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Week 36: Christmas Shoes and Smiles

Randy Robison and Sheila Walsh

Jonathan and Alena Pitts with Chrystal Evans Hurst

Randy: Welcome to *LIFE Today*. I'm Randy Robison. This is Sheila Walsh.

Sheila: Hey!

Randy: You know, Sheila, it's been almost two years since we had Jonathan and Wynter Pitts on *LIFE Today*.

Sheila: I remember that, Randy. It was great talking about raising their girls. And then...

Randy: We didn't know.

Sheila: No, we had no idea that just about a year ago, just over a year ago there would be this sudden tragedy in their life. And the beautiful Wynter apparently had finished her race and gone home.

Randy: Yeah, it's tough at a young age. Jonathan is back with us. Their oldest daughter, Alena is with us. And then Chrystal Evans Hurst who she describes as her "sister cousin" is with us. Would you welcome them to *LIFE Today*?

Sheila: I want to apologize. I was not expecting that but I just remember -- I remember where I was at home and I got this message from Priscilla, and it was so shocking. I wonder, can you take us back to what was going on in your life? Because the thing that's amazing to me is that

you and Wynter had just finished this amazing book called, *Emptied* that you had written about your marriage. So tell us what happened.

Jonathan: Well, I mean at the time our lives were completely what I would call oriented. Like all was well in the world. I was doing well professionally in ministry, was in an executive role and was transitioning from an executive role for Priscilla's dad, Tony Evans, in his ministry to church ministry and being executive pastor at Church in the City in Franklin, Tennessee. At the same time Wynter was -- her ministry was flourishing. For Girls Like You, her magazine, her writings were all flourishing. We'd written the parenting book we did together, then we were writing a marriage book together.

We just were excited. Life was good, and our girls were good and we were in this big move and really excited about what God had for our future. So we would move to Nashville on July 9th, and then buy our house, move in July 10th and then go back to make a couple of trips and ended up back in Dallas for me to finish up my role and for Wynter to finish the last book she was working on.

On July 24th, 2018, I would go to work. I would turn in actually that final edited manuscript for that book, *Emptied* at about 3:45, and about 7:45 that night I'd go home and make dinner. Wynter took a nap. She would have a cardiac, what's called a cardiac dysrhythmia, which would be like, just her heart rhythm would get off.

What I like to say about that event is that it was about as traumatic -- was the most traumatic event I've ever experienced in my life. But for her it was the most glorious and she would go home to be with her savior rather quickly and rather pain free. I've talked about it a lot so it's a little bit easier for me to talk about right now but yeah, it was incredibly -- it was life-altering, life-changing for me, for my girls, for our ministry, for a lot of people that knew us well.

Sheila: Was it good that you were in Dallas at that point? Because I'm thinking, you have a big family.

Jonathan: Yeah. There were a lot of mini miracles, I call them in our lives, and they're still occurring. But one of them was the fact that we had sold the house we were in that we loved, it was our favorite home we ever had. We had sold that and moved into this new home in Nashville. We only spent about four nights there together and all of it was like moving and I don't even know if we had sheets on our bed for the four nights that we slept there.

So for us to be back home and we were actually staying at Chrystal's sister's house, Priscilla's house. So we're in a place that was really comfortable but in a place that was distanced enough and all of our family was around. So when we went to the hospital, it was just everything you could think of, ambulance, all of that. But before I could even really get my bearings, all of our family was surrounding us, including Dr. Evans, who is my boss but also my spiritual mentor, including Chrystal and a couple of her siblings, and all of our family. So we were surrounded.

Sheila: Chrystal, can you talk us through what that was like for you? Because I remember what I think was just a night after Wynter went home to be with Jesus something pretty remarkable happened in the church.

Chrystal: We were in the middle of a summer series called, "Hot Topics." And that Wednesday night we had cycled through a lot of things -- that Wednesday night though was talking about when you don't understand God. What do you not understand about God? When God seems hard to understand. Tony Evans is Tony Evans so he was still going to go on Wednesday night and share something. We were all, my siblings and I, we were just like, "Dad, well, you can't go and talk about theory. Like we have had something within 24 hours that's totally rocked our world and that's what we don't understand."

I don't even know if I've told you but Priscilla had called me, and I didn't see the call. Then I saw, when I finally picked up my phone it was 911. So the whole way to the hospital, I'd been praying. And then I just said, "God, if she's gone, bring her back."

So that's where I was when the next night we were supposed to talk to my dad about this. I was the person interviewing him those Wednesday nights for that format. I told him, "I can't. It's not

good. It wouldn't be good if I did it."

Priscilla said, "I'll do it." We went for support to sit in the back and five minutes before service started my brothers and my sister and I, we all came out just to be there for support. That raw authentic interview where we're crying and you've got four kids talking to their dad with all different experiences, "I'm trying to believe God." Priscilla is steady, and Anthony, my brother is like, "Well, I'm not good right now."

Just that moment, watching my dad struggle, tears, all that, that ended up on YouTube. And so many people, hundreds of thousands of people have watched that video and have said over and over again, thank you because we can feel that interview and it is real. The ability to hear you all's faith in the midst of that difficulty was strengthening and helpful. So God did what he does.

Randy: I referenced that you referred to Wynter as your "sister cousin." What does that mean?

Chrystal: It means more like sisters but actually cousins. They moved to Dallas the week I had my second son. Y'all came over, she held my middle son and you came to live there. You guys were little. You weren't even one. So we all were having babies at the same time, raising our kids, going to the park, doing field trips, killing time. That was life and we lived 15 years just living life like that.

Randy: How has it been with the hole in your life?

Chrystal: Well, and I'm sure you guys can attest to this. I hear her voice in my head. They were moving so there was already this settled, they won't be here feeling. But when I'm reminded of the fact that she is physically not with us on this earth anymore, that doesn't stop me from hearing her in my head and from knowing what she would say right now.

Jonathan: Can I share another mini miracle? So because we were moving, people were already getting used to us not being there. One of the things, two things that happened, one was all of the cousins, and my sister-in-law and brother-in-law came together and basically wrote a

book of good-bye letters. And then there was another picture book that was made that had pictures of all of our 14 plus documented years together from our babies getting baths together in tubs and all those things that you do as family. So Wynter was able to actually read those notes and see those pictures. That week that she passed away, I think she saw the picture books.

Chrystal: The timing was impeccable. If you can say that about God saying it is time. His fingerprints were all over it and even in the difficulty of that it was very clear that he was being so very gracious. So very gracious to give us the opportunity to say what we had to say.

Sheila: Alena, I want to ask you, you're the oldest of the four girls. I remember the last time Randy and I interviewed your mom and dad and just how much she adored you all. I just want to, how are you doing in the midst of all this?

Alena: I don't -- like me and my dad say this all the time. I don't know how people do this without Jesus. I'd be a mess. So I feel like right now I'm in a time of like God is like, I guess, rejuvenating me and like restoring me. I can feel God like working and moving. And so through it all he's been with me so I'm able to stand up here and say truthfully, I'm doing amazing for someone who lost their mom ten months ago.

Sheila: How are you able to help your younger sisters because you're the oldest of the four?

Jonathan: For one, she did all their hair this week, which I'm grateful for.

[Laughter]

Alena: Yeah. So it was actually Aunt Chryssy, the night that my mom passed, I remember her whispering in my ear like, "Be their sister." So I've kind of like taken that with me because they want me to be their sister and not like some mother or like yes, I'm supposed to do their hair and be there for them, but ultimately, they want someone they can confide in and talk to as a sister.

Sheila: I want to ask you, Jonathan, when you walked -- I mean you're a pastor. When you

walk through something like this, does it change what you believe or does it reinforce what you already believed?

Jonathan: I'll say it two ways. One, you think about just the house built on the sand versus the house built on the rock. What's fun for me is to realize, O God, this is real. Like I really believe what I believe. So like there are some days where I cognitively believe it and emotionally I don't believe it. Then there are some days that where my cognition and my emotions line up. And on those days I just feel like everything is right.

So there are tough days but what I believe is true. With as much confidence I can say, it's true. Chrystal's dad, Dr. Evans who is a spiritual mentor to me, he used to quote, like when he would speak, I'd travel with him all the time and I'd hear him hundreds of times probably say, Acts 13:36, that David served the purposes of God for his generation and then he fell asleep. He always talked about people serving God's purposes. And with everything I have inside of me and everything I see in front of me that Wynter served the purposes that God gave her and I'm confident of that.

I'm not -- I don't know why my daughters' mom couldn't be here longer. I don't know why I couldn't be married to her for 30-years, whether it was 15 or 45 but ultimately, I just trust that God had a purpose for her to be here and she served that out and served it out quite well.

Randy: Describe her. All of you, describe Wynter in a few words.

Jonathan: The best word I could use to describe Wynter would be "still." She was quiet, but she was determined -- she wasn't movable. Still.

Sheila: That's a good word. I like that. What have you learned from her? I'm sure if she was here she would tell us everything she learned from you. But what was the legacy she left on your heart?

Chrystal: I always say that Wynter was the epitome of what it looks like to work from a place

of rest. In four years she got ten books done. So I would say, I don't understand. I'm killing myself over here trying to get one book done and it's taking me... And she would say, "Well, you go ahead and learn all the things, do all the marketing. I'm going to go take a nap and then I'll learn from you what you're going to do."

But she was very clear on her purpose and she was very open to what God wanted to do in and through her. And she just received, took dictation and poured out -- and without striving. She was the most napping person I've ever met.

Sheila: I love that in a woman!

Chrystal: I mean she just believed in taking naps. But that did not alter her productivity in the present here and now in the physical and also for eternity. There's a lot to learn in that.

Sheila: Alena, I love -- I went online today, and I was looking at the magazine that your mom started. I see the legacy living on through you. Tell us a little bit about that.

Alena: Yeah, so my mom, my dad is probably explaining the ministry but I'm able to write and do Q and A's and things in her magazine still today; like her magazine lives on and like people are still working on it. And we have a whole team that does it now. And so like even though she is not here physically, like you can see her fingerprints all over everything that she does, or that she did.

Sheila: There is a quote that you have on that page that I read that was actually from Priscilla's devotional, *Awaken*. Do you remember what that quote was? If not I can help you out?

Jonathan: Yeah, you can help me.

Sheila: But it is to the effect that you don't always get to live to see all -- a job finished.

Jonathan: Yeah, that finishing well sometimes means not finishing.

Sheila: Yeah! But the legacy that she has left, because aren't you a writer now too, young woman?

Alena: Yes, ma'am. I am.

Randy: And an actress. Some people might recognize her, it is from War Room. Phenomenal movie and you were absolutely incredible in it.

I wanted to ask you about life now. How does life feel now? You're in this pastoral position, you're in Nashville, it's probably a grace that you don't really have memories in your new house. It's like you started again in a new place.

Jonathan: We were moving so fast I honestly don't have any memories of us really together in that home other than buying it. But I have a picture of Wynter opening the front door and she's in a shirt that says "Not today Satan," written across her T-shirt that she is wearing. And all four of my girls are standing in front. The beautiful thing for me is that Wynter was able to sign off on every aspect of our life: The girl's school, my job. She was excited about everything that was about to happen. And for whatever reason she couldn't join us. But it gives me great peace that she was able to sign off on it.

And it is also like one of the greatest blessings. So I feel like with my work inside of the Evans family of ministry, grieving would have been really difficult, like in that place, family mixed with work, mixed with it all being right there. So it was really one of God's greatest gifts to me was just allowing me and the beautiful place in Nashville to work out grief.

Sheila: The book that literally you said four hours before Wynter met Jesus face to face, you turned your manuscript in. Tell us a little bit about what you and Wynter poured into this called, *Emptied*.

Jonathan: *Emptied* is really based on Philippians chapter two verses seven and eight which

says although Jesus was equal with God, he didn't consider equality with God something to be grasped but took on the form of a servant, emptied himself to a form of a servant -- even unto death. Ultimately, that book is, us figuring out what it looks like to do marriage well, which is basically living like Jesus, which is basically emptying yourself of all that you think that the value that you have in order to serve someone else.

So Jesus did it quite literally, in a marriage we do it quite figuratively, and sometimes quite literally. But just being poured out. And you're poured out so that you can be filled up. And in the book it talks about what we're filled up with which is the Holy Spirit, and the fruits of the spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. So above such things there is no law. And to the degree that you can be full of those things is the degree that you can serve like Christ served. So that's what it's about.

It's really our journey. It is not a how-to. It is a "join us in this journey." We were 15 years, what I love is that we made it 15 years and 27 days. We got married on June 27th and we made it 27 days past our 15-year anniversary. Which is another gift to me that we made it that far. I'm grateful.

Sheila: That's beautiful.

Randy: One of the words you use in that book is intentionality. You talk about being intentional in your marriage. I'm guessing that looking back now you can see how your wife was intentional in her life. Which when you look back at it, you go, 38 years is short on our account but there's a fullness when there is intentionality to it. Am I right in perceiving some of that?

Jonathan: Yeah. I would say that Wynter lived as long as somebody twice her age would have lived in terms of productivity for the kingdom, which I'm grateful for. But it really is a life of diligence. I always say that intentionality and good intentions are two different things. You can have good intentions all day but intentionality is step after step after step when you don't feel like it, when you do feel like it and just continuing to walk.

The thing I'm grateful for, I go to my counselor, I don't go as much as I used to, but when I go to my counselor I'm grateful that I can sit in that chair and not be just feeling regret for a job undone. I feel like our intentionality together in marriage and in parenting, I feel like we finished the job. And we weren't perfect obviously, but we finished the job.

Randy: I'm glad you say that you're seeing a counselor because having lost a loved one at a young age, I understand. I think for Christians the tendency sometimes can be to gloss over it. And certainly, we don't grieve as those who have no hope. But you're not in denial of the pain that's there and the difficulty. You're facing it and you're getting counsel. Is that then a key component to getting through this?

Jonathan: Yeah. For me, I feel a lot but I don't necessarily know what I'm feeling. So to be able to sit down with somebody and process through what I'm feeling. So like when I'm frustrated, I don't really get angry so like when I'm frustrated, oh I'm like oh that's anger. You're able to learn these things about yourself that otherwise I wouldn't be able to process.

Sheila: But I see Wynter's fingerprints over everything that's going on. And even in your book here, Chrystal, your dedication, I love this. This is Chrystal's new book, *Show Up for Your Life*: What the girl you'll be tomorrow wants you to know today. But I love this dedication. It is to you, Alena. "When I wondered what it looks like for a young woman to show up for her life, I think of you. Keep showing up. Keep doing you. Keep resting and believing in the beauty of who you are. And for Wynter, this book is for girls, just like you."

I just think your whole family is a gift to the body of Christ. Your mom and dad, Priscilla, Anthony and his ridiculous voice!

[Laughter]

But just I cannot wait to see, Alena, what God will do through your life. It is going to be quite spectacular.

So I would ask our viewers to continue to hold this family up in prayer and in thanksgiving. And pray for God's covering on these four adorable girls that Wynter loved so much.

Randy: Yeah. We're a part of community and I think, their family and their community has helped get them through. That's what we're called to do. Even if we don't know each other, we can pray for each other.

That's why it's important that we continue to do that in the mission outreaches that we have around the world. When we see that pain, we see that need we can reach out and pray and then take action. Be very intentional about doing something. I want to show you something where you can make a big difference. Watch this.

On the mission field:

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. 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 are actually giving them a chance for better health -- potentially, even saving lives. We are protecting them from some really debilitating diseases, things like hookworm, several things that can happen in their feet. These protect them. So it's doubled; it's a gift to give them something they don't have and it is something to protect their health.

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 join with us as we celebrate the birth of our savior at Christmas and we give Christmas Shoes and Smiles.

How are you doing, buddy? Let me see if we can get this on.

End of video**In the studio:**

Randy: It's amazing to see those kids dancing around in those shoes. The joy that a simple pair of shoes brings to them. I know you've seen this, Sheila. What do you think when you go out and you see how a simple gift can make just a big difference?

Sheila: It really is amazing. I know Randy mentioned it seems a little early to be talking about Christmas but the reason is that we have so many children. Our prayer is that for this Christmas we would provide shoes for 150,000 children. Do you know that over the years you have helped us give shoes to two million children? It is not just a fun thing for Christmas, it can literally be lifesaving because when their feet are cut they get all sorts of diseases through their feet.

But now we can do something so we're starting early. We want this to be the best Christmas that *LIFE Outreach*, *LIFE Today* has ever had. We want to get shoes everywhere around the world and we can do it with your help.

And not only shoes, but when children are born with cleft lip or cleft palate, in so many cultures, it's seen as a curse. So often those children are not allowed to go to school. They're kept out of society as if they're cursed by God. So we can come during the birth of Christ to say there is no curse because Jesus Christ himself became cursed on a tree so that we can be free.

Let's reach out and touch the lives of so many children this Christmas. And let's do it in Jesus' name.

Randy: It's easy to do. That's the wonderful thing. Can you hand me one of those shoes over there that you have? Because I want to show them.

Sheila: Yeah. There you go.

Randy: I want to show you that this shoe, a pair of these shoes costs \$3.60 to get them on the feet of children that desperately need them. And it is not just a great gift. Sometimes it really can be a matter of health, a matter of life and death. But the cost of this is such that ten pairs of shoes, shoes for ten children is \$36; \$180 will give shoes to 50 children! And 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; \$500 on average with the surgeons we have around the world.

Whatever you do, do the best you can and know that when you join in Christmas Shoes and Smiles, you really will be putting a smile on a face of a child around the world. Will you go to phones or go online? Give the best gift you can. Let's make this Christmas extra special.

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

On the mission field

James: Well, we literally stopped by the road where I say we knew we would bring them shoes and I'm confident that we will because children like these need shoes -- all over the world. It is amazing. You may say, "Why would they stop and let you take a picture with them?"

Well, the truth is they stopped because I just got out and sat down here on the road and smiled at them. And they came over and started sitting down by me.

Then we explained to the parents through our missionary interpreter that our plan was to come right back to this area, this village and bring shoes. So that is our intention. But it is going to take you making that possible.

I'm asking you to give as many pairs of shoes as you can to put on these beautiful, beautiful feet of these beautiful children. Thank you! Thank you for your help!

End of clip

In the studio

Randy: Please do make the best gift you can and know that you will be making Christmas very special for children this year.

Sheila, what an incredible show, an incredible group of guests.

Sheila: Wynter and Jonathan's book, *Emptied*, phenomenal. Chrystal's book is called, *Show Up for Your Life*. But also this great website for teenage girls, it's called...

Jonathan: For GirlsLikeYou.com.

Sheila: For GirlsLikeYou.com. Please, will you thank our amazing guests? Thank you so much for being with us.

Thanks for being with us. And we'll see you next time on *LIFE Today*.