

September 23, 2018
Romans 9:1-9
Pastor Rosanna McFadden
Creekside COB

“Runs in the Family”
by Sarah Spain, ESPN 09/02/18

Carol Briggs placed her newborn son on the bed and removed all of his clothes. She tried to find herself in his face, searching his mouth, his nose, his eyes. "Not yet," she thought. She saw only his father. She looked him up and down, making a mental note of each of his 10 tiny toes, chubby legs, puffy belly and two little arms reaching up at her. "In my mind," Briggs says, "that was probably going to be the last time I ever saw him."

It was December 1, 1972, and a big snowstorm had hit the greater Pittsburgh area that week. Briggs had gone sledding with some of the other girls the night before, dragging a cardboard box up and down a big hill that emptied out right at the Zoar Home for Mothers, Babies and Convalescents in Allison Park, Pennsylvania. She woke up in labor around 2 a.m., and just 32 minutes later, she was a mother. She named her baby Jon Kenneth Briggs.

Her parents and older brother drove the hour from her hometown of Youngstown, Ohio, to be with her at the hospital. After cleaning out her room at the maternity home and signing some papers, she was back in Ohio the next day, ready to resume her life as a 16-year-old high schooler and National Honor Society member. No one outside of her immediate family and her cousin Robin knew about the baby. Only when she was preparing to sign the adoption papers did Briggs consider sharing the news with the father, a teenage fling who had gone off to college before she discovered she was pregnant. She ultimately decided against it. "He was a kid too," she says. "He was off at college on a scholarship. I think I may have felt that I kind of got myself in this, I'm gonna do what I need to do to work my way through

it." With her parents' blessing, Briggs had decided that when the child was born, she would put him up for adoption.

"My mother was still cleaning up my room for me once a week," she says. "I wasn't in a position to be anybody's mother. I thought this was best for him, that I allow him to be placed with some family that would be able to give him all the great things that I had coming up because I had a mother and a father. I just didn't want him to get cheated out of anything." In her last interaction with the adoption agency, Briggs was told that baby Jon had been placed with a doctor and his wife in Columbus, Ohio.

Adelle Comer adopted her son Deland McCullough in 1973 when he was 6 weeks old. In early 2017, now-Kansas City Chiefs running backs coach Deland McCullough signed on to coach the running backs at USC, having spent the previous six years in the same position at Indiana University. A few months before making the move to southern California, he and his wife, Darnell, welcomed their fourth son into the world. For the fourth time, the couple provided doctors with Darnell's medical history but couldn't do the same for Deland's side of the family. At 44 years old, McCullough knew nothing about where he came from. Growing up in Youngstown, his adoptive mother, Adelle Comer, could tell him only that he was adopted at a very young age and that she had no information about his birth parents. For a long time, that was enough. McCullough wasn't interested in finding them anyway. There was enough trouble in Youngstown those days, and he didn't want to burden anyone who might have bigger things to worry about.

Things changed when he had his first child, and as his family grew, so too did his desire to know of his past. He wanted to know who gave him his deep voice and his muscular build and to whom he owed his pensive nature and quiet intensity. He wondered where son Dason got his height and which grandfather or uncle his bespectacled son, Daeh, might favor. He was so hungry for information that he never questioned whether the search might lead him to answers he couldn't handle. "I didn't know what was going to happen," McCullough says. "I didn't know how people would receive things one way or another. I didn't have a plan. I just knew I wanted to find out."

New laws in Ohio and Pennsylvania had called for the unsealing of adoption records, giving McCullough new hope that he might find his birth parents. In November 2017, more than a year after filling out the requisite paperwork and years after his search began, he finally received his adoption files in the mail. For the first time, he saw his original birth certificate, complete with his name, Jon Kenneth Briggs, and the name of his mother, Carol Denise Briggs. There was no information about his father. Carol Briggs, far left, was a 16-year-old high school student when she gave birth to her son, Deland McCullough.

Adelle Comer was living in a three-bedroom house on a cul-de-sac in Youngstown with her husband, popular local radio host A.C. McCullough, and their young son, Damon, when she got the call. It was a social worker reaching out to see whether she and A.C. would come see an infant at an adoption agency in Pennsylvania. Not long after the tragic death of their second son, Alex, who died of an intestinal birth defect after just 28 days, the young couple had started serving as foster parents, and they were looking to adopt. In January 1973, they met 6-week-old baby Jon. "He was asleep in a bassinet," Comer says. "And she put him in my arms, and when he woke up, his eyes were looking straight at me. It was instant connection. Love. Mother-son." By March of that year, Jon Kenneth Briggs had been renamed Deland Scott McCullough, and he was living at home with his new parents, Adelle and A.C.

"We were still in love, a good couple," Comer says. "We went to church, partied, went to cookouts. We were working together and doing this together and wanting to make a home for our children. We knew that God's hand was in it. Deland came so fast to us. We knew that it was meant to be. Both of us."

But things changed quickly. Comer's father had a stroke, and though A.C. wanted to put him in a nursing home, Comer brought her dad to live with the family in Youngstown. Their marriage deteriorated, and when Deland was just 2 years old, A.C. moved out. "They went through a lot of hurt and disappointment, but they took it," Comer says of her sons. "I said, 'God gives you an example of what to be and what not to be. You have to make the choice.' And that's all I had to say, and they got it."

When Deland was in elementary school, Comer came home to find that he had cut three gashes into the couch for which she had just finished two years of layaway payments. Kids at school had been teasing him about being adopted, and he accused Comer of loving him less than her birth son, Damon. She explained that she loved the two boys differently, one because he had been in her belly and the other because she had chosen him. After that, Deland McCullough rarely spoke of his adoption. He got good at pretending to be whole. "The void was there," he says. "I wish that it wasn't, but I think I did a good job of hiding it."

After the divorce, Comer had relationships with a few other men, some of whom were combative and abusive. "Some men don't understand what respect is," she says. "I've got two sons, and I'm not gonna allow my children to grow up with this type of lifestyle, this drama." Damon sometimes tried to physically defend her, but then he left for college, and Deland felt too small, physically and emotionally, to step in. His response to the violence was to try to tune it out, become emotionless, put blinders on and dream of a way out of the house and out of Youngstown. Comer acknowledges that she contributed to the chaos in her own way as well. "Biggest drama queen in the world, OK?" she says. "They called me Ma Barker because I'd shoot you and ask questions later."

Comer took Deland with her to therapy for a while, hoping to make things at home a little less turbulent. New boyfriends came and went, but she mostly settled into life as a single mom, taking on multiple jobs to support her sons, including as a switchboard operator at the Cuyahoga County Department of Human Services, a waitress, a social worker and a short-order cook at the local bowling alley. She did her best to rear the boys on her own, but they moved a lot, and she struggled to pay the bills, sometimes having to choose between electricity and a working phone. But Comer stressed the importance of an education, insisting that she see the boys' homework to make sure they were taking it seriously. She taught them the value of a dollar and the importance of faith, demanding that they use a portion of their monthly child support for Sunday school and tithes at church. And she was always shuttling them to activities, from the theater program at the Youngstown Playhouse to football, basketball and

track practices. Deland was a bit of a late bloomer in terms of talent, but the passion for football was always there. Early on in pee wee, he heard his name over the loudspeaker and a light went off in his head. He fell in love with the game and started carrying a football with him everywhere he went, even to bed. "It was an escape," he says. "When I was out there practicing, you didn't think about the electric is off, you know? You didn't even think about anything like that. You were just out there balling, doing your thing and competing and bonding with your friends."

Comer was a one-woman cheer squad, bringing multiple signs to Deland's games and running up and down the sideline rooting him on. One night when her ride didn't show up, she took her son's moped to the game. He looked up in the stands and saw her, still wearing his moped helmet, hollering and screaming for him: "D-MACK! D-MACK!"

As a junior defensive back, Deland saw himself playing football at a small school or enlisting in the Navy, but an opportunity to show his talent at the running back position his senior year drew the eye of college recruiters. Suddenly, he was being pursued by the likes of Jim Tressel, then the head coach at Youngstown State; Bob Stoops, then the defensive backs coach at Kansas State; and Sherman Smith, then the running backs coach at Miami of Ohio. DELAND MCCULLOUGH LOOKED out the window of his third-period English class at Campbell Memorial High School and saw a tall man emerge from a candy apple red Mercedes-Benz with tan interior and tricked-out gold rims. A few minutes later, he got a pink slip message to leave class and go to the office, where the tall man stuck out his hand and said, with a firm handshake, "I'm Sherman Smith, the running backs coach at Miami University." A former star quarterback at Miami, Smith was a second-round draft pick at running back for the Seahawks and went on to play eight years in the NFL. He had a booming voice, thick arms and broad, square shoulders. He walked and talked and carried himself like a former pro; McCullough was immediately drawn to him. "It was just something about his personality," McCullough says. "The way he presented himself. He had things that I hadn't seen out of a man or mentor. He was on top of his details. He was successful. He had played in the NFL. He got his degree. I wasn't around that type of person.

"The Mercedes was nice, too, you know?" he laughed. "That was slick."

As a Youngstown native himself, Smith thought guys from the area were tough, but the coaches told him McCullough was special -- a thin kid, but when he couldn't run around people, he'd go through them. McCullough was serious that day in the office, offering few smiles and answering with a lot of "Yes, sir" and "No, sir," but he was also intelligent and expressive. Smith thought he'd very much like to work with him. The feeling was mutual. Despite interest from other schools, the decision to attend Miami University was easy for McCullough, especially after the home visit, during which Smith charmed Comer as well. "Well, Coach Smith was hard not to love," Comer says, laughing. "I fell in love with him the first time. He was just a gentleman. And he was very attentive and respectful to me."

Smith drove them to visit the school and was back at Campbell Memorial a few months later for signing day, when McCullough signed his letter of intent to play at Miami. When McCullough arrived on campus, the coaches tried to turn him into a wide receiver, but he pushed for an opportunity to work with Smith and the running backs, accepting a redshirt freshman year to pursue the position he believed he was meant to play.

"I would tell the players, 'You may not be looking for a father, but I'm going to treat you like you're my sons,'" Smith says. "And so I just looked at every guy like my son. I just wanted to be a positive role model for Deland and exemplify what I thought my father exemplified for me." "He was everything," McCullough says. "If anything was going on, I was going to talk to Coach Smith. Everybody in that room gravitated towards Coach Smith just because that's the type of person he was. What he's about rubs off on you, so I always wanted to be around that."

Smith left Miami University after that season to be the tight ends coach at the University of Illinois, but he and McCullough stayed in touch. He watched from afar as McCullough put together a Hall of Fame career in Oxford, rushing 36 touchdowns and setting a school record with 4,368 rushing yards. McCullough was surprised when his name wasn't called in the 1996 draft, but he was invited to a few

workouts and ended up signing with the Bengals. He was leading the NFL in preseason rushing before he suffered a season-ending knee injury in Cincinnati's final exhibition game. After a few more looks in the NFL, a couple of seasons in Canada, several more knee surgeries and a brief flirtation with the XFL, McCullough finally accepted in 2001 that the dream of pro football was over.

A few years later, married and the father of one son, McCullough took a job teaching communications and coaching football at Harmony Community School in Cincinnati. Despite rising to the ranks of principal and making a good salary, his first taste of coaching gave him the itch to coach full time, and he reached out to his alma mater about an opportunity to join the staff. Smith had followed a similar path, first teaching and coaching high schoolers, then working his way up the ranks from Miami University to the University of Illinois, the Houston Oilers, the Washington Redskins and, finally, the running backs coach for the Seahawks. He was with Seattle when he got a call from McCullough, asking for advice as he started his new job at Miami University. By 2014, McCullough was coaching at Indiana University, and the two were reunited on the field, as Smith welcomed McCullough to Seattle for a coaching internship. He saw firsthand that his former player had a real future on the sideline. He had no idea that off the field, McCullough was consumed by the search for his family.

A few days before Thanksgiving 2017, Carol Briggs got home from work, sat down on the couch and opened a Facebook message from an unfamiliar man: "Did you have a baby in 1972 in Allegheny County that you placed for adoption?" "Luckily, I was already sitting," she says. Briggs had thought often of baby Jon. Every year, she wished him a "Happy Birthday" on her Facebook wall, and she regularly searched adoption websites to see if he might be looking for her. Briggs could still hear her mother's voice, saying more and more often in the years before she died, "You need to find that boy." Never married and without any other children, Briggs would joke to her cousin Robin that one day baby Jon might show up at her door and walk in to find her home alone, dancing around the house to Funkadelic. She called her older brother, who warned her that the message might be from someone trying to bribe or extort her. She responded anyway, and after a few short messages, she agreed to speak to McCullough on the phone that night after he got out of

practice. In the hours before the call, she Googled his name and read every article she could find. She stared at his pictures and tried to find herself in his face. It wasn't hard to see it now: the mouth, the nose, the eyes. McCullough called Briggs from a hallway at USC as he awaited the start of a football family dinner.

They spoke as if they'd known each other for years, an easy back and forth as they shared where life had taken them in the 44 years since she'd laid him down on that bed and let him go. She learned that he had never gone to live with a doctor in Columbus, that in fact they had been just a few miles away from each other in Youngstown for all of McCullough's childhood. She likely shopped at the same grocery store as Adelle Comer, perhaps even passing young McCullough in the aisles. She was certain that her sports-fanatic father, now deceased, had read about McCullough's high school exploits in the paper.

McCullough was overjoyed to find his birth mother, though a mother had never been what he was missing. "Within probably the first five or six minutes, he says, 'Who is my father?'" Briggs says.

She took a breath. She had probably told only three people the man's name. After making the decision to not tell the father all those years ago, she had been determined to never let him learn of the baby years later because of careless gossip. She hesitated but decided McCullough had a right to know.

"Your father's name is Sherman Smith," Briggs told him.

McCullough, leaning against a wall in the hallway, felt as though he might pass out. He started flashing back to all of his memories with Smith and all the times people had joked about him being a carbon copy of his coach. Throughout college, when he returned to coach at Miami University, during his internship with the Seahawks. "'Man, you and Coach Smith look alike.' 'Man, you all walk alike.' 'Y'all this, y'all this,'" McCullough says. "There's no reason to connect those dots because you weren't even thinking about them. A sense of pride that went through me, like, 'Wow, that explains these things.' And then I also start thinking about all the similarities of our path. That just blew me away."

Not only had he known his father for 28 years, but Smith was also his mentor, the man he had looked up to since he was 16 years old. McCullough thought of a photo of him and Smith at Campbell Memorial High, both beaming as he signed his letter of intent to play at Miami University. The same photo he had pinned to the corkboard that hung in his college dorm room. The same photo that was at that moment sitting in a Ziploc bag in the drawer of his bedside table, a bag that had traveled with him through every job and every move. "If you would have told me to pick who my father was, there's no way I would have picked him because I might have thought I wasn't worthy for him to be my father," McCullough says. "I felt like my blessings came full circle because I'd always wanted to be somebody like him." "I could hear him take a big breath," Briggs says. "And I could kind of hear him choke up a little. And finally he says, 'Well, I've known Sherman my whole life.'"

The next morning, McCullough texted Smith asking if they could talk about something important. It was November, and Smith assumed that McCullough had gotten a coaching opportunity he wanted to discuss. Instead, McCullough began by talking about his search for his birth parents, how he had found his biological mother, and she was from Youngstown, just like them. "Praise the Lord!" Smith recalls saying. "What a blessing!" "And then he said, 'I asked her who my biological father was, and she said you.'" Smith was quiet. Sixty-three years old, he had been married to his college sweetheart for 42 years and had reared a grown son and a daughter. He hadn't heard the name Carol Briggs in more than four decades. He never knew she was pregnant, never knew there was a baby. He knew he couldn't deny the possibility that he was McCullough's father, but he wanted proof. Even more, he wanted time to think. He asked McCullough if he could call him back later. Stunned and a little hurt, McCullough agreed.

Smith sat in his office. Guilt washed over him. Even though he hadn't been told about the baby, he couldn't shake the feeling that he had let Briggs and McCullough down. He felt awful that he had left Briggs in such a difficult position and regretted all the years he had missed out on being a father to McCullough. He had built a life making a difference in young men's lives. He had spoken to his athletes and his

kids about being responsible, being accountable. "Being irresponsible is not neutral," Smith says. "When you're irresponsible, someone becomes responsible for what you've been irresponsible for."

He thought about what this would say about him as a man and found himself hoping that a paternity test would show that he wasn't McCullough's father. It was a thought that brought him only more guilt.

He asked to speak to Briggs. Briggs cried her way through work the day she was set to talk to Smith. "I hadn't talked to Sherman in 45 years. And after 45 years, this is probably not the icebreaker conversation that you want to have with the guy that you used to fool around with. 'Hey, we've got a 45-year-old son. And how are you?' So, no, I wasn't looking forward to that at all. Not at all."

There was no need to worry. Smith was calm and kind, and the two settled into a nice conversation, catching up for a long time before they even got to talking about McCullough. Smith apologized to her for her having to make such a difficult decision at such a young age, and Briggs explained why she had felt it was best to not tell Smith about the baby. She said that over the years, she just wanted to know that McCullough was OK, and Smith reassured her that her son was a good man. Briggs hung up full of emotion but relieved that Smith wasn't angry with her. Smith hung up feeling much more certain that McCullough was his son. Smith talked to his wife, Sharon, and his brother, Vincent. He talked to his children, Sherman and Shavonne. He thought about McCullough's coaching internship a few years earlier, how Seahawks assistant offensive line coach Pat Ruel hadn't stopped cracking jokes about Smith and his protege acting like a father-son duo. McCullough sent Smith an old article from his days in the CFL, and Smith couldn't believe his eyes. "I'm looking at this thing and thinking, 'I don't remember taking this picture. I don't remember doing this article,'" Smith says. "I'm looking at Deland, and I'm thinking it's me. That got me.

"I called my aunt in Youngstown, and I told her about it. And she'd went on YouTube and pulled up some pictures of Deland, and she called me back. She said, 'Nephew, I can save you the money on the

DNA tests." The more Smith thought about it, the more he realized the story wasn't about him and his guilt. It was about McCullough and what he had been through. It was about a life without a father, about the years McCullough had spent looking for his birth parents, hoping to fill a void, wanting to know where he'd come from. "It was said that humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less," Smith says. "I started thinking about Deland."

Sometime in the weeks between that first phone call and the test results, Smith realized that he was hoping he was McCullough's father. That, in fact, he would be devastated if the results came back otherwise. When the test came in, it showed a 99.99 percent chance that Smith was, indeed, McCullough's father. Both were elated. "I look at it, and I just say it's a God thing," Smith says. "It's grace. It's undeserved. And that's what's made it great for Deland and for all of us, how everyone has embraced this and is excited about our new family." McCullough understood why Smith had been so curt at first. McCullough had spent his whole life wondering about his birth parents. Briggs had spent her whole life wondering about her child. Smith had gone from zero to a 45-year-old son in one phone call; he needed time.

A few weeks after the paternity test came back, McCullough had a recruiting trip near Nashville, where Smith and his wife had relocated after his retirement. McCullough made a special trip to see the man he now knew as his father. "I'm pretty sure he was nervous," Smith says of that day. "I laugh because I'm looking out the window because I know he's supposed to be coming. I'm standing there, and I see he parks at the corner down there. And he's parked there for five minutes. I said, 'What's he doing?' He finally pulls up and gets out the car."

As McCullough walked up the steps to the house, Smith greeted him with open arms and said, "My son." It was the first time in McCullough's life that anyone had called him that.

"For so many years that I was around him, the embrace was, 'Hey, Coach, how you doing?'" Smith says. "But this is, 'Man, my son.' Maybe I was doing it for me, to help me really, fully understand."

"I know he was saying it from a place of 'I'm proud. This is my son,'" McCullough says. "I'd never heard that. I'd never been referred to like that before -- period. It really hit me hard emotionally. When I sit here at this point, and I'm looking at the things that I've done, I'm happy that I'm able to be somebody that he's proud of." At first, McCullough was concerned that his adoptive mother might be upset by his relationships with his birth parents. But as soon as he heard that Briggs and Comer had hit it off in their first phone call, he knew everything would be fine.

"All I can say is, 'Are you serious?' Over and over again. 'Are you serious?'" Comer says of McCullough's journey leading to Smith. "It's just a miracle that his birth father's been in his life since he was 16, 17 years old. That's my son, and I want nothing but 100 percent best for him. He needed that, and God gave it to him, and it's in God's time." Both Smith and Briggs are endlessly grateful to Comer for raising McCullough with the wisdom they didn't yet have. "She did what I couldn't do," Briggs says of Comer. "She was an adult, she was married at the time, so you know she brought him into a family structure. That was what I wanted for him. I wanted him to have what I had, and she gave him that. She gave him all the tools that he needed in growing up to be the successful man that he is right now."

This past June, the two Miami University Hall of Famers, Smith and McCullough, were back on campus to witness the verbal commitment of McCullough's son, Deland McCullough II, to the Red Hawks football team. The younger McCullough is a defensive back, just like Smith's son, Sherman, who played the position at Miami as well.

In July, a huge family reunion in Youngstown brought McCullough, Briggs, Smith and Comer together for the first time. All of McCullough's parents in one place, reflecting on nurture versus nature, what is inherited versus what is taught and the many different forms of parenthood. It was both the culmination of a journey and the start of something new for the families that the journey had introduced. A man found his parents, a mother found her child, and a father discovered a son he never knew he was missing. There is no jealousy, no resentment and no regret. There is just gratitude for the winding paths that brought them all together.

"When I look at Deland, the type of guy he is, it was a gift to us," Smith says. "And to think -- Deland felt we were a gift to him." "Now I know who I am and where I'm from," McCullough says. "I got all of the pieces to the story. I got them all now."