before his self-interest.

Phil was immensely and justifiably proud of what he and his team had accomplished. He introduced us to his associates. I remember the members of his security team were mostly contractors, not U.S. military, and were tough looking characters. We spent most of the morning with Phil, and I came away as impressed with him as I was with the project.

Mark and I left the complex that afternoon to visit another facility. That evening, while we were having dinner, Mark received a phone call informing him that Commander Philip Murphy-Sweet had been killed not long after we had parted company. He and his security team had been traveling to a local jail in a three vehicle convoy. Phil had been riding in the middle vehicle, which was hit by an IED not far from the Rusafa Complex. Phil and everyone else in the vehicle died in the blast. He was forty-two years old, a beloved husband and father of three children.
That night I was struck again by the fragility of life. I had been in the company of a man that morning, and he was dead that afternoon. We were in a war zone, and casualties are expected. But what moved me to tears and moved Mark to tears was the image so fresh in our minds of the proud, upbeat, can do Navy commander and patriot, who could have been home with his family, but chose to stay longer in harm’s way so that a people he had not known before might have a chance to live in a society ruled by law rather than the gun. Nothing good happened in Iraq without a terrible price paid.

I attended his funeral at Arlington National Cemetery where full military honors were rendered. I met his incredible wife, Cheryl, their two daughters, Olivia and Lauren, and son, Seth. Cheryl showed me his last email to her, sent just before he died, mentioning our visit and how proud he was of the project. Later, they held a memorial service for Phil in Baghdad. Cheryl sent a letter that was read aloud, assuring her husband’s comrades that she and her children would be okay, and how proud they were of Phil’s and their service. Phil had died serving his country, doing what he loved, she reminded them. Her concern was now for Americans still serving there. Mark was at the service, and he told me every single person attending had been in tears as they listened to Cheryl’s letter.

While doing reserve duty in Afghanistan during the July 4th break in 2014, General Joseph Dunford, who commanded U.S. forces in Afghanistan, and is the incoming Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, asked me to meet with Major General Harry Greene. Major General Greene was the deputy commander of the international coalition force responsible for training the Afghanistan military. He oversaw the training budget. He was a very creative officer, who worked diligently to make sure our money was well spent and went to the right people. He also had a reputation for going “outside the wire” to inspect training programs we were supporting. That’s the best way to find
out what’s really going on in Afghanistan. Obviously, it’s also the most dangerous way.

General Greene and I had a long lunch together, during which he shared a number of useful ideas for improving the budget. He impressed me very much. He was a knowledgeable, capable and determined officer. As I was leaving lunch, we made plans to have our photograph taken together before I returned to the States. Unfortunately, that never happened.

A few weeks later, an Afghan soldier shot General Greene to death as he toured the National Defense University in Kabul. He was the highest ranking officer killed in action since the Vietnam War. I regret not having our picture taken. It would have been one of my most cherished possessions.

The most important thing I’ve learned from my time in the Air Force is how lucky we are to have such talented, brave men and women defend us. They regularly do more than duty requires to protect us at their peril. My experiences with them will stay with me always.

The Air Force has been one of the best things that ever happened to me. It identified and developed my talent, and helped me become useful to my country. It offered me adventure and showed me the world. It gave me a purpose bigger than myself. It put me in the company of heroes. It’s been almost like a family to me. I’m going to miss it an awful lot.
I had clerked for Larry Brandt in the summer between law school terms. I had been clerking for another lawyer in Seneca, Jerry Fedder. Jerry had me running down titles in the records room at Oconee County courthouse in Walhalla, where I struck up a conversation with Larry while we both waited at the counter. Larry had been an Air Force JAG lawyer, and had served in Vietnam. I told him I was Air Force ROTC. We hit it off, and when I told him Jerry didn’t have enough work to keep me fully occupied, Larry agreed to let me clerk for him as well.

I had stayed in touch with Larry while I was in the Air Force, and he was one of the first people I called when I decided to leave the service. I joined his practice in early 1989. Jerry Fedder was a commissioner on the state workers’ compensation board at the time. He left the commission the following year and returned to private practice, and we merged our practice with his. Larry and I worked out of our Walhalla office. Jerry ran the Seneca office with a young attorney who had recently been assistant county solicitor, Tim Cain. The four of us became great friends. We socialized together outside of the office. We traveled together. Tim and I often went bird hunting together.
Each of us complemented the other’s strengths. Jerry and Tim were better versed in the law than Larry and me. It’s not that we didn’t know the law. We just didn’t know it as well as Jerry and Tim did. We were country lawyers. We were at our best in the courtroom. Larry is a bulldog for his clients. He never quits fighting for them if he believes they have been wronged. His passion and devotion made a lasting impression on me. When Larry and I worked a trial together, we had our own style of good cop/bad cop. Larry would deliberately get a witness agitated, and I would follow up, smoothing things over, trying to get the witness to trust me. “You’re going to like me before this trial is over,” I often promised hostile witnesses.

Jerry is mostly retired now. Tim, to no one’s surprise, is a federal judge, appointed to the bench by President Obama after more than a decade’s service as an exemplary family court judge. Larry is still practicing in Walhalla, still fighting for his clients.

Ours was a small town, rural practice. It was fascinating to me, and quite an adjustment. I had been a military trial lawyer, working with if not inexhaustible resources, enough so that money was never an object. Now, I worked in a practice where money was definitely an object. In a small firm like ours, you worry about making payroll every month. You did the best you could for your clients within the limited resources at your disposal.

Larry gave me most of the firm’s family court cases. I did a lot of divorces in those days, which was quite a change from prosecuting murders and espionage cases in Europe. It wasn’t all I did. I worked felony cases, too. Larry and I did a murder trial together. I also acted as attorney for my hometown, Central. But I spent a lot of time in family court. My clients were rural and small town people like me, and most of them had hard luck stories like mine or worse. When people from humble beginnings and modest means split up the accompanying financial distress can be devastating. A lawyer with a conscience will try to prevent the proceedings from exacerbating an already miserable situation. You want the settlement to be equitable, and, although it’s not always possible, for both parties to feel they had been dealt with fairly.
There's a well-known story in Oconee County about a family court judge who presided over a divorce that was all but settled but for one outstanding issue. The family house had been sold, and the money divided. Same with the funds in the joint bank account. Custody of the children had been arranged to everyone’s satisfaction. But both husband and wife insisted on retaining sole custody of the family dog. They wouldn’t budge no matter how strongly the judge and their own attorneys exhorted them to compromise. Finally, his patience exhausted, the judge instructed each party to stand at opposite ends of the hallway outside the courtroom. He had the bailiff walk the dog to the middle of the hall, and told the couple to start calling it. The dog trotted over to the wife. The judge awarded her custody, and closed the case.

I thought that was a Solomonic decision, the kind of jurisprudence they don’t teach in law school. That judge understood people. He knew what was fair to them, and, just as important, what would seem fair to them. He found a solution that would cut short their misery even while they were intent on extending it. I wanted to be that kind of lawyer, a lawyer who acts in his clients’ best interests even when they don’t, especially when they don’t.

I had one divorce where the couple, like the couple with the dog, had agreed, if not amicably then without much hostility, to child custody arrangements and to the disposition of most of their joint assets except for one particular treasure, the velvet painting of Elvis they had in happier times purchased together at a souvenir shop in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. Neither could bear to part with it. I represented the wife. The husband, a frugal sort, represented himself. We had sold their mobile home, split the proceeds fifty-fifty, and agreed the kids would live with Mom. But we couldn’t get a divorce decree until one of them surrendered Elvis. They were driving me crazy. I drove to Pigeon Forge myself, and found the shop. As luck had it, the velvet Elvis wasn’t one of a kind. I purchased an identical portrait, and gave it to the husband. It was the best money I ever spent.

You learn a lot in family court, a lot about the law and a lot about people. You see a side of life you don’t see elsewhere. Actually, it’s not a side of life. It’s all sides of life. I met all kinds of people
in family court, all kinds of good people and all kinds of bad. Some of the bad were truly awful. And some of the good were living saints. I came in contact with both types when I represented children in family court.

I was a court appointed guardian ad litem for children involved in divorce or adoption cases, and for victims of alleged child abuse. I had prosecuted several child abuse cases in Europe, including sexual abuse. I had considerable experience with that class of crime, but you never get used to it. The trials were always gut wrenching. They stay with you forever, even the cases where you got a conviction or in some way made the victim’s life safer.

It’s hard to believe how prevalent child abuse is in every segment of society, all income levels, all races and ethnicities, among the uneducated and professionals, among religious and nonbelievers. The victims are alike in one respect, though. They’ve lost their natural trust in adults. Where once they saw most adults as benefactors, they now suspect almost everyone of being a predator. That suspicion was even more pronounced if their abuser was their parent.

Many good people had to work selflessly and hard to help these children regain a little of the trust they had lost for the society of adults. And more often than not those selfless, hardworking people were social workers. The people from the Department of Social Services are the finest people I have ever known. They work long hours for modest pay in extremely disturbing circumstances as they bear witness, day in and day out, to the worst wickedness people are capable of and the terrible harm done to the victims. Yet, the social workers I knew were cheerful, can do, gritty types who never lost enthusiasm for their work or their hope they could make a damaged child better. They are going to have a ringside seat in heaven.

I also think being a family court judge is the hardest job in the judiciary. It takes someone with a big heart and a lot of guts to preside over family court for any length of time. They, too, are among the people I most admire in this world.
I’m not sure where it comes from, but I have an ability to make people, including rape victims and abused children, comfortable giving difficult testimony. I can usually get them to trust me. I hope it’s because I convince them I am genuinely their advocate, not just a guy doing a job, but their protector in a frightening world. I also think I could convince them of my sincerity because of the affect they had on my personality.

I had felt kind of sorry for myself since my parents’ death. I don’t know if it was obvious to others, but I resented that my life and Darline’s had been turned upside down when we were young. I wasn’t always sure whom I was angry at. I was angry with God for a while. It wasn’t rational. Many people had stepped up to help Darline and me, and I should have been more grateful. My life had not exactly been one of continuous misery. I had gone to college and law school, where I had good friends and good times. I had lived abroad, where I had interesting and rewarding work. I might have been angry that my folks couldn’t be there to see any of my success. I might have been angry that I had to rely on family and friends as much as I did, that I had had to borrow money to keep the store open, that I had to worry about something other than myself. I don’t know. It wasn’t rational. But it was what I felt, self-pity, not in an incapacitating way, but persistently. I’m embarrassed by it now.

Representing children in family court cured me of that, took me out of myself, made me see the world from the perspective of people who had suffered worse misfortune than I had. It matured me. It strengthened my faith in God. And it wasn’t only seeing the suffering of abused children that had that affect on me. Representing children who were up for adoption helped me grow up, too. Helping put a child in the care of a loving mom and dad, parents they could trust, whom the social workers trusted, helped me appreciate how strong a virtue hope is. I learned how hope can survive almost anything. Even when it seems to have died it might only be waiting for an opportunity to reappear.
The older I got, the more good and bad I saw in the world, the more I appreciated what I had, not what I had lost. I stopped feeling deprived, and started feeling blessed, and confident about my future. Working in family court did that for me. So did meeting Adam Conyers and his family.

Adam’s mom and dad came to see Larry and me not long after we had merged practices with Jerry Fedder. They were nice, salt of the earth, unassuming, uncomplaining, kind-hearted, genuinely good people. From the moment we met them, we wanted to do right by them. We wanted them to have the support they needed. We wanted them to have justice. We felt their lives were in our hands.

Adam Conyers had been an engineering student at Tri County Technical College in Pendleton, South Carolina, about a half hour drive from Seneca. He was a bright and likeable kid with plans to attend Clemson after he graduated from Tri County. He had been out drinking with friends the night of October 9, 1987, and was still under the influence as he drove home to Earl’s Grove. He drove off the road not more than a mile from his house. He wasn’t wearing a seat belt, and when the car flipped over he was thrown through the windshield. His neck was fractured, but his spinal cord wasn’t transected. In other words, the fracture had not caused a complete tear yet.

The EMTs arrived on the scene quickly, and they did everything right. They immobilized him as they were trained to do for someone who might have a cervical spine (c-spine) injury. They carefully put a neck cuff on him. They placed him on a special stretcher, a board used to transport people with spinal trauma. They placed blocks on either side of his head. They evaluated the patient’s condition. They scraped the bottoms of his feet. His toes flared indicating his spinal cord hadn’t been severed. One of the EMTs noticed his leg move slightly. They checked him for priapism, a sustained erection that is caused by severe spinal trauma. He didn’t have one. Their evaluation sheet made clear that when the EMTs attended him Adam Conyers was neurologically intact, and they took every care not to aggravate his injury as they transported him to Oconee Memorial Hospital.
Board certified emergency medicine physicians didn’t staff the emergency room at Oconee Memorial in 1987. Local doctors in private practice worked there. The doctor on duty that day was the director of the ER, a surgeon with a large practice, who had received his medical education and training at prestigious hospitals. He was older, in his late sixties, and had practiced medicine in Seneca for decades. He was from a big local family. Everyone knew him and most folks liked him. Sometimes it seemed as if everyone in the county had been his patient one time or another. He was considered a generous man, who had done a lot of good for the community. He had treated folks who didn’t have insurance and couldn’t afford to pay him. He also had a reputation for being hostile and noticeably rough with patients he suspected were intoxicated, especially if they had been driving.

No one else had been injured when Adam ran off the road. It was a single car accident. But that didn’t seem to affect the care he received when the EMTs wheeled him into the ER.

According to witnesses on the hospital staff and Adam’s mother, the doctor examined Adam for over an hour-and-a-half. He wasn’t responding to questions or saying anything. Whether he kept his silence because he was inebriated or in shock from the accident isn’t known, and it shouldn’t have affected the treatment he received. The standard of care for a patient who is ejected from a car and has likely sustained a neck injury requires that the spine be checked for fractures before anything else. A portable X-ray should have been brought into the ER and used to shoot Adam’s spine from the side before he was moved. His mom asked the doctor if they were going to take an X-ray. He answered he didn’t know what to X-ray since Adam wouldn’t talk to him. Instead, he had Adam taken off the board and placed on a gurney, the blocks that immobilized his head were removed, and a chest X-ray was taken from above that couldn’t detect his injury.

The doctor told Mrs. Conyers they were going to keep Adam overnight. She remembers asking again about X-rays, and the doctor responding by saying something like, ‘He’s just drunk. We’ll
admit him. He'll sleep it off and go home in the morning. Then Adam’s blood pressure suddenly
dropped, which the doctor assumed was caused by internal bleeding. “Let’s sit him up,” he
ordered. He jerked the neck cuff off Adam, placed his hand under his neck while a nurse hooked
him under his arm, and together they pulled him into a seated position.

“Oh, my neck,” Adam cried. He spoke again when they laid him back down. He said he couldn’t
feel his feet. The nurse checked him for priapism, which he had. They scraped his feet. He didn’t
have a reflex reaction. Adam’s spinal cord was severed. He was quadriplegic.

Had professional standards of care been observed — had he been kept immobilized while X-rays
were taken, an informed diagnosis been made and appropriate treatment given — Adam probably
wouldn’t be in a wheelchair today. He wouldn’t require round-the-clock care for the rest of his life.

Over two years had passed since the accident when a friend of the family who knew Larry called
to discuss the case. He asked if Larry would have reservations about suing the hospital and the
popular doctor who ran the ER? “No,” Larry answered.

A few days later, Cecil and Frances Conyers came to see Larry Brandt and me about representing
Adam in a malpractice suit. Though their relatives and friends from church helped out, Adam’s
parents were his primary caregivers. You could see the strain they were under, especially his mom.
She was a quiet, kindly, dignified woman, and a loving mother, if ever there was one. They both
worked, Mrs. Conyers from home because she couldn’t leave Adam alone.

Adam had worked at Duke Power, and had a little health insurance, but the meager disability
component was nearly used up. His folks were in their forties then, but had the look of people
who had aged suddenly because of a disease or other misfortune. They didn’t complain. They
didn’t curse an unkind fate. They didn’t strike me as particularly angry about what had happened.
They were just trying to do what was right for their son.
They drove a two-door car. When they brought Adam to our office, he rode in the front passenger seat, and his mother sat in the backseat with his wheelchair. We watched out the window as she crawled out of the backseat and helped get their son into his wheelchair, husband and wife working through the awkward procedure together, gently, carefully, lovingly.

Larry was the lead lawyer on the case, and he and I did most of the trial work. He’s the most talented and tenacious lawyer I know, and I learned a lot from him. In a case this big the whole firm had to pitch in. Jerry Fedder, one of the best legal minds in the profession, was the overall case manager. Tim was especially helpful in his thorough way, making sure motions we filed and evidence we introduced couldn’t be challenged because of mistakes we made. The statute of limitations would have expired in October 1990. We filed the complaint that summer.

The first thing a trial lawyer has to do is educate himself about the subject matter in contention, which meant we had to become temporary experts in spinal cord trauma. Adam was treated at an outstanding facility in Atlanta, the Shepherd Center for Spinal Cord Injury Rehabilitation. We went there first and then to another hospital specializing in spinal cord injuries, Craig Hospital in Denver, Colorado, to talk to experts in the field. I spent quite a few days in Atlanta over the next year-and-a-half, learning everything I needed to know about neck injuries.

We needed experts to testify to two things primarily. Had Adam’s paralysis occurred at the accident site or in the emergency room? Second, what was the standard of care in ERs for possible spinal cord injuries, and had the standard been breached at Oconee Memorial? We talked at length to the medical director at Shepherd, Dr. David Apple. He had never testified for the plaintiff in a medical malpractice suit. He was so outraged by what had happened to Adam, he agreed to do so for us. We needed him. The other side, the doctor, hospital and the malpractice insurance carrier were hiring eminent experts of their own, and some of the best lawyers in the state to argue that Adam’s paralysis was entirely his fault, and had happened before he reached the emergency room.
at Oconee Memorial. Dr. Apple recommended an emergency room physician from Rochester, New York as our expert witness on the standard of care.

The case didn’t come to trial until the summer of 1992. We were confident but not cocky. We had compelling evidence on our side. We had the testimony of the EMTs, and some of the hospital personnel who had seen what occurred and were appalled. The hospital administration, of course, wasn’t in a cooperative mood. Some folks who reached out to us didn’t want to testify publicly. They had to work with the doctor. But they spoke to us in confidence, pointed us in the right direction. We had faith in our expert witnesses. And we had a compelling story to tell.

They had money and experts on their side. They also had public sentiment, which we worried might affect the jury. The defendant’s popularity caused some folks to blame Adam for his condition without considering or even being aware of evidence of malpractice. Adam had been driving drunk. He had caused the accident. They might have agreed it was a tough break for a kid, but it was no one’s fault but his. That’s what a lot of people thought. They didn’t like us too much either, lawyers going after one of the most respected men in the county.

But a courtroom is where the lowliest victim should find justice and the highest wrongdoer receive just punishment. That’s what makes the law a noble profession, its impartiality and fairness. It doesn’t always work out right. The wealthy have more resources to defend themselves with, the best lawyers, expert witnesses, jury consultants, and more. A poor person can be stuck with a public defender, who lacks the skill or will to mount an effective defense. But justice is always possible if you have the facts on your side, if you have a good story to tell and you can prove it. Justice isn’t delivered by an elite, by experts, by the high and mighty. A jury of your peers decides. Courtrooms are sacred places in a free society, where every citizen stands equal under the law. In the eyes of the law, there wasn’t any difference between Adam Conyers and the doctor he was suing until a jury decided which of them had been wronged.
Adam was a great kid. He had no bitterness. He had been raised right. We talked quite a bit, probably more than Larry and he did. I was closer to his age, and Larry was closer to his parents’ age. He confided in me. He told me that in his dreams he wasn’t hurt, he could still walk and run. Then he would wake up, and let his new reality sink in again. When I praised him for having a positive attitude, he said he was trying to see God’s plan in what happened to him. He was worried about the strain on his parents. He was concerned someone else might be mistreated as he had been. But he wasn’t burning with resentment as I think many people would have been. He knew he was responsible for the accident that put him in the ER. “I screwed up,” he admitted. “But I didn’t deserve this.”

The trial lasted two weeks. Dr. Apple gave testimony based on the EMTs’ evaluation that the probable cause of Adam’s paralysis had not happened at the accident scene. Our expert on emergency room standards of care made clear his paralysis might have been prevented had the ER doctor followed proper procedure for treating possible spine injuries.

The other side had an eminent expert of their own, an orthopedic surgeon from an Ivy League medical school, who insisted that contrary to the EMTs’ eyewitness testimony, Adam’s spinal cord had been transected at the scene not in the emergency room. Larry had questioned him during his deposition. I got to cross-examine him at trial. He said it was clear to him that the EMTS got it wrong. I accused him of saying whatever the insurance company paid him to say. He took offense at that. Unfortunately for him, in discovery we had gotten hold of a letter to him from an insurance adjustor. The letter thanked him for agreeing to support their theory of the case, that the plaintiff’s paralysis had been caused at the scene, and enclosing the medical records from Oconee Memorial that the “expert” should have examined before he concluded anything about the case. In other words, he was exactly who I made him out to be, a hired gun saying what he had been paid to say.
I was trying to make him mad, and I succeeded. He was red-faced and sputtering when I introduced the letter, and even madder when I started badgering him with pointed questions of this nature:

“Tell me, Doc, if one of us got in a wreck in town tomorrow, who’s coming to help us, you or those EMTs you say got it wrong?”

“What good are you to us, Doc? You ain’t here. You’re up north.

“And you’re telling us the people who are going to help us are just stupid?”

“But they know what they’re doing, don’t they, Doc? And you know what you’re doing, what you’ve been paid to do.”

He was still red-faced and sputtering when he left the stand.

Adam, his dad, and his mom all testified at trial. They all did well. You could see the jury liked Adam. But his mom, she was something special. We had made a short film of a day in the life of Adam Conyers and his parents, and showed it to the jury just before his mom took the stand. She took over the courtroom. Only once before had I seen a witness, a rape victim, give such compelling testimony that it held everyone in the courtroom, judge, jury, lawyers for both sides, the bailiff, court recorder, everyone spellbound. She wasn’t dramatic or unusually eloquent. She just described her day from the moment she woke up her son, and brushed his teeth, and washed him, and got him in his wheelchair, and fed him, and changed his bedding, and cleaned the medical equipment, and stretched his limbs, and fed him again, and did the piecework she did at home to bring in a little extra income, and took him to the doctor or the physical therapist, and brought him home, and fed him again, and got him into bed. She spoke with visible emotion, near tears, but with dignity and not a trace of anger. Everyone listening to her could feel how deeply she loved her son, how her heart ached for him.

We had to convince the jury that the breached standard of care in the ER was the proximate cause of Adam’s paralysis. We also had to make a case for an amount in damages that seemed fair to the
jury. Toward that end, we had a witness, a financial advisor who put together life plans, estimate Adam’s lost earnings potential and what it would cost to care for him the rest of his life. But it was Adam’s mom, who gave the most captivating testimony on that score. It would cost their entire lives, and they would pay without complaint.

Larry spoke first in closing arguments. He walked the jury through the facts of our case, the EMTs’ testimony that Adam was neurologically intact at the scene, the ER doctor’s negligence, the impact on the family, and he explained the applicable law. Defense counsel followed Larry, recapitulating their case, that as sad as it was, Adam’s recklessness had caused his paralysis not the treatment he had received from the well-regarded physician who had treated him. Adam had been drinking, driven off the road, was ejected from his car, broke his neck and cut his spinal cord. A tragedy, to be sure, but no one’s fault but Adam’s.

I spoke last in reply to the defense. I explained right from the start why the doctor’s good reputation and Adam’s lapse in judgment shouldn’t sway the jury’s opinion. Yes, the doctor had done a lot of good in the community. But he is a professional, and this is about professional responsibility. He makes his living in medicine and he has to be held to the recognized standards of his profession no matter how good a guy he is. We put our lives in the hands of professionals like him. We put our lives in their hands to make decisions we can’t make for ourselves drunk or sober. We have to be able to trust them.

Adam had been driving under the influence. He shouldn’t have been. He made a mistake. Do you know anyone else who’s a good person who’s made the same mistake? There are people who make critical decisions for us when we make mistakes. And the standard here can’t be that our mistake costs us the ability to hold them accountable for their mistakes. We’re not talking about a Good Samaritan situation here. This isn’t about someone who happened to be driving by the accident and tried to help. He is a medical professional, whose job is to treat an injured man
according to standards of care he had been trained to meet. Adam had his whole life ahead of him. He put his life in the hands of the ER doctor, who failed him.

Then I started talking about how the defense argument was dishonest. “Don’t legitimize this,” I begged the jury. “All the evidence shows Adam still had neurological capability when he reached the emergency room. The EMTs have no reason to lie. He wasn’t paralyzed at the scene. That happened in the ER, and it shouldn’t have.”

I finished by talking about his mom, recalling her testimony, and praising her devotion. I had to fight to keep my emotions under control. “If you do right by Adam,” I explained, “you’ll make the system work better. You might prevent a similar tragedy. And you’ll help people who need to be helped.”

The jury deliberated for hours. Around five o’clock that afternoon, they sent a message to the judge that they were deadlocked. A unanimous verdict was required and they could only get a 10-2 vote for the plaintiff. We discovered later that the two jurors who resisted finding for Adam had conflicts they should have mentioned during jury selection. One had a spouse who worked for an insurance company and the other had three relatives who were patients of the defendant. Fortunately, the judge declined to excuse the jury, and instructed them to keep trying to reach a decision.

They reported back a couple hours later. They found for the plaintiff unanimously, awarding Adam five million dollars in damages, which at the time was the largest damage award in a medical malpractice suit in South Carolina history. Emergency room care was changed in the state as a result. Henceforth, ER doctors had to be board certified in emergency medicine. The defense appealed the verdict, but we settled the case that fall.

We helped Adam find an investment plan that would pay him a decent monthly annuity for the rest of his life. He and his folks bought a new house adapted for a person with disabilities, and a van. They have done well in the years since. They are as loving and devoted to each other as ever. And Adam is still the upbeat, resilient soul he was twenty-five years ago. He is in good health, all things
considered. That’s because his caregivers are the most loving parents any son ever had. Adam and his dad built a light aircraft a few years back. Adam worked out the engineering on his computer. His dad did the building. They fly it over the hills and valleys of the beautiful country where we live.

We did okay, too. First, it was a deeply gratifying case. The Conyers had put their lives in our hands, and we had done right by them. We all felt the weight of that responsibility from the moment we first met them. We didn’t want to be another part of a system that let them down. It was a great relief to win.

Our firm did well financially. I was able to pay off the last of my mother’s medical bills, and had enough money left over that I was in a position to make choices I might not have been free to make before the trial. I helped myself in other ways in that regard, too. I got a bit of a local reputation from that trial. Of course, some of the folks who knew me from the trial were friends and admirers of the defendant, and they didn’t hold me in very high regard. But other people who had never heard of Lindsey Graham before had read or heard accounts of the trial and been impressed with my performance. It wasn’t long after that I would try to parlay that modest public recognition into a political career.
Since childhood, I had a notion I might someday get into politics. That said, I had never been particularly political. My parents had been mostly uninterested in politics and mostly agnostic about political parties. They had conservative views about most issues, and like most rural South Carolinians in the 20th Century, when they voted I’m sure they usually cast their ballots for Democrats. But they didn’t talk much about politics or exhibit strong feelings for candidates of either party.

I didn’t have strong feelings one way or another either until Ronald Reagan became President. I admired him even before I went to Europe, mostly for his appeals for a strong national defense. The geopolitical dramas I witnessed while stationed in Europe made me admire him all the more. You could see the difference his administration was making in those last days of the Cold War. You could see we were winning it.

So I was receptive to an approach from Ed Mitchell, a World War Two veteran, great guy, and, longtime GOP activist. He tried to recruit me to run for the state legislature as a Republican. The county had never elected a Republican to the legislature, which probably explained why there
wasn’t a lot of competition for the Republican nomination that year. Democrats had a majority of
the seats in legislature, but South Carolina was becoming a Republican state, a process that had
been accelerated by Ronald Reagan’s presidency.

Lowell Ross, the Democrat incumbent, was a fellow Seneca attorney. I knew him, and had helped
him a little in his previous campaign. Lowell had come out of nowhere two years earlier to upset
the sitting chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. He was a capable man, and I respected
him. But he wasn’t the most tactful person in the county. He sometimes came off as curt and
condescending. He had been rude to my pastor who had tried to discuss an abortion related issue
with him. And when my pastor asked me to appeal to Lowell on his behalf, he had been rude to
me, too. And, apparently, we weren’t his only two constituents who felt a little slighted. There
was a fair bit of grumbling in the county about his manner. And the more I thought about the way
he had dismissed me, the more annoyed I let myself become . . . and motivated.

I met with David Wilkins, the leader of Republicans in South Carolina’s House of Representatives,
and future Speaker. We had breakfast at the Ham House, a restaurant of local renown in Greenville,
David’s hometown and where he practiced law. He encouraged me to run. David was working hard to
get a Republican majority, but I’d be surprised if he had thought I was anything better than a long shot.
Nevertheless, he gave me real support and good advice, and asked that I vote for him as Speaker Pro
Tem if I were elected. “Be glad to,” I promised, “what does the Speaker Pro Tem do exactly?”

I had no idea how to run a campaign either. So I just resolved to out hustle Lowell in a campaign
that would be strictly retail. I would, as I always had, rely on my family and friends. Ken Baker was
my campaign manager, but Denise Bauld did a lot of the day to day campaigning with me. She and
Greg and Darline were my closest advisors as they were in most areas of my life. But everyone
pitched in, my relatives, my friends, my law partners, everyone. We went knocking on doors,
hundreds and hundreds of doors, day after day after day. We went to high school football games.
We went anywhere we thought people might congregate and not mind being pestered by a novice politician and his family and friends. Denise’s kids were little then, and she often brought them campaigning with us. We’d pull them along in a little red wagon. Her youngest, Kevin, would hand out my cards and say, “Vote for Lindsey Gamm, he’s my friend.”

Denise put together a fundraiser for me. David Wilkins helped raise a little money, too. But the campaign was mostly self-financed. Thanks to my share of the contingency fee we received from the Conyers case, I could put twenty thousand dollars into my long shot campaign. In these days of practically unlimited money in politics that doesn’t seem like much money. But it was a lot of money to me. And I doubt many people thought it was a smart investment. We probably didn’t spend all of it very shrewdly either.

A furniture store located at a major intersection in Seneca had rented a baby elephant that they put on display in their parking lot as a marketing gimmick. I have no idea where they acquired a baby elephant, but Denise convinced the store to rent it to us. We put my sign on it, and let kids pet the animal. We drew quite a crowd, including local reporters. We handed out graham crackers with my name and logo on them. We took out an ad in the Seneca paper. We just made it up as we went along, but we were gamers, and usually enjoyed ourselves. It was hard work, though, exhausting at times, the ultimate retail campaign. We didn’t know how else to do it.

We had one debate, and I did pretty well. In those days, state legislators could pick their colleagues to be state judges. It was an open secret that Lowell wanted to be a judge. I made clear in the debate that I was running to be a member of the South Carolina House of Representatives. Period.

I opened the newspaper one morning to discover hundreds of the most prominent people in the county had endorsed Lowell. “I’m going to get killed,” I thought to myself. I told Greg and Denise that I just hoped I wouldn’t embarrass myself or them.
We didn’t get killed. We won. And I learned a political lesson I’ve never forgotten. You can’t put too high of a value on likability. Lowell had experience, and I didn’t. He ran a more professional and better financed campaign. He was better known in the county than I was. But thanks to the Conyers case and all the hard work my family and friends put into the campaign, I was known widely enough. And I managed to make myself the more likeable candidate. That has stayed with me since. Even now, in my third term in the U.S. Senate, I avoid putting on airs, which seems to be an occupational hazard in this place. I know how I got there. I learned that in my first campaign.

We had an election night party at a Seneca restaurant. All my family and friends were there. We waited for the absentee ballots to come in before we realized I had won, and won big. Our hard work had paid off, and as usual I owed my success, as I owe everything important in my life, to the support of the people I’ve been blessed to have in my life. We won every precinct in the district except my own, something I recall when I need a humility check. Cleo Hendrix had the vote totals from all the precincts framed. It hangs in my house in Seneca.

Not long after the election, I left the law firm and opened my own office. With the legislature and politics taking up much of my time, it wouldn’t have been right to stick my partners with a bigger workload because I didn’t have time to pull my weight. I couldn’t wait to get to the legislature. I wanted to make a big splash as quickly as I could, and I was an active freshman legislator. But I didn’t stay in Columbia long enough to make much of a splash or accomplish anything of lasting significance.

I’ve had lucky timing in politics. It’s the secret to my success. I was lucky I got into politics when I did as South Carolina was transitioning from a Democratic state to a Republican one. I was lucky I ran for Congress in an election that would be remembered as the Republican Revolution. I was lucky to have been well known in South Carolina for my role in Bill Clinton’s impeachment trial when Strom Thurmond retired. South Carolina graveyards are full of politicians who waited for a chance to run for Strom’s seat. I’m the guy who got the chance. I was lucky I had won my first
political campaign, gained some experience and had a seat in the state legislature when Butler Derrick announced his retirement from Congress.

Butler had represented South Carolina's Third Congressional District for twenty years. He was an accomplished Member of Congress, the Chief Deputy Whip of the House, and respected by both sides. He was a gentleman and well liked by almost everybody back home. I was in my legislative office when I learned he was retiring from Congress. I assumed whoever succeeded him would hold the seat for as long as Butler had.

Claude Marchbanks from Clemson had the office next to mine. I stuck my head in his door and asked if he had heard the news about Butler. He had, and he told me I ought to run for the seat. “You’re smart. You work hard. You can win.” I blame everything that’s happened since on Claude. If he hadn’t planted the idea in my head, or nurtured an idea that I was probably contemplating already, I don’t think I would have run. He was the only person who encouraged me. No one else, friend or foe, thought it was a good idea.

Denise told me to stay put. I was a political novice. A congressional race would be a hundred times harder than the campaign I had just run. I had just gotten to the state house. I liked it there. I was busy, the work was interesting, and I needed to make more of a mark before I asked for a promotion. She made perfectly good sense. So did David Wilkins, who had helped me get elected. He told me I had a promising future in Columbia. I might chair the Judiciary Committee. I might become part of the leadership. He even hinted I might be speaker someday. I talked to Darline, and to Cleo, Greg, Larry, Tim and other friends, who all agreed I should wait. I listened politely to their advice, and didn’t disagree that the smart thing to do was make the most of the office I already had. I knew my family and friends were still exhausted from all they had done to get me elected to the state house, and I would have to depend on their help even more in a congressional race.

There were other reasons I shouldn’t have run for the seat. The district hadn’t elected a Republican since Reconstruction. And because it was an open seat it would attract a number of
quality candidates. It would be an expensive race, and I would probably lose. But the timing felt right to me. It was now or never. I didn’t expect the seat to be open again for decades, no matter who won. So, I thanked everyone for their advice, and told them I was running.

The Republican primary initially attracted interest from a half dozen or so prospective candidates. I made a sizeable loan to my campaign. It seemed an awful lot of money to me then and now. But it gave me an advantage over some of my opponents. It made it possible to hire talented campaign professionals such as Dave Woodard, a Clemson political science professor and well-regarded Republican consultant, and Richard Quinn, one of the most prominent political strategists in the state. Their experience and counsel would be invaluable, and hiring them impressed the South Carolina political media.

But the event that had the biggest impact early in the campaign was the kick-off party Denise organized at the Clemson Ramada Inn, with help from Greg, Larry Brandt and other friends. It is still to this day the best political event I ever had. Over five hundred people showed up. The room was packed. The police had to help direct traffic. Denise got the band from my high school, D.W. Daniel, to play, and the chorus from Seneca’s high school to sing. The two schools are huge rivals, and they never did anything together that didn’t involve trying to beat each other in sports.

The size of the crowd made a big impression on the district. It probably scared off a few prospective candidates. It made an impression on the local press and political establishment. It put me in the front of the pack. And it made an impression on me. It fired me up, and from that night for the rest of the campaign, I worked harder than I ever had before to make sure the people who showed up at that event, my friends and family, would be proud of helping me. I had depended on many of the people in that crowded room for years, long before I got into politics. They had given Darline and me a home and a support system. They had lent us money. They had helped us through our troubles and celebrated our every achievement. They had worked themselves to the bone to get me elected to the legislature. Now, here they all were, helping me again. I was very moved. Still am.
Whatever my faults, and they are many, no one has ever fairly accused me of forgetting where I came from. No one ever will. That's because of what the people in my life have done for me. Their kindness gave me humility. When you have people all around you, people who would do anything for you even when you're no one important, you want to do everything for them. They are the best people I know. I'm lucky to be one of them. And no identity, no title, has ever been dearer to me than that.

I've never married. I guess I attribute that to timing, too. The opportunity never presented itself at the right time, or I never found time to meet the right girl, or the right girl was smart enough not to have time for me. I haven't been lucky that way. But I have a family.

I have Darline, and her family. She's married and the mother of two, and a respected professional, who runs the public information office of the state Department of Vocational Rehabilitation. I'm as proud of her as my parents would have been, and as close to her as ever.
I have relatives and lifelong friends, who have been there for me at every success and every setback. I have never, not for one moment, not after the deaths of my parents, not when I felt sorriest for myself, not when I was scared or lost or tired or uncertain, not when I was happy and successful and doing things I never imagined I would do, I have never felt the lack of a family. I've always been loved and have loved in return. I'm as blessed that way as any man on earth.

The Third Congressional District is huge. It runs from Walhalla all the way down the Savannah River to Aiken. Aiken is a Republican stronghold, but everything between Aiken and Anderson County belonged to Yellow Dog Democrats. The district encompasses Pickens, Oconee and Anderson counties. The winner of the primary and the general election would need to win the biggest share of those three counties. They were becoming more Republican in 1994, but Democrats had won plenty of elections there in the past. I was raised in Pickens County and lived in Oconee when I ran. I was in good position to do well, but I wasn't the only Republican running from that part of the state.

It looked to be a very crowded primary in the beginning, although some folks thought better of running before the filing deadline. Three candidates in addition to me stayed in the race, and one of them, John Pettigrew, a town councilman from Edgefield near Aiken, dropped out before the election. Ed Allgood, who owned a tire business in Pendleton, and whose wife was very active in the party, and Bob Cantrell, an attorney from Anderson County, were my principal opponents.

The Christian Coalition endorsed Bob, and gave him a lot of support. The Upstate is predominately Southern Baptist. Both Bob and I, and assume, Ed, too, belonged to the church. And we had mostly identical views on social issues. But Bob had agreed to sign the Coalition’s pledge and I had refused. They weren’t asking me to take positions I didn’t already hold, but on principle, I’m opposed to pledging any oaths other than the oath of office.

Basically, our strategy was to outwork the opposition, and we did. We hustled to as many events as we could fit in the schedule day and night. There were a lot of debates and candidate forums, and
I managed to stand out in most of them. Each day we worked harder than we had the day before. I had the best volunteers. They worked themselves to exhaustion for me, people like retired Air Force sergeant Bramlett Lusk. Bram and Greg’s dad put up all my signs, and he’s helped me in all my subsequent campaigns. I owe my career to volunteers like Bram, who were there for me when the odds were longest, and who’ve remained my most important base of support ever since.

We took nothing for granted, but we gained confidence the closer we got to the primary in August. We hoped to win an outright majority. If we didn’t, there would be a run-off, probably against Bob Cantrell, and with his support from the Christian Coalition, he would be hard to beat head to head.

On primary night, Dave Woodard was totaling the returns, and it looked like we were going to fall a couple hundred votes short of fifty-plus percent. John Hamrick, who owns a Seneca real estate company, took out his checkbook and wrote a check for a thousand dollars. “Here’s your first donation for the runoff,” he said. I’ll never forget that. I’ll never forget his faith in me. But Dave had miscalculated. We soon realized we had won Pickens, Anderson and Oconee counties, the last one by eighty-five percent, and with it, a fifty-two percent majority and the nomination. I tore up John’s check on the spot. I’ve learned since, after more than two decades in politics, to never tear up a lawful donation no matter how good a mood I’m in.

The Democrats were not so fortunate. There were four candidates in their primary, and no one won a majority. The top two candidates were both state senators, Jim Bryan from Laurens County in the middle of the district, and Tommy Moore from Aiken County. Both were skilled and well-respected politicians. Jim won the run-off by a few percentage points.

I had the wind at my back in the general election. Everyone knew it would be a big Republican year, although no one knew just how big. It was the end of Bill Clinton’s second year in office, and he was unpopular in my part of the state. My prospects looked good. Still, we all worked ourselves to death, and with hard work and lucky timing, I won.
We spent election night in a ballroom at a Holiday Inn in Clemson. When it became clear I would win, and win easily, my emotions got the better of me. Darline cried, and Denise, and then I had to fight back tears. Three years before I had been a small town lawyer from a family of farmers and textile workers, the beneficiary of many people’s kindness, most of whom were in that room. I had been a high-spirited kid raised in a bar by two loving parents, who, before they died too young, managed to impart to me all their hopes and some of their decency. Now, I was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. It was kind of overwhelming.

As at other happy moments in my life, I felt a familiar regret that my parents weren’t alive to see what I had become, to see what their love and faith had done. As I lay in bed that night, I thought how happy my folks would have been to share that night with me. I thought about the Sanitary Cafe, and all the good people who had been our patrons. I thought about Central. I thought about hunting with my dad in the hills we loved. I thought of my sick mother cooking her family a last Easter meal, and I wished they could have known the joy I had that night.

Whenever I had experienced that regret in the past, as I often had, I felt we had been cheated. I felt my parents had been robbed of the satisfaction they would have taken from my success. I felt I had been robbed of knowing I’d shown them their sacrifices had made their children’s lives so much easier and more fortunate than theirs had been.

Then, for the first time since my mother and father died, that feeling faded and was replaced by a calmness I had not known before. I sensed I didn’t have to worry about any of that anymore. I felt assured my parents knew what I had achieved, and that it was because of them, of all they had done for me, that I had succeeded beyond our dreams.

I have felt that assurance every day of my life since. I felt it at every big moment, at every notable event and interesting place I’ve experienced in the blessed and fascinating life I’ve lived. I’ll take it with me wherever I go in the years ahead. And I’ll be grateful.

*********