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Week 36: Christmas Shoes and Smiles

Sheila Walsh and Randy Robison

Chris and Emily Norton

Sheila: Welcome to *LIFE Today*! I'm Sheila Walsh here with Randy Robison. We are very excited. And honestly, very honored to introduce the couple of guests that we have on this program. Brand-new book out called, *The Seven Longest Yards*. Rather than me tell their story, I'm going to let them do that. So please would you help me welcome Chris and Emily Norton? Welcome! Thank you so much for being with us.

Randy: So great to have you guys. And some people, I think, Sheila might actually recognize them.

Sheila: Yeah! You've been on Good Morning America a couple of times. I saw you there. And I also saw you on one of favorite programs called, Say Yes to the Dress.

Emily: Yes.

Sheila: Where you got your wedding dress, which is lovely. But let's start with the obvious, Chris, that you're sitting here in a wheelchair. And I have to honestly tell you, I always read books of my guests. Reading the first chapter I sat and sobbed because I'm a mom of a son who played football too. So would you tell us what happened to you?

Chris: Yeah. October 16th, 2010, an 18-year old kid at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa; sixth game of the season, everything is going according to plan. I was an 18-year old. I was going to earn a business degree, meet the girl of my dreams, become an All-

American athlete and someday own a lake house or better yet, the girl of my dream's family already owns a lake house.

Sheila: Always better, yeah!

Chris: But I was just running down the field during the kick off and I see this opening forming and I know that ball carrier is going to run through that hole and I'm going to stop him. I'm just going to drive my shoulder through his legs. Well, I see that opening and I dive to make the tackle, but I miss timed my jump just by a split second. So instead of getting my head in front of the ball carrier my head collides right with his legs.

And in an instant I lose all feeling and movement from my neck down. I was completely conscious, I'm just telling myself, Chris, get up -- but nothing is working. No matter how hard I try to push off that ground nothing is working. Like someone just turned the power off to my body. I just kept waiting thinking that my strength will come back. Later, I realized I suffered a severe spinal cord injury.

Sheila: You thought it was a "stinger" which can happen in football, but the feeling would immediately come back. What happened? How long did you lay there on the field because we've all had those moments as parents where everybody in the arena is silent until they make sure that the kid is okay. What happened to you that day?

Chris: Yeah, so I'm just lying there. The crowd goes silent. It is kind of an eerie feeling because the crowd was loud, it was buzzing, we're making this comeback, and then all of the sudden it's just dead silent. The athletic trainers run out, they check on me. They start asking me questions, "Chris, can you make a fist with your hand?" I tried making a fist. Nothing works. "Chris, can you feel us touching your leg?" I couldn't feel a thing.

They kept asking these questions over and over again but I'm thinking, you know what? You're 18 years old, bad things happen to other people; it happens to people that you read about, that you watch on television. There is no way that's going to happen to me. Then

they call in for the helicopter and that's when I knew that this is serious. So at that point I just closed my eyes, I just begin to pray. God, whatever you do, do not change my plan. Just let this be a big scare, put this all behind me. I just want to be a normal 18-year old kid. I want to play football. I want to run around. But whatever you do, just don't change this.

Randy: I'm watching him tell just a small part of this story, just sort of the beginning in many ways. You're talking with your hand. You're making some motions, but I remember reading in the book how the doctor came in and gave you a three percent chance.

And you said, "What? To ever walk again?"

He said what? To ever move again? Something like that?

Chris: Yeah. There is a misconception that it is a three percent chance to walk. Easy to go to that assumption. But in reality, it is to move or feel anything. It is a three percent chance to scratch an itch on your face, to feed yourself.

Randy: How did you become part of that three percent, which you clearly are?

Chris: I was resilient. I just said no way, not me. I'm not going to accept this. I'm going to do whatever I can to beat this. I went to work day one just nodding my head yes and no. I nodded my head for hours. I looked like a giant bobblehead; just bouncing my head around. I also just like held out to this hope that God can take this pain into his purpose. I had this hope.

So many times I called out it is was like, God, how is this part of your plan? Like what are you doing? Are you sure you know what you're doing? I just had no idea what could come from this. I was so scared. So many times I just prayed. God, can you give me a glimmer of what's ahead? Can I just know how you could use this so I can make this time of suffering a little bit easier? Obviously, you don't get that glimpse ahead, you just

have to keep going and stay hopeful.

Sheila: One of the interesting things, Emily, bringing you in is that you guys actually met through a dating app. It must give a lot of people out there hope that those dating apps actual do work. Tell me, what stage of your life were you at when you and Chris met?

Emily: We were in college when we met. We definitely weren't really searching for a serious relationship where we thought it was going to be much of anything. But God had this amazing plan to bring us together and we had this instant connection where it just felt like it was meant to be. There's definitely fears and questions about what it would look like but just trusting God and keeping that faith, and knowing that he had everything I wanted in a man; just his perseverance and his attitude and the way that he looked at life and stayed positive through just a difficult moment with his injury. So I just knew that with him everything would be okay in life if I had him.

Sheila: The fact that Chris was in a wheelchair, that was not at all something that gave you pause?

Emily: It did. I was really curious about it, honestly. I like to get to know people and get to know who they are. I was very, very curious with how positive he was. Like how does he do this? How is this possible? I didn't understand how you could do that in that situation. So I was very curious and asked a lot of questions about his situation to get to know him. And that was really what helped with our connection, is really getting to know him with those things.

Chris: But I was worried because before we officially met, we were texting and she's like, "How about I just come by your house and I'll just pick you up? You can put the chair in the back seat."

I'm thinking, oh no. Like she drives a little yellow two door car and she has no idea what

she is getting herself into. Like she has no idea what it takes to get me transferred over, get my chair apart, if my chair would even fit in the size of that vehicle. So I'm thinking, this is going to fail.

Emily: No, I was very naive to it all. But we just made it work.

Randy: Let me ask Chris, when you hear her talking, because there was a point where you felt like all your dreams in life were shattered but yet I just heard her saying that she met the man that was everything she hoped for, the man who had everything she wanted in a man. How does that make you feel now?

Chris: It makes me proud, I guess, just blessed to have someone like Emily in my life. Something I discovered as I was going through my journey, my identity was wrapped up in my physical ability, in my ability to run and walk and how much weight I could lift, and like my success on the football field and athletics. I'm like how can I be a man without that physicality, with that strength that you think of?

I learned that people really value who you are as a person of value, at how you make them feel versus how quickly you can move or how much you can lift. I began to see that in other people that those other things didn't really matter to them as much as they mattered to me. So I really wanted to make sure I could add value to other people in other ways and bring joy to them. And you can do that without physical ability.

Sheila: One of the things I think is amazing is you made a determination that when you graduated from college you wanted to be able to walk across and pick up your diploma. What was the process of getting ready for that like? Because that must have seemed to so many people an impossible dream.

Chris: It felt impossible at times, I'm not going to lie but it was just a dream that we just, both of us clung on to. We're going to figure out a way each and every day just to get a little bit better and put as much as time and effort into it to make it into a reality. So we

would put in together four to six hours of training just to try to make this dream a realization. So it was just a lot of time, a lot of effort and thankfully, I had a great personal trainer.

[Laughter]

Sheila: One of the things that make you such a perfect couple is when you were a little girl you have always had a heart for what's inside of people. Talk about your love for children who don't have perhaps the happy childhood you did.

Emily: Yes. I grew up in a great family, always had support and love. Didn't know that there were kids out there that didn't have that. But when I was growing up, I started mentoring and I met Whitley, who ended up going into foster care. She got taken away from her mom. I just could not believe that there were kids that I knew that I was mentoring that then didn't have that family support and that love that I had.

So I just had a passion and I loved to just be able to help others see that they're special, and that they matter, and that God has a plan. It became my absolute life goal to just do that because I could not believe that there were other kids out there who were going through abuse and neglect and living in group homes without a family. So it was my life purpose then.

Sheila: It's amazing!

Randy: You've done pretty well don't you think?

Sheila: I think so. Yes, amazing!

Randy: How many children do you have?

Emily: We have five kids right now. So we've adopted five kids. We've been foster

parents for three years now. We've had 17 kids in all.

Sheila: 17 children! That's unbelievable!

Emily: We absolutely love it. It's by far the greatest thing that we've ever done. Just to be able to take these kids who've gone through so much and they're at such a vulnerable place and they need love and support, and something that a lot of us are very capable of doing.

Sheila: One of the things that is very -- that you talk about in the book that's very vulnerable is you talk about your own, I don't know whether it just hit you out of nowhere but a real dark night where you were hit with depression. I want you both to talk about that. Because I think what a lot of people don't understand is that it doesn't just affect the person who is suffering, it affects the person who loves the person who is suffering. What was that like for you?

Emily: Oh it was super hard. So right after college, right after the graduation walk, actually, we were so busy with it, just completely focused on doing the graduation walk and I had started seeing some different signs before that where I was starting to feel like I didn't care as much as I used to.

I used to take everybody's stories and the kids that I was trying to help and put it on my shoulders and felt like this responsibility; like it was my responsibility to do something about it. I didn't really -- didn't give it to God and I tried to do it for too long. And then I got to a point where I started shutting myself down and I stopped caring as much.

Right after the graduation walk it just hit me. I went through a time where I did not have any hope. I didn't think I was ever going to be me again. I went completely away from God. It was too hard to face what I was feeling. I don't like being vulnerable; I don't like it at all. I avoid it at every cost -- which does not get you anywhere, that's for sure. But a lot of pain and extra suffering. So I went down that time where everything was just so, so

hard.

Sheila: What was that like for you, Chris, watching that?

Chris: It was tough. I just didn't understand it at first too, so I didn't come at it from a great place.

Sheila: Because you're just a motivational person.

Chris: Yeah, I'm thinking, I'm going to motivate her. Yeah, I'll motivate her. I can do this. I can fix this. That didn't work. At all!

Randy: What did work finally?

Emily: Going to church again. So I had these views that I had to do it myself. I'm extremely independent. So I thought I had to do this by myself. And if I couldn't get through this then I was going to be in trouble in life if I go through something really hard. Like I wasn't going to make it.

So I had this view that I had to prove to myself that I could do it. That's why it went on for almost three years where I struggled and was so against getting that help. I felt like it was going to show weakness and that I couldn't do it. Then all of the sudden I went to church and realized I needed to pray again like the whole message was about praying. From there we found an amazing church that we've been able to call our home, Christ Fellowship and it's changed everything. There was one message that I heard at the very beginning the pastor shared that sometimes people go through hard times to take parts away that aren't supposed to be there, to prepare you for what God has. He even said, sometimes people who are very independent go through a time where they realize you have to depend on God. I learned that and I would not be able to do what I do now if I didn't learn that.

Sheila: Why is the book called *The Seven Longest Yards*?

Chris: We set the goal that we were going to walk seven yards down the aisle of our wedding, on April 21st of 2018, seven yards marking the seven-year injury anniversary, and three yards further than the graduation walk. And honestly, though, the walk that we did down the aisle of our wedding was the easiest part of our journey. Honestly, it was everything leading up to that which was the challenging, most difficult, trying times of our life. But going down that aisle way with her by my side, it was just perfect. There is no other person I wanted to be there than Emily. And to share the rest of my life with her was so special and it gave us so much peace. I was so motivated, I could have walked 14 yards.

[Laughter]

Randy: What's your prospect for the future as far as walking more?

Chris: I don't know. I still train. I'm still hopeful for the future but I'm content with where I'm at. Interestingly enough, so many people, they come up to me and they pray for my healing and for my walking, which I appreciate but honestly, when I recognize and I think about my own prayers, I never pray for healing or walking. That's not what consumes me. What I think about is my wife, my family, my kids, and just making an impact on others. That's really what I pray for because I'm that content with my life.

Sheila: That's beautiful. One of the things that's really moving is that even while you were still in college you set up a foundation because you realized that some other people maybe didn't have all the help that you do. Tell us about that.

Chris: So we started the Chris Norton foundation which yeah, in college I started because I realized how unfortunate other people were in their circumstance because I was fortunate to be an NAA athlete, at an NAA school where I had the NAA catastrophic insurance policy cover all my medical and rehab costs. That's unheard of. No one else

had those liberties to have insurance pay for everything. Because there's people out who are just as motivated as me, if not more, but can't afford to do so. So we wanted to change that. So that's where we started setting up grants and giving out money for better rehab equipment. Then on top of that we're starting a kids' wheelchair camp for kids and families who all come for free and they can do archery, ziplining, horseback riding, a bunch of fun games and activities.

Randy: This is a super couple, right?

Sheila: Yeah. But the thing I really love is that you're very honest about the suffering, but you met God in the middle of the suffering and pushed through and are pouring back into the lives of others.

One of the most moving videos that you can watch actually on line is when four of the little girls you have been fostering. Tell us about that Sunday service and what you were able to tell those little ones.

Emily: Yes. We figured out this year that we were going to adopt our four girls that had been with us for a little over a year. They're siblings that we took in through foster care. It was -- there were a lot of really hard moments because they wanted to stay with us and their future was so unknown. Just helping them to get that clarity, like you're going to be here forever was amazing. So we set it up where we surprised them in our church on stage and just told them we are adopting you and you're going to be our family forever. And it was such an amazing moment.

Sheila: You wonder why I have no eye makeup left on is because I watched that video right before we came out here tonight. So it was fantastic!

Randy: And this guy is surrounded by girls everywhere!

Chris: Our dog is a female too!

[Laughter]

Sheila: Well, the book is called *The Seven Longest Yards*. It is out right now. We're going to tell you how to get a hold of it too. But one of the things that is very much the heart of this couple, and it's very much the heart of us here at *LIFE* is that when God has met us in hard places, we want to do exactly the same for some other people. Would you watch this?

On the mission field:

[Child crying]

Janice: Is he saying something?

Open Captions:

>> He says, "It's paining."

Janice: I'm in a village in Angola and came upon this child. This little boy is Augusto and this breaks my heart. His little feet are in some of the worst shape I've ever seen. And there are many in this village with horrible conditions on their feet. But this little guy is just scratching; they itch so bad. They're completely infected. He said there's insects that have gotten into his feet. I'll be surprised if he doesn't lose his toe. Then the disease comes in through their feet and just goes throughout their body. It can actually kill them -- all from going barefoot in conditions that we're in right here.

I know *Shoes and Smiles* is a campaign that we get really excited about and it's fun but this is why it's fun, because it saves lives. You would think just a pair of shoes is not life-saving, but in areas like this, in conditions like this, it is. We can change it for Augusto. We can help him. We're going to clean these up and get him a pair of shoes and

help him.

Please do what you can. Help bring shoes to little children like Augusto all over the world. You can be a part of something big -- and something even fun! But this is the reason we do it. Please!

End of video

In the studio:

Sheila: That was Janice that you just saw. She is our mission photographer and we've traveled many, many, many, many miles around the world together. But this is one of the projects that we absolutely love. Some of the projects that we do are desperately hard. This is such a joy to be able to put shoes onto the feet of a child that has never worn shoes.

When I first heard about it, I thought, well, isn't that just a fun thing? It is way more as Janice explained to you in that piece. When children are walking over these hard surfaces and they get cuts in their feet and then they get diseases, it literally is a matter of life and death. I can't even imagine what it's like for a child to never in their life have a pair of shoes.

You might think, wow, it's a little early coming with Christmas Shoes and Smiles! But the reason is that we need to be able to get the help in now so that we can get all the shoes ordered. We have partners on the ground waiting for these Christmas shoes to be delivered so we can put them on the feet of little children and make sure they have a life. Randy, over the year so far, we have helped two million children.

Randy: Isn't that amazing!

Sheila: I know! But this Christmas we have a new goal.

Randy: 150,000 pairs of shoes for 150,000 children. So what we want to do, and we can do it if you will partner with us, each pair of shoes runs an average of \$3.60 each. That means ten pairs of shoes, shoes for ten children is \$36! \$180 will give shoes to 50 children. Then the surgeries where we go in and correct the cleft palate and give that child not only a reason to smile but the ability to smile is \$500 on average with the surgeons we have around the world.

So we have some big goals, but we have some very achievable goals. If you'll just go to the phone or go online right now and partner with us we can make this Christmas very special for some children. Give them something they've never had before. And at the same time prevent some diseases that can harm them or potentially kill them.

So won't you put some smiles on some children's faces this Christmas season? Won't you put some shoes on their feet? I hope you'll give the best you can. Reach out with us, with arms of love around the world and give these children shoes and smiles.

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 often take for granted like a simple pair of shoes.

Far too many children living in extreme 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 provide 20-pair and a gift of \$180 will help provide 50 pairs of Christmas shoes for children in need.

As a thank you for your gift of support, be sure to request this beautifully crafted green crystal shoe ornament, a treasure to display at each Christmas. With your gift of \$100 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 the beautiful "Safe in the Shepherd's Arms" bronze sculpture.

Please call, write, or make your gift online today!

End of video

In the studio:

Randy: As we travel around the world, one thing we've noticed is the condition of the feet of so many children. We see children all over the world running around barefoot in some terrible conditions. And it's not just unsightly, it is unhealthy and potentially, deadly.

As we give shoes, which is a wonderful Christmas gift, keep in mind that we're actually giving them a chance for better health, potentially even saving lives. We are protecting them from some really debilitating diseases, things like hookworm, and several things that can happen in their feet. These protect them. Just like the smiles when we go in and correct a cleft palate, we're not just giving them a cosmetic change, we're actually improving their health. Everything we do is to improve the health of others physically and spiritually.

So go to the phone or go online now. Give the best gift you can as we give Christmas Shoes and Smiles.

End of video

In the studio:

Sheila: Thank you so much. Don't you think it would be great if every single Christian family watching this, part of *LIFE* determined this Christmas we're going to do something for another child? Honestly, we don't need any more ugly sweaters -- we really don't!

And for any gift at all, we'll send you this lovely wee shoe. This is our new one for this year that you can put on your Christmas tree. What a great thing to do for your kids as well, to do it as a family. Say, we're going to cut back a tiny bit on what we do with each other because we're going to make some children's dreams really come true this Christmas. I think it is quite an opportunity.

Randy: It is a wonderful opportunity. And today, I want you to make the best gift you can and ask for this book by Chris and Emily Norton, *The Seven Longest Yards*. Any gift, just request it and we would love to send it to you.

But Sheila, I love the subtitle of this book: "Our love story of pushing the limits while leaning on each other."

Sheila: Beautiful! I really want to thank you both so much for the mark you're making in the world; not just through the way you pushed through your injury and not just through the way that you've opened up your heart, but just the way as a couple. You're making an impact in this world, in children's lives and we're just -- aren't we grateful to them? You're just amazing! We want to celebrate you and say thank you.

And remember, you can also check out Chris's foundation. You can go online and find out about that foundation and get involved. There's so much you can do.

So thank you so much for being with us. For Randy and myself, God bless you! And we'll see you next time on *LIFE Today*!