

The facts and trivia behind the Creative Arts at Union

Many see and hear the members of the Creative Arts each Sunday during worship. Through hymns, praise, specials, video, drama and readings...all come together to express God's Word for the observer. But there is also a great amount of stories and testimony that go on behind the scenes to make this ministry work from week to week.

In this publication, we will take you behind our Arts world to give you just a glimpse of what we really are all about. From embarrassing mishaps to little known trivia, from unforgettable memories to heart-breaking challenges...it's here. So sit back and enjoy!



## THE CREATIVE ARTS PASTOR...

Jim Lanier has been the Creative Arts Pastor for 25 years and is fulfilling a calling that he never expected in a million years! Here are some facts you may not have known;

- 1/ Born and raised in Avon Park, Jim began in our very own choir as a soprano in the early 70's.
- 2/ He was the band director here in Avon Park during the late 80's.
- 3/ Jim lived in Atlanta for 5 years working at the Atlanta Ballet in the PR department.
- 4/ Though he directs the choir, Jim has no formal choral training.
- 5/ With no clean clothes, Jim gave an entire senior sax recital in his pajamas in college.
- 6/ He briefly dated Jan Hooks (Designing Women, Saturday Night Live)
- 7/ He stopped wearing a choir robe when he saw a pic of himself sitting on a stool. "I looked like I was getting a haircut at a barber shop!"

**Here is a story from Jim's early choir days when he was in high school;**

*'The church choir had its moments not because I enjoyed singing church music, but because the director was my band director's wife and we all loved her to death even though we would frustrate her almost every day! This lady literally got me started in music in the school system and I was very good friends with her son. The aggravation towards his mother was not just from me, he was included in everything as well.*

*One example was when we surprised the congregation as the choir was ready to process down the aisle for Sunday morning worship, which was VERY traditional and full of rules and rituals! We all wore those long robes with the stoles that went around our necks and draped a long 'V' down the back. It was Christmas and we took several ornaments off of the church tree and placed them on the back of our Directors stole. Pausing just a couple of seconds so she could get a head start down the aisle, we found ourselves crying with laughter as she so proudly made her way to the front of the church with her new fashion statement for Union Congregational! Moments like this made the choir special.'*



## PRODUCTIONS AT UNION...

Throughout the early history of Union, there were always wonderful choir cantatas and special events. The directors and leaders of the choir through the years were very gifted and always made sure these performances were 'top notch' for our Lord. We speak in terms of these years using the 'choir' only because that was generally what the arts at Union Congregational consisted of...along with most all small churches at that time. But as the church grew, more could and would be added to the arts ministry. The hand bell choir would come next and in more recent years came the instruments, drama, dance and praise.



Since the mid 90's, Union has put away the traditional 'packaged' cantatas and through original creativity, has continued to produce pretty large scale productions that you would never see anywhere else! Some examples include; 'The Music of Andrew Lloyd Webber' in which we showcased the more inspirational music from this great man such as 'Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat', 'Jesus Christ Superstar', 'Requiem' and many more. 'Millennium's Light' was an original production compiled completely by Pastor Jim that took us on a very moving journey through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This was done as the world was entering the new Millennium.

Other highlights have included; 'Dinner at the White House', 'A Disney Spectacular', 'The Heart of Stage and Screen', 'Heartsongs', 'Christmas-An Interactive Experience', 'Anna', 'Journey Through the Classics', 'Ordinary Miracles', 'Finding Christmas' and so many more! Now there certainly have been a few 'packaged' programs that have been highly successful such as; 'Portraits of Christmas' which was actually recorded and shown on public television. 'Godspell in Concert' which was tremendously successful! And 'Experiencing God', which was one of the greatest challenges for this ministry.

This amazing production was to be done for the first time using a full orchestra, children, choir and other video enhancements and special effects at Union. One of the challenges was how to get this done by rehearsing in a separate building all the way up to the date of the performance! At this time, the new



Millennium Sanctuary was under construction and the plan was to let this be the first arts programs in the building. So...for the weeks of preparation, the choir had to learn their parts in the old church building, the orchestra which was put together from local musicians, learned their

parts on their own and the video and special effects would...well, they would have to wait! Long story short...We had ONE rehearsal with everyone in the new building before the performance but needless to say, this was one INCREDIBLE and UNFORGETTABLE event! Everything was perfect and one of the most inspiring evenings ever at Union Church!

So many thanks would be given to Sue Lewis who helped get some string players from the college and Pam Lanier who was the band director at that time and provided so many of the instrumentalists and guided them through this journey.

# UNION PRAISE

*(a retrospective)*

The rich history of Union Congregational has always been filled with great music since the earliest days of its formation. In those infant stages of growth the leading source of music was from the sanctuary choir. As years passed and Union developed, the music began to expand as well with the addition of a hand bell choir and the use of many solos, duets and other vocal and instrumental ensembles. Soon in more recent years it became unavoidable to ignore the surge in popularity of the 'praise' experience during worship. In the late 90's many at Union fought the inception of this music into worship but with careful steps and respect for all of our members, eventually it began to be a part of our ministry.

In 2001, the Millennium Sanctuary was erected on campus and along with this wonderful expansion, came the expansion of our music department as well to now include a praise team to be used in worship. Union still held on to a lot of traditions that had been observed for many years and to suddenly 'change' everything we did at once would have been disastrous! Thus began this...our first team still donning our choir robes!! Pictured here from left to right was Pam Lanier, Chris Hess, Aaron Jahjah and Pam Sim. Not pictured was the director; Jim Lanier on the piano and Dwayne Quick on the drums. Notice that we all had our own music stands because with this being so new to us, no one wanted to be without music to read. We were much to frightened to look up at those screens!



So along with this new way of worship, came the harsh criticism that really is unavoidable in any 'new' situation...especially in the arts. "It's too loud!!!!" "It's the same thing over and over and over!!!" And the poor workers in the sound booth were doing the best they could and we on the stage were just trying to worship. Oh well...with time, things began to get better and everyone began to get a bit more relaxed. A drum plexiglass front was purchased by one of our members and that made a lot of folks happy. For now anyway!



Now came the 'look'. We discarded the robes but we still maintained a nice 'Sunday' look for the stage. In this picture, Pam Sim was missing but a little bit about her needs to be mentioned right here. Pam Sim was not only a great musician and harmonizer for this group, but she was also one that set the standard of the true meaning of why we were doing this. All Pam wanted

to do was sing to the Lord...no matter what that meant. In choir she always sang with a smile on her face and often during praise she would close her eyes and just let the music and words minister out of her in a most natural and inspiring way. Every once in awhile we would need to cancel rehearsal for one reason or another and it would greatly disappoint Pam. She said once that "rehearsal was not just about getting the notes right, but it was also her time to get lost on a Thursday evening with worship and get a little closer to Jesus".

Up until now Union had always had just one service but many churches were now switching to a 'traditional' and 'contemporary' service. This new format would please more people and give the creativity of worship a new outlet for success. So our little praise team would now present its worship at the new service and the choir would handle the regular traditional setting. However, that traditional service did not go without its own form of praise which worked very well with this crowd. David Flowers put together his own group of praise 'singers' and they would lead an opening of worship each Sunday with some Gaither tunes, hymns and some of the newer praise songs as well.



Well, we were now on our way! Through the years the personnel of the praise group changed and grew. We were now making great strides in bringing the Gospel through praise and worship and when we did our 40 Days of Purpose campaign, we were having a great time singing to the Lord using all of this great music. Even combining efforts with our Voices of Truth Choir.

Years later we were deeply saddened by the tragic loss of one of our former vocalists; Jessica Montague who in these pictures is singing on stage left next to the 40 Days banner. Her mother Tina Warner is also a member of the group in this picture. Jessica was killed in a senseless murder at the Sun Trust bank in Sebring Florida in 2019.





Many of the faces that we have seen in Union's praise group through the years are still active in the music ministry though they might not be participating in the group itself. In the above picture we see from left to right Pam Lanier, Chris Hess, Aaron Jahjah, Angela Springsteen, Lauren Leon and Kim Tillis. Playing behind the singers is Jim Lanier on keys, Donny Dunn on bass and James Gugle on drums. Later Tiger Gullet and Ron Garman would join in on guitars. (We didn't use the guitars for awhile when we started. We were still getting the congregation used to the drums!!)

Shemkia Swafford would join the group lending not only her vocals, but her dancing and poetry readings as well.



Our praise group at this time was getting rather large but to have all these voices praising each Sunday was very inspiring to many who listened.

Of course we would be wrong if we didn't admit the internal problems that came with such a group. We didn't have ego problems but we did have problems with personal tastes and conflicts of opinions...which is expected of course. But what did we do with that? Well, we made sure we stayed grounded of the real reason we were on this stage. Not for a performance, but for worship and praise to our God.

And times were changing and so was the music and the feel of the group. New praise and worship songs were appearing every week and sometimes we would struggle to keep up. Many of the praise

songs have now become standards but when we started thinking that every new Christian song on the JOY FM had to be done, it got to be a bit overwhelming and missing the 'reasons' would begin to get in the way.



But over any problems, we did have fun! When Ron, Tiger, James and Jim were the instrumentalists, they began stretching out in some rather off the beaten paths...including songs from the Beatles, Fleetwood Mac and even Donna Summer. But there were reasons of course for all of this. They didn't just pick a secular song and do it because they wanted to. They used worship as the key. The

Beatles 'Let it Be' actually brought an ex-church member back to God. Fleetwood Mac's 'Tusk' was mixed with 'They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love'. And Donna Summer's 'She Works Hard for the Money' was used on a very special Mother's Day!

One of the great additions to this group was Loni Larimer. She would sign each song and bring a very special connection to worship through her gifts!



Another great loss for this group was the passing of Angela Springsteen who sang with the group for many years. Her love for the color purple was remembered when on the Sunday following her death, the group left her very own purple microphone center stage empty in memory of her. She was a vital member to the group and like Pam Sim, believed that her rehearsal time was her personal time with Jesus.



In recent times, the praise team has gone through many changes and is now much smaller with new vocalists that are most worthy of bringing the good news to everyone! Today the group is lead by one



of its original members; Aaron Jahjah and Kim Tillis continues to provide heart tugging vocals along with Kyanna Elise who's silky tone brings life to any praise song ever written. Tanah Becker has been a favorite vocalist since she was a little girl and new and upcoming talents like Elijah Torres and his brother Edwin Rivera amaze us with their vocals. Though not a regular member, Leslie Morrison continues to contribute to the praise experience with her beautiful voice and interpretations!





There have been a number of 'spin-offs' of praise for Union. The youth ministry has their own group and at one time there was a Saturday evening worship group and a Wednesday evening worship group. One of the vocalists included in these groups went on to appear on American Idol and is now performing nation-wide...our cherished Shelby Dressel.

And believe me, there are many, many more young singers in the works for the future of this team.

Jeremiah Lambright has been a great addition to our

staff in one who is an expert at working with and training these upcoming singers and instrumentalists.

In 1999 Pastor Jim fought against the idea of Praise and Worship at Union until one weekend he bought a copy of Hillsong's For All You've Done CD and then the barriers were broken. Jim now understood the importance and the significance of all this new music.

At one time in history the music of Mozart was not accepted because it was moving in new directions. The same with Elvis, The Beatles, Chicago, and on and on! Thank God for the 'shakers' and the 'movers'. New directions is what the success of humankind relies on and we will not stop!



## SOME GENERAL TRIVIA...

- 1/ Back in the early days of Union, choir members could not wear jewelry and NO ONE was allowed to walk in front of the alter.
- 2/ The sound booth in the back of our sanctuary was actually upstairs. When it was moved down, the lighting remained upstairs. The tech crew would then pass notes and information by way of a wicker basket that was raised and lowered. (No substantial cell phone use at that time!)
- 3/ The choir did a small production of 'Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat' back when we were in the historic church. It was obvious we needed some colored stage lights. Steve Becker put up three floodlights (red, green, yellow) and used a dimmer switch to control them!
- 4/ We wanted it to snow in the historic church for a Christmas program. Jim had the great idea of putting a couple of kids up in the attic to drop the fake snow little by little at a certain time. That was the best we could do. Because of the structure, we had no other way of getting the snow effect done. There just happened to be two very large attic entrances right over where the choir and hand bells were placed. Well...time came for the snow. Jim was so excited because things like this were never done at Union Congregational. This was a chance to do something new and untried in this very traditional building.

With a radio in hand, he gave the cue to start releasing the snow! The attic doors opened and before the choir finished the first three words of the song, the entire collection of snow was dropped below and it was over!! "Little by little" Jim had said to the kids..."Drop it very slow". These precious volunteers just dumped the entire bag at once creating a mountain of snow all over the hand bells. Rather than a snow effect, it looked more like the roof of the 'old' building had suddenly collapsed!
- 5/ Peggy Bailey was our organist for several years. She loved to play and was always a lot of fun. However she had a huge fear of the piano! She would not go near one much less sit down to play.
- 6/ Steve Becker amazed the Creative Arts when he was asked to build a giant octopus that could be maneuvered throughout the church for one of Jim's programs.



To be in the business of lifting the name of Jesus and guiding people from this life to the 'eternal' next is priceless when it comes to public service. Glorifying God and touching others through the Arts is something NOT to be taken lightly. It is a very serious job.

A lot has changed since those early days at Union Congregational. Today churches have the luxury of modern day sophistication in the Arts Ministry. Images and movies shown on big screens...professional stage lighting...and high-tech sound production, make presenting the Arts with good quality and endless possibilities. However, all of this equipment can break...and does from time to time. And lest we forget that most of this 'stuff' is still run by volunteers, and things can go VERY wrong. But after all these years, Pastor Jim has learned to just take it day by day...have fun while doing it...and do the best he can in any given situation, no matter how bad it might be.

Once while directing the opening hymn for the congregation, the words to another hymn showed up on the screen while the orchestra, choir, organist, pianist, and Jim continued on a total different song! Here we were...a room full of people trying to sing the words of "Fairest Lord Jesus" to the melody of "May Jesus Christ Be Praised". When it finally came to a disastrous end, Jim simply kept his cool...gave a smile to the tech people...and spoke to the crowd; "Well folks, that was a first today! I've never tried to sing Fairest Lord Jesus to the melody of May Jesus Christ Be Praised!" (giggles broke out among the congregation) "You know though...I think we may be on to something! In fact, I think with a little work we could do this more often!!" (great laughter now from the people).

The Arts under Jim's direction never was one that took a church choir and put on your typical 'cantata' for Christmas and Easter. Nor did you find the Arts department at Union sitting a certain way...wearing a certain pattern...or ritualizing a ritual because it's well...a ritual! Why? It is very 'drab' to repeat programs and do the same ole same ole. Jim always wants to come up with something...do it...leave them wanting more...and then ditch it! While it's true that some programs have been repeated, the general rule according to anybody you speak with is that Mr. Lanier never repeats or saves anything. In fact this can cause incredible regret at times as well. Most everyone knows that he likes to write music and has written a wonderful musical entitled; ANNA. Well in the mid-90's, Jim wrote a Christmas musical for the children of the church and it was presented for two years straight. However, after this he destroyed the entire production and there are no copies or recordings of this event at all!! (Not a smart move!)

Of course the 'never repeating' scenario is not just for Jim. It's for the congregation as well...probably even more so! "We never want the people that need to hear the Gospel to ever get bored with its message. Its power is as significant today as it was to those original disciples and it's up to people like us to make sure it remains fresh and exciting for a changing generation."



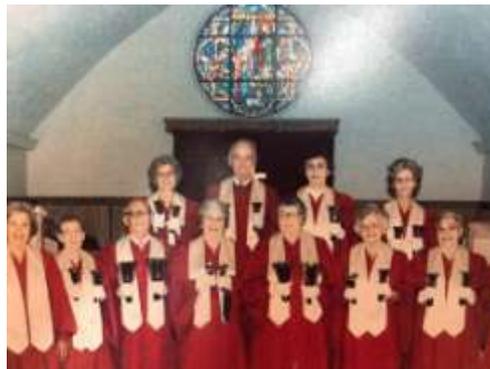
## MORE TRIVIA...

- 1/ The hand bells were almost sold a couple of years ago until Denise Anderson joined our family and has managed to expand the ministry to its largest group to date! What a blessing she is to our church family!!
- 2/ Past Bell directors have been Elizabeth Zuck, Evelyn Delk and Sue Lewis. Muriel Sammer once directed a children's bell choir.
- 3/ Since the early 90's, our lead Pastor has remained a member of the choir. (Not often seen in most churches!)
- 4/ The piano in the Millennium Sanctuary was donated by Mr. Don Meiser back in the early 80's. Artists who come to Union have often commented that it is one of the finest pianos they have ever played.
- 5/ Incoming concerts that we host are common at Union and often they have audiences waiting in line outside for hours extending down the sidewalks! The first concert of this kind came from an idea Pastor Jim had when he first began working here. He decided to see if he could get one of the Gaither singers to come down and Sue Dodge agreed. She showed in her own little car and had a bag of tracks with her to perform with. (She was fresh off of one of the Gaither Homecoming tours). She charged nothing but a love offering and we took her to lunch at the Jacaranda. She was one of the sweetest ladies we had ever met.
- 6/ Few know that we have a Carillon system in the Millennium Sanctuary. It has not been used since hurricane Irma but will be back in business hopefully by Easter. It began in the Historic church and was often heard playing favorite hymns four times a day and ringing in the noon hour. There is a plaque of dedication in the lobby.
7. A special live production of 'Touched By An Angel' was performed here at Union by our own Arts Department in 2000. Jim came up with the idea and had to get permission from CBS to put on the production. It was such a hit that another episode was done a few years later and for that one, the late great Della Reese who starred in the television series sent a special letter to our church congratulating us for doing such an original idea.

Here is a choir photo from 1994;



MORE PICS...



## IN CLOSING...

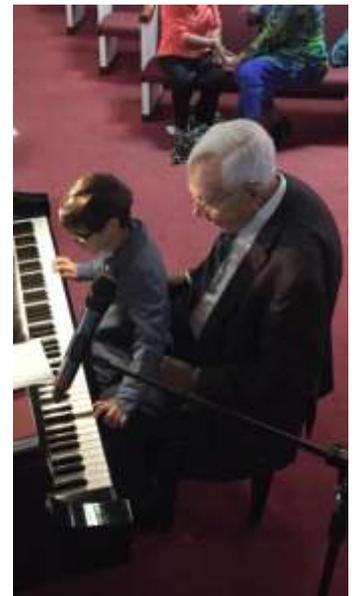
Union's Creative Arts Department has always provided special artistic creativity for worship, events and programs... and we are always taking on new and unique challenges for our congregation to be involved in. In the old days there was a choir. Now we continue to stretch the envelope so to speak to present fresh and engaging projects and presentations through the years and the Creative Arts is, and always will be, a valuable tool for reaching souls for the Kingdom of God.

Since 1994 Jim Lanier, has stood by a philosophy to engage people in the Arts of all ages, race and backgrounds, and not because of some great talent... but what they express through their heart and soul.

***"It's not how you sing your note... it's WHY you sing that note"***  
***-Jim Cymbala (Pastor Brooklyn Tabernacle)***

We also strive for joy in this ministry. We have developed from pure singing to laughing and hugging. Original musicals and class act productions. Stories from a chair and flying from the ceiling. Testimonies with stories and baking for the sick.

The Creative Arts at Union will always be known for its individual areas, but lest we forget that it's not just what we see on stage, but it has always been a combined effort of many dedicated people through the years who work behind the scenes as well to make the story of Christ come alive for the lost... as well as the Christian.



## **SOME NAMES FROM THE PAST (but certainly not all that should be mentioned!)**

**David Clark** - led music ministry in UCC for a time. He was very creative, an actor and a musician. He worked with the Tri-County Teen resident program and included teens in choir programs as part of their rewards program. It was a blessing to the choir and church to have these young people join us on Sunday morning, Wednesday evening and for special programs as well. It was a privilege to love them and nourish them to the church as we continued to grow to love people and love God.

**Evelyn Delk** - Evelyn was the choir and hand bell director for many years and was responsible for the success and longevity of continuing the music here at Union. A proficient pianist, her musicianship was unequaled through the years as she performed, directed and embraced the wonderful 'tones' that would touch so many lives. Her entire family was ... and still is very musical and her husband Joe was a wonderful vocalist who in the 70's, sang an unforgettable version of 'How Great Thou Art' and walked out of the church that morning straight into the arms of God.

**Nancy Nunnallee** - was one joyful woman. Like many others, she had her share of trials and challenges. Music was one of Nancy's gifts. She had perfect pitch and loved to sing in the choir, "Sweet- Adeline's" and ring the bells. Nancy never uttered a word of negativity about anyone. She was a very special person to everyone who knew her.

**Pat Rhoades** - Pat was a loved and appreciated musician that had served Union Congregational for 22 years as the organist. Pat had perfect pitch so when she played, she could not even tolerate making a mistake. And along with that same gift came the gift of dedication and perseverance. In those 22 years, Pat never missed a Sunday until she retired. For many of her years she stayed hidden behind the walls as the organ was up in the chancel area back in a side room. The organ was eventually moved out to the floor area and this made poor Pat a nervous wreck. She was much more comfortable being hidden. She loved to serve... not perform.

**Chet and Daisy Wollank** - A musical and theatrical family. Daisy was a dynamo. She did readings and singing from the "drop of a hat." Chet played the harmonica so there was always music for every event. This was before we had a sound system to play music. Son, Larry, like his folks, sang in the choir and was active in other areas of church life as they all had a passion for crafting too. Daisy collected dolls and Chet and Larry did wood working. They made some of the furniture we still use in the sanctuary of both churches.

**David Lanier** - Among other ministries, David was considered our church pianist for many years. He would also perform duets with the organist from time to time and they were always followed by a standing ovation!

## A WEE CAMPUS SEARCH FOR YOU!

You can use this page to find certain items and explore some trivia of the arts throughout our campus

- 1/ As you enter the main doors of the historic church, keep going due west and you will see on your right side two sets of stained glass windows. This small area was once enclosed as the choir room and also housed the air and heater units. It was very cramped! On the window that is in memoriam of Anne Carter, see if you can find the small hole that was put there by some mischievous choir boys!
- 2/ Pastor Aaron's present office is where the choir moved to next. It was larger but became just as cramped as the choir expanded. Weather would play a factor in this space because the choir would meet there to robe and rehearse Sunday morning and if the weather was bad, there was no shelter for them to get over to the church!
- 3/ On the stage of the historic church, the back room to the right is where the organ was once housed. The organist had a rear-view car mirror on the wall so she could see what was going on in the sanctuary.
- 4/ Once again in the historic church, you can see in the front ceiling the two attic panels where the boys dumped the piles of snow that was mentioned in the earlier story.
- 5/ On the stage of the Millennium Sanctuary you can still find the remains of the system that was used to 'fly' someone in a couple of programs.



- 6/ The Fellowship Hall (Solid Grounds) stage was used throughout the years for a great many programs. Children and family Christmas events were held in there along with family night suppers with programs and other memorable events. Two tremendous chandeliers were brought in from Highlands Little Theater for our 'Dinner at the White House' program. Most recently, Pastor Jim used this area for 'Breakfast With the Arts' where he would interview different musicians and singers followed by a performance all alongside a wonderful breakfast!



# LESSONS FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW

an excerpt from *MUSIC, WORSHIP and the IMAGINATION—finding the colors of my life*

by; Jim Lanier

Beyond the books of school, I have learned the ‘other’ sides of life from my experiences. Most important, I’ve learned to never under-estimate the power of the Arts and the imagination in the life of the human being. It is something that our souls most desperately need to survive.

The very essence and existence of all of this is amazing to me. How God himself put this magic together can be astounding if you really take the time to think about it. How the mathematics of such a complex structure can be pieced together so precisely as to give a whole profound meaning to the survival of man.

I have listened to recordings made from space of the planets. Even they themselves...their very rotations and existence in the heavens, have a way of making music. Yes...it has been recorded! The song of the whale, the rhythms of the earth...it is truly amazing, and it is truly directed by the very hand of God.

People of all ages, all backgrounds, all personalities, need the Arts for their survival. To give them this pleasure, it is a road of many highs and lows...a journey of tears and laughter...and a process of bringing the souls of man together for one common good...the path to truly know our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Going outside of the box and dreaming with the biggest of imaginations is a must also in my field of work. All of the rules do NOT have to be followed and carried out. By not following the directions, sometimes can cause the creator to embellish on the original, only to look back and realize that they created a marvel of their own unique and great design!

The arts and imagination was a wild roller coaster for me growing up, yet each twist and loop would lead me closer to the cross without even realizing it. In every situation and in every struggle, I would not find myself in church, but I would find myself in a quiet corner giving thanks to God and understanding even at a very young age that my gifts and talents were only in me because of Him. I was NEVER too proud, NEVER!! I hate ego! The man, the woman, the child, the gifted, the struggler...we are all God’s beautiful children, and we ALL have a right to give praise to God for what He has done in our lives.

What I myself may excel in, might be something that you find very difficult and trying at times. What you might find your gifts to set you on top, might be something that I could only dream of doing.

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“Treat others the way you would want to be treated.”

