



Hunter Cunningham

Vernon Intermediate School

Teacher: Mrs. Rhonda Lindley

District 4

“The Best Marriage I Know”

Isn't it obvious how some things are meant to be together? For example, can you imagine peanut butter without jelly or cake without ice cream? Just like peanut butter and jelly and cake and ice cream, my mom and dad were simply meant to be together. The very first time that my mom and dad ever saw each other was in March 1992, at a at spring football game in Vernon, Alabama. Some people might say



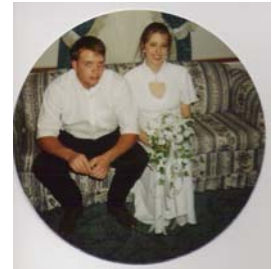
that it was just a coincidence that my parents met, but I think it was just destined to happen. My dad was a South Lamar football player who would have been playing at the jamboree game had he not suffered a shoulder injury during the previous football season; my mom almost did not go to the game. One of her best friends persuaded her to go at the last minute. My mom's friend knew

my dad, and when he walked by them, she stopped him and introduced him to my mom. It has been almost seventeen years since the night they met; they have been together ever since. Whether their first acquaintance was by chance or by fate, they are now happily married with five children, and if I had to bet right now, I could guarantee that my mom and dad will love each far into the future. What makes their marriage so strong? Perhaps it is the love and compassion that they have for each other, their ability to communicate with one another, and the way they work together to resolve conflict.



The love and compassion that my parents have for each other play an important role in keeping their marriage strong, and the special time that they set aside for each other helps them to keep the romance

alive. Even after being married for several years, my mom and dad make it a point to spend time with each other at least once a week. Some weeks the two of them go to dinner. Other times they stay at home and watch a movie. Either way, they are creating memories that will last them a lifetime. Not only do my parents think it is important to do things as a couple, they also feel that it is essential to do things as individuals and as a family. There are times when my mom will get a book and find a nice quiet spot to read, or my dad will put on his camouflage and go hunting for a couple of hours. As a family, we all have a great time playing baseball or basketball in the back yard. Regardless of whether my mom and dad are doing things as individuals, a couple, or a family, they are relieving some of the stress that comes along with their everyday lives. This refreshes them and gives them the renewed energy that they need in order to face the many challenges that lie ahead in the upcoming week.



Another reason that I believe my parent's marriage continues to last is because they respect each other and openly communicate with each other. They show their respect for each other by helping each other out with the daily activities involved in raising their family. Sometimes this might mean that Dad will help Mom out around the house, and Mom helps Dad by running errands for him. They also respect the decisions that each other make regarding their marriage and their family. My parents are also very supportive and understanding of each other, and if one of them stumbles, the other is always there to pick them up. For example, my dad owns his own business and if he has a rough day on the job, my mom reminds him of the many blessings in life that bring happiness.

No two people are going to agree on everything all of the time. As a result, no marriage is going to be without conflict. One important thing that has played a role in strengthening my parent's marriage is the way they deal with their disagreements. For example, when my parents have a disagreement, they do not yell at each other or criticize one another. They talk things out and work together to solve their

problems instead. Everyone makes mistakes, but it takes a truly sensational couple to be able to forgive each other. Not only does calmly discussing things help my mom and dad, it also teaches my siblings and me that you cannot resolve a conflict by yelling and putting each other down.

The way that my parents are able to rely on each other and negotiate their conflicts with each other shows how strong and sturdy their marriage truly is. Knowing that my mom and dad care so much for each other makes my siblings and me feel loved and safe. Although they were only sixteen when they met, my parents have always worked hard to build their relationship on a solid foundation, and as a result their marriage continues to grow stronger and stronger each day. I can only pray that one day I will have a marriage as strong as that of my parents.

**Tommy and Jennifer Cunningham**



Corey Collier

Madison County Elementary School

Teacher: Ms. Talton

District 5

### “The Best Marriage I Know”

People get married for many reasons, and at least 40% of all marriages end in divorce. Ending a marriage is just as easy as starting one in today’s society. Not everyone takes the promise of “for better or worse, for richer or poorer, through sickness and health ‘til death do us part” to heart. I know two people that not only understand the seriousness of marriage then, but they also work every day to overcome being another statistic.

December 16, 2009 will be a special day for my mom and dad. They will celebrate their sixteenth anniversary. When my mom and dad got married on December 16, 1992, most people they knew told them that they were making a mistake. Most said they wouldn’t make it the first year. Only a handful of people stood by them and supported them. No, my mom wasn’t pregnant and “having to get married.” My mom was twenty-four and just out of college. My dad was twenty-two and had completed two years. The reason most people thought they were making a mistake was because my mom is white, and my dad is African-American.

They lived in the South during a time when racial marriages were still on the books as not being legal in Alabama. They were getting married in the South in a time period when many people did not accept interracial marriages. In 1901, Alabama created a law that banned these marriages. Although people were not prosecuted after the Supreme Court ruled this law unconstitutional, the marriages were still technically illegal. My mom and dad had been married almost five years before Alabama citizens voted in 2000 to remove the Alabama law that banished interracial marriages, and then it only passed 52% to 48%. Alabama definitely was not ready to open its arms to interracial marriages. They started their marriage facing obstacles most couples do not have to face just because they loved each other. No one expected them to survive the first year of marriage much less sixteen years.

Luckily, my mom and dad took their marriage vows seriously. Life has not been easy. In 1993, my mom was turned down for a job because she was married to my dad. Seems the principal doing the hiring didn’t think “my mom’s personal life was beneficial to the students,” although she had graduated with honors from Auburn University. People made comments about them when they would go places. Her parents disowned her in the beginning. My dad was trying to finish his degree. He worked temporary jobs. They told me and my brother about not having any money to exchange Christmas gifts their first year of marriage. They even had to live with his parents when they first married because they couldn’t afford their own place. These types of stresses would be enough to end any marriage, but they worked hard to make their marriage even stronger.

Now, my mom is a teacher and my dad is a principal. They are not only good role models for me and my nine-year-old brother, but also for all the students they are around. Students see them together everywhere they go. Students see them at church and at ballgames. Students see them eating lunch daily and working in our school system to create a positive environment. Students see that married couples can be happy and enjoy building a life together. My brother and I see how they take care of each other, support each other, and even argue with each other but never go to bed mad at each other. They never leave each other's company without a peck on the cheek or hang up the phone without saying, "I love you." They act more like newlyweds instead of an "old married couple."

My parents have made a lot of sacrifices over the last twenty years that they have been together. They just recently built their first home. Until two years ago, they lived in a small mobile home. They drove older cars and did without the newest technological gadgets. Their lives have never been easy nor ones of luxury, but none of that matters. All that seems to matter is that they have each other's love. They have worked hard to create a home with two loving parents for me and my brother. Everything they do, they do for each other and for us to make our lives better. I can't think of any better way to honor their sixteenth wedding anniversary than by telling everyone that they definitely have the "best marriage that I know."

Winner: Hannah Huguley

Clay Chaulkville Middle School

Teacher: Ms. Spivey

District 6

### “The Best Marriage I Know”

Marriage is something that I greatly look forward to. I hope that I will be blessed enough to have a marriage as wonderful as my grandparents'. They have been married for fifty-nine years and are still inseparable. They complement each other very well. There is so much to learn from them. They are constantly a great example to me and I will never be able to thank them enough for that.

My grandparents' names are Phil and Lou Neel, and they are my mom's parents. Phil was not a great student, though he was very talented. He sang in his band called the Hoot Owls and loved to draw. In his high school's "Who's Who" he was voted 'most likely to be the next *Grand Ole Opry* star'. Both Phil and Lou grew up on farms that were relatively close to each other. Of course, back then, close meant one or two miles away. They were not what we think of as the "All-American" couple, meeting, falling in love, and living happily ever after. Lou did not even want to date Phil at first. The irony of the situation is that she actually wanted to date his brother. Phil never gave up trying to win her heart because he felt she was worth the effort. Eventually, Lou gave Phil a chance and saw the kind of man he really was, and that is when they began to fall in love. Phil went to college at an art school in Birmingham and now he is a sports cartoonist. In fact, Auburn's mascot Aubie was created from the sports program he drew for the Auburn football games. Lou went to college at Montevallo and Phil would come down to visit her. They would take long walks just to talk and catch up with each other. They both loved poetry and reading. Lou is still an avid reader and Phil still loves to draw in his art room. They have four kids, fourteen grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren and love to be involved with the family. One of the things I like most about them is that they work hard at making everyone feel special.

One of the greatest things about their marriage is that they do nearly everything together. Every morning, even at their present age, they go to the gym together and work out. They attend church together, are involved in serving other people together, and they even make hospital visits together. When my grandmother cooks a meal for a family going through a rough time, my grandfather goes with her to deliver it. When Phil would coach his sons in athletics, Lou would always willingly keep score for the team. They do everything together, yet they know when to give the other one some space. They always support each other, even in the tough times. Two years before my mom was born, Lou gave birth to a baby boy who only lived an hour. For a month before the birth, to a month after the birth, Lou was completely confined to her bed. Her feet never touched the floor. Phil really had to step up to the plate to continue to raise their four and two-year-old as well as juggling a full time job and meeting Lou's needs. At this time, they did not even have a car; Phil rode the bus to work. From what I see now, Lou is always waiting on Phil hand and foot, but when you know their past, you can really see they just do what the other one needs.

There are so many things to learn from this amazing couple. They are both Christians and God's way is the center of their relationship. I think they love God and know He loves them, and that helps them love each other. Phil has a temper. He is always expecting a lot from himself and the people who surround him. Lou has a way of "rolling with the punches" and knowing when it is a good time to say something to him or just let him vent for a little while. They always try to talk their problems out. They can both kid each other without hurting each other. They pray together. What I see the most from my grandparents is that they try to love each other with all their hearts, 100%. They don't just give 50/50 and meet in the middle. They each put the other one first.

Phil and Lou Neel may have started out as an ordinary couple, but now they have an extraordinary marriage. They have given much to each other, but even more to every person who knows them. They are a great example of how a marriage that depends on God's principles can survive the struggles in life. I hope I will get to enjoy my future marriage the way my grandparents seem to enjoy theirs.

Candice Elliott

Carver Middle School

Teacher: Mashad Kimber

District 7

### “The Best Marriage I Know”

It happened one rainy afternoon, about two o'clock, on the first floor of the Greene County Courthouse. My uncle Joe and Aunt Mary Virginia Hall entered into the “best marriage I know”. Marriage is when a man and woman take certain vows to love and cherish one another, and to stay together through sickness and health, for better or worse. This vow was taken by my Uncle Joe and Aunt Mary on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1991. To this day, they have kept this agreement, and I see their marriage as one that cannot be dissolved except by death of one of them.

I was told that my Uncle Joe had high blood pressure for a long time, but did not think it was as bad on his health as it proved to be. After about six months of uncontrolled blood pressure, his kidneys became damaged and he needed to start dialysis. They said he went through dialysis for about three months, and then he was fortunate enough to receive a kidney at UAB hospital in Birmingham, Alabama. My Aunt Mary told me that this was a stressful time for everyone. But, through love, caring, understanding, and belief in the vows that she took on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1991, they made it. Today, my Uncle Joe has to take a handful of medicines for the rest of his life, but he is alive, he has the love of me, and has the love of my Aunt Mary, in “the best marriage I know”.

What makes this marriage great is that I often see my Uncle Joe and Aunt Mary communicate about things that need to be done, things that should have been done, how they feel about certain things, and about how to take care of and provide a good life for me since the death of both my mother and grandmother, whom I loved dearly. A husband and wife should be able to peacefully discuss how they are feeling, especially about important things, and things that will have an affect on all of us. I hear them discussing things a lot. Sometimes they disagree, but they don't argue and fight. I have been living with my Aunt Mary and Uncle Joe since I was in pre-school. I have never seen them have a fight! This is wonderful; this is “the best marriage I know”.

Living with my Aunt Mary and Uncle Joe taught me a lot, especially about what makes a good marriage, and about boys and girls courting each other. A strong marriage is one where a wife and husband respect each other and spend quality time together. During the busy time between my Aunt Mary's working and my Uncle Joe's doctor appointments, they make time to just be alone together. Sometimes they get a babysitter and just go away for the weekend together or just right out somewhere together. But sometimes, they just sit, hug, and touch each other. This marriage is a description of the kind of marriage I want to enter someday.

My Aunt Mary and Uncle Joe have realized that there will be stressful times in a marriage, but have learned to respect each other and to get along. They have accepted the changes that came along

with children, loss of time for each other, and the sickness of my Uncle Joe. My Uncle Joe and Aunt Mary Virginia Hall care for each other and for their marriage. This is “the best marriage I know.”