

Today's Christian

Woman

November/December 1998

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Chonda
Pierce

Funny Girl

What lights up this live wire?

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Chonda Pierce is center stage, and the 14,000 Women of Faith conferees at Chicago's United Center are loving it. This slender, blonde-haired dynamo with the Carolina twang starts singing her take-off on the Enjoli perfume jingle: "I can bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan—but why should I bother when Domino's can? I'm a woman—w-o-m-a-n." We roar. As her sassy, good-natured stand-up routine unfolds—with perfect comic timing—we laugh so hard tears spring to our eyes. Then Chonda segues to the tragedies that have shaped her perspective on life, and tears of a different sort flow.

It's astonishing anyone with a story like Chonda's would feel like laughing, much less help others laugh. Yet this spunky Christian comedian is equally at home performing at corporate events, the Grand Ole Opry, or Women of Faith conferences. Chonda's appeared on the Nashville Network's *Music City Tonight* and the *700 Club*, and in crusades with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Team; she's toured with fellow comedian Mark Lowry on the Comic Belief Tour and is currently touring to promote her latest video/CD, *Having a Girls' Nite Out* (Myrrh), which cap-

tures her off-beat take on contemporary life. Chonda readily admits she's "living proof" that God works all things out for good.

"There's definitely healing in laughter, but I didn't think that up," says Chonda, whose latest book, *It's Always Darkest Before the Fun Comes Up* (Zondervan), was just released. "It says so in the Bible!"

Chonda would know. She grew up a Southern preacher's kid with elder siblings Michael, Charlotta, and baby sister Cheralyn. Being part of the ministry gave Chonda an insider's peek at church members' struggles. But her own family's secrets were kept under wraps as her father battled manic-depression and her mother, Virginia, diligently maintained the semblance of a normal, happy family. Then tragedy struck.

When Chonda was sixteen, twenty-year-old Charlotta was killed instantly in a head-on collision on a rainy highway. Soon after, Chonda's father abandoned the ministry, packed his suitcase, and left his wife and kids. Not long after Chonda, her mom, and fifteen-year-old Cheralyn attempted to put their lives back together (Michael had married and moved away), Cheralyn was diagnosed with leukemia and died a month later. In a matter of twenty-two months, a family of six was reduced to a family of two.


It was then Chonda's comedic streak—evident since childhood—took an unhealthy turn. Humor became her mask, her way of escaping pain and

funny girl

How comedian Chonda

by Jane Johnson Struck

photographs by Bill Bilsley



*Pierce's faith—and mom—helped her survive the tough times
and laugh again.*

The only thing I can control are the memories



Deck the Halls: Chonda gets Christmasy with husband, David, Zachary, and Chera Kay.

the God she'd given her life to as a child. During her final year of college, Chonda landed a job at Nashville's musical theme park, *Opryland, USA*, impersonating country great Minnie Pearl, honing her singing and comedic talents. But it wasn't until after she'd married her childhood sweetheart, David, now a college English professor, and gave birth to their firstborn, daughter Chera Kay, that Chonda finally made peace with God.

Tears spring to Chonda's eyes whenever she tells her story—especially as she talks about the woman who never gave up on her, who prayed her through the tough years. Chonda's love and respect for her mother are undeniable, and their bond has been made even more precious in recent years as Virginia's battled breast cancer. At Chonda's cozy Tennessee home, which she shares with David, Chera Kay, now fourteen, and son Zachary, nine, Virginia graciously prepares her delicious spaghetti casserole. As we enjoy

one of her mother's specialties, Chonda talks movingly about her childhood, loss and forgiveness, and the influence her mother's faith has had on her.

When did you first learn your dad was manic-depressive?

I think I was about fourteen when I first heard the words manic-depression. It seemed to me that when my father took his medication or worked with a counselor to deal with his stress, he'd be okay. But then the church would experience a great growth spurt, or we'd take a family trip that rejuvenated him. Something euphoric would happen and he'd think, *I'm feeling so good, I don't think I need to take this stuff anymore*. After a couple months, the medication would be completely out of his system. That's when the mood swings would kick in.

I'm not saying God doesn't heal in response to our prayers. We prayed a lot. But the apostle Paul wrote that he'd become grateful for his thorn in the flesh because it was the very thing that

kept him close to the Lord. And I've decided, oddly enough, that maybe this was our thorn in the flesh—something to keep our whole family clinging to Christ.

What happened when he was off medication?

My father would become emotionally and verbally abusive to family members. But he was more abusive, I think, to himself. For example, he had a gun, and many nights he'd kiss us good-night and tell us this was the night he was going to put himself out of his misery so we could all be happy.

I can't imagine the terror of living with that.

I remember getting off a school bus and wondering what it was going to be like when I got home. Either Dad would be in a great mood and we'd all go fishing, or he'd be a basket case. And Mamma, bless her heart, would

be in the kitchen trying to cook his favorite meal and do whatever she could do to pull him out of it.

If only we'd fully understood it was a physical problem. But we fell into the trap of thinking it was spiritual. Unfortunately, sometimes in the church there's a stigma attached to depression. We equate it with spiritual need, but sometimes it's nothing more than a physical need, the same as if your body needs insulin.

How did this affect your family?

My mother played the role of the perfect pastor's wife, mother, and homemaker. She realized that since she couldn't fix things, she would just try to survive. Besides, she had made a vow "in sickness and in health." She worked overtime to make sure our eyes remained on Jesus, not Dad, not nosy church ladies, not even on her—just Jesus.

One of the ways I coped with Dad's problems was by being the jester. I've always been something of a ham, even

we make as a family.

as a kid. I guess I felt that if I could only get Dad to laugh, or goof off, or get his mind off it, maybe *I* could fix him.

When Charlotta died, I tried providing a little comic relief by boisterously objecting to God's will for our family. That's when my humor started becoming confused, muddled.

You mean sarcastic?

Oh, man, I became the queen of that.

I remember standing across from Cheralyn's grave at the burial, looking at my mother, and saying, "We're dropping like flies!" That was my way of dealing with it. But Mother knew I laughed the hardest when I hurt the most.

That first Christmas without Charlotta, we tried to figure out if we should hang up her stocking or not. We made the decision to hang it. I can't remember when we finally stopped.

The first Christmas we didn't have Cheralyn, I remember walking into the living room of our one-bedroom apartment—it was just my mother and me—and seeing my stocking hanging there all by itself. *This is the pits*, I thought. *Things could not be any worse.*

But, of course my mother said, "I think it's the prettiest stocking in the world!" That's my mother—determined to celebrate life, not concentrate on death. She reminded me *I* was still alive.

But it's not easy to celebrate when you're grieving ...

Yeah, there are no magical words for people in the throes of grief. I used to hear "Time always heals" *a lot*. But my take on that saying is that it's baloney. Time *doesn't* heal all things; it's what God does during that time that brings the healing. Time may ease the pain—but the pain's still there. You've got to spend the time wisely.

You seem to have had every reason to say, "Hey, God, what gives? Here we are serving you, and this is how you treat us?"

Well, let's be realistic. I probably said that once or twice!

What kept you from totally giving up on God?

I have to admit, I've thought, *I have every excuse*. But I do know that as imperfect as my family was, I grew up knowing about the Lord. Even in all our storms and struggles and bad times, there was still that little foundation, that little piece of light. And you can't get away from it. I know; I tried.

However, I always knew my mother was praying for me, and it would drive me nuts! When I attended a secular university, I was probably the furthest I've ever been from the Lord. I was the life of the party—trying to drown out what was going on in my heart.

I remember one late night after a party when I was riding down the road in my old beat-up Chevette with the broken radio, singing songs as I drove along. And all I could think of were songs like "Amazing Grace." It made me so mad!

You see, you can't drown that stuff out. And that's what I tell parents: Your kids may stray, but they can't get away from what they pick up around your dinner table or family devotions or church services. And that's one of the sweetest promises in God's Word.

What turned you around?

When you become the life of the party to drown out what you need to face, then there's a problem. That's what I did for a long time. I even used my role as Minnie Pearl at the Opryland theme park—four forty-five-minute shows a day—as a defense mechanism to keep me from feeling.

I remember standing backstage at the Opry one night, and Minnie Pearl was there. She told me this old story that one of the announcers of the Opry told her a long time ago: "You got to love the audience, and they'll love you back." Then she said, "I want to make this more personal. You'll never really know what laughter is all about until you make peace with God and love him first."

Well, in my state of mind, I thought, *My mother told you to say that!* It sounded

just like something my mother would say. I was at such a searching place in my life, but I finally realized *that* was what was wrong with me—I wasn't seeking to know God, I was trying hard to forget him!

Not long after that, after the birth of my daughter, Chera Kay, I was at my day job working in a music publisher's office when I heard a song about God's love called "The Saving Kind." After I heard it, I went in the bathroom, literally sick to my stomach. Of course, as a comedian, I see the humor in these things. I thought, *This has got to really crack God up. I've been in the church all my life. I've heard altar calls all my life, and I rededicate my life to God in the job!* But my mother taught me there's no time like the present to get your life right with Christ.

Do you feel as though you've had to forgive God?

You know what I finally figured out? God didn't do any of those things to me. He's done a lot *for* me. He didn't look down from heaven and say, "Okay, I'm going to do this to her and that to her to mold her character." No.

But here's what happens: You get on a highway and drive a little too fast when it's rainy. And one of the laws of nature God created long before he created you or me—inertia—says that if you go 60 MPH and hit a puddle, you might slide into the path of an oncoming car and get killed in the collision. God could reach down and stop it—and occasionally he does. But sometimes life just happens. When I quit blaming God for everything, as funny as it sounds, it let him off the hook. And it let me off the hook of trying to find somebody to blame for everything.

Stuff happens. But what we do with that stuff is up to us. It's either going to destroy us, or we turn it around to help

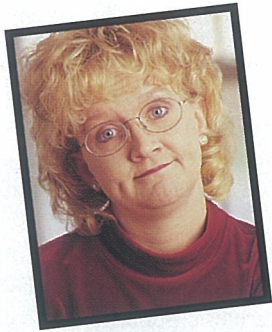
Chonda Pierce

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somebody coming up the road. God doesn't force us; the choice is ours.

How did you learn to trust God again?

One day I wrote out Proverbs



You'd be surprised at all the joyful things in life—if you

3:5–6—"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight"—on a large piece of paper. I cut out each phrase, then rearranged them on my bathroom mirror, putting "In all your ways acknowledge him" first. Then I placed "Lean not on your own understanding," followed by "Trust in the Lord."

I know that's not how it's written, but the first thing I needed to do was focus on glorifying God. Then I chose not to lean on what I can't understand. I can't fathom why this happened to our family; I don't know why people die. I don't know why children starve in Africa. So I leaned not on my own understanding.

When I acknowledged him and leaned not on what I couldn't understand, I started developing this trust.

What have you taught your kids about God?

David and I make God a Person at our table, not something we just haphazardly pray to. Christ is a vital part of our family life. We pull him into almost every conversation. And I do that because I saw my mother do that.

I know I can't be there for my kids all the time. I can't know how their minds are working or what they're going through every minute of the day. The only thing I can control are the memo-

ries we make. We have family devotions before we eat. I allow them to hear and see me pray. I let them hear me apologize for things I've messed up on. We work at being real with our kids.

I'm so fortunate that in a job that's so inconsistent—I could be gone three

days and home six or gone a week and home twenty—the Lord sent me the perfect mate who loves to be home. David's a writer; he works in a room upstairs. I'm so fortunate that the four walls of this house rarely change, whether I'm here or not. I try to keep the same consistent things surrounding them. And that's probably from my childhood of not knowing how it was going to be at home.

Are you and David very different?

We are night and day. Although, let me tell you, he's much funnier than I am. He has a real dry wit.

David and I grew up together. We met when we were sixteen. I loved him then, and I love him now—so much more now. I didn't know anything about love when I was sixteen.

It doesn't mean I don't know his faults, and he certainly knows mine. But we have an investment together—a commitment. David met my father two days before he left. He met Charlotta once at a youth choir event, but he was very, very close to my little sister, Cheralyn. We share that. When I grieve and go to the cemetery to see Cheralyn's marker, it affects David, too. He's been through all kinds of things with me, and that's an incredible history—something you don't throw away just because you've hit a rocky spot in your relationship.

Do you keep in touch with your father?

No ... but that's okay, really. When my father divorced my mother, I never heard much from his side of the family ever again. That bothered me for a long time. I'm the first to admit I certainly didn't handle my anger and frustration

very well. I was an eighteen-year-old loud-mouthed, smart-aleck kid—and I let everybody know it. So whatever relationship we tried to have, I did my share of making it difficult.

But did your father ever say anything such as, "I'm sorry for what I did ... "?

Never. I finally got over waiting for that. Forgiving and moving on—without all the loose ends tied up in a neat bow—are possible only through the power of the Holy Spirit. And I don't know how people do it without some professional Christian counseling.

What I choose *not* to do is sit and nicker over the bad things; I've chosen to—and it is a choice—remember how my dad could fix anything, how smart he was. He was personable; people loved him. Remembering the crummy stuff isn't going to do anybody any good.

I want to honor him, as I honor my mother. And you know what? When you begin your prayer time with praise, your needs list shrinks. The same thing happens with your parents. When you find yourself lifting them up, all those other little things fall by the wayside.

I'm not saying abused wives should think, *Oh, if I just honor my husband more, it will be all right*. He's still probably going to come home and beat you up till somebody either gets out or gets help. It's not that easy.

Forgiveness is a process; it doesn't

happen overnight. I don't know how I'd feel if I stepped onstage and saw my daddy's face. But I believe I'd just have to stop what I was doing and go hug him. Listen, I can honor him and praise his good qualities—even when there's no word from him.

is, "If you're here tonight looking for a perfect church to attend, this ain't it. Neither is First Baptist on that corner, and neither is Church of Christ over there, and neither is Second Methodist downtown. There is none. So quit being so hard on the church. Quit saying, 'Okay, what can the church do for me today?' *You* are the church. So get in there and do better."

I've made a commitment to a particular body of believers not because they're perfect and have it all together—but because it's a group of imperfect people learning about and loving the one true, perfect God. I fit in nicely with a bunch of imperfection. Isn't God's grace amazing?

know there's a group of ladies who keep my schedule in the church office and pray for me. My pastor calls me several times a month. I have an accountability group I meet with to keep me focused—people who ask me the tough questions like, "What did you read in the Bible this week?" And I love every bit of that. I need somebody to remind me that I'll have nothing to give if I don't fill up every now and then.

When I'm in concert, I don't know what people need. But I want to provide them with a great laugh—to help them forget their troubles for a few minutes. By the end of the night, I also want to help them focus their lives on the living God—and do it to the best of my ability, with the gifts he's given me.

Do you think we Christians just need to lighten up?

Especially on each other! Don't get me started on that.

You know what I began doing out of necessity for my work? (If I can't keep coming up with some funny things, I'm

I cannot remember a day my mother didn't tell me she loved me—even when I was a teenager and mad and wanting to borrow the car. I cannot remember a day I did not know my mother adores me. The confidence that gives a kid!

I'm terrified of the day I'll lose her. I try not to think about it; instead I prepare my heart.

Has loss changed your view of heaven?

Well, I love to people-watch at airports. David used to pick me up on the curb of the airport, but I told him one day that he had to come in and meet me at the gate, because I'd get so jealous watching the people who got off a plane who had someone meeting them.

I think that's how heaven will be. People arriving, excited to be there, and people waiting for them, excited to see them. What a reunion.... You cannot paint a picture that captures it. I've seen grandmothers and little kids sitting in airports, and watched them all have sweet reunions. And I think that's what heaven's going to be like! **tcw**



train yourself to look for them.

You poke gentle fun at church life. What's your real take on church?

I've been in the church thirty-eight years. I've seen the good, the bad, and the ugly!

But what I say in concert many times

With your schedule, how do you stay involved?

My husband teaches fourth grade Sunday school, and I love my women's group. We meet on Wednesdays. And I

in trouble.) As I sit in airports, I write down a funny line I hear, something I read in a magazine, or something I see. This helps me find the funny, light-hearted things in life, instead of waiting for them to happen. Some people suggest keeping a joy journal. Why not affirm the joyful stuff? You'd be surprised at all the joyful things in life if you train yourself to look for them.

How about in your own family?

I'm big on affirming positive behavior. My kids are totally different! Zachary is at the age where he'll stomp and stew. You know where Zachary stands—sometimes to the point you wish you didn't know. Chera Kay, on the other hand, is a quiet child; you've got to pull her emotions and thoughts out of her.

I'm sure my mother's four kids were really different, too. I don't know how in the world she learned to individualize for each child. What I want to pass on to my kids is that they can do anything they want to. As a mom, I can only do my best, pray, then let the

Holy Spirit do his thing.

Yet your mother's had a tremendous influence on you.

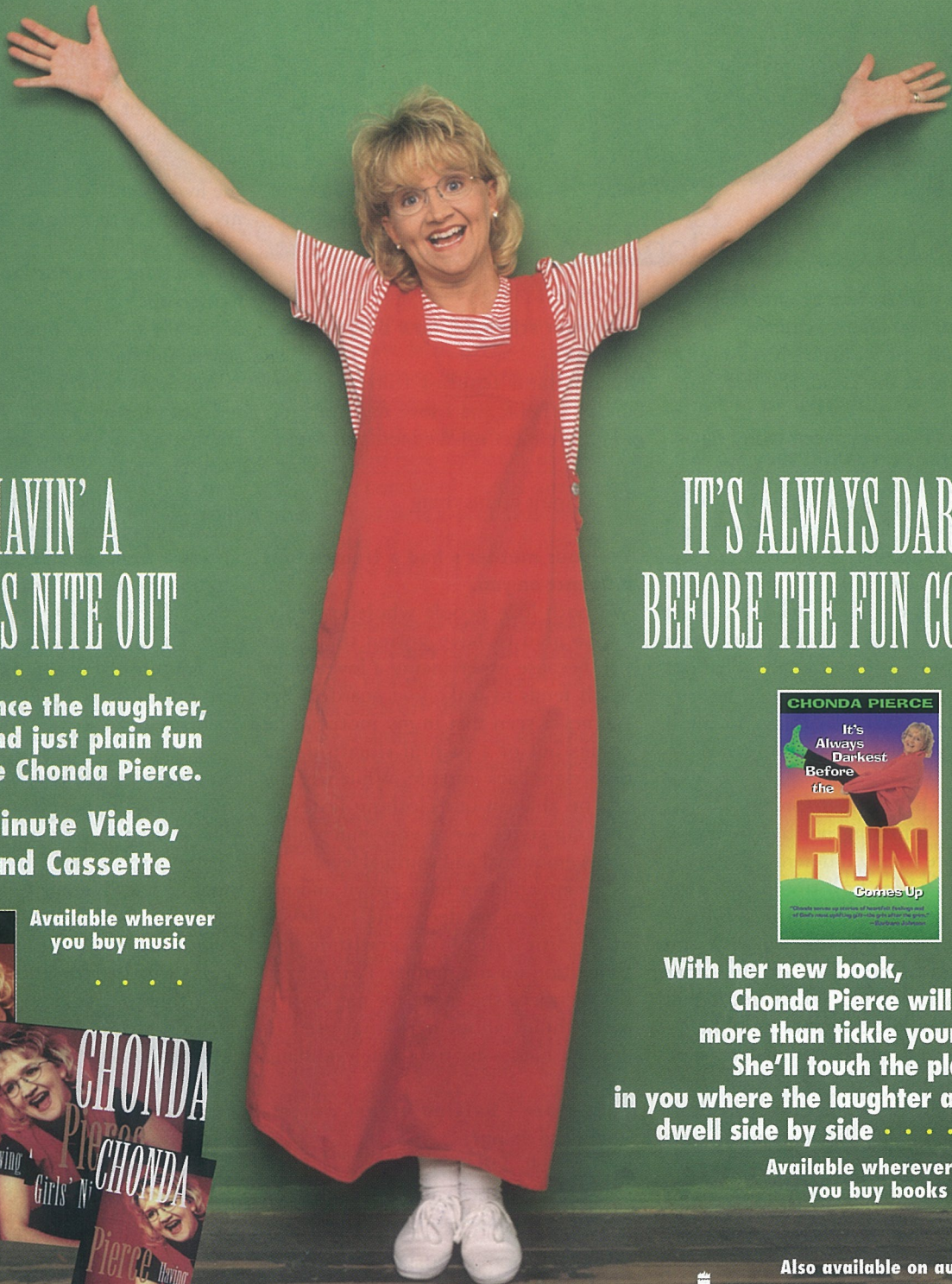
We both love people wholeheartedly. I'm so glad to have gotten that from her, because experiencing a loved one's death tends to make you guarded. But I've never seen that in my mother. She comes out of a painful situation and dives right back into life. While we may not be alike in our clothing tastes or cooking styles, we're very much alike on an emotional and spiritual level.

As my children have grown and my love for them has deepened, I've developed more full-blown gratitude and admiration for my mother. I've realized the sacrifices she made for me. So the petty things about her—that used to drive me nuts!—mean absolutely nothing.

Your mom's battled breast cancer. How's she doing?

Really well. Doctors call it a state of remission. Mother calls it healing. She doesn't give cancer another thought.

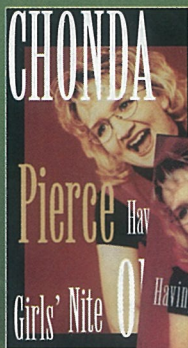
Laugh Out Loud!



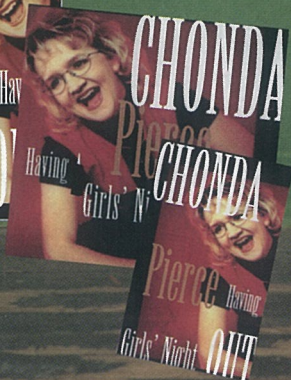
HAVIN' A GIRLS NITE OUT

Experience the laughter,
tears and just plain fun
that are Chonda Pierce.

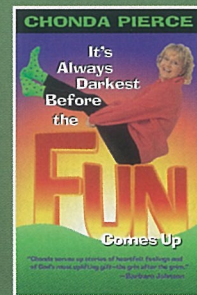
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