



**GAME NIGHT** - Whether it's a home-cooked meal or a T-Rex puzzle, Dennis and Kathy Crouse's dining table brings the family together. Here, dads Sherman Moretz (husband of Natasha) and Billy Anderson (husband of Monica) help kids Brax, Josiah, Leah, Ryker, and Bo (in counterclockwise order) piece the puzzle together.

# Pass the Salt...

The first handful of houses were already dark as I pulled into Wittenburg Springs at ten 'til eight. But when I spotted the home off Kipling Drive – the one with warm, buttery light streaming out of every windowpane – I knew I was at the right place, at the right time. The sound of high-pitched giggles spilling underneath the front door only confirmed it. It was Sunday night, after all, and that meant it was supertime for 20 at the Crouse house.

But Bethlehem isn't where the Crouse's roots were planted; it was Vashti, just short of a quarter-mile from the Linney's Grove Baptist, inside a little brick house with white shutters. There, the Crouse kids – Natasha, Monica, Tiffany, and Joe – all grew into their big hearts and earned softball-sized bruises. Likewise, the family of 6 became cornerstone members of Linney's Grove, where Dennis and Kathy attend and are beloved by the Vashti community still today. Just wait for Saturday nights in the summer, when they host fish fries as fundraisers for their youth group. There, in the fellowship hall, you'll see the evidence of it; people come from every hollar of the community – my family included.

I've known Dennis and Kathy Crouse longer than I can remember. In fact, I can recall being 4 or so – fresh out of the oncology unit of Brenner's Children's Hospital – and sitting with the two of them as Monica and Natasha, their oldest girls, played ball for my dad. And, more vividly than that, I can remember spending summer afternoons with Tiffany, my first babysitter and their youngest daughter, drawing curly cues with sherbet-colored sidewalk chalk.

Now, you're probably thinking, "anybody who's anybody knows the Crouse's." And friend, I surely hope you're right. A long while back, my dad referred to them as "salt of the earth people." He said it slowly, with reverence and a slow nod of confirmation. You know the kind of people he speaks of: those that remind you just how sweet this life is by simply knowing them. There's never been a title so fitting.

I'm not alone. After all, the roots of Dennis and Kathy Crouse run deep and wide in the Alexander County soil. Kathy runs the Alexander Central cafeteria like a well-oiled steamboat and has for decades. Dennis, on the other hand, has paired his job at CommScope with weekends over his XL cooker master-

ing his part-time pork gig. In fact, his well-loved barbeque, hand-chopped and topped "with its certain, secret sauce," was the inspiration for the iconic family business: Crouse's Country Barbeque. By now, those purple shirts with pink script have become iconic. When they aren't selling that barbeque at the Apple Festival, weddings, or class reunions, the couple sets up shop beside their two-car garage and sells Boston butts to their Bethlehem neighbors right off the rack. Oh, and then there's Kathy's peanut-butter fudge.....need I say more?

But Dennis and Kathy Crouse aren't motivated by their love for spatulas or charcoal – or even the compliments they receive. And believe you me, there's plenty of them. Instead, they are fueled cornerstones that don't bend with the tide or change with the flip of coin. They tap into their faith, the gaggle of grandkids that frequent their upstairs playroom and help with the barbeque assembly line, and the legacy of Tiffany, the daughter they lost and the girl whose death changed Alexander County.

In fact, February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2002 is a day that they – and the people of Alexander County – will never forget. It marks the date that Tiffany's bright, vivacious life was snuffed out by a skiing accident gone horribly wrong on Beech Mountain. Over 15 years have passed since.

And in those years, Dennis and Kathy – alongside their kids, and now, full roster of grandkids – have chosen to commemorate Tiffany's radiant life with action, movement, and growth. Just like shrugging off a broken tooth in softball practice – as Natasha Crouse did playing high school softball for my dad– the Crouse family does not fold or crumble. They move forward.

I sat at the head of the table with a full plate of Kathy's tenderloin and gravy, green beans, and bow-tie macaroni and a glass of sweet tea. And even though the food was seasoned perfectly and begging my fork to continue, I sat it down

on the wood table and panned the room. In the living room was blonde-haired Ali, talking a-mile-a-minute to a wide-eyed Leah, who face was glowing with agreement. To my right was pint-sized Brax teaching pajama-clad Josiah how to flip toy cars with the touch of a finger. And in the background was baby Moriah, bouncing on her daddy, Billy's right knee.

But perhaps the most magnetic sight was that of Dennis and Kathy, mid-laugh and mid-bite of creamed corn, blue eyes glittering, and heads tilted back in delight. I wanted to take a picture, capture the moment and pin it on a wall or in a frame. But I resisted.

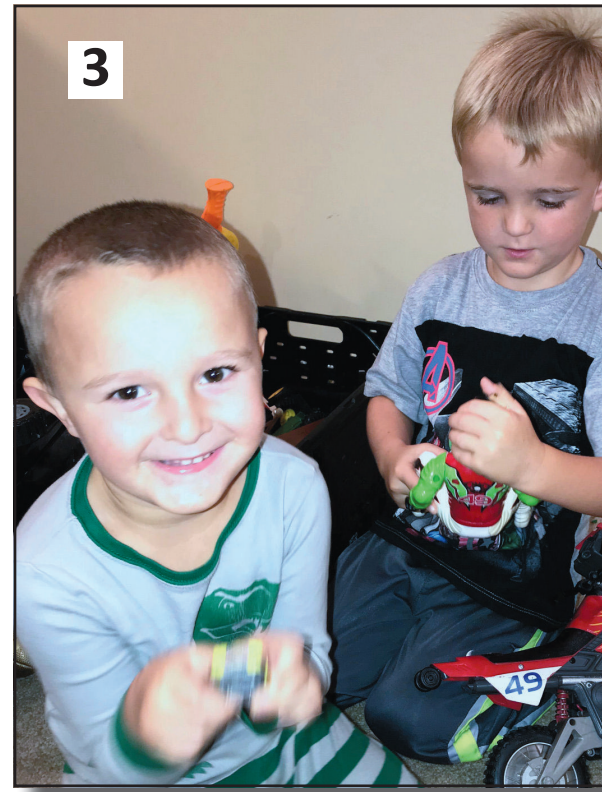
It was too genuine, too real, too sweet. And so, for a girl of 22 with her whole life ahead of her, I painted for you the picture of what I can only hope for my future to hold. Dennis and Kathy, what a wonderful life you share.



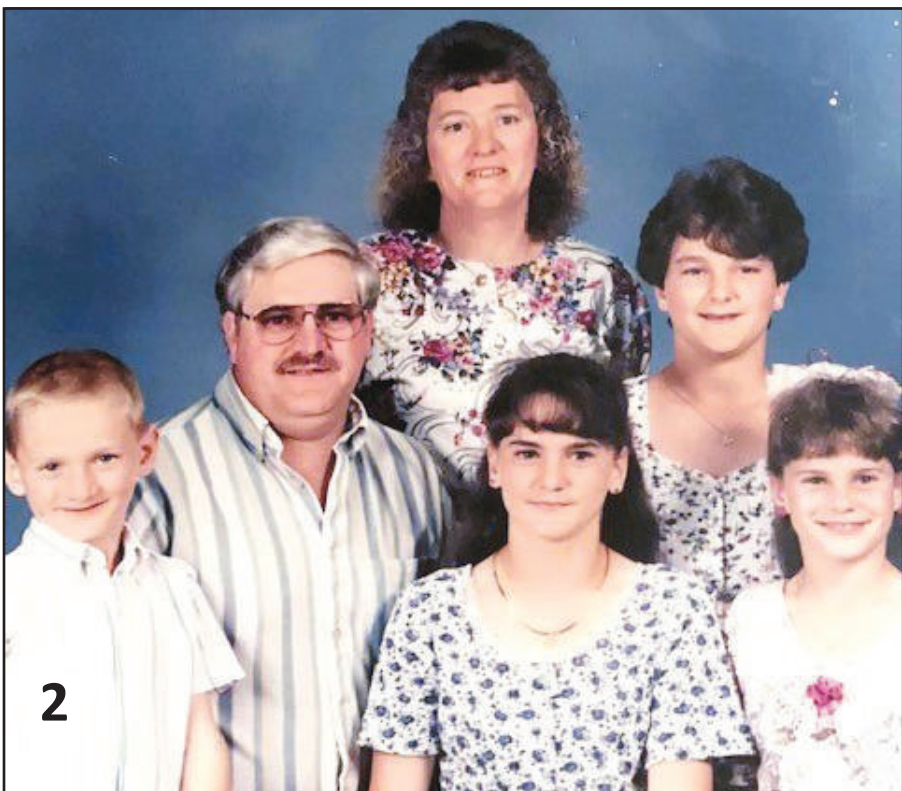
BAILEY SHERRILL



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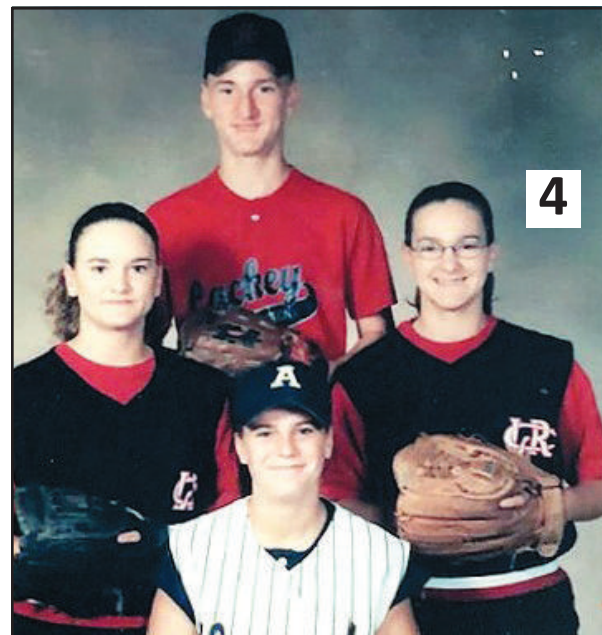


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(1) Kathy works on her famous peanut butter fudge (2) A throwback photo of the Crouse family from the 1990's (3) Grandsons Brax and Josiah enjoy playing together (4) The Crouse kids were always know as top notch ball players



4