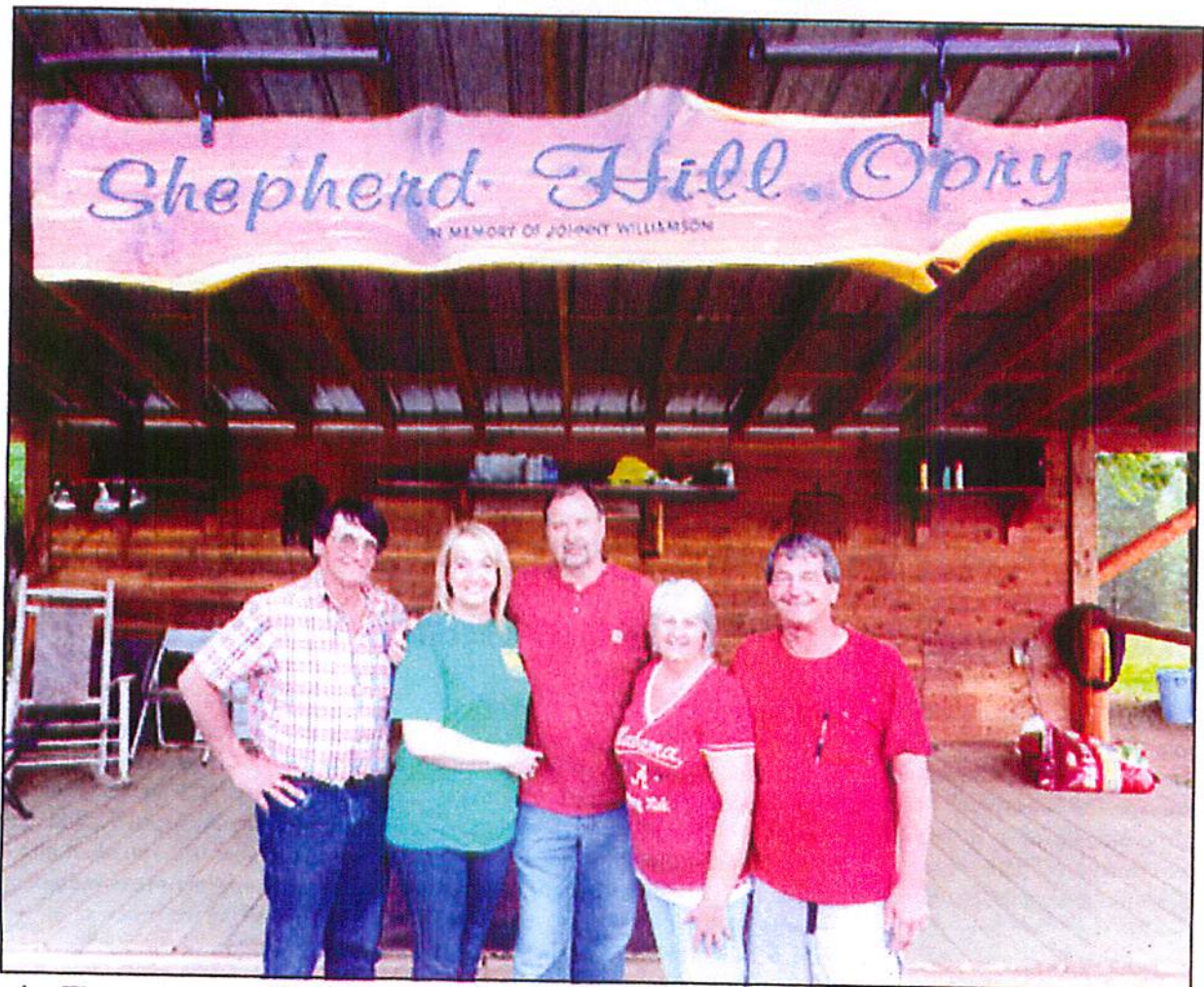


HELPING THOSE IN NEED



A Legacy of Love: The Williamson Family

By Matt Jaeger
Gazette Staff

How can you possibly measure the life of a man? I mean measure it exhaustively. Account for every single relationship, every path crossed, every single transaction. It's a daunting mission made all the more difficult when you're measuring the life of an extraordinary man. This is the task at hand for the Williamson family in Samantha, Alabama. Their father, Johnny Williamson, is something of a folk hero. In our part of the world there is a lot of talk about neighborly hospitality, loving your neighbor, being the "Good Samaritan", etc. but how often do we go out of our way to live like that? It's very hard to constantly put yourself out there for people, because a lot of the time people hurt us. If we are honest with ourselves we are naturally self-preserving creatures, we do not like to take people in.

That was not Johnny Williamson. If you lived in the Northern portions of Tuscaloosa County, near Northside High School over the past 60 years and needed a helping hand, Johnny Williamson would be there to lend it. He worked six days a week, and then returned home to spend time with his family but to also tend to his crops. Not so the family would have a surplus, but so he could give it away to neighbors in need. This is the legacy that his kids are attempting to live out. They adore their father, as they should, but they know that their mission is more than remembering his extreme generosity.

If you drive down Highway 43 going North you'll pass Tuscaloosa County High School, keep going. You'll pass Lake Tuscaloosa, but you should keep going. You'll eventually reach Northside High School, and just before you keep driving into oblivion chasing the sunset you'll see a local landmark commonly re-

ferred to as "Jesus in a box". That is not its name. It's called the Good Shepard Statue and it was crafted by local artist Willie Logan, the same renowned artist that was commissioned to create the Chief Tuskalusa statue that currently resides in the Tuscaloosa Public Library.

Besides, you could never put Jesus in a box.

This roadside oddity has a unique magnetism that seems to draw travelers in. I like to think that Johnny Williamson knew this would happen. You see, Johnny had something that every person that has ever lived wanted, whether they knew it or not. He had a faith that allowed him to open up his life to those he loved the most, and to those he barely knew. He had faith that God would provide all that his family would need, and enough to provide for a few of his friends as well.

Johnny Williamson passed away,
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and as it often does, death did not diminish the man who had become a legend. As a matter of fact it seemed to cement the legendary legacy of Johnny Williamson. Last year, in memory of their father, the Williamson family opened up their property for the first annual Legacy of Love Festival. Their expectations were humble, they hoped to provide a fun atmosphere for their community and to build some neighborly bonds. What they got was 500 people at their doorstep ready for a party. And a party is what they got; food, music, and some homemade ice cream. That's a good recipe for sending everyone home with a smile on their face. The event was also a way for the family to bring attention to their mission: helping those in need.

When Johnny passed away in 2013 he did leave a void, and in this void his children (Becky, Larry, and Ricky) gladly stepped in. They continued on the heritage of servanthood their father left behind. It wasn't something that they did begrudgingly, no one twisted their arm. They did it gladly because it's what daddy did and it's what Jesus did.

Last years festival was a success by any measure. People came, had a good time, and folks that needed a little help were met with loving arms. This year the family hopes to build on last years success, especially in the giving department. Through donations from local churches and other anonymous benefactors they were able to build out the property which has been transformed into a community performance center. They've also begun work on "The Little Closet", which is named for their grandmother who made it a habit to give folks a "poke" from the little closet, no one went home empty handed. The Closet is just a continuation on a family heritage of love and generosity. It was

impossible to stand in that partly completed structure and not be excited and encouraged about the possibilities. The Little Closet will be a food bank that anyone with need will have access to.

This years festival will most certainly be an even bigger celebration than last year. Since last years festival multiple Nashville musicians have reached out to the Williamsons about performing this year. All of a sudden Becky Williamson is hosting Nashville country stars in her home.

"I make sure they get a good breakfast." she says hospitably.

The Legacy of Love Festival will begin at 1pm on April 18th, at Shepard Hill (see website for details). Musical acts includes: Allen Frizzell, Jennifer Brantley, Donnie Lee Strickland, and The Crains Nest.

So this Saturday, April 18th, if you're out on those northern backroads and you hear some hootin' and some hollerin', don't be alarmed. In fact, you ought to come out and enjoy some time with your neighbors. I know there will be plenty of food and ice cream to go around. The music will be loud, but not too loud, and it'll make you want to get up and dance. And if you get a chance go and take a walk, go somewhere quiet, and in the distance you'll hear it. You'll have to get real quiet and listen really closely, but you'll hear it. It's the years and years of prayers that Johnny certainly said for his family, his friends, and his community. At a Spring party in 2015 those prayers are slowly being answered.

-Matt Jaeger can be reached for comment at mtjaeger1@gmail.com

-For more information on the Legacy of Love Festival and the Good Shepard Foundation please go to www.johnnywilliamson-goodshepardfoundation.com

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