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### Gardner-Webb's Helen Pack Discovers History, Hope and Healing

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# Gardner-Webb's Helen Pack Discovers History, Hope and Healing



Office of University Communications

November 19, 2012

## *Cancer Diagnosis Launches Search for Answers and Yields Family Ties*

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – The diagnosis was frightening. Stage three non-operable lung cancer. At just 46 years old, she was told to put things in order. She had six months to live, at most.

For Helen Ford Pack, that was one of the darkest days of her life. Her thoughts swirled and her emotions churned. She'd always been the type of person who emanated a spirit of thankfulness. Now, something in her heart twisted and she knew she had to find them. She needed to know all of her story. Even if this was the end. Somehow, her last chapter could not be written without them.

At the age of six months, Helen had been adopted by a wonderful couple, Edwin and Esther Ann Ford, who had a five-year-old biological son named Clark and were unable to have more children. She had grown up in a loving home and although she always knew she was adopted, it was a source of great pride. "My mother told me I was very special, because they got to choose me," Helen recalled. "When I went to first grade, and all the kids were asked to introduce themselves, I remember standing up in class and saying, 'My name is Helen Ford and I'm adopted.'"

She knew very little about her biological parents; just that the Fords adopted her from a foster home in Morganton. "I was one of the luckiest people in the world to go to Edwin and Esther Ann Ford. They are the most wonderful people," Helen shared. "I never felt adopted, I just felt like I was theirs. They treated me so special and I was so fortunate to have them raise me." Married and with two children of her own, the unanswered questions about her past surfaced. Her parents were fully supportive of her desire to learn more.

"They were told only that I was from the mountains, and that's all they knew," Helen said. "So my dad was as curious as I was to find out. And my mother wanted me to find out also. They were very secure about it."

Following the cancer diagnosis and with little information to go on, Pack hired a private detective to track down her biological parents. Within three days, the detective had news. Although her biological father had passed away, Helen had a biological brother, as well as two half-brothers. And the most incredible information of all: Her mother was alive, and living in Baltimore.

“I called her up and said, ‘You’d better sit down because my name is Helen Pack and I’ve got some news for you,’ she said. Shocked by the news, her biological mother was initially hesitant to discuss details. Understanding the heaviness of the information she was giving, Helen said, “I told her, ‘That’s fine. I respect your rights, but I would like to call back and talk to you.’ I didn’t feel rejection, I knew that eventually she would talk to me. It was just the initial shock of me calling.”

Within one week, Helen had reconnected with all of her “new” brothers. She learned that her biological parents, James Lester Yeary and Edna Lewis Yeary had divorced before she was born. Her biological brother, Danny, was five years old and never knew he had a sister. Her brothers helped supply additional information about her unknown history, and she had another crucial conversation with her mother.

“The second time we talked, she was very open,” Helen shared. “It was the first of many long conversations.” Within six months, they had planned a meeting. Helen drove to Baltimore with her daughter and her newfound sister-in-law, who knew Edna personally. As soon as they spotted her, Helen’s nerves nearly took control.

“I was so excited and I was just looking at her and I ran up the sidewalk,” she recalled. “My legs were shaking because I was so nervous, and I remember looking at her and I thought she had the most beautiful eyes, a deep ocean blue. I remember she smelled so good. I just hugged her and it was wonderful to finally meet her.”

She had no way of knowing then that their time together would be brief. After reconnecting, Helen and Edna spent five years getting to know one another. As a birthday present to Helen, Danny moved their mom back to North Carolina so they would be able to spend more time together. Sadly, Edna became ill and passed away unexpectedly, just a year after the move.

“It was hard, like a nightmare really,” Helen shared, as her eyes became misty. “I just had five years with her. I wasn’t ready to let go that quick.”

Yet, the two women shared more in that brief time period than some do in a lifetime. “It was a great thing that I got to meet her, because I got to tell her what a wonderful thing she did by giving me up for adoption,” Helen reflected. “I had the best family and she was so relieved. She had been looking for me for years. She worried about me; she wondered. I was able to thank her for giving me up. She did the right thing. And I think she got peace about that.”

Although she never got a chance to meet her biological father face to face, she became close with his second wife and the boys they had together, her half-brothers, Ronnie and Jimmy. “I saw a photo of my biological father in his army suit, and when I looked at the picture, I knew automatically that it was him,” she said. “I just knew that was what he’d look like.”

Now 14 years cancer free, Helen is more grateful now than ever. “Family is just precious to me. For so long, I knew they were out there and I didn’t know where,” she shared. “To find them, it was like a puzzle was put back together.”

She also carries a strong conviction that the right decisions were made; that somehow, this was all part of God’s master plan for her. “When I think of God, I know he was there for me from the time I was born that day,” she said. “He planned my life. He knew exactly what was going to happen. He got me to the most wonderful parents. I’m very blessed. I can’t be thankful enough. God looked after me from the day I was born. And he’s still looking after me.”

*Helen Pack has worked at Gardner-Webb University for 14 years as WGWG Radio Host and Board Operator. As we enter into the season of Thanksgiving, Gardner-Webb University honors its faculty, staff, and students who have their own adoption stories and we celebrate November as National Adoption Awareness Month.*