

STRANGER ON A BIKE

by Judy Horton

Be careful how you treat other people! You're the only version of the gospel they're likely to meet today.

Ten years ago, on a cold and blustery Thanksgiving Day, I met the gospel in the person of Carroll Fultz. At home, the turkey was on to cook, and my three year-old daughter Kelly was restless, so I bundled her up and headed for the park.

Dottie Jordan Park was deserted due to the cold and wind, but Kelly didn't care. She swung with gusto and climbed the playscape, and finally settled down to playing with the pea gravel. I sat on a bench and watched. The neighborhood was quiet, the only sound the wind blowing softly through the trees. It seemed as though Kelly and I were the only people in the world.

I looked up as a bicycle entered the park, ridden by a man with a tiny boy bouncing in the seat behind him. A grandad, I thought, or maybe an older parent like me. (Kelly was born to my husband and me 20 years after my previous pregnancy, and I was used to being the oldest mom of the youngest child in any group in which I found myself.)

The man wheeled the bike down the slope of the park, up to the edge of the gravel pit. He surveyed Kelly playing in the gravel, and me on the bench, and broke into a smile as wide as Texas. "Hi," he said. "I'm Carroll Fultz, and this is Pito."

Pito scampered up the playscape and began a death-defying series of toddler gymnastics. Carroll settled down to visit with Kelly, and soon had worked his now-familiar charm on her.

Thirty minutes later, I had learned that Carroll was an experienced father and foster dad, that Pito was about to be adopted by Carroll and his wife, that Carroll belonged to St. George's Episcopal Church not far from our neighborhood, and that my family would fit in and be welcome there any time, and why didn't we come next Sunday, and that he didn't know much about Down syndrome but if Kelly was an example then he thought it was probably a fine thing to have. Before leaving, I was treated to the first of the famous Fultz bear hugs and Kelly and I had both made a friend for life.

The first time our family crossed the thresh-hold of St. George's, there was Carroll to greet us. Within a year or so, Kelly was baptized in the arms of (as she now calls him) her "handsome godfather."

St. George's was a powerhouse of mission, out of which had been established St. George's Court, an apartment complex for low-income elderly and handicapped, and St. George's School, among others, and as new Christians we caught the fever. For some time we had been thinking about establishing a community for persons with mental retardation, and after getting the go-ahead, we tapped Carroll to be our first president.

And so he has served, since 1990, in good times and in bad. He has chopped brush, cooked hamburgers, driven bull-dozers, fed calves, chaired meetings, given presentations, signed for loans, donated faithfully, and inspired us always with his presence, hugs, prayers, and grace. When we made the decision to become Catholics, dismaying some friends, Carroll was there with a smile and the assurance that in Christ we all are one.

I have never heard Carroll say an unkind, or untrue word about anyone, and I don't really think he knows how. He does what he says he'll do, when he says he'll do it. Eternally optimistic, he unfailingly believes the best possible thing about anybody. His life has not always been smooth sailing, but like a cork in the ocean, he may be momentarily swamped only to be seen riding high on the next wave.

He reminds me of the hymn *There is a Balm in Gilead*. So often, when discouraged over this or that happening or not happening for the Ranch, Carroll has been the steady point in our lives—the safe refuge, the shoulder to cry on, the friend to rejoice with. The balm of his friendship has healed many a hurt.

He's been the perfect partner with whom to build a dream, as we have often said we're doing here. He may not be president forever, but God willing, his bond with Down Home Ranch is for life.

Welcome to *Reflections*!

Reflections begins this month as a way to keep in touch between issues of *The Spirit*, and offers an opportunity to explore the philosophy and vision that form the foundation of Down Home Ranch. We'll be able to delve a little deeper and look a little closer at issues which affect the lives of people with mental disabilities.

In this first issue, Judy Horton introduces our board president, Carroll Fultz. Many of you know Carroll, and you'll smile in recognition at how he came into the lives of the Horton family and helped build the Down Home Ranch community. If you haven't met him, you probably will someday!

Others are being asked to contribute to writing *Reflections*, friends like Bob Lively, Teacher-in-Residence at Riverbend Church, and present and former board members, volunteers, staff, and other friends of the Ranch.

Reflections will be published monthly. Six months of the year, in odd-numbered months, it will arrive alone, as a self-mailer. On even-numbered months it will come as an insert with *The Spirit*, the newsletter of Down Home Ranch.

We hope you enjoy it.

Our Mission: Down Home Ranch, faithful to the Christian mission to provide for those in need, seeks to build a rural, self-reliant community for adults with mental retardation, offering training, housing, recreation, and dignified employment, as well as opportunities for growth in mind, body, and spirit.

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