



“I Am Second.”

by Sue Wright



Vonda Johnson Gourley

Think “put together,” and you have a perfect description of this week’s guest to I AM SECOND.

When I saw the heading on the information she sent about herself, “Some ideas for Sue,” I said, Oh, goodie! Maybe I’ll come to understand why this lady is such a snappy dresser, reads the Bible so thoroughly enunciated, can generate the meaningful prose she prays with us in worship, carries herself with presence, purpose, and good humor, and beams even more radiantly than she did two years ago. Though no SUM of her, I hope you find as I did in these random thoughts she shares, SOME of the reasons our Vonda Johnson Gourley has become the magnificent woman she is.

Vonda begins, “I was a country kid from the day I was born in Bates County, Missouri, the youngest of six children and the only girl.” She adds, “Of course, I wasn’t spoiled, not MUCH anyway!

“The first six years of my formal education,” says Vonda, “I attended a rural school where one of my brothers was my teacher. He was my role-model then and is still my role-model at the age of 98.

“Carrying our lunches as we walked, it was three quarters of a mile to our one-room school house.” Vonda sometimes wished she had a bicycle to make the trip, but never got one. Her Dad said, “You don’t need a bike—you have a horse.”

And as a matter of fact, she did. She even won a blue ribbon at the county fair for being the Best Child Rider under 16.

“We lived on a dirt road eight miles from our church and the nearest town,” remembers Vonda, “so it wasn’t unusual for the weather or seasonal demands of the farm to make my attendance at church irregular. As a consequence, my mother and I often conducted our own services at home. She played the piano and tried to teach me to carry a tune.” Vonda doesn’t say whether her mother was successful, so you’ll have to ask her if she can sing or not. Vonda does say she was saved and baptized at the age of nine.

Vonda graduated from high school at seventeen and started college the same summer. That summer she also took a teachers’ exam that covered eight subjects so she could teach school in the fall, her ten students spanning eight grades.

“Each day I rode a school bus ten miles to a dirt road where I walked from there to the school building and the children awaiting my instruction,” Vonda recalls. “Besides teaching, it was also my responsibility to build the fires to keep us warm and do the janitorial work. I saved as much of my \$110 a month salary as I could since my real goal was to go to college full time, which I was able to do the fall of the next year.

“I loved going to classes at Central Missouri State Teacher’s College in Warrensburg, but eventually the money I had saved ran out, so it was back to full-time teaching for me, this time in a two-room school with almost twenty students, grades 4–8. Still undeterred from my goal to get a degree, I graduated in four years as I had planned by going four summers and two winter sessions. My major was speech pathology with a minor in math and social studies.

That fall I was hired as the Independence School System’s first full time speech therapist with twelve schools to service. I taught several hundred students with speech problems in schools and at Clay County Health Department from 1968 to 1976.” All together, Vonda taught more than 40 years in a combination of public and private schools and with children from kindergarten age through high school.

At the age of twenty-two and the same summer she graduated from college,



Vonda and her husband Darrell

I Am Second

by Sue Wright



Vonda married Leland Johnson in a double wedding ceremony with Leland's sister and his sister's "intended." Vonda would go on working her job in Independence until their daughter was born in 1953, followed by a son in 1956.

About this time, the family moved to Overland Park, Kansas, where Vonda added teaching Sunday School classes to her list of weekly activities, a "calling" as she terms it, she has embraced in whatever Baptist Church she has belonged to for more than 50 years. She has taught Young People through Senior Adults in Missouri, Kansas, Texas, Oklahoma, and back to Missouri again in 1993. "I've belonged to ten different Baptist churches in my life," she says, "And I've loved all of them."

According to Vonda, the worst grief in her life came in 1982 when her husband Leland died suddenly in their home of a heart attack. She was 54 years old with no family in El Paso, Texas, where they had been living, though she was blessed, thankfully, with many caring friends. She went back to work full-time as a kindergarten teacher at Immanuel Baptist Christian School, staying there for sixteen years. Vonda claims this verse as giving her the most comfort and encouragement following her loss: "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11)."

Two especially important happenings have impacted Vonda's life and brought her "great happiness" in the past several years. One was becoming a grandmother in 1986, 1989, and 1991 to three granddaughters and a grandson, all of whom are now college graduates or in their final year of college. Second was becoming a world traveler.

Vonda explains, "Our family had visited most of the 50 states by traveling each summer the children were home, but we did miss a few, so after I was widowed, I journeyed those missed states except Idaho, and then began my further travels. I have visited Europe twice, seeing 12 countries there, and toured the Holy Lands and Egypt." Vonda has also visited Argentina twice to see the foreign exchange student who lived with the Johnsons from 1970-71. Lidia, and her husband and two sons, live in Tucuman, Argentina, and remain close to Vonda and her family.

No surprise if you know Vonda, she says her "dearest possessions" are the friends she has made through the years, these friends teaching her what Charles Swindoll says is true—"Life is ten percent of what happens to you and ninety percent how you respond." And what are her greatest joys? They are working at In As Much Ministries, serving our church as a deacon, and being a Stephen Minister for the past five years. Vonda also enjoys co-teaching the Senior Ladies' Bible Study on Sundays. All of this can't help but remind Vonda of the Bible verse her mother penned in her autograph book when Vonda was still a child. "In all thy ways acknowledge him," she wrote, "and He shall direct thy path." How He has done that in my life, Vonda exclaims!

And He hasn't

stopped, as far as Vonda is concerned. "God has had even more blessings in store for me in my later years," she declares. Proof positive—"somehow" she and Darrell Gourley, one of Jewell's beloved coaches, now retired, found each other through church and by attending the same basketball games. Coach asked Vonda to lunch, "and the rest is history." The two were married January 9, 2010 in Second's chapel. "Every day is a blessing to us," smiles Vonda. "We are thankful to God for whatever time He gives us in this second chance we're having at happiness."

The Gourleys' combined family numbers five children and 12 grandchildren. "Our goal is to be good role-models to all of them," Vonda says. "Each is a blessing in our lives." Vonda's children have appreciated the vital part their parents played in their healthy upbringing. As evidence, Vonda's son has named the children's gymnasium he built in the Northland, the LEVO GYM in honor of his father Leland, and mother, Vonda.

In closing, Vonda offers this inspirational reflection from author Barbara Johnson: "When we bring sunshine into the lives of others, we're warmed by it ourselves. When we spill a little happiness, it splashes on us and just keeps splashing!!!!"

If you ask me, that's Vonda—a woman spilling sunshine everywhere she goes, and still, the perfect lady!

—Suewrights@att.net

