

THIS WAS GEORGE by Gerry Watkins

He never met a stranger. He had a way of talking to people that made them want to do the right thing. There was a season in our marriage when George held a great deal of political power in his hands, from local to state legislature, even to the governor of the state of Texas. He tried never to abuse this privilege, but to use it for the good of the people he represented. For a number of years, he served as United Way Chairman for Bell Helicopter/Hurst, where he worked.

One day he was fundraising for United Way in Johnson County. A city official in Granbury approached George and said to him. "George, I have someone here who would like to meet you." Ed Shipman was a businessman who was also an ordained minister. He held services in his home on Sundays. He and several friends had purchased a beautiful hillside outside of Glenrose and planned to develop it recreationally so they could enjoy it when they retired. Several of them, including Ed, had already built beautiful homes on the hill.

Upon introduction Ed said, "George, God has destined that you and I should meet. I have something to share with you." George was amazed at the story. "Several days ago there was a knock on my door," he began. "When I opened it I saw the Johnson County Sheriff standing there with two teenage girls." "Ed, I have just arrested these two girls, for drug dealing," he said to me. "I don't know what to do with them. My jail is not fit for men, much less teenage girls. What do you think I should do with them?"

Ed said he thought for a few minutes, then he told the sheriff to leave them there with him. He said he didn't know what to do with them either, but as days passed with the girls still living in his home, Ed began hearing from God about the situation. "God is telling me that I must build a shelter for troubled teenagers and I must build it here on this hill," he said. He has given me a plan for the shelter. It will cover the hill my friends and I had purchased for our enjoyment. Here is the plan."

As Ed laid out the plan God had given him, George was amazed. "This is quite a big project, Ed," George replied. "But I will do the best I can to help you." And so, the two began working together. George spread the word wherever he went, and donations began to arrive at the Happy Hill. Soon a large barn came up, then animals to use on a farm: cows, mules, horses, goats, and lambs. Ed began a practice to give an animal to each child who came to the Hill. "This animal will belong to you," he'd say. "It will die if you fail to care for it, but it will grow if you do." It was a first step in Ed's process of developing a caring responsibility in the child.

When Ed had a need, he would call George and tell him what he needed and why. The farm grew as more teenagers came to live there. They needed dorms for the kids to live in and house parents to care for them. Ed managed to purchase the whole hill from his friends and they began farming. The farm fed the animals and big gardens fed the people. Ed named the place Happy Hills. Farm and Academy because by then teachers had been hired to educate the kids. There was a need for a school to educate them and that was built. Developments were covering the Hill. As word spread more people became involved, many to raise money.

A famous Dallas artist began painting scenes from the farm. She developed a line of Christmas cards to use as a fundraiser. Jerry Jones and his Dallas Cowboys began adopting kids at the farm. When the artist died from cancer, the Cowboys began producing a recipe book to replace the Christmas cards. As money poured in, more buildings went up. Soon the Hill was one big complex, filled with activity as troubled kids learned responsibility for themselves and others and how to live a Christian life. More than forty some years later, students graduated from Happy Hills Academy in 2023. Almost 100 % of those who graduate go on to college and live productive lives.

One evening George and I attended an appreciation dinner for folks who had contributed to Happy Hills Farm and Academy. The crowd was huge and as awards were given to those who had raised large amounts of money, I turned to Ed and said, "Ed, I don't see more than a half dozen people I know here at this event." Looking at George, Ed responded, "I don't see too many people I know well, but I see one person I'm sure glad I got to know." Ed Shipman is gone now, but the Happy Hills complex still grows. Jerry Jones and his Dallas Cowboys, as well as many other folks, still contribute, making it possible for Ed's family to carry on the dream God gave Ed many years ago.

Governor Dolph Briscoe had appointed George to several boards, and one was an advisory board to govern doctors and medical personnel in the large local areas surrounding Dallas and Fort Worth. One evening George arrived at a meeting that was being held at Granbury. When he arrived, one of the members called him aside and told him an important plan was to be introduced at the meeting and George needed to be alerted as to its purpose. He told George that a group of doctors would introduce a plan to do away with local hospitals and medical facilities and build huge facilities in the Dallas Fort Worth area.

George was appalled and asked why they would do such a thing. "Because" said the member, "the doctors' wives don't like living in rural areas. They want to live in the city where the excitement and action is taking place." George thanked the man and went aside to consider how he would handle the problem. When the time came, he talked to the doctors about the reason they wanted to become doctors in the first place, then about the problem local folks would face if they or their families faced a serious medical crisis with no local help available. When the time came to take a vote on the measure, it died on the floor. Local hospitals exist today because George spoke for the needs of the local people.

Governor Briscoe had also appointed George to serve as chairman of a labor board in Johnson County. There were small businesses and factories in the county, but nobody to represent the workers. George did a lot of things to increase wages and benefits of the Johnson County workers. One day the Superintendent of Schools came in to see George. When George congratulated him on the building of the new high school, the superintendent told George that he needed help. He said they had spent all their money on the building and had nothing left for supplies. The school had been built to include a large area for training students to become skilled tradesmen, but there was no equipment available to carry out the plan. George asked the man if he had talked to a certain person in the area who might help him. The man said he had contacted that person and had no luck in getting any help at all. George promised to talk to the man, and he did, resulting in a promise to provide the school with whatever was needed.

Few Johnson County kids were able financially go on to college, so the skilled trades training was a godsend to many students. So, the school was furnished with an abundant supply of equipment to train high school students for many different skills. That meant many kids would receive training for a job that would provide a good living for themselves and their families.

These examples give you a picture of the ways that George handled responsibilities given to him. George Watkins was a man who listened for God's voice and when he heard it, he acted on it. I feel extremely blessed to have partnered with him for more than sixty years.