



PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL GOMEZ

beyond the Picket Fence

BY JOY FISHER

Four-year-old Pierce Jernigan has spina bifida. He may never walk, but he's teaching others to get up and live.

As young men in their 20s, Henry Jernigan and Brent Gambrell formed their own Christian comedy duo. This energetic team evolved from performing skits at their home church to a decade of road trips, doing Carol Burnett-style comedy and drama for youth conferences and single adult events.

Back then, Henry and Brent prayed fervently for each other's future wives. Brent recalls, "Henry dreamed of having 2.5 kids, a white picket fence, and a sheepdog." It didn't happen just that way, but Brent is constantly amazed at the faith and strength with which Henry leads his family.

MEET ELIZABETH | The drama in Henry's life was simply a career choice, but the drama in his future wife's life was by circumstance. At the age of 8, Elizabeth was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, a degenerative eye disease that erodes peripheral vision and the ability to see at night. In many cases, the disease leads to blindness.

When Henry and Elizabeth began to date, Brent knew marrying Elizabeth would be a far cry from Henry's dream. "I asked Henry about having a wife who would likely go blind," Brent recalls. Henry's response? "I love her. If that's the hand we are dealt, it'll be OK."

Soon after they married, Henry's career shifted. Brent felt called to leave the comedy team to preach and speak; Henry became his manager.

Most of us remember well the week of September 11, 2001. Henry and Elizabeth remember it in another way — two days before the attacks, they learned they would be parents. But during a routine fetal protein test in her second trimester, Elizabeth and Henry also learned something was amiss. Ultrasound indicated spina bifida, a condition in which the backbone and spinal canal do not close before birth. It was a heartbreaking day, but a joyous one as well, when they learned their child was a boy.

Elizabeth admits, "It really put our faith into perspective. You say that you'll *trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding, and in all your ways, He will direct your path.* But when you actually put that into practice, it's a whole different ball game. In a sense it was a joy to walk through [Pierce's birth] from a faith standpoint because the Lord brought us closer. Even in those times when we couldn't pray because we didn't know what to say, we knew God was in control and taking care of each situation."

Henry agrees. "We decided during pregnancy that we wouldn't worry about what we didn't know. It gave us a true peace as we waited for Pierce to be born."

Once again, Brent saw Henry's strength shine through. In a society when many babies with spina bifida are aborted, Brent remembers Henry saying, "This is what God wants for us, so we're not just OK; we're blessed by it."

THE NEW "NORMAL" | William Pierce Jernigan was born April 16, 2002. Though Henry and Elizabeth had prepared themselves mentally for the task of raising a physically-challenged child, the first few months of Pierce's life were a whirlwind of surgeries and complications. Before Pierce was 6 months old, he had been wheeled into surgery five times. Now 4, Pierce has had more surgeries and countless medical procedures.

Most kids are able to walk or close to it when they reach 1 year. Pierce didn't. It's a milestone his parents know he may never reach. Instead, Pierce struggles to learn how to get in and out of his pint-sized wheelchair. He has function

in his upper body, but no control over anything below his hips. Since Pierce was 4 months old, his mom has performed physical therapy with him twice a day for 45 minutes. The range of motion exercises they do together improve his flexibility and tone and stimulate his bones and muscles to grow. There's no need for the wheelchair in the Jernigan's one-story home. Pierce is a regular G.I. Joe, scooting around on his belly. He's fast, too!

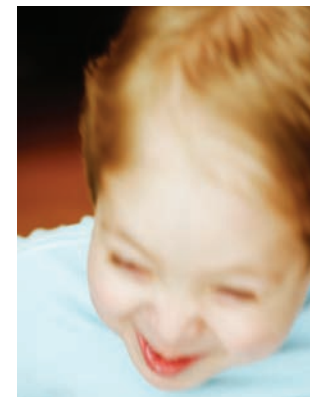
Developmentally, Pierce is mostly in line with his peers. He attends preschool to practice skills that will help him be more independent when he starts kindergarten. He's a social animal who makes his parents laugh often. He goes to birthday parties and has friends at school. The fact that he can't walk doesn't faze this amazing boy. It's just life.

DAY IN, DAY OUT | Since Elizabeth cannot drive, Henry transports the family everywhere they need to go.

Confined to home most of the time, Elizabeth created *Elizabeth's Washtub*, a home-based business through which she packages handcrafted bath and body products. She cares for Pierce, loves to cook, and relies heavily on Henry and friends to be close by when Pierce has a medical emergency.

Requelle Raley is one of those friends. "Elizabeth loves life, and that joy is contagious,"

"I'd rather him live and not walk than for him to walk and not live."
— Henry Jernigan



she says. "Henry and Elizabeth have been so gracious to allow me to be a part of their family. They've never viewed Pierce as having special needs. To them, he's just Pierce. Jeremiah 29:11 is their motto, allowing them to enjoy Pierce for the fun-loving, happy little boy God created him to be."

GET UP AND LIVE | Last year, Henry found a way to tie together his loves for drama, comedy, and his son. More than anything, Henry's life is a statement of faith in the God he knows guides him every step of the way. He has stepped down from managing Brent and is on the road again, this time solo. He's sharing a message about life that he's learned directly from Pierce.

Henry shares, "I come at it from the angle of Pierce's joy and enthusiasm for life." On stage, Henry challenges listeners to approach life in a positive way.

There have been times when Henry thought his son might die. At those times, Henry says, "When I thought he was dying in my arms, I wasn't praying, 'God, let him walk,' but, 'God, let him live.' Our prayer now is more for Pierce to live and experience life than it is for him to walk. I'd rather him live and not walk than for him to walk and not live."

Because Henry's first love is comedy, he shares the poignant story of his son's life from a sometimes humorous angle. The crux of the message is simple: "Stop worrying about the little things that drag you down: Get up and live." 🍌

Joy Fisher is a wife of 10 years and mother of three. One of the greatest blessings in her life is her 7-year-old son, Samuel, who has Down syndrome.

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

The Jernigans are grateful for the love, prayers, and ongoing support from family, friends, and their home church, Two Rivers Baptist in Nashville, Tenn.

Book Henry Jernigan for a speaking engagement at: henry@henryjernigan.com, and visit his Web site at www.henryjernigan.com.

Visit Elizabeth's Washtub at www.elizabethswashtub.com.

SHARE THE GIFT



When you cross paths with a family that includes a special-needs child, embrace the opportunity! Interaction with this family can:

- Help your own children learn empathy and give them opportunity to treat others with respect and love, regardless of differences.
- Give you a new perspective on what's important in life.
- Remind you of the value of all human life.

Not sure what a family needs from you?

Follow these guidelines:

- Listen. Sometimes parents want to share about a milestone their child has reached. At other times, they may need a sympathetic ear to share struggles or frustrations.
- Be careful about giving advice unless you are asked for your opinion.
- Don't say, "Call me if you need me." Say, "I'm available tomorrow morning for three hours. What can I do for you during that time?" Be prepared to load the dishwasher, care for the child while mom naps, or pick up dry cleaning.
- Respond to specific situations. If a child is hospitalized, offer assistance with siblings. Provide a meal. Start a prayer chain. Send a card.
- Get to know the child. This is perhaps the greatest gift you can give. Follow the parents' lead as you learn to interact. Look the child in the eye; speak to him even if he cannot speak back. Ask how you can participate in his development; you might practice sign language with him, assist him with exercises to boost his large motor skills, or simply sit with him to watch his favorite video.