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Living the dream by faith plays out in unexpected ways

By GLENDA CAUDLE
Special to The Messenger

Every dream has a genesis, a starting point, a beginning.

For Billy Dowell Jr., who grew up in Union City, the dream is golf.

In the beginning, when he was simply a 4-year-old being introduced to the game by his grandfather, Lewis Couch, it was enough just to dream of the next happy outing. Couch bought his young grandson his first set of clubs at that age. He included the youngster with his regular golfing group and began showing him how to play the game.

Along the way, as young Billy gained years, strength and ability and as his love for the game grew, the dream took on more ambitious parameters.

"I began playing tournaments at age 9," Dowell says. "It did not take me long to start dreaming, while putting on the greens at Poplar Meadows Country Club in Union City, that I was putting for a professional win. Playing there with my dad and friends are memories I cherish. Still, to this day, PMCC ranks up there as one of my favorite courses to play."

By the time he completed his senior year at Union City High School in 1994, he could boast of unusual success on the school golf team and more trophy wins from a variety of tournaments. He could also point to a golf scholarship to Mississippi State University.

The young golfer headed south. His dream pursuit was moving along nicely, in spite of the fact that there were some mornings when he could barely crawl out of bed because of low back pain. At one point, he was hospitalized because of the pain and was diagnosed with sacroiliitis, a condition in which one or both of the body's pelvic sacroiliac joints becomes inflamed.

The condition did not alter his dream or his determination, but it did make him grateful he had also put in place a Plan B.

"I graduated from Mississippi State in 1999 with a degree in microbiology. I intended to go to podiatry school as a plan for something to fall back on," he says. In the back of his mind was the example of Dr. Gil Morgan, an optometrist by training who pursued his own golfing dream and made it to the PGA tour.

When the new century rolled around, the young golfer was studying at Temple University School of Podiatric Medicine in Philadelphia. A year later, he was married and still studying and golfing. Except for the ongoing pelvic pain issues, everything was going along smoothly.

"After my second year of podiatry school, I began looking for golf tournaments to play. In between studies, I would go to a local driving range. I even began working with a strength trainer to maintain good joint health, and I was putting some dates down, aiming to play in tournaments," he says.

"All of a sudden, I began to have gastrointestinal issues. This quickly progressed, leading me to go to the emergency room. I was admitted to a hospital in South New Jersey, and I would stay there for two weeks before being transferred to Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Center City Philadelphia. When I arrived at TJUH, my vitals were near fatal numbers. I was a patient there for another 2½ months. Then I went home for two weeks."



Submitted photo

GRATEFUL HEARTS — Billy Dowell Jr. (second from left) and his wife, Meredith (third from left), share a special moment with his parents, Billy Dowell Sr. and Jenny Dowell of Union City. Billy Jr. and

Meredith make their home in Jacksonville, Fla., where he works toward his dream of competing in golf on the Senior Tour in a couple of years and of walking with Jesus Christ daily.



Submitted photos

TAKE A SWING — A young Billy Dowell Jr., who was introduced to the game of golf by his grandfather, Lewis Couch, was a successful player at Union City High School and earned a golf scholarship to Mississippi State University. Despite setbacks caused by medical issues, he is still pursuing a professional career in golf.

During those weeks in the hospital, doctors struggled to make a diagnosis and eventually determined his illness was probably ulcerative colitis, a chronic inflammatory bowel disease. They warned him he could lose his colon, and that represented a major concern for him, because he understood the implications. Dowell was hopeful that during emergency surgery doctors would be able to save his colon. But on waking up, he realized he had an ileostomy bag, which presented a new way of life.

"During that time I was in the hospital for so long, I had started drawing golf courses. I was so sick and in there for so long, and I just drew the holes like I was playing them," he says.

But golf wasn't the only hope he had, at that point.

"When I was in the hospital, my Bible was bedside, for sure," he says. "It seemed like such a long time, and I lost about 70 pounds, down to around 130. Prayers were voiced often and my dependence on God deepened."

Little did he know just how important that faith-filled optimism was going to be.

No reason to celebrate

July 4, 2003, is a date Dowell and his bride, Meredith, will never forget. On America's birthday, only days after his return home from the long hospital stay, he developed a perforated large intestine, leaving him in terrible abdominal pain.

"I could have died that day," he says.

His parents — Jenny and Billy Dowell Sr. of Union City — flew in overnight to support their son and daughter-in-law and to pray for Billy Jr. as he fought the

hardest battle of his young life.

During emergency surgery, doctors had no choice but to remove their patient's damaged colon and rectum.

"I awoke in surgical ICU, reached down and discovered the worst thing I had thought about had occurred. I had an ileostomy bag. I had been through such struggles the previous three months and had just depended on God to carry me through," he recalls. "There were no more thoughts of former things like a low golf round or a nice meal. I just thought about getting back to a baseline in my life. My wife and I had been married 1½ years, and now our lives had been completely changed by my health. I spent mornings and nights crying with Meredith. Some say time heals, and it does, but time with God heals and He also shows a way."

Golf was not, however, something he could engage in immediately following surgery. Neither was completing the medical education he had been pursuing. The Dowells decided their best option was to move to Meredith's hometown of Winter Park, Fla., while they figured out the next steps in their future.

"We got to Florida and just thought, 'Where do we go? What do we do?' None of us were experts in any of the things that were happening, but I knew I had a long stretch of body adapting. We checked with Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, Fla. I had my records forwarded from Philadelphia and they agreed to see me.

"Dr. John Cangemi (a physician specializing in gastroenterology and hepatology and I just really connected," he says when speaking of his Florida med-

ical team. "so Meredith and I decided to hope and pray about going with them."

From that time and until his retirement last year, Dr. Cangemi headed up the interdisciplinary medical team caring for Dowell, directing him to proper care for what has turned out to be multiple autoimmune disease manifestations. The problem is a central defect of his immune system.

Both his ulcerative colitis, which was re-diagnosed as Crohn's Disease, and the sacroiliitis (now better identified as ankylosing spondylitis or inflammatory arthritis), are now recognized as part and parcel of the autoimmune condition. More recently, pain in his left eye was identified as uveitis, an eye inflammation which has led to glaucoma.

Surgeons at Mayo's Department of Ophthalmology implanted a glaucoma valve to release the pressure and restore vision in that eye. They also determined the vision problem is linked to the inflammatory process that happened earlier in his GI tract.

"By the grace of God, it is doing really, really well," Dowell says of the shunt in his left eye. "It regulated the pressure, but part of it was that I started seeing double out of my left eye."

A physician friend assured him, however, that his brain would adapt and he would no longer notice the double vision. That has proven true.

Just shy of a year after the couple moved to Florida, Dr. Philip Metzger reformed the ileum or lower portion of Dowell's small intestine into a j-shaped pouch and attached it to the end of his rectum. Since then, he has had no need of the ileostomy bag; however, he has experienced repeated inflammation issues — which have since been brought under more control — and he does need to visit the bathroom more often than most people.

Once it became clear that all his health challenges were related to his body's autoimmune problems, the search began for a single drug that would treat each condition. In July 2011, Mayo Clinic physicians hit the jackpot with a drug called Humira (adalimumab).

According to Dr. Cangemi, Humira acts like an antibody and targets the molecule that promotes the inflammatory process, deactivating it. ("Autoimmune disease is no handicap to golfing greatness"; July 15, 2019; Mayo Clinic News Network).

Dowell explains his blood

must be checked regularly because his body has started producing antibodies to it. In 2020, doctors increased his dosage regimen to weekly, rather than every two weeks, and his health has prospered.

"I spent approximately 10 years getting my autoimmune diseases regulated and managing GI issues. During those years, pouchitis, intestinal infections and bowel obstructions occurred often. My eye health was up and down. My low back pain fluctuated often, preceding intestinal inflammation. Humira was the treatment that ultimately controlled the three autoimmune conditions, but taking this medication puts you at higher risk for skin cancer. In 2021, I was diagnosed with skin cancer and Mohs Surgery was performed at Mayo Clinic. I see a Mayo dermatologist every six months, and I've just added another management area on the list for pursuing golf.

Ready for a round?

"God, golf and health make up my life, in a way," Dowell says. "Golf taught me discipline. It is a game that does not give you anything; it must be earned. Golf brings me back, whether I shoot my lowest or worst round of golf. I know one thing, for sure, is that I am working towards being my best. In turn, losing aspects of my health means I cannot get that back. I work hard through a learned process of managing my health, though. My prayer and hope each day is to maintain the health I have."

Once the young golfer began taking Humira, he felt ready to return to the golf circuit. He began swinging his clubs again, but he found he also had to make some more body changes. As he signed up and began training for an amateur golf tournament in the spring of 2015, he realized that during the years of fighting his autoimmune disease battle, he had gained a considerable amount of weight due to the side effects of drugs like prednisone. A nutritionist and a strength trainer helped with diet modification and exercise, and he managed to lose 100 pounds and return to his college weight. And he played in that May 1, 2015, tournament.

Many other golfing opportunities have followed.

"I have a passion to work as hard as I can on my game and play at the highest level I can. It's a process of ups and downs, but I've been so blessed with friends like Dennis Walters in the World Golf Hall of Fame. He is paralyzed from a golf cart accident that happened early in his professional golf career. He has toured the U.S. and abroad for years, doing golf trick shot shows. And he's been such an encouragement to me."

Dowell recalls that a few years ago, he was blessed to get to know Wally Armstrong, a PGA Tour player during the 1970s and '80s.

"He wrote a book called 'The Mulligan' that's been made into a movie. He always emphasized the principle of walking with Jesus. You can live with Him and call on Him, but the emphasis was in walking with Him always. Walking with Jesus is the center of my life. Wally's book is terrific, and we continue to stay in touch."

In May 2022, the Dowells moved to Jacksonville, enabling him to become part of Mayo Clinic's primary care program. He also began working at Coastal

Indoor Golf in Jacksonville Beach, where he had previously formed a warm and encouraging friendship with the owner.

"I work out six days a week, and I'm still focused on that dream. Just the other day, I met a kid who is playing college golf in Georgia. I love the opportunity to influence young people like him to never give up on the dream. My own dream is still to play professional golf. I keep that dream alive every day, adding some aspect associated with my golf. I have great hope of influencing others going through low points in their lives.

"These days I am dreaming about playing on the Senior Tour. I'm almost 48, so I need to get into high gear over the next two years.

"I am so very thankful for my hometown of Union City, Tenn. I enjoyed wonderful years growing up in northwest Tennessee. Even while I was living in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Florida, the people of Union City have always been so encouraging through prayers, cards and calls. I am proud to be a native of Union City and often share its greatness with others."

Billy's biggest cheerleaders

"I love so many things about Billy, but it's his determination that sticks out to me. He is so determined," says Meredith Dowell. "I love his positive outlook on life in all aspects. He loves to have that positiveness, and I notice that people are drawn to him in a good way. He has an inner strength and is very calm. He lights up when he can help people going through special struggles. He even offers his phone number through Mayo Clinic if he can help people. He likes to educate them about things that have worked for him."

The Dowells have learned to rise to multiple challenges with faith and determination.

"I just admire him for being so positive," Jenny Dowell says of her son. "He seldom ever complains. He has told me many times, 'God is not through with me yet.' He's just a very special person."

Billy Dowell Sr. describes his son's commitments in life in a few words. "It's God, family and country for him. And his faith is so strong. Jenny and I were told on three separate occasions that our son wouldn't make it through the night, but he did. His comment to me at one time was, 'God won't put anything on me I can't handle.' I just think it's amazing what he has been through and how he has handled it. I think people have just been put in his path so that things fell into place with the right person there at the right time on several occasions."

Playing through

Every dream has a genesis, a starting point, a beginning.

But sometimes, there are detours, setbacks and modifications along the way.

Those whose faith and commitment are stronger than even the dream itself — those like Billy Dowell Jr. — can still say, "I pray every day, and I pray for His will to be done through all of this, because it's not about me."

And he means every word.

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