

8/31/17

Week 36: Christmas Shoes & Smiles

Randy Robison and Sheila Walsh

Jonathan Lee Iverson

Randy: Welcome to *LIFE Today*! I'm Randy Robison. Sheila Walsh is with me. My parents are taking a little break, which brought an opportunity that I was very much looking forward to. Because when they said, "Is there anyone you would want to have on the show?" I said, "As a matter of fact, there is!"

Would you welcome from Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus for over 18 years, the ringmaster, Jonathan Lee Iverson.

[Applause]

So good to have you man! I just said all that but you're not the ringmaster anymore.

Jonathan: Well, I'm the last ringmaster. I was the last voice that you heard go, "Ladies and gentlemen, children of all ages, welcome to the greatest show on earth!"

Sheila: Wow! That's so cool!

Randy: When Sheila and I guest host from now on, can you just show up and say that? What a great intro!

Sheila: Knowing that you did that I went online and of course, you can Google everything, and the photographs of you with your top hat and those costumes, fantastic!

Jonathan: Absolutely! Someone described me as a -- said, "He works the ring like a three ring televangelist."

Randy: That's a compliment around here -- that's a good thing!

Jonathan: No, no -- a great thing.

Randy: How did you even get there?

Jonathan: It was a happy accident. I graduated at the University of Hartford, Hartford school of music. I had plans to be an opera singer. That's what I was going to do. I went to school for voice. And of course, my roommates would soundly just make fun of me. What are you going to do with a degree in do re mi fa sol la ti do?

And well, I graduated college and I was doing the hustling thing and I was looking for work because I wanted to go to Europe and further my studies. And I happened into this wonderful audition for the Fireside Dinner Theater Christmas show. Unbeknownst to me, the director, Phil McKinley was also directing Ringling Brothers and he was actually looking for a singing ringmaster, he made that clear. I had no idea.

I did the audition for the Fireside. Went home and got this call from Ringling Brothers. You would have thought somebody was trying to recruit me for the C.I.A. I thought, okay, why not? I was young. I was dabbling with my faith then and so I thought, oh that would be a great pick up line, "Ringmaster!" So they just put me in with 30 other candidates and it was a rigorous audition process but the rest was history.

Randy: You were used to some of the rigor because of your experience with the Harlem Boys' Choir; is that right?

Jonathan: Yes! Very much so.

Randy: Tell me a little bit just even back before that because you grew up in a broken home?

Jonathan: Well, I grew up -- I would never call it a "broken home." It was actually far more whole than most people's two parent homes. My mother was -- I think my mother is a social genius. I think she is just a marvelous human being. She is really the best thing that ever happened to me. I think from her, everything else was right. She's where -- at her knee is where I learned my faith. It wasn't in a church. It was with her, and her example, and her prayers, and how she conducted her life in spite of herself, in spite of our own humanity.

But the Boys' Choir of Harlem was just this wonderful song of hope in the midst of Harlem at that time. The backdrop of the crack cocaine years and H.I.V. AIDS at its peak. And in the middle of Harlem you had just this brilliant organization that was taking all of these boys in the New York community and sort of thumbing its nose at society saying, "Yes! They can do all those things." We could do everything from Bach to hip hop. That was our big deal. It was quite the life.

Now I was very ignorant to the fact that this was a real legitimate professional group of kids. I thought it was like church choir. Just go in there, I'll get my passport, I'll start traveling. It was

the hardest 18 months of my life. When I first joined, I thought I *never* would perform. I thought I'd never get a chance because I was always rehearsing, always rehearsing, day in and day out. I wanted to quit every other day. My mother was like, "No!" Finally I got my chance and really it was just a great experience. But I'll never forget the rigors of going through that. It really taught me a lot and I still carry those lessons to this day.

Randy: Like what? I can imagine. But specifically what were they?

Jonathan: You know, devotion -- devotion to a craft. You see what happens when discipline is not really held as something. We see it. We have a reality culture where all the wonderful things that you would normally give to people who have practiced something or devoted themselves to something, you would give them the wonderful treasures that come with that type of success. But now you do a selfie and you can be famous. It's ridiculous. But that choir showed me that you really have to devote yourself to something, whatever it is, put your heart in it and devote yourself to something and really be a stickler for discipline. So that's what stuck with me.

Perseverance was the big thing; to actually be a student of music and of song. But not just that, it really built my character to have to really, really learn something and stick with something, to see it through even when I didn't like it, even when it hurt, even when everybody was making fun of me and going, "What are you going to do in a boy choir? You're so tall, go play basketball." I stuck with it and finally, 13 was my year. Everything broke and it was wonderful. I was spending my summers in Japan.

Sheila: I want to talk about your mom a little bit.

Jonathan: Yes! I love her.

Sheila: One of the things that was interesting and sad to me about the story is that because your mom was a single mother, she experienced judgment within the church. I find that kind of horrific because you'd actually think the opposite should be true; that those in the church would gather around her. How did she deal with that and how did she teach you to rise about that?

Jonathan: You know my favorite book as a kid was the *Scarlet Letter*. And I connected with it immediately. I saw my mother. Not to that extreme but um, I was covered a lot. I was a very green child so I was covered a lot from the arrows and daggers that she and my older brother took.

But I learned about certain things that I did suffer unbeknownst to myself, being left back a grade because in this Christian academy, the principal just couldn't stand that this was what we were. And she just, to get back at my brother, she did this to me. All sorts of things. What it taught me,

it was really a gift, to be quite frank with you. I mean it really taught me to cling to Christ. It really did. There is nothing like pain to show you that all you really have is God. That's the thing my mother taught me. She was sort of radical because she was one of those mothers, she would go to church, and that was back when everybody was passing around pamphlets to bring prayer back in schools. She would take the pamphlet and toss it. They would look at her in shock and horror. They go, "Why not?"

She said, "Well, if the prayer never left the home, it would never have left school."

So for me, that was big. For me, I understood she was a very active -- she was an activist mother. So she was my first teacher, my first pastor, my first healthcare physician, my first best friend, all these things. And so from that I really learned to lean on Christ above all. She would tell us, "I'm going to disappoint you. I have. Your father disappointed you. He has. People will disappoint you. You can't put your faith in that."

That's not shunning people. And it really gave me an empathy for what the church is. I don't expect the church to have these wonderfully angelic people. It is a broken place. It is like going to the hospital and expecting everybody to be well. That's what it's for. It's for the broken. So if you look at it that way, I think it really covers you from kind of an idolatry.

Sheila: That's a great perspective, actually. So fast forward a little bit. You're 22 I believe. Tell us about that first night when you have to don that top hat and walk out there as the ringmaster for the very first time. What's that like?

Jonathan: Oh my goodness! It was wonderfully nerve-racking. Because as you can imagine circus people are, in my opinion they're the greatest artists on earth. When you're dealing in a craft of mortality, you're really good.

Randy: There's not a lot of room for mistake.

Jonathan: I don't think Denzel Washington or Meryl Streep ever walked on to a set or a stage and went, "You know if I miss this line this could be it."

[Laughter]

There's something about being the voice of that. I was always very humbled in the presence of my colleagues because really, the ringmaster is a glorified fan who gets paid to dress well. I get to see behind, I get to see what goes into the magic and what goes into that magic is a lot of hard work. It is a devotion like you would never believe. The hard work those people put in, they should be getting \$20 million in Academy Awards. To be the voice of that was always a

humbling thing.

So when I first went out there, it was wonderfully nerve-racking. I had the confidence having been a performer with the Boys' Choir of Harlem, that really was a great base for me and going to college at the Hartt School of Music and having a wonderful art's education at Laguardia High School of Music and Art and Performing Arts; I had all that. But when you get out in life, it doesn't matter. Now it's the work.

So I remember those first few shows and it was a little rocky. My first year was a little rocky because I was trying to be a rock star too. Remember, I was 22 and I was like ooh, I've got this job, I've got money! What am I going to do now? And boy, I paid for it.

[Laughter]

But it really was quite, quite the experience. You went through so many different things. The schedule as you know is one of the most rigorous in all of entertainment.

Randy: How many shows a year?

Jonathan: About 450 shows a year.

Randy: That's crazy!

Jonathan: Absolutely! But you didn't really feel it because the energy of the audience and what you're giving and what you're getting back is just so tremendous.

Randy: So those lessons you learned from your mother and those lessons you learned early in life, particularly the ones that are faith-driven, where did those kind of come back during your circus years, to carry you through?

Jonathan: It came back in the form of my wife, my wife Priscilla, who I met on the show. She came in as a dancer. I remember before she came, there was this buzz all about the circus. "We're going to get Brazilian dancers! We're going to get Brazilian dancers!" Remember I'm single at that time and I'm thinking, yeah!

[Laughter]

It's so funny. A colleague of ours, who was a mutual colleague, he danced with my wife in his native Brazil and he told me about her. He said, "Oh she is going to love you, man!"

I'm going, "Whatever!"

I tell you, when I met her, it wasn't love at first sight but it was gradual. I sensed her power and her potential immediately. We started dating that summer and by fall, I said, "Yep! Here! I'm going to put a ring on it." And we got married after the 10:30 show, in between shows.

So it really came back in her growth as a human being, as a woman, as a professional. She gave her life to Christ during the duration of our relationship, during our courtship, rather. I just learned so much from being in her presence. It really, really forced me to actually really, really recommit myself. Because a lot of us go through that stage where we're just dangling on the fence. We're dangling on the fence. We're trying to mix a little bit. Oh I can have a little of this. But we forget, God is serious business. I always say Jesus is a gangster. He really means what he says. He's going to want an accounting. And you really can't -- you can't date him. It's the ultimate commitment. I really know that I know that I know he was right, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing."

Sheila: Hmm! Amen, brother!

Jonathan: She's been a lifesaver. She's been wonderful. She actually ended up becoming my boss at some point during our career in the circus.

Randy: I've got a lot of questions. I could talk to this guy for days. I'm guessing though that the commitment to God came back even in more force with your children.

Jonathan: Oh absolutely! The lessons God teaches you and how humbling they are. It's so funny. One of the great gifts we have is that we were able to raise my children around my mother and my wife's parents as well. So they get to find out what we were really like.

I've always seen God and really felt him as my father. And he would really alert me to things as my children would develop. I learned as a father, wow, I really don't like punishing you. I really don't like -- I really, really love doting on you. I really want to see you at your best. Watching how a child's impatience is a fascinating thing and how we're like that too. But I want this. Give me that. Please answer this prayer! And he's going, "You know I know better."

The lessons have been just tremendous. I think it's really the greatest work of my life to be able to be a husband and father to these wonderful people who listen, the greatest blessing of the circus was I was able to take them with me and travel with them. So I made a living while having a life and everybody was employed in my house. Everybody! From me to the eight-year old. They all had a job with the circus.

Sheila: One of the things I was thinking about when I was reading some about your story was when I worked at the B.B.C. in London I was the only believer that I knew of in a crew of maybe 85, and it became really clear to me that my life had to speak louder than my words. I wasn't hired as an evangelist. I was hired as a TV host on a rock show.

I wondered how being part of that community in the circus, how you worked your faith out in ways where you're not being employed to come up and read John 3:16 every night.

Jonathan: You know first and foremost as you say, I love the quote by Francis Assisi: Preach the gospel every day and if necessary use words.

I understood from what I learned being in the Boys' Choir of Harlem and from what my mother taught me about ambassadorship. My mother would always say to me, "Take Jesus with you," everywhere I would go. And it would drive me crazy when I was trying to be "that guy." But it was right and I really understood wearing that top hat, it meant a sort of leadership, not only on the arena floor but it also meant back stage because we had a unique life.

Unlike a lot of traveling shows, we didn't separate from each other. We went back home to our own neighborhood which was the great American circus ring. So we lived together, we barbecued together, we hung out together. So people knew who you were behind the curtain. So I always took pride in doing my very best to really be an ambassador for Christ, being an ambassador for my family, myself, my own personal dignity and to the role of ringmaster because I knew it set a tone for how things operated.

But also, the show was very dynamic in that we actually had chaplains who traveled with us. We had chaplains and nuns; there was an actual ministry in the Catholic Church that actually is committed to traveling shows. And so we had ministers from the Catholic tradition who would travel with us, they would give counsel, they would do mass, they would christen children, do weddings and things of that nature. They would just be there. They would be counselors. And that was a wonderful thing I learned from them too, is they were just witnesses and they would just be present as a wonderful minister of Frank Cancro would say to me. He would say, "You know there is something, I believe in the ministry of presence." Because you're in the presence of a lot of different cultures and a lot of different belief systems and lifestyles. What a gift because they said, "Go out into the world." What happens when God gifts you with the world coming to you? What an opportunity to witness in that respect.

Randy: Good, good witness! The circus, I just -- like I said, we could listen to him all day long because the circus is one of those things that just puts a smile on everybody's face. I took my children to see Jonathan Lee Iverson multiple times. We still have the painting that the elephant painted hanging on my daughter's wall.

But I think God would like the circus because God likes to put smiles on our faces. We, as Christians are called to preach the gospel and if necessary use words. But there is a way that we can do it with your deeds and put smiles on children's faces. Would you watch this with Sheila and I?

On the mission field

Ralph: It's this time of the year we like to focus on giving Christmas smiles. Today I'm sitting here in China at one of our *LIFE* centers with little MoMo. MoMo came to the *LIFE* center here with a special need of a surgery because he had one of the worst cases of cleft palate, cleft lip that we've ever seen. The doctors were able to operate and bring him a Christmas smile. But he is just a happy little boy. He is a boy all the way. He is playful. But he's just a bundle of joy and a ball of energy. He is sitting quiet right now but he loves, loves playing and loves being a little boy.

He just loves his life here. He's been loved on. In fact, he is hoping to be adopted sometime soon. Thank you so much to all of our donors who give so generously over and over again to help *LIFE Outreach* bring Christmas smiles to children who God loves just so much. Say bye-bye!

End of clip

In the studio

Randy: What an amazing privilege to be able to do that. Sheila, what do you think about when you see this outreach, the shoes and the smiles where we can change children's countenances?

Sheila: One of the things I find so moving about that story is that darling little boy, four years old, he is actually in an orphanage there, and as he was before, with that cleft palate and cleft lip, his was one of the most severe we'd ever seen; it extended almost right up to his eye. He had so little hope of ever being adopted. There is something about certain cultures, when children are born with deformities, it is almost seen as a curse, as if it is something that has made them like a social outcast. And for you and I, in Jesus' name, to be able to say to a child like MoMo, no you're loved and you're seen and God has a future for you and a plan. For just \$500 we actually are able to perform those surgeries. That would cost so much more here in the United States. But we work with some amazing doctors who are absolutely committed to helping us do that. So literally, \$500 is all it takes to be able to offer those surgeries.

But the other thing that we have going, Randy that I love is Christmas shoes. This is just amazing to me. These shoes, they're literally, we're able to provide them for \$3.60. So here's what we want to do this Christmas. We want to provide 150,000 children with their very first pair of

shoes. It's so doable! Literally, for \$72 you can provide 20 pairs of shoes. Thirty six bucks! You can't even buy shoes for that. But that will provide ten pairs of shoes for children who in so many places, if they don't have shoes and they get cuts on their feet and they're putting their feet in water where there's disease they're going to end up with hookworm and all sorts of things that can lead to brain damage.

We have such an opportunity. Christmas is a wonderful time. It's a time where you and I love to get together with our friends and family. We eat too much, we buy each other things that we don't need. Here's an opportunity for you and I to do something to change the lives of children.

So literally, \$36, 10 pairs of shoes -- that's nothing!

Randy: I know you've been in the field. When we put these shoes onto the children it makes them smile. For many of them, it is the first pair of shoes they've ever had. So these are very durable, practical shoes. A lot of kids outgrow them quickly and pass them on to others so they have a life of their own.

It is just a great gift. This Christmas -- we're thinking Christmas a little early here for a good reason because we want to prepare as we give so many children Shoes and Smiles. Will you be a part of that? Will you go online and make the best gift you can? Call that number. Please do it right now.

Begin video clip

Announcer: Poverty is a killer and because of it children needlessly suffer; not only from a lack of food and clean water but also from a lack of things we take for granted such as a healthy smile or a simple pair of shoes.

Far too many children living in poverty have never owned a new pair of shoes. And while that may seem minor in light of all their needs, walking with bare feet puts them at risk of life-threatening infections and disease that could lead to crippling consequences -- and even death.

By responding today you can help immediately secure and begin shipping Christmas shoes to 150,000 children around the world just in time for the holidays. Your gift of \$36 will help provide ten pairs of shoes. A gift of \$72 will help provide 20 pairs. And the gift of \$180 will help provide 50 pairs of Christmas shoes for children in need.

With your gift of any amount, be sure to request this beautifully crafted crystal shoe ornament, a treasure to place on your tree each holiday season. With your gift of \$180 or more you may also

request this keepsake boxed set of LIFE's Christmas shoe ornaments.

Finally, please consider a gift of \$1,000 or more to help provide over 275 pairs of shoes or two children with corrective cleft palate surgeries and you may request our determined eagle bronze sculpture. Please call, write, or make your gift online today.

End of clip

On the mission field

James: Here is one group of the most beautiful children. These children are in Central America and these are just a few of the children that we want to bless with 200,000 pairs of shoes. You think about that! 200,000 kids and what it's going to do for their family.

I've said to you over and over, that it is one thing to pray for people but it's another thing to become an answer to somebody's prayer, someone's need. And the Bible tells us very clearly, in one place as an example, many places but one very clearly, Isaiah 58, that when you reach out and you touch those in need, then you call and God says, "I will answer quickly." We get our prayers answered.

And, Betty, it's been amazing to see what happened in our lives when we just began to bless others and giving shoes is one way to bless others.

Betty: It is! And to me, it is such a rewarding thing to do. We come over here to be a blessing but we always go back so much more blessed, James. Because we see what can be done, we see the needs here, but we know that our friends, because they love children, they love to give, they love to share -- that's you I'm talking about -- you love to help any need that we share with you. This is a real need -- shoes for the children!

End of clip

In the studio

Sheila: Thank you so much. And if the phones are busy, please keep trying. For any gift at all, this is our brand-new little Christmas shoe. I love it! It's crystal this year. I have these on my Christmas tree and they're amazing. So please! A little amount of money can make such a huge difference -- 150,000 children with their very first pair of shoes this Christmas!

Randy: Let's do it! And would you thank our guest, Jonathan Lee Iverson? If you're interested in how to get him to speak at your events, you can go to BigTopVoice.com.

And as always, thank you for watching *LIFE Today*!