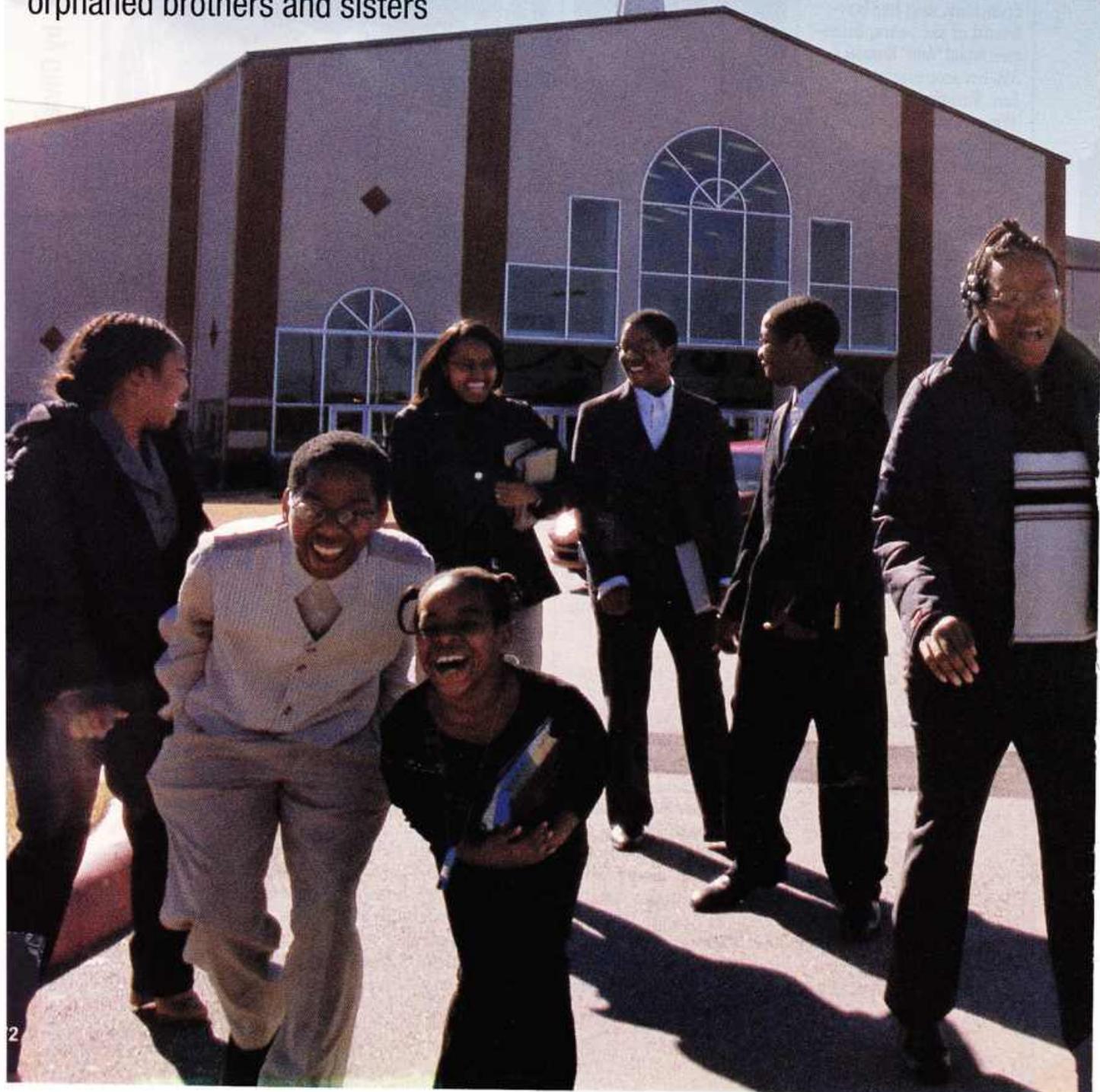


# Guardian Spirit

When his widowed mother died, Corey Bell turned grief into action: He and his wife took in eight of his orphaned brothers and sisters





**"They trust me, which is gratifying but also scary," says Corey (at the Shoreline Christian Center with, front row from left, Candace, Curtis and Cheryl, and, back row from left, wife Millicent, Cameron, Charles and Cauretta).**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JANA BIRCHUM

## ● family

**T**wo years ago Corey and Millicent Bell were living a yuppie dream. Managers for Dell Computer with a pair of MBAs and a law degree (his) between them, they owned a custom-built home near Dell headquarters in suburban Round Rock, Texas, outside Austin. Popular dinner-party guests and active church members, they were upwardly mobile, childless and carefree.

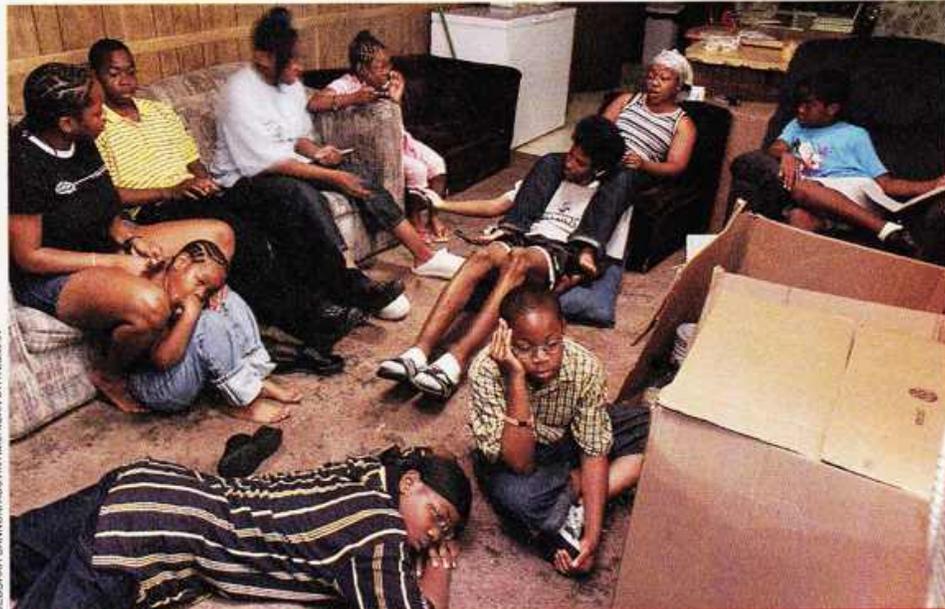
Then last year everything changed. After an eight-month battle, Corey's mother, Mildred, died of liver cancer on April 9, her 51st birthday. Already emotionally devastated by her death, her family faced a dilemma. Mildred, whose husband had died six years earlier, left 13 children in all—eight of whom, ranging in age from 8 to 18, still lived with her in rural Hopkins, S.C. Where would they go? Could they stay together or would they be parceled out to relatives? For Corey, now 29, the answer was clear: As the eldest and most prosperous sibling, he would assume the mantle of legal guardian.

"It wasn't so much *if* we were going to do it, but *how*," he says, adding, "Mom probably knew I was going to try something like this if she died. But the entire time she was sick, we never discussed it. We never, ever talked about death." Millicent, 28, was not without trepidation. "But I never just sat thinking, 'I can't deal with it,'" she says. "These aren't nameless people. These are your husband's brothers and sisters."

And so the couple kissed freedom goodbye. On June 8, 2001, more than 60 family members and friends in Hopkins assembled to see the younger Bells take off for Texas in a chartered bus. Nine months later, with patience, cooperation and planning, all eight are doing well. Soft-spoken Catherine, 19, a student at Austin Community College, is an aspiring FBI agent; feisty Candace, 17, aced science and is eyeing college premed programs; serious



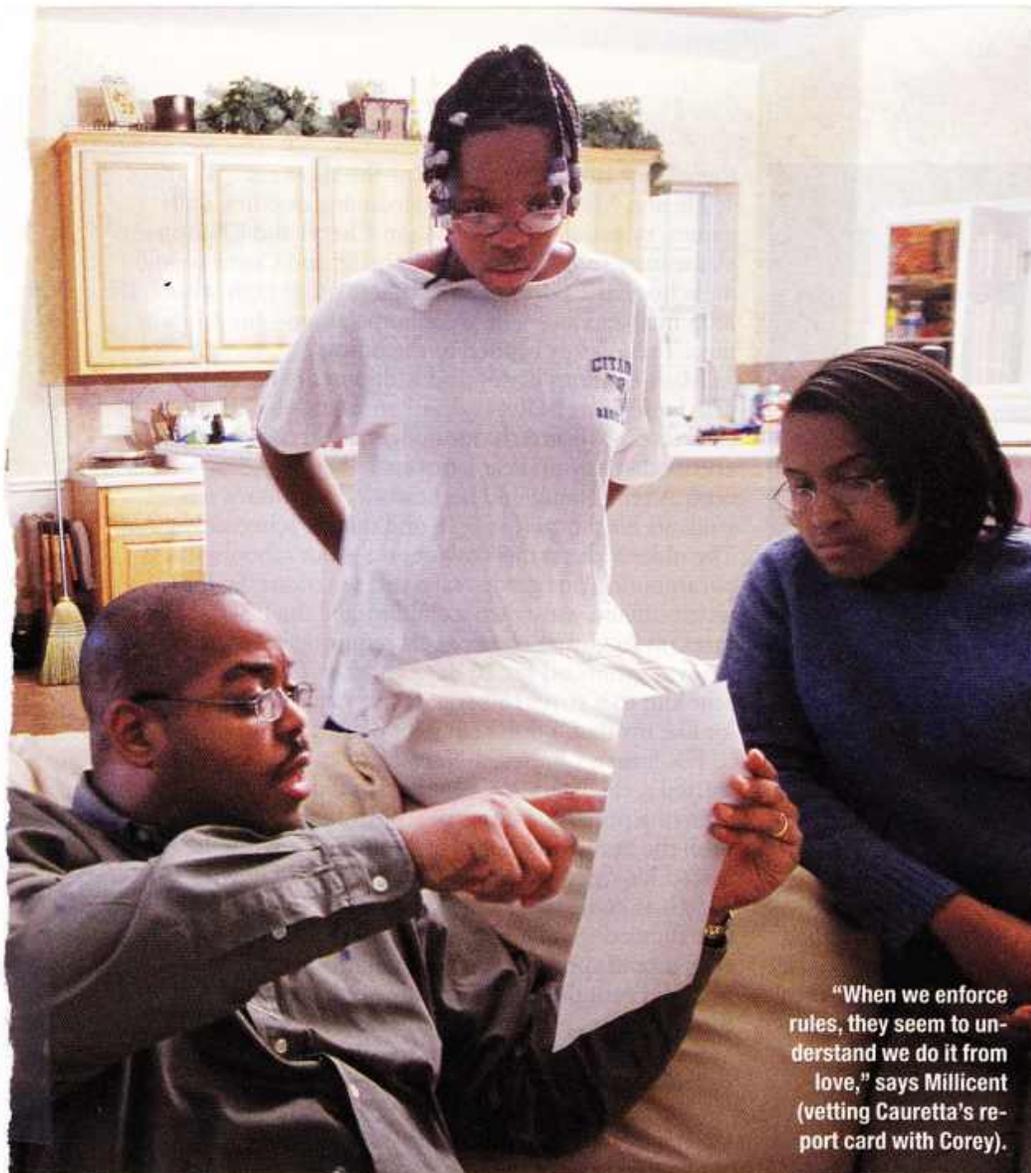
Parents Charles and Mildred (in '92) "had big dreams for our family," says Corey.



In their Hopkins, S.C., home last June the Bell kids and two pals (Cory Jacobs, 21, center, in shorts, and Jeremy Goodwin, 12, in blue T-shirt) await the bus to Texas.

COURTESY BELL FAMILY

DEBORAH CANNON/AUSTIN AMERICAN STATESMAN



"When we enforce rules, they seem to understand we do it from love," says Millicent (vetting Cauretta's report card with Corey).

analyses. Still, Corey's aunt Janet Bell, 32, a paralegal near Hopkins, had words of caution: "I told him, 'You can't run a family like a business. You have to make room for empathy and sympathy.'"

First the Bells simply had to make room. Corey was used to close quarters—he and his siblings grew up in a double-wide mobile home. Not so Millicent, the elder of two daughters raised in well-to-do Marietta, Ga. However luxurious, the couple's three-bedroom home wouldn't do. "The quickest way to destroy my marriage," Corey says, "would have been to bring all my brothers and sisters into our house."

The Bells sold their home and bought a five-bedroom, four-bath house in a nearby development. With the new digs came a steeper mortgage, but Dell, where Corey is a supply-chain manager and Millicent oversees freight delivery, let them reduce their workloads without a pay cut. "Corey had some fear that he'd be jumping off the fast track, losing ground," says his boss, Dick Hunter, 49, a

Dell vice president. "I told him that with this experience he's actually *gaining* ground. What I look for is a key leader, and he's getting that leadership with the kids."

Indeed, Corey laid down the law with the children. "I made it clear to them that my wife comes first," he says. "Act up if you want to, but if it comes down to you or her, she's going to win every time." Rules were enforced to ward off chaos. No TV or video games on school days; no eating or drinking anywhere but the kitchen or breakfast room; everyone must put their dishes in the dishwasher, do their laundry and make their beds. The Bells implemented a corporate-model chore system, complete with incentive bonuses. The house was divided into eight zones, assigned on a rotating basis. Corey and Millicent award points based on performance, issuing allowances accordingly. (The range: \$2.50 a week for elementary schoolers to \$10 for high schoolers.) Exemplary work earns base pay plus 50 percent; a poor showing means no pay at all. "We end up going to the bank a lot for the extra money we pay in bonuses," Millicent says with pride.

The kids take their work seriously. On a recent Sunday afternoon, as Carla played Beethoven's "Für Elise" on an electric keyboard in the dining room, Cameron cried out,

Charles Jr., 15, plays the tuba; cheerful Cauretta, 14, made her high school color guard; gregarious Cameron, 13, goes out for middle-school football and basketball; polite Curtis, 12, builds model cars; strong-willed Christina, 10, is a gifted singer, and impish Cheryl, 8, can't decide if she wants to be a model or an entertainer. "I like Texas because I've made a lot of friends," she confides, "but it's too hot and people push too much."

In fact the response was mixed when Corey, with the blessings of the extended family, called Catherine and told her to get the kids packing. "I was saying to myself, 'Corey, what are you thinking?'" Cameron recalls. "I don't want to move to Texas; I hear it's like a desert." Candace, though, was exuberant. "I said, 'You don't have to ask me twice,'" she says. "I was getting tired of South Carolina, and I felt Corey could give me a better life in Texas." Each child conferred with Corey before the big move, but all knew better than to resist once their indomitable big brother had decided on a course of action.

True to their business training, Corey and Millicent approached mass guardianship methodically. For two weeks after Mildred's funeral, they conducted nightly strategy sessions, devising graphs, timelines and cost



Corey huddles with Cameron after one of his basketball games.

“Hey, I just polished that chair you’re sitting on!” And Christina sat on the floor with Corey’s CDs, which a sib had left in disarray—an infraction punished with a week’s ban from the living room, meaning no TV or music. Corey gave Christina the task of matching discs with their containers. “I used to have these categorized by artist and genre,” Corey says with a sigh.

Weekdays begin before sun-up. One January morning Corey answered e-mails at his home-office desk at 6 a.m. He tousled Christina’s hair as she read Bible stories, then knocked on a bedroom door and called out “Rise and shine” to Charles, Cameron and Curtis. In the kitchen Corey set out donuts, while Cameron and Christina poured milk and juice. At 6:15 Millicent emerged and logged on to a laptop so she could work from home. Over the next half hour the other kids trickled downstairs. “They wake up in shifts,” Corey explains, “so

there’s not such a mad rush for the showers.”

He and Millicent talked scheduling: doctors, ball-games, tutoring. At 7:27 she ran Cheryl and Christina to elementary school, and at 7:40 he ferried Curtis to middle school, then dropped the others off at high school. By 8:05 husband and wife were home alone—for 15 minutes. Then Corey headed to the office.

Most evenings Corey and Millicent are home by 6 p.m. The family eats buffet-style, often pasta, chicken or casseroles. “To stretch our budget, we’ll cook a big meal every other day and eat leftovers in between,” says Millicent. After cleanup and homework, elementary school students hit the sack at 8:30 and middle schoolers at 9:30. The older kids set their own hours—but schoolwork is paramount. Poor grades earn stiff sanctions. So far the worst offense was when a child forged the Bells’ signatures on lackluster class papers requiring parental review. He was grounded for 10 days and lost TV privileges. “We sent him to a virtual Siberia,” Corey says. “I tend to be a lot like my dad. I don’t cut a lot of slack.”

His father, Charles, a Nabisco salesman who later started a chicken farm, ran their mobile home like a kind of loving military camp. An Apostolic Christian who took the family to church several times a week, he enforced his strict order’s discouragement of movies and TV. Girls could wear only skirts or dresses. Children were not allowed to take part in extracurricular activities or even attend sports events, though music lessons were permitted. From the age of 8, Corey worked for his grandfather, a mason, pushing wheelbarrows laden with bricks and mortar. “My father,” he recalls, “said he didn’t want to see me grow up as a jelly-backed man.”

Corey won a scholarship to South Carolina’s Clemson University, then headed to the University of Tennessee. While he was in law school there, a friend urged him to ask out business student Millicent Dorrah. Ever thorough,

Corey subjected her to a three-hour telephone interview before their first date. “A lot of questions were family-related,” Millicent says, “such as whether I was raised in a church.” She was—by Philip, 60, a chemical-company benefits rep, and Barbara, 59, a secretary. Millicent passed her audition, went to dinner with Corey and 10 months later, on Dec. 20, 1997, married him in a lavish ceremony funded by her parents.

Sadly, Charles Bell wasn’t there. In June 1995 he had suffered a mild heart attack. Two more followed within a month, and one day that August his heart gave out. He was 44. Charles had mellowed in later years, and now his children look back warmly on his un-



Corey and Millicent spend an average of \$2,000 a month on groceries for the family.

## ● family

stinting support. "My dad told me all the time that I was brilliant," says Corey's sister Catasha, 25, an architect. "You know what kind of confidence that builds?"

In the summer of 2000 Mildred learned she had advanced liver cancer. "She made me promise not to tell anyone," says Catherine, the 19-year-old, who was on hand when the doctor told her mother the awful news. "She started chemotherapy in August, and it was a secret until October." With Mildred confined to bed, Catherine assumed the role of caregiver. In late February 2001 Mildred entered the hospital, and on April 4 she called Corey in Texas. "Honey," she said, "I need you to come home." No flights were available, so he and Millicent made the 1,700-mile, 20-hour car trek back to Hopkins, driving straight through. "As we got closer, I was getting cell-phone calls from my sisters every 30 minutes," he says. "'Corey, where *are* you?' they'd say, crying."

When he finally arrived, his 12 siblings were all there, including the four who had moved out: Catasha, who has a daughter, Amaya, now 2, with her fiancé; Charlene, 23, a University of South Carolina senior; Carla, 22, a senior at Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, Fla., and Carlton, 20, a Marine private first class. Mildred was too heavily medicated to speak. "It's hard to say whether she even knew I was there," Corey says. After she died, the siblings convened at the mobile home. "I remember thinking, 'Mom was in these very rooms just a few weeks ago,'" says Corey. "But life had to go on."

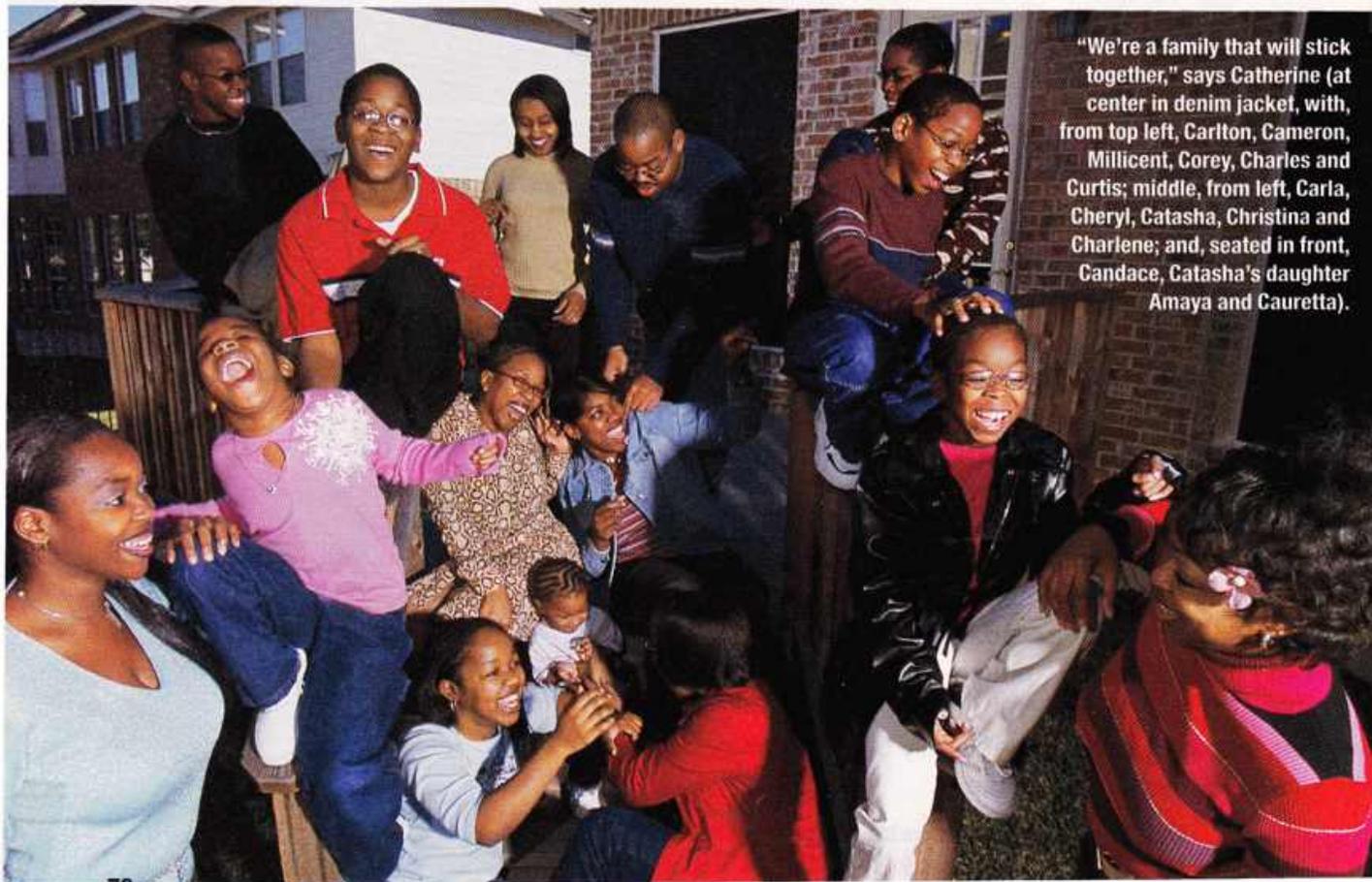
That it has, albeit radically revised. For the children

the move to Texas has had its bumps. "It's okay living here," says Curtis. "But I miss my friends, relatives and teachers back home." Cauretta and Candace—despite her initial enthusiasm—found it hard to go from Lower Richland High, which was 95 percent black, to predominantly white Stony Point High School, where kids tend to form cliques by race. "It's a whole new way of life," Candace says. "A huge learning experience."

The most difficult change for Corey and Millicent has been loss of privacy. "We have no real time to spend with each other except at bedtime, and by then we're both just so tired," she says. Still, they enjoy a regular Friday-night date, usually dinner or a visit with friends. They leave an older sibling in charge, often Catherine, who has high praise for Corey—and his wife. "A child can sense if an adult is real or not, and Millicent's the real thing," she says. "She's put her life on hold for us. If she had other dreams and goals, you'd never know it."

One dream is starting a family of her own. "We're thinking maybe three years from now," Millicent says. "By then we'll have a few who've left the house." For now the Bells find joy in daily miracles. "Seeing Cheryl use Rollerblades for the first time, Christina play her first soccer game, Cameron his first football game, Charles with the marching band, Curtis getting the best grades of his life," Corey says. "Yes, it's a challenge. But it's a great honor to have eight lives in my hands."

- Richard Jerome
- Anne Lang in Round Rock



"We're a family that will stick together," says Catherine (at center in denim jacket, with, from top left, Carlton, Cameron, Millicent, Corey, Charles and Curtis; middle, from left, Carla, Cheryl, Catasha, Christina and Charlene; and, seated in front, Candace, Catasha's daughter Amaya and Cauretta).

## Round Rock family featured

**Greta Van Susteren** and her new face lift are on the cover of this week's People magazine, but the real story of transformed lives begins on Page 72 with a feature about the Bell family of Round Rock.

A six-page article called "Guardian Spirit" tells the story of **Corey** and **Millicent Bell**, husband-and-wife managers at Dell Computer Corp., who agreed last summer to take in Corey's eight youngest brothers and sisters after they were orphaned. The couple rented a bus, rode to the family's chicken farm in rural South Carolina and brought the children to their home in Texas — an odyssey reported first in an June 24 Austin American-Statesman article called "The Road Home."

"Nine months later, with patience, cooperation and planning, all eight are doing well," the new article says.

And, just like at home, Corey gets the last word: "Yes, it's a challenge. But it's a great honor to have eight lives in my hands."

The family also has caught the eye of **Oprah Winfrey**. A crew from her TV show filmed the family Sunday for an upcoming show; its air date will be announced later.

— **Denise Gamino**

### Round Rock's Bells to be featured on Oprah

When **Oprah Winfrey** met **Corey** and **Millicent Bell**, she wanted to know the same thing everyone else wants to know. "You're 28, and all of the sudden you get eight kids. How did you know what to do?" she asked Millicent Bell on Tuesday during a taping of "The Oprah Winfrey Show."

The Bells opened their home to Corey Bell's eight youngest siblings last summer after the children were orphaned. Their story, "The Road Home," appeared in the American-

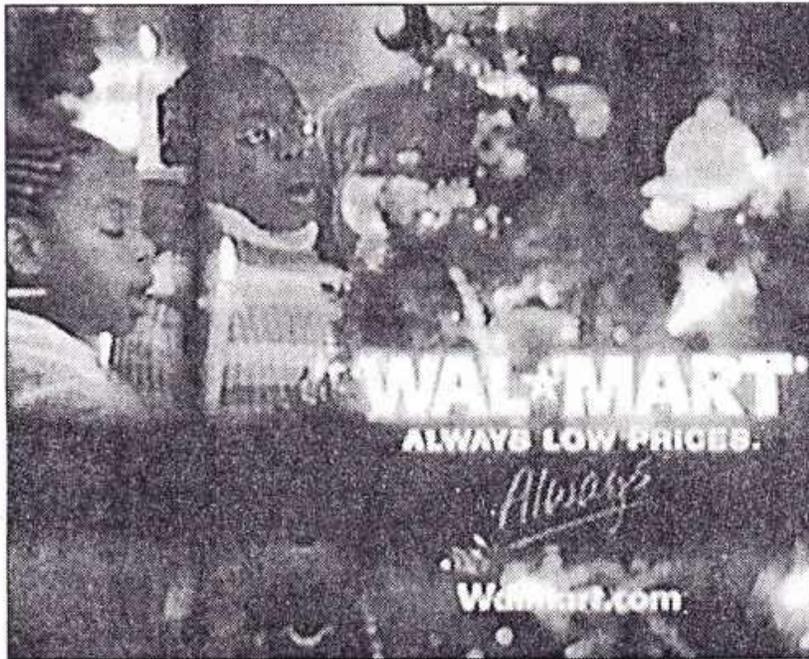
Statesman on June 24 and can be seen online at [statesman.com](http://statesman.com) under Special Reports.

Oprah's interview will air Thursday at 4 p.m. on KXAN Channel 36 as part of a show about extraordinary families. The Bell children did not go to Chicago to meet Oprah, but a crew filmed them at home in Round Rock. Viewers will be able to see Corey, 29, and Millicent, 28, watch that footage for the first time.

2.20.02

— **Denise Gamino**

Austin American-Statesman



WAL-MART

The Bell family of Round Rock — Corey and Millicent, plus Corey's eight siblings — stars in Wal-Mart's newest commercial. The Christmas scenes

include the children trimming the tree, left, and Corey loaded with wrapping paper in the retail store at Interstate 35 and Louis Henna Boulevard.

## Round Rock family of 10 stars in Wal-Mart holiday commercial

By Denise Gamino

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

If the folks starring in the new nationwide Wal-Mart television commercial look familiar, you're right. The Bell family of Round Rock, whose story was chronicled last year in the Austin American-Statesman, can be seen trimming their Christmas tree and shopping for gift wrap and toys at the Wal-Mart at Interstate 35 and Louis Henna Boulevard.

Corey and Millicent Bell, a young married couple, decided in 2001 to raise Corey's siblings after his parents died. The eight children were living alone on the family chicken farm in South Carolina when Corey and Millicent rented a bus to bring them to a new five-bedroom home in Round Rock.

After the Statesman story appeared, the Bells were

### On statesman.com

To read 'The Road Home,' the original story about the Bells, go to [statesman.com/specialreports/](http://statesman.com/specialreports/).

featured in *People* magazine and appeared on Oprah Winfrey's talk show.

"I was literally in a doctor's office reading those old magazines that are always laying around, and one happened to be the *People* magazine with their story," said Kirk Kirkpatrick, senior vice president and executive creative director of Bernstein-Rein, a Kansas City ad agency that was looking for a family that stretches its gift-giving dollars by shopping at Wal-Mart.

"I like the fact it wasn't just a family that needed money but a family that came about in this

poignant and very special way," he said. "At Christmastime, that's kind of a nice, uplifting message of giving rather than receiving."

Kirkpatrick found the Bells listed in the phone book, and the family agreed to be in the 30-second spot. Family members were paid standard Screen Actors Guild wages, which range from \$500 to \$275 for a day's shoot, and nominal payments each time the commercial runs.

"It was all God's blessing," Corey Bell said. "We didn't do anything. It came to us. We just received a phone call out of the blue.

"The reason we did it is, how many kids would ever have the opportunity to be in a commercial? For us it wasn't at all about money: The kids were paid richly in an experience of a lifetime."

[dgamino@statesman.com](mailto:dgamino@statesman.com); 445-3675



The gang's all here (from left): Cauretta, Candace, Christina, Catherine, Millicent, Curtis, Corey, Cheryl, Charles and Cameron at home.

### Sequels

1-27-03

I was so happy to see the update on Corey and Millicent Bell and their family. I have marveled at their Wal-Mart commercial. Their act of love and unselfishness is remarkable, and to see the joy on their faces is very inspirational. This is why I read PEOPLE.

Linda Lobb, MEMPHIS, TENN.

## a brother's love

After their mother died, Corey Bell took 8 of his 12 younger siblings home to a new life in Texas

When Mildred Bell succumbed to liver cancer in April 2001, she left behind 13 children who had lost their father, Charles, six years earlier to a heart attack. In June the eight youngest Bells left their Hopkins, S.C., home and went to live in Round Rock, Texas, with their eldest sibling, Corey, 30. Far from his parents' chicken farm, Corey and his wife, Millicent, 29, both managers at Dell Computer, had a three-bedroom home in the Austin suburb and comfortable lives befitting two M.B.A.'s. (Corey also has a law degree.)

Their tranquil world was replaced by cheerful chaos in a new five-bedroom, four-bath house (PEOPLE,

Feb. 18). "Now we really appreciate all that our parents did—they were absolute saints!" says Corey. To help keep order, the couple devised strict house rules—no TV or video games during the week—along with a budget and a system of chores and allowances. "I'm still getting used to the volume of responsibility," admits Millicent of the endless chauffeuring duties and \$2,000 monthly food bills. "And to the volume of noise!"

Amid the din the kids are thriving, making good grades and new friends at their respective schools. Cheryl, 9, is an avid reader; Christina, 11, plays soccer and the clarinet; Curtis, 12, made the football team;

Cameron, 14, will go to Paris with his eighth-grade class; Cauretta, 15, sings in two choirs; Charles Jr., 16, plays the tuba; Candace, 18, runs track; and Catherine, 20, is studying criminal justice at a community college. Their four grown siblings—Marine lance corporal Carlton, 21; Carla, 22, a college student; aspiring singer Charlene, 24; and architect Catasha, 26—visit often. "We don't think about loving one another," says Corey, who joined the others in a Christmas TV ad for Wal-Mart. "We just do it." By eating dinner together and going on church outings, the family honors Mildred. "It's getting a little easier to talk about her," says Cauretta. And Candace sees past grief to a future as a doctor: "I can truly appreciate the opportunities I have in this new life."

Photograph by JAMES McGOON