

A Christmas to Forget Remember

By Gary Emery

It looked to be a pretty tough Christmas. It was 1974. Nixon was out; Ford was in. A recession was developing with some pretty serious inflation and long gas lines. At the Emery home we were just trying to survive. As the holiday season approached, my father had just gotten his “belly-button-to-armspits plaster body cast” off.

Six months earlier Dad fell about 25 feet at the lumber mill, crushed his skull, and shattered his back. It was flat-out touch and go for a few months. With God’s grace and a lot of incredible friends we got through the initial crisis. By November, amazingly, we were still afloat, but Dad was trying to adjust to the new “norm” (his name was Norman).


Even though he was a walking miracle, Dad would never be able to hold down another job that required any kind of physical labor. It’s a bit tough on one’s manhood to be 44 years old and know that, in a tough economy, the only marketable skills you have you are physically incapable of performing. Dad was too young to retire, too proud to go on full disability, and too young to get excited about starting over.

He and Mom were raising four baby boomer kids who were in the high school/college mode...spendy times for any family. Besides all that, Dad just plain hurt (and honestly, the painkillers caused as many problems as they solved). Bottom line: Dad was depressed. I had never seen him so low. Therefore, our family didn’t have a lot of mirth-based momentum going into December. I was a senior in high school (dating this cute chick, Joneile, ... but that’s another story) and I just wanted to fast forward to forget Christmas this year.

But Mom came through and turned a Christmas

to forget into a Christmas to remember. She went out to Sears and bought a full-fashioned Santa suit. I don’t know how she convinced Dad, but once he put the suit on the magic began. That evening I “elfed” him around town in our ’65 Buick; we went to a whole bunch of homes from the church. I would park about half a block away. Dad would knock on the door. When the parents (who had no idea who he was) let him in he would ask to see their kids, whom he knew by name (just like the Big Guy from the North Pole). The children would come and he would ask them, in his most Santa-riffic voice, if they had been good boys and girls and what they wanted for Christmas. Before heading for the Buick-wanna-be-sleigh, he would remind each of the kids that Jesus was the greatest Christmas gift ever.

I don’t remember much else about that Christmas, but what mattered I will never forget. I learned that the best antidote for depression is to bring joy to others. It was my last “kid” Christmas. Next year Dad and I were both in college. Dad found a second career in real estate and I went into the ministry.

He would battle pain and all that came with it the rest of his life. But he never stopped caring for others. Years later as a pastor some of my greatest ideas for outreach and caring for our community were really simple extensions of his “Santa-Dad” heart. He made it and every Christmas a Christmas to remember. 



Gary Emery has served as Pacific Region Executive Director since 2000. His passion for the next generation serves as the motivation for raising up young leaders and planting new churches (45 new church plants in the past 9 years). He and his wife, Joneile, have two grown sons.

Photo inset:
Norman and Leota Emery

