

BEGINNINGS, ENDINGS AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

The Legacies of Love,
Life and Football



Dennis Family Christmas 2025

Beginnings, Endings and Everything in Between The Legacies of Love, Life and Football

This past year I have been thinking a lot about what leaving a legacy really means. Of course, in today's marketing-focused world, it can get confusing since it seems like the word "legacy" is appearing more frequently in business names – everything from investment advisors to car dealers. Kyle, my marketing genius son-in-law, could patiently explain that it's popular from a marketing perspective because the word evokes images of permanence, heritage, trust, and even family legacy. Even with these warm and fuzzy thoughts, my personal quest revolves more around exactly what makes up the legacy we are leaving behind.

According to the Merriam Webster New Collegiate Dictionary (12th Edition), the following is the official definition of the word legacy:

Legacy le-gə-sē (noun). 1. something (such as personal property or money) that is willed to someone by a person who has died; 2. something transmitted by or received from an ancestor or predecessor or from the past, such as a cultural or historical influence.

While I understand the need for estate planning to transfer property or money, the second definition is of much greater concern for me, and especially how it works its way out in our lives. For lack of a better analogy, exactly what are the fingerprints or the footprints that we leave behind with our family, neighbors, friends and coworkers?

The Idea of a Legacy. I should begin with a confession about my past failures in this area. It's sad to say, but up to the end of my junior year in college, I never once thought about what fingerprints or tracks I was leaving behind, or what tracks I should follow in terms of examples from family or friends. Regardless of whether it was because I grew up dirt poor or because I had no great examples to inspire me, the truth was I had neither grand plans nor a vision for what I could accomplish in life. I gave little consideration to what I would ultimately leave behind for others.

That all changed the summer I met a very special girl. During the summer of 1974, working at a Valmac chicken plant in Russellville, Arkansas on my summer break, I met a cute Arkansas Tech Co-ed (which is a totally different story). Needless to say, despite our "fowl" surroundings and job, I was smitten, and over the summer Donna began showing me how a genuine Christian lived. Perhaps without her even knowing it, she showed me how uncomfortably lost I was. Through the example of her life and her talk about Jesus, I was introduced to a new and much more meaningful life that could begin with God's spirit inside me.



The Beginning of a Legacy. The plot continued to thicken, and one year later in May of 1975, Donna and I got married and the official story of us as a couple began. At that time her plan had been to become a lawyer, and I thought I would become a doctor. Unfortunately, on my way to considering the medical profession, I met Dr. Organic in Chemistry class and quickly became convinced that being a doctor was perhaps not the path for me. Given her career choice and my indecision about a career, neither of us were really interested in starting a family, maybe only 1½ kids. Or so we thought.

Speaking of legacies, I forgot to mention that there are at least two kinds of legacies, known and unknown. For example, Donna's faith was a known legacy left to her by her family, but unbeknownst to me at the time, my new wife had also been raised to be a diehard Arkansas Razorback fan. In fact, if we didn't already have family cemetery plots, I could see her wanting to be cremated and having me spread her ashes over the goal lines at Razorback Stadium, so that if anyone scored on the Hogs, it would be over her dead body. Well, at least up until the current just-ended football season, but that is for later in this story.



Donna's legacy and love of football was hidden in her DNA but had been passed down from her grandmother, dad and uncle who both loved football and the Hogs. Little did I realize at the time we tied the knot through the exchange of vows, that her legacy now applied to me and made me a Hog fan by marriage.

Major Accomplishments – December 2025. You have probably already figured out that since Donna and I got married in May of 1975, this past summer marked our 50th anniversary, a very big deal for anyone in today's generation. So big, in fact, that all of our family came from around the country and the world to help us celebrate. And celebrate we did - by doing something we had never done before. We had a good ole fashioned hoedown with a caller, multiple musicians and a square dance that included all of our kids and grandkids at the party.

Even though this was our first square dance, over the past five decades of our lives together, much water has passed beneath mine and Donna's bridges of life, some rough and muddy but most calm and clear, though the water always seems to flow faster. I can't help but think of a song that Jim Croce wrote and sang for his wife who was pregnant with their first child, "Time in a Bottle." The song begins with "*If I could save time in a bottle, the first thing that I'd like to do, is to save every day 'til eternity passes away, just to spend them with you.*" While I liked the song as an 18-year-old, I didn't understand what a "Time-in-a-Bottle" event was until recent years. Even though there are no time machines, and we can't save

our days in a bottle, we can remember, especially when current events recall similar events that happened in our lives over the years.

Several such events just happened to coincide with our golden anniversary, but to understand them it would help if I gave you some perspective. All of our kids and their spouses are in their late 30's or 40's, clearly in the busiest times of their lives. After our big party, a number of *Time-in-a-Bottle* events caused my thoughts to travel back in time, as my youngest son and his wife became parents and three of my daughters-in-laws celebrated birthdays together at turning 42 and 43.

All of my son's wives are Godly, patient and delightful members of our family. They are wonderful wives and moms in their own unique ways, especially since they all do an amazing job keeping my troublesome sons in line and raising my 14 Arkansas-based grandchildren. Time is relentless though and my kids and their families are quickly growing up and living in the middle of what I consider some of the most dangerously busy and hectic years of their lives.

Another *Time-in-a-Bottle* event was the birth of our 27th grandchild on August 30th in Mesa, Arizona. My fifth daughter-in-law, Edna, (who is married to my youngest son, Jeremiah) gave birth to their first child, a baby girl, Analucia.

Perhaps it has to do with being a senior (the politically correct way of saying I'm old) but as I reflected on my three 42 and 43 year-old daughters-in-law, and the birth of Jeremiah and Edna's daughter, these *Time-in-a-Bottle* flashbacks took me back to 1977 when Donna and I began our marriage with an experience similar to Jeremiah and Edna's, marking a major life change and the beginnings of mine and Donna's future living legacies.

August 23, 1977 - Fayetteville, Arkansas. Our story began late one afternoon after a University Baptist Church Sunday School party. Donna and I had been married for a little over two years, and I was now at the ripe old age of 24. I had already graduated with my MBA and was in the process of looking for a job after turning down an offer to be assistant manager at a Wal-Mart in McAlester, Oklahoma. Donna was heavy with child - very heavy. The UBC party ended with a hard-fought volleyball game in which both Donna and I played to win.



Now, hours after the party and games...birth pains (not sore muscles from volleyball) had set in and were coming faster. We held on until 11pm when we were positive the contractions were under 3 minutes apart before I called the doctor and got the green light to come to the hospital and introduce our new baby to the world.

While we got to the hospital in record time by 11:30, Donna suddenly stopped at the curb after getting out of the car before going into the emergency room. What? My mind was a blur! I could see it all happening right before my eyes. The baby must be coming, and this was to be a sidewalk delivery!

Well, not exactly. Donna had just realized that it was before midnight and if we went in, we might get charged for an additional day of hospital stay. Since we didn't have insurance and were paying for this bundle of joy ourselves, she stopped dead in her tracks. Coming face to face with my wife's immovable, strong will (another legacy from her mom and dad along with her thriftiness), I agreed. At midnight (and not one minute before), we entered the hospital only to realize that we were a long way from delivery and in the middle of hours of hard labor.

Finally, it was time for the baby's arrival, and Ashley Melina Dennis was born, just 48 years and six days before Jeremiah and Edna delivered Analucia. When Ashley entered the delivery room on August 24, 1977, the lives of Randy and Donna Dennis would forever change.



August 1995 - Fayetteville, Arkansas. Fast forward eighteen years to 1995. I was 42 and over the course of 18 short summers, the wrinkled, pointy-headed, little baby girl had grown up. Somewhere along the little-girl-road of dolls and swing sets, she had changed and become a woman, and on a hot August weekend, we found ourselves at another delivery. Coincidentally, the delivery once again took place in northwest Arkansas, but now both Donna and I were trying to hold back our tears because we were delivering Ashley to the University of Arkansas as a freshman.

This time though, it wasn't just Donna, me and Ashley. There had been lots of changes, especially to our plans for doctoring and lawyering and our 1.5 child family scenario. We were now leading a parade of five brothers and a sister, ages 6 to 16, with Ashley as she was taking her first steps along the road to independence.

Of course, it wasn't all tears, there were some lighter moments. As Ashley was moving her belongings into the dorm, our middle child, 12-year-old Zach, stood in front of Humphrey Hall and just stared. Finally, he turned to me and said, "How do the girls get in and out of the building?" I told him that they had a card key to open the door. He looked back at the front entrance and asked a follow up question, "Could they come and go all night?" "Yes," I said, and he just smiled and said, "I think I'm going to like college." True to his words, six years later, he did.

Standing Still is Not an Option. *Time-in-a-Bottle* events are like memory snapshots that mark our legacy over time because our lives and the

legacies that arise from them grow and change over time. Spoiler alert. No matter what we think or plan, very little in life stays the same and since Ashley's arrival in 1977, life not only changed, but it also sped up, and the years flew by. Six more children were born and went from diapers to jeans, to school, to playing sports, to college and now, almost all have families of their own.

What happened to the naive and hopeful young couple that brought the infant girl home from the hospital in Springdale? I can't believe how fast time has flown and the words of Tevya from *Fiddler on the Roof* come back to mind "*Where was that little girl I carried?*" - 48 summers have passed since Ashley entered the scene and totally disrupted our two-year-old life as husband and wife.



Ashley, My First and Oldest, married a wonderful fellow whom she incidentally met at orientation that summer of 1995 before we delivered her to the University. Ashley and Kyle have six children and are in the middle of building out their own Floyd branch and family legacy in Vermont.

Melissa, Lauren and Anna, my birthday daughters-in-law, married my three oldest sons, Chad (six kids), Josh (five kids) and my middle son Zach (four kids and most notably of 1995 Humphrey Hall fame), respectively. All have branched out and are building their own families and life legacies in central Arkansas.

Michael, Beth and Their Five Children have been transplanted from America to Cali, Colombia and are building a life, a new church and a legacy of faithfulness.

Jeremiah and Edna, after two years of marriage, now have their own birth and baby story and have begun their new family in Mesa, Arizona as a pastor with many yet-to-be-faced challenges and years of new experiences in front of them. Welcome to parenthood, my children.

Rachel, my youngest, is single and is building a great life and ministry as a missionary in France.

Unfortunately, legacies and reputations can be a bit fragile. Warren Buffett, one of America's most successful investors and businessmen, is quoted as saying that "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently." All of us should take his advice to heart.

The Legacy of the Hog. The University of Arkansas has continuously fielded a football team since 1894. During their first year as a team, the Arkansas Cardinals, as they were then known, won two games against Fort

Smith High School but suffered an overwhelming 54–0 defeat against the Texas Longhorns (kinda sounds like déjà vu all over again). But, over the years they did improve, and in 1910, they became known as the Razorbacks.

The Hogs continued to improve, and about the time Ashley was born in 1977, Lou Holtz was hired as head coach, thus cementing my wife’s love for the Hogs and, as I have mentioned, my own commitment to support them in sickness and in health. Over the years, the Hogs have had good and bad years, but in my opinion, they have represented our state well.

Recently, Donna and I followed the Arkansas football team to Austin, Texas to watch them play the Texas Longhorns. As faithful Razorback fans who have followed and supported the Hogs for many years, 2025 has not been the best year for the football team. To make a long story shorter, the score got away from us and Texas won by more than a few points.

Without question, this season affected Donna. For example, my Arkansas-loyal, red-hog-wearing wife, resorted to wearing a Razorback shirt given to her by our son-in-law which proclaimed “Arkansas Almost Always Almost Wins.” The shirt was an instant hit with both Hog and Longhorn fans in Austin probably because it reflected the 2025 legacy of our football program - after 131 years our Razorbacks had reached a new low.



In college sports as well as in life, hope springs eternal. History has shown that Arkansas and multiple other D-1 teams have fired their coaches to bet on a new leader. Rather than losing their own jobs, most athletic directors argue that a new head coach (and NIL money) can turn the program around. At least that is what every Razorback Nation fan hopes.

The Next Generation. As I consider my 72 years of circling the sun and especially the 50 years since Donna and I said our vows, we were given a unique opportunity to birth, change diapers, worry about, stay up late for, discipline, educate, and raise seven children to adulthood. And while these children are a wonderful legacy for Donna and me, perhaps even more amazing is that God has given our children the opportunity to raise 27 more children (at present count) and with God’s grace, to raise them to adulthood as their own godly legacies.

For everyone reading this card, I know that busyness (a battle I have fought for years) makes it easy for us to miss big or little *Time-in-a-Bottle* legacy moments with your family. These everyday events are easily lost in the clutter of meetings and activities that consume us. We can always rationalize that we can make it up later when “things slow down,” which

seldom happens. There may not be a “later” as tomorrow is just a hope, not a promise. I’m convinced that family, kids and your faithfulness to recognize and act on *Time-in-a-Bottle* moments are what make up our real legacy.

With these things in mind, I turn to an old poem by Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*, and his decision “...to take the one less traveled by - that has made all the difference.” With God’s grace for the days that remain before me, I want to pursue the road that seems to be less and less traveled. I don’t want to drop the ball, fumble, or throw a last-minute interception for a turnover decision that disappoints my family, my friends or coworkers. I don’t want to become known as someone who “*almost always almost finished the race well.*”

The Only Eternal Legacy. As God’s clock changed to Heavenly Savings Time (from BC to AD), a baby was born to a carpenter and his wife in a little town called Bethlehem in an obscure country in the Roman Empire. Except for some local shepherds and a group of magi or wisemen from the East, the birth of Jesus went unnoticed by the world. This one life, however, marked a change in history that would allow a world of broken people to be reconciled to the God of the universe. Although He only lived a short life, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus provided the way to make this possible.

Since Donna introduced me to this Jesus, He has been the savior and role model for our lives and our family. Coaches come and go, as do winning and losing records but a life built on Christ will survive all of life’s storms. What kind of legacy are you leaving to your family?

