

# Lunsford family, split long ago, reunites

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For 39 years, the questions have mounted in the back of Jonnie Lunsford Turner's mind.

The Spindale resident has passed decades wondering about her youngest brothers, James and Dennis Fine, neither of whom she had seen since 1969. Where did they live? Were they OK? Were they happy?

"They've always been in my mind and in my heart," she said. What Jonnie didn't know until recently was that the two boys she had been looking for, whom she last saw when they were 5 years and 13 months old, respectively, had been raised in Lexington, where each had remained to start families of their own.

At the end of June, the long-lost family members finally made contact with each other, and on Saturday, the two men attended a most unusual family reunion at the Edward C. Smith Civic Center, one that restored them to their biological family and filled in many of the gaps in their memories. The Lunsfords, scattered to the four winds at the end of the 1960s, were finally back together.

## **A family fractures**

The road leading up to Saturday's reunion was long and uniquely difficult for each of the 10 Lunsford children.

The saga began in 1969, when Frances Lunsford, the family's matriarch, was in the depths of a struggle with alcoholism and bipolar disorder. Although some of her children had already reached adulthood, she was still raising several young ones, in poverty and virtually alone, having separated from her first husband, Harry. Out of desperation, she made the difficult decision to put her six youngest up for adoption.

Jonnie, born in 1948, was already an adult by that time, and helped care for her younger siblings. She vividly remembers the split, and her mother's anguish at deciding to initiate it.

"She wanted them to have a better life," she said. Wise as that might have been, it was a choice that meant some enormously painful good-byes. Dennis and James left the family's Asheville house on the same day - and in the same taxi - as their sisters, twins Patty and Ginger.

Despite his young age at the time of the split, Dennis said he remembers the day he left the family home. Jonnie, he said, had been too distraught to put him in the taxi.

"She had to get one of my uncles to do it," he said. "It was the longest day of my life."

Like their brothers, the twin girls were adopted together. Two others, Kim and Rene, were given over to a foster home.

Jonnie's sister Jerrie was also grown when the adoption took place. One older brother, Chris, ran away rather than enter a foster home, and Tommy went to live with Jonnie.

After the family split, the siblings by and large had minimal contact. Tommy, Chris, Rene, Kim, Jonnie and Jerrie all knew how to find each other, and spoke sporadically until their mother died in a car accident outside of Asheville in 1979. Two years later, Jonnie made contact with Patty and Ginger, whom she hadn't seen since the day they left the family home. Jonnie was, to use a term she uses quite often these days, "elated" to have reconnected with a significant piece of her past.

"One of my prayers had been answered," she said.

### **Searching for the boys**

For the next 27 years, however, she could only wonder about Dennis and James, whom no one in the family had been able to locate or contact.

"We had absolutely no idea where the boys were," said Ginger, who now lives with her family on Pawleys Island, S.C.

Jonnie said she had resigned herself to never finding them until recently, when her daughter, Sherry Lance, posted the family's story on a Web site dedicated to helping long-separated families find each other.

Sherry was approached by a free adoption researcher, Bob Crowter, on behalf of an L.A.-based production company, Jason Brooks Productions. The company was interested in filming the reunion for a documentary, and offered to set up a meeting in Lexington between Jonnie, Sherry, James and Dennis.

Jonnie was ecstatic.

"I said, 'I don't care, I just want to see my brothers,'" she recalled. Within days, the producers had gathered the four at Smiley's Barbecue on N.C. Highway 8.

"The second I saw them, I knew who they were," she said.

For Dennis and James Fine, who had been each other's only link to the Lunsford family, the news that Jonnie was actively seeking them halted both men in their tracks.

"When my brother told me, I hit the floor," Dennis said. The youngest of the Lunsfords, he had struggled for years to find any scrap of information about his birth or his family, to no avail.

The reunion, the meetings and conversations with his brothers and sisters, have given him some closure, though he says he still has some difficult emotions to work through.

"I got to see my mother's grave, put a rose on it and tell her I didn't hate her for what she did," Dennis said.

Despite a lifelong search that turned up virtually nothing about his biological past, he said he never gave up hope that a reunion would someday happen. James, however, said he had come to believe it was impossible. A little over two weeks ago, however, the phone rang.

"It was a private investigator, and he asked me if my name was James Lunsford," he said, noting that he hadn't been called that since he was a child. Like it was for Dennis, the revelation that his family was looking for him was a weight lifted off his shoulders.

"It's been like an emotional roller coaster, but it's joyful," James said. "It's like a healing process."

## **Reunited**

On Saturday, the next big chapter in the Lunsfords' lives opened. The relatives met to break bread together, bringing their own children and grandchildren, and welcomed siblings from as far away as California. For such a large family, one that has endured so much, the meeting was nothing short of miraculous.

Rene Crain, one of 10 Lunsford children in attendance, described a profound sense of gratitude at the fact that all of her brothers and sisters had agreed to take part in the reunion.

"That everybody is here, and everybody wanted to be here, it's just amazing," Crain said.

Despite the difficult past, there were plenty of broad smiles and laughter as the relatives, many of them in each other's presence for the first time, got to know one another.

For Jonnie, witnessing her family gathered together again after so long, the feeling was overwhelming.

"My heart is complete," she said.

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