

Single-Parent • Family

February 1999 • \$1.25

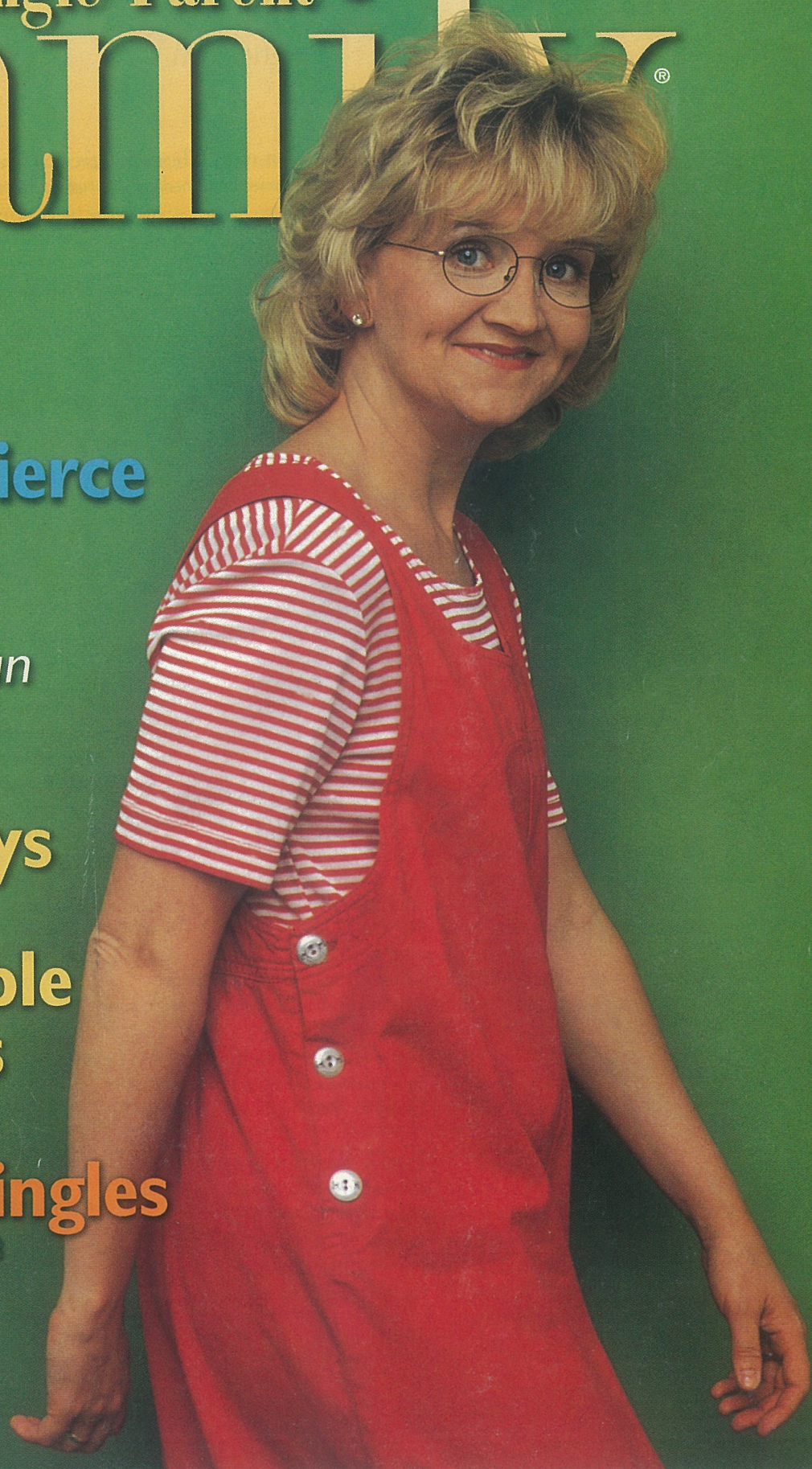
Chonda Pierce

*Why Is This
Christian
Funnywoman
All Smiles?*

Three Ways to Raise Responsible Teen Boys


Sex and Singles

For details, see page 18



by Lynda Hunter

Girls' Nite Out



*with
Chonda Pierce*

One funny girl's tragedies-to-triumph story



From the first row of the Women of Faith gathering, I listened to 15,000 conferencegoers seated around McNichols Arena in Denver sing praise songs. Then the master of ceremonies introduced the first speaker of the day. "She's funny. She's the only female comic with sanctified cellulite. She's Chonda Pierce."

Up the steps bounded a 5-foot-5-inch blond bundle of energy. She took a breath, then belted out, "I can bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan. But why should I do that when Domino's can?"

From that moment, I found myself hooked by this funny woman's engaging smile and nasal, twangy Southern accent. Later I saw a more serious side.

Chonda once used humor in an unhealthy way, as a weapon to guard against painful life experiences. She told me, "In self-protection, I forgot nearly everything I had learned about hearty guffaws—like the time mother's Jell-O salad hit the ceiling of our Chevy on the way to church when Dad tried to miss a bump.

"My laughter came from a heart filled with pain—bitter, cutting humor that reeked of unhealthy sarcasm. Assuming pain was just around the corner, I lived life waiting for it. Looking for it. On guard against it."

What pain gave rise to Chonda's humor?

Growing Up

She grew up as Chonda (pronounced "Shonda") Courtney, the second youngest of four children. She and her siblings—Mike, Charlotta and Cheralyn—moved with their parents to a dozen Southern towns before settling in Ashland City, Tenn. "Too bad we weren't able to collect frequent movers' miles," Chonda said with a crooked smile.

Their mom, Virginia, played the piano at church and helped the four children form a family quartet. Their dad pastored, but he also battled manic depression most of his life. "We'd get off the school bus not knowing if our dad was in a good mood or threatening to end it all," Chonda said. Then the unthinkable happened.

On Saturday, July 3, 1976, the red, white and blue Tennessee version of the United States bicentennial celebration was underway. Charlotta, 20 and recently engaged, led a community choir in a production of "Ring All the Bells of Freedom." But a driver broadsided Charlotta's car as she drove to work that morning.

Her parents had just dropped Chonda off at her part-time job with

her cousin's insurance office and headed toward the Cut 'n' Curl beauty shop so Virginia could get her hair done. Several minutes later, they returned to pick up Chonda.

"There's been an accident," they said. That was all they knew.

Chonda locked the office and jumped into the back seat of their car. "Mother had a scarf around her curlers," Chonda said. "I would have made my usual crack: 'New 'do, Mom?' But the silence in the car choked my words."

At home, Chonda called Charlotta's fiance to see if he'd heard from her. He hadn't. She walked to the piano and touched Charlotta's director's copy of "Ring All the Bells of Freedom" and the hymn book still open to the song Charlotta had practiced for church the Wednesday night before: "Whatever It Takes to Draw Closer to You."

Tears glistened in Chonda's eyes as she spoke: "I knew then that my sister was dead."

Chonda had answered the phone when the call came. Slowly the house filled with people. The youth choir—dressed in their red, white and blue outfits—sang around Charlotta's casket. Chonda said, "They celebrated a young girl who had lived her life loving the Lord and using her talents for Him."

Family Split

Chonda doesn't remember her dad ever recovering from Charlotta's death. "From what I could see as a young teenager, things just went downhill for the next 18 months. I listened to the sounds of a marriage breaking apart."

On Nov. 19, 1977, when Chonda was 17 and Cheralyn 14, Mike married. Their father performed the ceremony. Chonda will never forget the day.

"The bride and groom drove off in their car with silly messages painted on the sides," she said. "Then my dad drove home, packed his suitcase and drove away—in my car. He never returned."

Late one night a few weeks later,



BEN PEARSON



'I was mad—at God and at my dad because he wasn't there. I tried to drown it all out with my sarcasm.'



the sheriff knocked on their door to deliver divorce papers. He told Chonda's mother he had waited until dark so no one would see him come.

When their dad left that November, Cheralyn was a freshman and Chonda a senior. A rough Christmas followed without Charlotta or their dad.

By February, Chonda and Cheralyn were staying busy with parts they had gotten in their high school production of "Oklahoma." Chonda had the lead part of Lori, and Cheralyn had the ballet counterpart.

"I teased Mama," Chonda said as she leaned her head back and laughed. "Now that you're not the preacher's wife, we get to dance ballet?" But I loved my role because of the funny lines it had. I don't think Rodgers and Hammerstein ever meant for 'Oklahoma' to be that hilarious, but this was in Cheatham County, Tenn."

Cheralyn turned 15 on April 18, and production of the play was going strong. Then Cheralyn got sick. Before Mom left for work as a night nurse, she would care for Cheralyn as best she could and leave her with Chonda. "Mama would call and wake me up at 3 in the morning to see if we were sleeping," Chonda said.

One evening when Cheralyn had gotten up to go to the bathroom, she passed out. Mom took her to a specialist the next morning. Too soon they heard the diagnosis: leukemia. Cheralyn went in the hospital the third

week of April. She died 21 days later on May 13.

"I was mad—at God and at my dad because he wasn't there," Chonda said. "I tried to drown it all out with my sarcasm. I've heard people become alcoholics for a lot less."

Chonda tells how at Cheralyn's graveside, she made one more attempt to mask her pain. "Mama," she had said, "we're a-droppin' like flies."

More Changes

Chonda graduated from high school in June. "Don't ask me how. I think everybody lied about my grades," she said.

The divorce became final a few days before Chonda's 18th birthday, and within a few days her dad remarried. "Life shouldn't beat you up," Chonda said. "People naturally just grow apart. Yet when my Dad would pop in for a visit I took on the same characteristics as I did as a little girl, either tap-dancing to keep my father in a good mood or terrified that he was going to hurt me. I went through a long bout of learning how to forgive him. But I've also learned that I have boundaries finally, and I don't have to keep getting emotionally beaten up."

Mom got Chonda a job as nurse's aide "so she could keep her eye on me," Chonda said. Both worked at part-time jobs to help them make it through the months after Cheralyn's death. Eventually they realized they couldn't keep their house any longer.

Chonda's mother applied for government help and got permission from a man who owned a retirement center to move into a one-bedroom apartment. "We lost our beautiful split-level home and sold everything except for mementos of Cheralyn's and Charlotta's and a few sheets and towels," Chonda said.

At their moving sale, Chonda dressed up like Raggedy Andy and held painted posters that read "Gotta-Go Sale!" She said with a crooked smile, "I wanted to write 'Name-It, Claim-It, Take-It Sale,' but I ran out of space."

Chonda remembers the pain of dismantling the home that had taken her mom 25 years to build. "That Raggedy Andy costume was the mask I counted on to get me through another horrible day," she said.

Then there was college. Mama had prayed about school for Chonda. One day, she received a letter from Trevecca Nazarene College in Nashville, Tenn., saying that her first year of tuition had been paid for by a distant uncle.

"That was the sweetest speck of hope for me," Chonda said as she raised her glasses and wiped her eyes with a napkin. "Only God and my mama could arrange so that I could go to a private college across the street from where we lived."

Chonda tells how her mother attended all her performances, just as she'd always done. "I sang and danced four or five shows a day, six



Chonda ended her time on stage that morning with a song dedicated to her mom:

*She tucks them into bed,
turns out the lights.*

*Her children are the apple
of her eyes.*

*But of all the things they learn
in their lives*

*She prays they'll see the love
of Jesus in her eyes.*

*Now after all the lights are out
at the end of the day*

*She just puts it all into the
hands of Jesus and she prays.*

*Now I lay me down to sleep.
My sweet loves safely keep.
And if I die before they wake
They'll know I've lived for
Jesus' sake.*

"My strong, godly mother kept me from getting bitter," Chonda told me at the end of our time together. "She kept my eyes on Jesus and not on what was happening around us. She'd say, 'Let's pray about this and put it behind us.'"

"Mama brought God into every circumstance. When that happens, He covers up all those imperfections going on."

And that's Chonda Pierce, who dedicates her life to encouraging other mothers—and fathers—who dare to bring God into their circumstances. ♦

*You can find out more about the Women of Faith conferences by calling (800) 49-FAITH. To request a copy of Chonda's CD or cassette, *Havin' A Girls' Nite Out*, or her book *It's Always Darkest Before the Fun Comes Up*, see page 13.*



Chonda and her mother, Virginia

days a week during the summers at Opryland Themepark. And there Mama was. One time she passed out in the heat while I'm singin'. A few hours later, here she comes again with a little bag of pretzels in hand. She wasn't going to miss her daughter in the limelight."

During her sophomore year, Chonda transferred to another college to study theater. She financed her schooling through a grant, part-time jobs and a work-study program.

Movin' On

Chonda married her high school sweetheart, David Pierce. "We were drawn like magnets by our own dysfunction," Chonda said. David was 9 when his alcoholic father and his mother divorced. His dad raised him.

I asked Chonda if she held true to her faith during these difficult times. She laughed, of course. "It depends on your theology," she said. "I grew up Nazarene where you get saved every time you say shucks, so I got saved 347 times every year. David was Baptist, so he only got saved once."

Chonda grew more serious. "I don't know where I would have been eternally sometimes, though. I knew what was right, and when I was living wrong, it killed me. There are a lot of worse things than death and divorce—such as time spent away from God. Those really were the worst years of my life."

Chonda described one day after she became a mom and brought her

daughter, Chera Kay, home from day care as she sang Sesame Street songs. Chonda said, "I realized my daughter was 3 and didn't know a single Sunday school song. The only time she was in church was when Mama took her. I wasn't doing what my mama did for me."

So Chonda and her husband found their way back to church, and their parenting changed. "Today," she said with pride, "Chera feels called to be a missionary. My prayer is that someday she'll throw her arms around me and say, 'You lived it in front of me, and I appreciate it.'"

What's Ahead

Chonda just finished taping a new video. While *Girls' Nite Out* deals with motherhood, her recent project, called *Soap Boxes*, targets fatherhood. "It's about my journey of getting to know Abba Father and how precious that is to the fatherless," Chonda said.

Chonda received a phone call last fall telling her that *Havin' A Girls' Nite Out* had become No. 1 on the Christian retailers' video chart. Her 9-year-old son, Zach, asked what was going on. "Mama's video is No. 1," Chonda said.

"Great. What's for supper?" he said.

"What's really funny," Chonda continued, "is my mama's been telling everybody 'Chonda's video is No. 1 out of all the videos in the whole world.'"

Chonda says, "I don't have the heart to tell her any different."