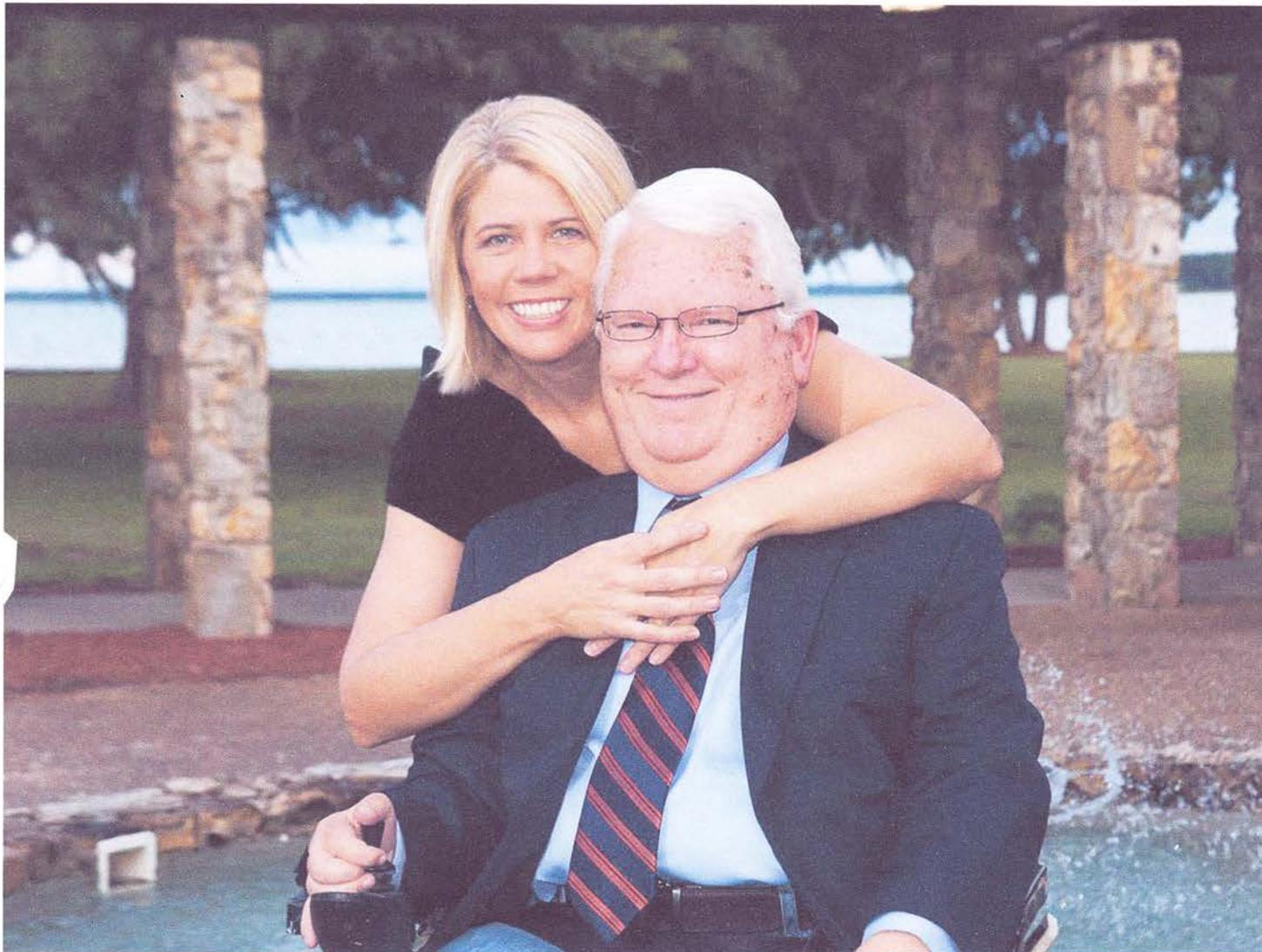


Heroes Among Us:

Jim Hukill, a Quadriplegic, Helps Others with Disabilities Give Back



Rhonette and Jim Hukill

RON FLOYD PHOTOGRAPHY

BY ANNE LANG

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As a young adult, traveling the country as a motivational speaker and musician, Jim Hukill drew satisfaction from knowing he was giving back.

That was important to Hukill, whose muscular dystrophy had left him a quadriplegic, and who felt grateful for public services and community support he had received all his life.

All along, it was Hukill's goal to someday give those with physical and intellectual disabilities a chance to do for others. And in 2007, he did just that.

That year, Hukill, 54, and his wife, Rhonette, launched an annual Christmas event called GiveBack. Gathering at the First Baptist Church in Orlando, Florida, the Hukills and 100 volunteers – people with physical and intellectual disabilities and their families – filled 262 boxes of donated toys, school supplies, personal hygiene items and notes of encouragement for needy children in developing countries. The boxes were shipped out by the nonprofit Samaritan's Purse as part of their Operation Christmas Child program.

"It was incredible to watch people with disabilities be able to move beyond that position of being a recipient of services to being empowered to do something for other people," Hukill recalls. "One man with intellectual disabilities told us, 'I'm working really hard, and I'm loving every minute of it!' He was just so excited to be contributing."

The movement steadily gained momentum. Seven years later, at the 2014 GiveBack event in November, more than 250 volunteers filled 2,121 boxes for Operation Christmas Child. In total, Hukill and his volunteers have packed some 4,000 boxes that have gone to children in more than 100 countries including Ghana, Mexico, Niger and Zimbabwe.

Hukill has a history of overcoming challenges. At 20 months, he was diagnosed with a form of muscular dystrophy that doctors said would kill him by the age of 12. But Hukill's family, led by a pastor father, refused to accept that dire prediction.

"My family was one of deep faith," Hukill says. "My parents believed in purpose. If we could imagine and dream something, we could accomplish it. They felt that by striving to reach those goals and dreams, we're able to live a bigger life than what's been handed to us."

Hukill grew up participating in church services in the impoverished Appalachian region, where his family served for 20 years. Not only did young Hukill develop empathy for those less fortunate, he also became skilled at communicating and singing before large congregations –

ultimately leading to his becoming an ordained minister and launching a career as a motivational speaker.

In 1998, Hukill and Rhonette moved to the Orlando area, where they started a nonprofit ministry for people with disabilities. "We had felt that there was something missing in the faith community regarding people with disabilities," Hukill says, "particularly ministering to families of disabled individuals as a whole."

Naming his fledgling ministry the Lift Disability Network, Hukill now has a paid staff of five and satellite branches in Minnesota and Missouri. In addition to GiveBack, Hukill's organization offers monthly social events with dinner and games and five-day retreats for people with disabilities and their families.

Andrew Vacca, 32, has spina bifida and is the program director for Lift Disability Network. A participant in three consecutive GiveBack events, Vacca says: "To see the disability community giving back and contributing to society in this way is huge. When you have a disability, you're almost always on the receiving end of services and support, so this empowers people with disabilities to know they can do something to contribute."

The Hukills, he adds, "have been wonderful for this community."

Yuliya Shubina, 22, remembers being a little girl when Operation Christmas Child delivered shoebox gifts to her country in Central Asia. "I opened the box and the first thing I saw was a stuffed dog," Yuliya recalls. "I felt very loved."

Hukill feels grateful for the chance to help. Hukill, who gets around in an electric-powered wheelchair and uses voice-recognition software on his computer, employs self-deprecating wit to put strangers at ease. "I talk about my big head," he says with a laugh.

A diehard Dallas Cowboys fan who also attends baseball spring training with his buddies, he says his work leaves him little time to dwell on his own limitations. "We know we're doing the right thing, and when you do the right thing, you overcome every limitation that's ever been put on your life."