

THE Amazing Adventures of Dave & Bonnie (and their nine kids)

How God ruined one family's life—for the better

When Dave and Bonnie Shaw first became Christians, their greatest fear was this—that they'd have to spend the rest of their lives “standing around the piano singing Kumbaya.”

Fortunately for the Shaws, it seems like God had different plans.

Between raising nine kids, moving to inner-city Orlando to do community development, serving on the pastoral staff at a megachurch, leading mission trips around the world, and now planting a Covenant church in Deland, Florida—not to mention surviving Dave's kidney transplant—they've been a little too busy for Kumbaya.

Following Jesus, they've discovered, can be a grand adventure.

It didn't seem like that back in December 1979, when the Shaws moped around their house as the “saddest new Christians you ever saw,” says Dave, recounting the story while sitting next to Bonnie in their home in Deland.

“We were pathetic,” he adds, with Bonnie chuckling on the couch beside him.

When the Shaws first started going to church, they weren't much interested in God. But with one daughter, Lauren, at home and another one, Megan, on the way, they felt that they ought to take their kids to church, because “good parents took their children to church,” Dave says.

“We did not want to be involved in the church or do any of that,” Bonnie says. “We were big partiers—we really had no place for church. We just wanted our kids in Sunday school.”

But the Shaws had hit it off with Peter Cross, the church's young minister, so when Cross asked if he could visit them on a Tuesday evening, they agreed. The plan was to make small talk for an hour or so, and then shoo him out the door before their guests arrived for a party that night.

There was one small problem. Cross didn't leave when he was supposed to. “He just hung around and hung around,” Dave says. Meanwhile, one of their guests arrived early with six six-packs of beer.

“If he had just calmly gone to the kitchen,” Bonnie says. “But no, he started offering beers around, and then went to the kitchen and started clanging the six-packs into the fridge, popping the tops. We were so embarrassed.”

Then things got worse. Cross picked the Bible off the coffee table and began going through it with the Shaws. They began to see that their plan of dropping the kids off at Sunday school and not getting involved was not going to work. They realized that if they let Jesus into their lives, he was going to shake things up.

To the Shaws, that sounded like bad news. Life as they had known it would be over.



Dave and Bonnie (center) with their nine children, two sons-in-law, and three grandchildren

Things got better for the Shaws, in part because they found themselves drawn into a family of faith, where they formed friendships that went deeper than the easy camaraderie of their partying days. They were also too busy to mope around, as their family was expanding.

Even from their first date as students at Stetson University, Dave and Bonnie had talked about their dreams of having a large family. But they had gone to college during a time of concern about overpopulation and they worried about having more than two biological children. The answer seemed simple. They would adopt.

When they began talking with an adoption agency, however, they ran into difficulty. Because they were white and already had two children, they would be placed at the end of a long waiting list for a healthy white child, behind couples who were infertile. At that

time, few agencies were willing to place black children with white couples, so that door seemed closed as well.

But then the adoption agency asked them to consider adopting a biracial child. “In those days, that was a fairly radical thing to do,” says Bonnie. The Shaws thought it was a great idea.

A few weeks later, before their home study was even complete, a newborn girl named Sarah came home to live with them. Eleven months later, Adam came to live with them, followed by Jared, and then Hannah.

The Shaw family’s multiracial make-up made for controversy. People—both white and black—would stop them in public and tell them that a white family should not be raising black children.

Despite the responses, they believed that God had a hand in the adoption process. “I really felt that each of those children was destined by the Lord to be our child,” says Dave. “They came to

us by some pretty unusual routes, but they really were our children.”

Several families in their church followed in their footsteps, and before long, they started a support group for multiracial adoptive families, which attracted people outside the church and eventually attracted more than 200 families.

A call to ministry

In the mid-eighties, Dave began feeling a call to the ministry. At the time, he was working in finance for the Florida Safety Council, a job that seemed to fit him well. With his short gray hair, metal-framed glasses, deadpan expression, and affinity for business suits, Dave looks the part of a banker or accountant. Then, every once in a while, he gets a twinkle in his eyes and a look of mischief that seems out of place.

Bob Smietana is features editor for the *Companion*.

Bonnie says that Dave’s mom thinks of her son as the calm, stable member of the household, while seeing Bonnie, a red-headed former hippie, as being the impulsive, risk taker.

“We’ve done crazy things and his mother thinks it’s always been me!” Bonnie says.

With six kids at home, Dave knew that quitting his job and moving the family out of state to attend seminary was impractical. (At the time, the Shaws attended a Reformed Presbyterian church, which had a seminary in St. Louis.) But when Reformed Theological Seminary opened a campus in Orlando, he began taking one or two classes at a time.

“One time I was stupid enough to take three,” Dave says. He figured that someday, when the kids were grown and he was finished with seminary, he could have a second career as a pastor.

Not long before Dave started seminary, the Shaws sold their house in Deland and moved to the country club community of Tusawilla in Winter Springs, just north of Orlando. They also became involved with a rapidly growing church called Northland Community Church.

Life appeared settled for the Shaws. While Dave worked for the Florida Safety Council and went to seminary, Bonnie homeschooled their kids. Several of them had learning difficulties and thrived in a homeschool environment.

Then things got interesting. Dave was asked to become an elder at Northland, which was going through a growth spurt. He and Bonnie also became involved in an inner-city ministry called Restore Orlando, where they spent Sunday afternoons helping out with a Bible club for kids in the Holden Heights neighborhood.

Although Holden Heights is located near downtown Orlando, part of the neighborhood is in unincorporated Orange County. Once a fairly prosperous area, because of its proximity to Boone High School, considered a prized school for white students, the neighborhood fell apart after Orlando

schools were desegregated. Everyone who could afford to leave did, says Dave, leaving about a third of the homes in the neighborhood vacant.

As Orlando developed around the neighborhood, Holden Heights was left behind. As recent as the mid-1990s, the unincorporated part of the neighborhood had miles of unpaved roads, no city sewers, and a fetid drainage pond (referred to as “Budweiser Bay”) instead of storm sewers. Many of the houses were abandoned or in ill-repair because of absentee landlords.

Because the neighborhood was racially divided—with the older white residents not mixing with their newer black neighbors—and had few political connections, change seemed unlikely.



Dave Shaw

The Shaws began to feel uncomfortable volunteering in the neighborhood for a few hours, and then returning home. “I knew that something wasn’t right,” Bonnie says. “We would leave our beautiful home and we go down to the city and we tell these little kids, it’s OK, Jesus loves you. And then we would go back to Tusawilla and our home with a pool. Something was not right.”

Bonnie thought about scaling down the family’s lifestyle. Dave had another idea—sell the Tusawilla house and move to Holden Heights. Bonnie was skeptical. Dave told her, “I think we are supposed to move down there.”

“You are nuts,” Bonnie recalls tell-

ing him. They had six children—the chances of finding a house that would fit their family seemed remote.

Then Dave called home one afternoon and told Bonnie he had found a house—it was two stories with six bedrooms on two acres of land, one block off of Orange Blossom Trail, a major thoroughfare. The house had been built in the 1930s, and a previous owner had bought up and fenced off twelve lots and planted enormous vegetable gardens, along with orange, lemon, and lime trees.

There were a few problems, however. The house backed up to the red-light district of the neighborhood. And it featured some creative home repairs.

“The whole thing was falling down, paint was falling off in chunks, and [a previous owner] had wired his own electricity,” says Dave. “He had Romex cable draped around the outside of the house with nails—had drilled a hole in the wall wherever he wanted to put an outlet. So there were wires everywhere. The house looked like it had been draped in spaghetti.”

The Shaws sold their suburban house with a pool and moved to the inner-city house with the outside wiring. They went in naive, thinking they could save the neighborhood, and along the way, convinced seven other families from their church to move with them. In the end, they helped their neighbors find ways to save their own neighborhood.

They spent much of the time convincing their white neighbors to come out of their houses and get to know their black neighbors. “It turned out that our ministry was really to the white families,” Dave says. They would tell them, “Come on out of your homes, let’s meet our neighbors. Let’s go meet the politicians. Let’s have fellowship.”

“That was a whole different deal we hadn’t planned for,” Dave says, “and it was a whole lot of fun.”

Once neighbors, black and white, began showing up at neighborhood meetings, local politicians began paying more attention to the neighborhood.

That attention brought community development projects—new sewers, storm drains, and paved roads.

Another change of plans

The Shaws didn't get to see many of those new projects come to fruition. Four years after moving to Holden Heights, which was in southeast Orlando, they moved north of the city to be closer to Dave's work. By this time, he was serving as a staff pastor at Northland.

His call there had been unexpected. As the church grew and became a megachurch, Dave and some of the elders realized that some intentional changes were needed.

"The church had grown so quickly that in many ways it was still operating like a small church," he says. "There was no budget. Money was coming in and we [spent it without a plan]. Those of us who were business people, it made us nervous. You are not supposed to run an organization like this."

The elders decided the church needed a part-time chief operating officer. Dave helped draft a job description, and added additional responsibilities. The church's vision included partnering with other churches—both in the U.S. and in other countries. Dave thought that someone needed to work on making that vision a reality. The other church leaders agreed.

"That sounds perfect," they told Dave. "And, by the way, you ought to do this job." Although he hadn't been looking for a new job, Dave agreed to take it on.

That new role took Dave on dozens of trips around the world, setting up partnerships with churches in Africa, Asia, and South America. It also led him to meet local church leaders, including Kurt Miericke, superintendent of the Southeast Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

Joining the Covenant

Dave relished his new role as pastor. But after about four years, he began to feel a call to do something else. He wasn't sure what that was.



Bonnie Shaw with one of their three dogs

"I always thought that when God called you, you knew where you were supposed to go," he says. "I felt called from something to nothing, which was very strange."

At first Dave and Bonnie considered becoming missionaries. Two compli-

the process. The Shaws kept volunteering at the home and invited Nathan and Tiffany over for holidays, but they didn't tell them about their interest in adopting them.

"You were stalking us," Tiffany likes to tell her parents. Their adoption was finalized in 2002, about the same time that Lily, a newborn girl, became part of the family.

While all this was going on, the Shaws were talking with Kurt Miericke about the possibility of planting a Covenant church in Deland. They went through the Department of Church Growth and Evangelism's assessment center for church planters, and later church planter training, and were approved in 2002.

They began planting Covenant Community Church about the same time that Nathan and Tiffany's adop-

"Sometimes you have enough faith to step out of there on the water, then you start to look around and think, 'Boy, that was a dumb idea.' By then you are already out there—you have no choice but to have faith . . ."

cations made that unlikely. First, Dave had lived with a serious kidney disease for many years, and he knew that at some point he would need a transplant. Also, their family was growing.

In 2001, with their children almost grown, the Shaws again began thinking about adoption. Bonnie began checking into adopting an infant.

Around this time, the Shaws were volunteering at a children's home, where their daughter Megan and her husband, Scott, worked. There they met a brother and sister—Nathan and Tiffany. As they got to know the two teenagers, Dave and Bonnie wondered about adopting them. The Shaws quietly began looking into the possibility, but legal complications slowed down

tion was finalized. That made for some interesting times, as Nathan and Tiffany were very Goth—they dressed in black, listened to Goth music—and didn't seem like typical pastor's kids.

Dave and Bonnie wondered what visitors to the new church would think, but they didn't let it bother them. They felt strongly that there were more important things going on in their kids' lives than their wardrobe and taste in music.

"We didn't want to bring them into our family and say, OK, now you've got a new family and a new home and you've got to also get a whole new wardrobe, new music, and all that," Bonnie says.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20

In the end, the Shaws' worries proved pointless. A number of families joined the church precisely because of Nathan and Tiffany. They had kids who didn't feel they fit in with the typical clean-cut, straight-laced church youth groups and came to the Shaws' church because "it was the only church their kids could stand," says Bonnie.

"I don't know how it is with you, but sometimes we have such little faith. Dave and I have been shown [God's provision] over and over again—people say we have big faith but sometimes I cannot believe the stuff we miss," she says.

On most Sundays, Dave and Bonnie, their nine kids, two sons-in-law, and three grandchildren can be found at Covenant Community Church, which worships in a rented building, not far from their house. Afterward they gather back at home, where they spend much of their time standing around the kitchen counter, laughing, joking, and giving each other a hard time.

In November, Dave needed a kidney transplant, and his son-in-law Scott was the donor. Dave considers himself fortunate because of the way the transplant unfolded. Even though his kidneys were failing, he never had to go on dialysis. The transplant was scheduled soon after his kidneys began to fail. Having a live donor made the process much easier, something that Dave is immensely grateful to God for.

"I don't want to leave people with the impression that oh, I am a Christian and God made it easy. God didn't promise us that," Dave says. "The witness you have is that, because you are a Christian, you are not as afraid of what happens if this all goes bad. You have that kind of a witness. And by God's grace, he has made it very easy. We are just thankful that's all."

The church plant has gone slowly, with an average attendance of about seventy people. The church is also involved with plans for a new Covenant Enabling Residence in Deland, sponsored by the Southeast Conference.

Not long ago, Dave took a job as an administrator with the local YMCA to

ease some of the financial burden on the church. He is hopeful about the local Covenant church's future because the Covenant offers both a faith grounded in Scripture and "theological charity," something he often sees missing in church culture.

"There are some people today who are in a context where the purpose of the church is to defend sound doctrine. And the identity of the church is that these are things that we believe that nobody else believes," he says. "So you are always majoring on how we are divided from each other. That can't be what Jesus had in mind for the local church."

Stepping out of the boat

Recently, Dave has been on the receiving end of teasing from his family, after receiving a Jefferson Award for outstanding community service from the Florida Safety Council. The award was presented for Dave's community leadership in Orlando, and the Shaws' service as foster parents for more than thirty children. The award noted Dave's service in Florida and "around the world."

That line, "around the world," brings a chorus of laughter from the Shaws, who don't think their lives are any big deal. Instead, they want to deflect attention toward God.

"Dave and I have had a very easy time deciphering what God wanted us to do and then just doing it," Bonnie says. "We have such little faith that God has to make it really, really clear and then we are afraid not to obey. So we just go ahead and do it. Looking back, we feel like God has possibly chosen us to do some things and made it look easy so that other people won't be afraid to try the same things."

"We are kind of like Peter stepping out of the boat," says Dave. "Sometimes you have enough faith to step out of there on the water, then you start to look around and think, 'Boy, that was a dumb idea.' By then you are already out there—you have no choice but to have faith, because if you don't, you're going to sink!" □