

heart of the matter

BY TORI TAFF

Allison Durham Speer

The first time young Allison Durham sat down to a big family dinner at Brock and Faye Speer's house, she wasn't fully aware of the fact that she was breaking bread with Southern Gospel royalty.

The small Kentucky town she grew up in had only one radio station; and it played contemporary Christian music, so Allison was more familiar with Amy Grant, Sandi Patty, Russ Taff and the Imperials than the legendary Speer family. But she was still mightily impressed.

"It was the most wonderful feast I've ever experienced," Allison tells me. "The food was wonderful, but it wasn't the best part. That family sat for three hours around a table and talked and joked and laughed and cut up and thoroughly enjoyed each other! It was the most marvelous thing I'd ever felt. I had a ball with them; they were genuine, loving and concerned about one another. It had such an impact on me, I just fell in love with Brock and Faye and the whole family atmosphere they had created." That's not all she fell in love with—the "family atmosphere" included Brock and Faye's son Brian Speer, who had oh-so-casually brought her home to dinner that night. He was working as the financial officer at Homeland Records, the company that had just signed Allison to a recording contract. Since she was a little leery of getting involved with anyone in the music business, Brian was

careful not to call that evening a "date." But despite her initial reservations, Brian's persistence and the loving embrace of his family won her over; and before too long the Parksville, Ky., girl with the soaring soprano voice had become Allison Durham Speer.

Allison was raised on her grandfather's tenant farm, an idyllic country environment she describes as "poor in the basics of life, but wholesome and loving." She grew up singing but was never encouraged to pursue music as a career. "In a farm community, you might pick a guitar or a banjo every now and then, but you don't travel and sing for a living; you stay on the farm and work. It was a little bit of a trying experience because the dream I had was so unattainable in their eyes. Mama kept saying, 'Let's just make sure you have something to fall back on...'"

During Allison's second year at the University of Kentucky, fellow singer Squire Parsons introduced her to Maurice Templeton, who immediately booked her on all of his Christian cruises with speakers such as Charles Stanley, Bailey Smith and James Kennedy. This brought her to the attention of Bill Traylor of Homeland Records, who signed her as a



Allison, age 5



Performing with Uncle Ben

Southern Gospel artist. By the time Allison became a full-fledged Speer in 1989, Brian had begun serving as her business manager, and she had done her musical homework. "I realized I needed to take a little journey into the history of this music I came to love," Allison says, "and that's when I discovered the richness of those incredible old Speer family recordings." It was also around this time that Allison first met the Gaithers on one of the Templeton cruises. "I sang one night with Bill and Gloria sitting right on the front row, which is enough to give you a heart attack," she laughingly recalls. "But afterward Bill said 'Hey, what do you think about touring a little bit with the Vocal Band?'" That connection led to a contract with Star Song Records and further expanded her singing ministry, which eventually grew to include featured roles in many Homecoming videos.

In the last few years Allison has also worked with two mission organizations that are very close to her heart, traveling to Russia, Bosnia and the Phillipines with the International Aid Organization and the American Leprosy Mission. She says, "I believe that if you truly desire to lead, you have to serve. I think every Christian would benefit from doing some kind of mission work in a foreign country. My eyes were opened to the great, great needs and dire circumstances that people are living in around the world, and it changed my life completely."

Allison has also had a long-standing desire to share some of the communication and performance skills she has developed during her 25-year career with young ministers and musicians. In October of 2008 that dream was realized as Allison held the first four-day "Elijah Conference" just outside of Nashville. She gathered an experienced group of industry professionals and speakers to help instruct attendees in the many different aspects of

music ministry. "We're putting all of our efforts into training gospel musicians in areas like communication, using humor successfully, vocalizing, spiritually preparing for a concert, successful musical and verbal segues between songs, booking, management, nonprofit status—everything we can think of to help them grow their ministry and take it to the next level," Allison says excitedly. "All we really have to do is turn the light on, and then the Lord leads them down the road to where they need to be. It's absolutely the most rewarding thing I've ever done."

Ironically, Allison's newfound enthusiasm for sharing what she has learned with others came on the heels of one of the most discouraging times of her life. Describing herself as personally and professionally burned out,



with husband Brian

Allison says, "About four years ago I was ready to give it all up. I told Brian, 'Don't book any more concerts, I'm quitting, I'm done.' There was absolutely no desire to keep on doing what we were doing. I had no passion, no zeal, I didn't love the concerts, I didn't even care about the audience anymore."

But one afternoon while walking through a mall in Nashville, Allison saw a woman she recognized. "It was a little lady by the name of Lois J. Huddleston, a song evangelist. Years ago when I was just a teenager, she had come to our tiny church in Kentucky and stood up on a stump and sang about Jesus. We sat down on a bench, and I began to talk to her about how I was just so very weary and tired



Allison's family in Kentucky

of it all. She said, 'I am sensing two things—that you don't have a love for God's people, and you don't have a love for God's Word.' Lois grabbed my hand and began to pray, whispering very softly in the middle of that mall for over an hour. Finally she said, 'I want you to promise me that every day when you get up you will say, "Lord, give me a love for the blood-bought people of God and give me a love for your Word. Let me eat it and breathe it to your glory."' Allison's voice breaks as she says, "I made her that promise out of my longstanding love and respect for her. Even though I didn't feel like it, I did it; and the Lord began to do a work in me. He gave me strength and courage and let me see that those people sitting in those aisles and pews were beloved to Him. And when I began to really see the love God had extended to me and the grace He'd given me, I was renewed, and my heart was refreshed."

Allison's hunger for Scripture has now expanded her ministry to include teaching the Bible at women's conferences. "That's the main thing I want to pass on to others," she says. "If we feast on that Word and drink that living water every day, He will be our sustenance and our provision." ■



Tori Taff is an author, speaker and Grammy-nominated songwriter. She and her husband Russ Taff live in

Brentwood, Tenn. with their daughters Madi Rose and Charlotte. Tori writes about life with a gospel singer, two teenagers and three yappy dogs at her blog: www.Babybloomr.com.

LADYE LOVE SMITH

My life in one sentence?
It's colorful, full of surprises and blessed!



I have a wonderful husband, Reggie, and one 6-year-old son, Bret. I love photography and sing in recording studios during the week. I also have a master's degree in counseling and like to take part in women's retreats. I am currently involved with Anne Beiler of Auntie Anne Pretzels in conferences called, "7 women, 7 stories—Women of Truth." And I'm STILL trying to finish writing a book! Our Web site is reggieandladylove@musiccitynetworks.com, where we have several projects including our newest (our big band project!). And I also have a cookbook!

My Five Fun Facts!

1. I love Diet Coke and "good" ice (too much!).
2. I drive everyone crazy taking pictures! I love making memories and giving them to people to document them.
3. It's hard for me to stop until things are done...I can't let things go and relax until they're finished! (I'm working on it!) I always unpack our luggage no matter what time we get home!
4. I have always been a big advocate for racial equality since I was 7 years old. We should see everyone as God sees us—the same. I feel that way today about everyone, whatever the difference.
5. I LOVE clean sheets and good thread counts!

FAYE SPEER

My life in one sentence? I continue to enjoy a richly blessed and happy life.

I was married to Brock for over 50 years, and we have three children plus two daughters-in-law: Suzan, Marc (Joyce) and Brian (Allison). My current passions are volunteering at my church, water aerobics and shopping!



My Five Fun Facts!

1. I love little dogs; and my favorite is my poodle, Coco Puff.
2. My favorite flower is a daffodil.
3. There are days that I would like to sell everything, move to the beach and sell hotdogs!
4. "I am still a blonde," to quote Kirk Talley.
5. I have lived in the same house for 49 years because there is too much junk to move!

ALLISON SPEER

My life in one sentence? At this point in my life the things of earth are growing strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.



My husband, Brian Speer, and I have been married for almost 20 years. We always travel together. He is my manager, producer, best friend and love. I am the executive director and instructor of the Elijah Conference. I am also a theology major at Liberty University. Dr. Jerry Falwell gave me a scholarship before he died. I have felt a calling to teach the Bible for many years and have run in fear from this daunting responsibility. One of the things that changed my outlook on life altogether was something that Bill Gaither said to me during some very difficult days. He said, "I wish I had learned earlier in life to tell the endings from the beginnings." Indeed, what I saw as an end to a dream, God had designed to be the beginning of His sovereign plan for my life. I will never forget the day God revealed Himself to me through those few words from Bill.

My Five Fun Facts!

1. I am a painter, and I love art of the southwest.
2. I adore dogs and have a mini-schnauzer named Ellie.
3. I make notes on everything, even TV shows. How dumb is that?
4. I love to shop at thrift stores.
5. I love to refurbish houses and furniture.

MARY TOM SPEER REID

My life in one sentence? Good!

I have three children, two in-laws and six grandchildren! My favorite Homecoming videos were the ones taped at Billy Graham's church; and I have too many favorite songs to mention, but everyone loves when we sing "Didn't It Rain." My current passion is getting one pair of glasses so that I can read and watch TV without having to change them!

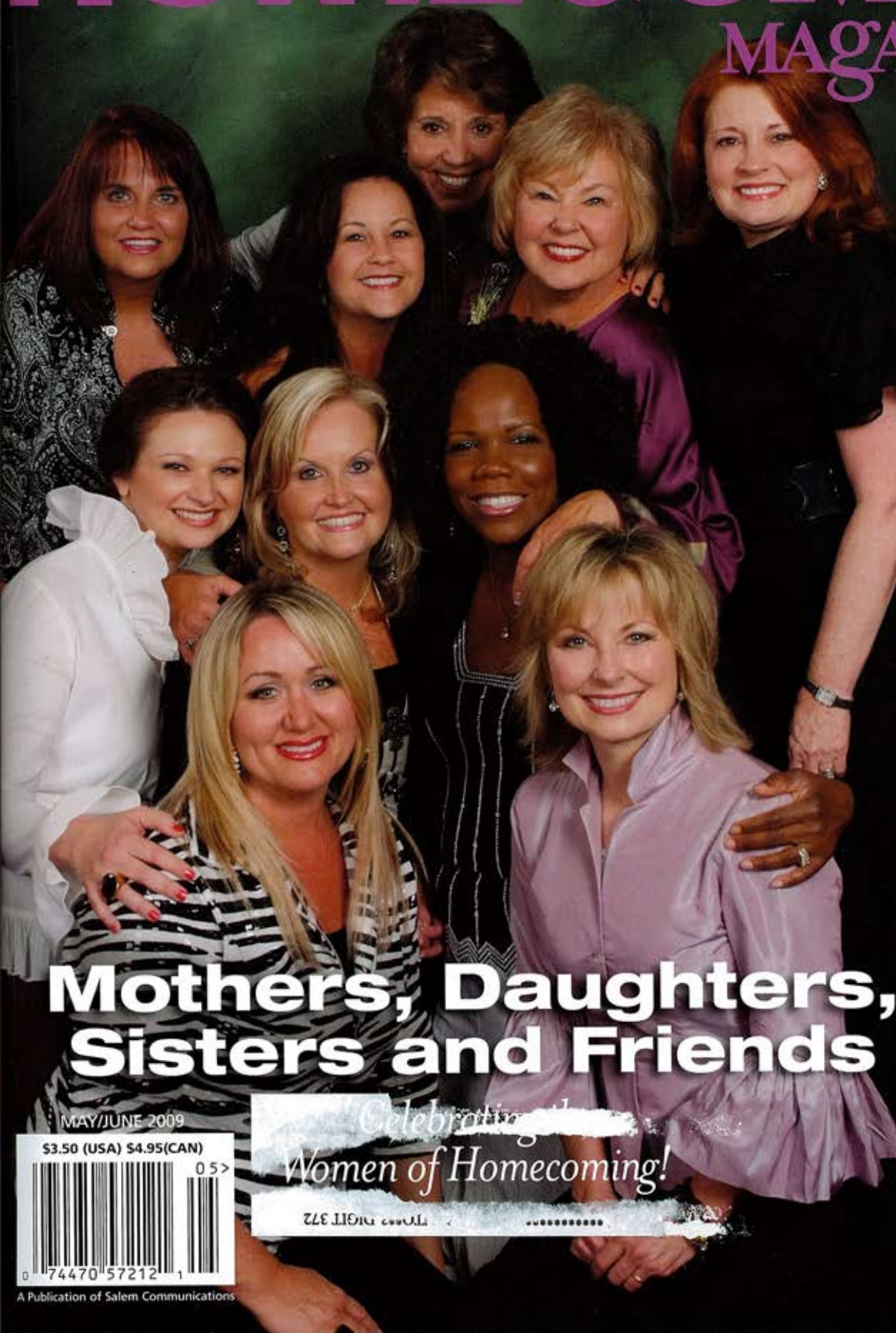


My Five Fun Facts!

1. I've been inducted into three different Halls of Fame.
2. I started singing when I was 5.
3. I was a pastor's wife for eight years.
4. I worked for Ben Speer Music for 50 years.
5. I can make a "mean" banana pudding!

Bill & Gloria Gaither present

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BILL'S INTERVIEW
WITH COUNTRY STAR
WYNONNA



SHEILA WALSH
Woman of Faith