



FLY

like an eagle

By Victoria Beasley & Suzanne Johnson

The outlook for Elizabeth Huntley '93 looked bleak during her childhood in Clanton, but everything changed as soon as she realized one important lesson: she was more than a bird.



At first glance, young Liz Huntley's future looked dim—if she even survived to have a future. The 5-year-old was living in less-than-ideal circumstances in Huntsville with her parents and four siblings when things began to unravel.

First, her father was jailed for selling drugs.

Her mother, addicted to heroin, committed suicide.

The children were separated and, at 5, Huntley and her younger sister were uprooted and moved to Clanton, where they were raised by their stern, hardworking grandmother.

Things should have grown more stable—but they didn't. Not in a household with a sexually abusive uncle and another uncle whose schizophrenia was expressed with violence.

Her younger sister got pregnant as the girls were displaced in foster homes and with extended family when their grandmother grew ill.

But Huntley knew there was a better life than what she'd been handed, and she was determined to find it.

The road to not only surviving, but thriving, led her to God, to Auburn, to her husband, Tony Huntley '85, to law school, to a seat on the Auburn University Board of Trustees, and even back to Clanton, where she works in her old community to make sure other children like her don't fall through the cracks even as she maintains a demanding legal career in Birmingham.

It all begins and ends with faith.

Although her home life was hard, Huntley stood strong and made faith her highest priority. Her church, The World's Church of the Living God, which she still attends with her own family, first became a safe haven when her pastor, Elijah Good, spoke to



the congregation about Joseph and how God used his life despite all its tragic events.

"I thought if God can use Joseph's life for a good purpose even though all those bad things happened to him, maybe He can use my life," Huntley says. It was that day Huntley found hope and realized she was more than a bird. If God cared so deeply for a mere sparrow, He would certainly take care of her.

In spite of all the hardships going on behind closed doors, she thrived in school and had a desire to learn. Because her home life was not the affectionate environment she craved, she found praise and love from her teachers and other authority figures that were placed in her life to help her succeed.

Huntley's desire to become a lawyer first surfaced in middle school when her history teacher encouraged her to start reading biographies. Through her readings she learned that everything significant that happened in America happened through the practice of law. She discovered she wanted to be someone who put the good of the public first and helped people.

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She's quick to credit God with putting the opportunities in her path, but Huntley met the challenges. She was a cheerleader; a part of the YMCA summer job program; and a participant in Upward Bound, a college preparatory program for low-income and potential first-generation college students, at the University of Montevallo. Huntley also attended the summer Minority Introduction to Engineering Program (MITE) program at Auburn, and in her senior year was invited to the National Young Leaders Conference at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.

It could be no surprise, then, that the shining moment of her busy high school career was being named valedictorian and accepting a scholarship to attend Auburn University—where she found a new family.

"Auburn has a way of making you feel like you belong and are part of a family," says Huntley. "At that time in my life I needed that."

Huntley was no couch potato at Auburn even as a freshman, serving in the Tigerettes and Tiger Hosts program right off the bat. "Being a Tigerette gave me the opportunity to interact with people that were actively involved on campus," she says. Huntley ultimately earned the opportunity to serve as chaplain of the Tigerettes and Tiger Hosts.

She also became involved with the Fellowship of Christian Students and the Student Government Association, for which she ran for president. "She was always destined for greatness whether she was aware of it or not," says her friend Vonnie Stone '95.

Although Huntley might not have agreed that she was destined for greatness after losing the SGA election, then-Auburn Football Head Coach Pat Dye thought otherwise. The two met to discuss her plans for law school and why she wanted to be a lawyer.

After Dye made some calls on her behalf, Huntley began interning with Lightfoot, Franklin & White, the Birmingham-based law firm at which she is now Of Counsel. "Through that experience,





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Reaching Out
 Huntley, on a recent visit to her childhood neighborhood in Huntsville as well as a local school (on next page), stressed the importance of education to making a better life.

I learned I definitely wanted to be a lawyer. I love the commitment, the challenge and the grind of it.”

Huntley’s sole focus was getting into Cumberland Law School, but after being waitlisted, AU Professor Wayne Flynt, now a professor emeritus of history, told her about an internship opportunity with A+. That internship enabled her to speak in town hall meetings, work in communities and form relationships with statewide leaders such as attorneys Bobby Segall and Alyce Spruell. It was through Segall and Spruell’s influence that Huntley visited the University of Alabama School of Law and decided to attend with a partial scholarship.

“God closed one door and opened another one with A+ and later law school at Alabama. Those experiences opened up a world of opportunities for me,” Huntley says.

Currently, Huntley is a litigation attorney who practices in the areas of banking and financial services, consumer law, business litigation and product liability with Lightfoot, Franklin & White.

Today, Liz Huntley and her husband, Anthony J. Huntley ’85, love and care for their three children in a way that Huntley never knew as a child. But she’s driven to help other children as well.

Far from hiding the difficulties of her childhood, she decided to share them in her 2015 inspirational autobiography, *More Than a Bird*, and use them to help other children rise beyond their circumstances. She has a passion for childhood education and providing children with resources to overcome negative family cycles and help them realize their circumstances do not define them.

While her faith is her No. 1 value, empathy follows close behind. “If you live a life of empathy and service it takes care of so many things,” she says. “Empathy and service are the cornerstones of character.”

Character, for Huntley, also meant returning to live in Clanton so she could help the children from her own childhood community realize that there is a way to succeed and escape poverty and violence.

“The kids that are there never see the people from that neighborhood that got out and have turned out okay, because most of them that succeed move away. There is power in seeing real, tangible, successful people and knowing they were from the housing projects.”

Huntley’s major focus in the community is pre-K—specifically, developing options for every child to have access to high quality pre-K. “My potential in education was tapped into early and it became a refuge from the bad,” she said. “Once I understood the importance of education, I realized it could get me out of poverty and out of the projects.”

She believes it’s vital to get children engaged while they are still young, vulnerable and willing to learn. Giving them an environment of nurturing, encouraging teachers could change their lives. “I’m not stopping till every 4-year-old in Alabama has access to high quality pre-K, because then they have a chance,” she says.



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As a member of the board for the Alabama School Readiness Alliance, a statewide, nonprofit coalition advocating for the expansion of high-quality, voluntary pre-K, Huntley and the other members have proposed a 10-year plan to expand voluntary pre-K programs throughout the state. "We need to educate them and start early."

Because of her devotion to early intervention and educating children to change their lives for the better, she also has been appointed to serve on the Governor's Task Force on Prevention of Sexual Abuse in Children. The group's purpose is to submit suggestions to the governor for an age-appropriate curriculum to be taught in classrooms, aimed at reducing the incidence of child sexual abuse in the state.

Huntley has also instilled her passions into her own children. She and her 14-year old daughter are starting a summer program to increase and improve Clanton's reading levels.

"This summer we are starting a reading initiative because one of the things I have learned through the years of after-school tutoring is that a lot of kids can't read. Yet these kids are moving

through the system, and that's when we start seeing dropouts. You are wasting your time when you are trying to help the kids with social studies and they can't even read the book."

She also has created Project GEAR, which offers after-school tutoring to children who might not otherwise have that opportunity, and has helped create exposure programs to help kids see their full potential by taking them on college visits.

Huntley is no stranger to inspiring and changing lives, besides being a role model and advocate for children. She also is a motivational speaker, hoping to inspire the youth and adults to become game-changers and realize how much they can impact others' lives.

That type of inspiration also drove her to pen *More Than a Bird*. It is part inspirational memoir, but mostly a story of faith.

"God used each one of the undesirable memories and experiences to lead me to where I am today and shape me to be able to help so many people.

"I celebrate those memories now because God used those terrible things for wonderful outcomes." 

