

Feature Assignment #1
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Unspoken Support

The table where the families sat down at for bi-weekly dinners looked unfamiliar – five years had changed everything.

From continuously caring for their now fragile children to re-entering the dating world, Bruce Ham and Caroline Cheek-Hill had to learn how to navigate grief on their own timelines.

“With anybody who’s going through the same thing there is a kinship that is very much unspoken,” Ham said. “But that empathy is so much deeper when you know the person. You can see it in their eyes, beyond the surface.”

That unspoken support was powerful for Ham and Cheek-Hill, the two life-long friends widowed at far too young of ages.

The Sandlot

Fayetteville is a small military town in southeast North Carolina. It is covered in tall pine trees and slathered in bumpy pavement that makes driving down any road a treacherous act.

There has never been much in Fayetteville, its greatest attractions today being 11 taco bells - but that’s part of its charm.

In the 70s and 80s, it could best be described as the real life Sandlot.

Growing up in Fayetteville was measured in fried bologna sandwiches, miles racked up on rusty bikes to and from school, and kisses from adoring Southern parents.

Ham and Cheek-Hill’s childhoods were centered around all these things, and more. Most important of all were the many hours they spent at Snyder Baptist Church.

“If the lights were on, we were going to church by golly,” said Catherine Bond, fellow Fayetteville native and friend of Ham and Cheek-Hill’s.

While their parents were friends and they went to the same schools growing up, Ham, Bond, and Cheek-Hill never thought much of each other beyond waves exchanged in the hallways of Snyder.



Snyder Baptist Church

The crossover of their life stories was only just beginning.

The Preacher's Kid

Ham (58) was a worrisome, gangly, loveable child. His charming and at times attention-seeking personality when he was young served him well as the preacher's kid.

He was the lead in church plays and involved in every aspect of Snyder. However, being the star pupil meant all eyes were on Ham.

"Growing up in a Baptist church you learned about sin and what you shouldn't be doing, so I was pretty straight and narrow," Ham said.

When Ham went to Wingate University in Monroe, NC, he returned home after only two weeks. However, it wasn't just his minor case of homesickness that led Ham to this decision.

At Wingate, Ham was staying in Helms Hall, named after one of the most notoriously conservative senators, Jesse Helms. Helms Hall was enough to send a much more liberal Ham running.



Bruce Ham

The following year, he moved to Raleigh and attended NC State University. There Ham met some of his closest friends and started working at the YMCA in an attempt to get more involved with his community.

The Leader of the Pack

Bond (53), five years younger than Ham, was the typical oldest child – responsible but unafraid to get into mischief. It was a common occurrence for babysitters to call parents crying after a night with Bond and the rest of the 'neighborhood kids' who always pushed the limits for entertainment's sake.



Catherine Bond

Growing up, Bond was the leader of the pack amongst any group, but she wanted everyone to be cared for and included. She always spoke her mind in a gentle yet straightforward way.

In 1989, Bond went to UNC Chapel Hill as an undergrad. She joined Alpha Delta Pi as a freshman at UNC and was a friend to all – liked by every "clique" that formed, a feat in the sorority world.

She never knew a stranger, a characteristic of Bond's that would serve her (and her friends) in the future.

The Little Adult

When Cheek-Hill (49) was little, she could walk up to a group of churchgoers and wow them with her confidence and maturity. She was like a little adult.

“The initial parts of my childhood were very storybook,” Cheek-Hill said.

In 10th grade, Cheek-Hill’s parents divorced, making the ‘little adult’ endearment a bit more realistic.

Despite the harder parts of her childhood, Cheek-Hill was still a straight-A student and ‘Miss Terry Sanford’ (Fayetteville high school prom queen equivalent).



Caroline Cheek-Hill

“I think without the strong ties that we had with our church group and our community, that would’ve been a super difficult time for me but really I was very supported,” Cheek-Hill said.

Cheek-Hill came to UNC Chapel Hill in 1991 with hopes of becoming an orthodontist. After not making the cheerleading team her freshman year, she pledged ADPi in search of a little fun to pair with her demanding schoolwork.

Do you believe things happen for a reason?

“I think that there’s probably some sort of something we can’t see below the surface whether that is God or just something spiritual... something that is shifting and maneuvering things that should be.”

Community Ties

The Alexander YMCA in Raleigh sits on Hillsborough Street near downtown. In 1985, the Alexander Y was a single brick building with dingy workout equipment sitting in it. However, YMCA summer camps were a staple for many Raleigh families.

Camp counselors spent their days wrangling kids in the gym, passing out glue sticks at the “Craft Shack,” and putting on goofy skits that drew uproarious laughter.

Ham was the Youth Director at the Alexander Y two years out of college. Lisa Ham (then Lisa Permar) and



Alexander YMCA

Trey Cheek were two of many college aged students who worked at camp.

“We just had so much fun those couple of summers,” Ham said. “At this point though, I didn’t really think much of Lisa because I was her boss. Eventually I realized I kind of liked her.”

Ham and Lisa fell in love over weekly breakfast at Ye Olde Waffle Shoppe in Chapel Hill during Lisa’s senior year of college at UNC. Lisa was also in ADPi in the same pledge class as Bond, both three years above Cheek-Hill.

Ham attended ADPi events and used to drop off brownies at the sorority house for Lisa who often rolled her eyes at the gesture. Nonetheless, Ham charmed her.

“I still remember I was like ‘You’re dating Bruce Ham!?’” Bond said. “And Lisa would just shrug and laugh.”



UNC ADPi

Cheek-Hill got into Dental school after her junior year and took a gap year in India and Nepal doing mission work before starting residency for orthodontia. When Cheek-Hill came back to UNC she spoke to many Christian groups about the work she’d done.

At one of her presentations, she recognized a tall Trey Cheek in the small audience, who she had previously met at an ADPi event.

Cheek-Hill wasn’t looking for a relationship at the time, her independence and occupational goals the only thing on her mind.

“If he hadn’t been so persistent, who knows if we would’ve made it,” Cheek-Hill said.

Trey asked Cheek-Hill on a date after the presentation. She was interested but ambivalent. He was absolutely smitten.

Ham didn’t know Cheek-Hill and Trey knew each other, but he wasn’t surprised to hear they were dating. The athletic goofy camp counselor and the bright, driven ADPi from Fayetteville.

“I remember thinking ‘Oh, Trey and Caroline... I guess that makes sense,’” Ham said.

Ham and Lisa got married in 1993, Cheek-Hill and Trey in 1998, and Bond and her husband, Jeff, in 1999.

The couples looked forward to the beginning of their young adult lives that lay ahead of them in Raleigh. Bond was, unsurprisingly, the leader in bringing their families together as friends (and at times only acquaintances) outside of the Y, ADPi, or Snyder.

Everybody loved Trey

Trey was an athletic, outgoing, and goofy personality.

“He wasn’t stuck up,” Ham said. “He was this real down to earth guy. You know, everybody loved Trey.”

In fall of 2004, Cheek-Hill gave birth to her second child, Preston. She owned her first orthodontic practice and Trey was a lawyer at a firm in Raleigh. Their lives were on a trajectory, surrounded by good friends and a new family.

On February 21, 2005, Trey set out to pick Cheek-Hill up from work across town.

On the way, Trey (33) got in a car accident that suddenly took his life – and much of Cheek-Hill’s too.



Trey Cheek

“Trey was my very, very best friend in the world,” Cheek-Hill said. “I just lost so much right then.”

Ham saw Cheek-Hill for the first time after the wreck at Trey’s funeral.

“People were coming up and giving her hugs,” Ham said. “And I walked up and said, ‘you look good,’ and I think she said something like, ‘I’m medicated.’”

Cheek-Hill describes the year following Trey’s death as monotonous. Wake up, love on your kids, go to work, sleep and repeat.

“We were so little when he died,” said Bailey Ham, the oldest child of the collective families. “I only have vague memories of Trey from when I was little.”

Ham along with the six other pallbearers were driving in the same car after the funeral when they decided they needed to step up and support Cheek-Hill during this time. Every Thursday for the next year, the gangly crew of men came to Cheek-Hill’s house to play with her oldest son, Jackson, and provide some comedic relief.

Bond and Ham were two of many people who pushed into Cheek-Hill’s world and helped keep her head above water.

A week after Trey's death, Bond remembers going to celebrate Jackson's birthday. As Cheek-Hill laid out the party plates and napkins, she remarked "these survived the wreck."

Bond said Trey's passing was surreal. Showing up was all there was left to do.

"There's no good way for someone to leave too early," Cheek-Hill said. "But there is a correct way to support someone through an experience like that."

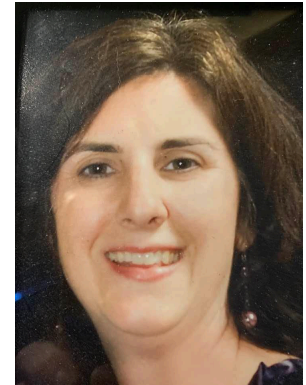
Lisa was a fighter

Lisa was known to be able to talk to anybody.

"She was a person that could really get involved in stuff and she cared about community and church and was a leader," Ham said. "That's what I liked most about her."

In the summer of 2009, Ham and Lisa were rekindling their marriage after feeling bogged down by busy work schedules and their three young daughters.

By September, however, Lisa had been diagnosed with stage four colon cancer.



Lisa Ham

The grief of potentially losing Lisa was all-consuming for Ham. Lisa, on the other hand, had a different perspective – she was a fighter.

"Lisa was just so straightforward with me about what I needed when Trey died," Cheek-Hill said. "I think I was able to do the same with Lisa and Bruce when she was sick because they showed me how to do it first."

Cheek-Hill remembers one particular conversation with Lisa about what her sickness meant for the future. Perhaps the most important takeaway was Cheek-Hill's promise to Lisa that her daughters would have straight teeth.

"My dad didn't know what to do with three girls on his own," Bailey said. "We had a lot of family friends step in to help fill that mother role."

By February of 2010, Lisa passed away at the age of 39. A part of Ham was lost with Lisa's passing, a harsh reality for close friends and family.

About a week before she passed away, Bond and another close friend visited Lisa in the hospital to give her a manicure/pedicure – her nails her prized possession. She was tired and could barely talk.

“Lisa’s mom walked in and saw us and started crying,” Bond said. “I think it just touched her. It was in like a biblical sense because we loved Lisa. It was like the washing of the feet, like you’re important to us.”

Do you believe things happen for a reason?

“I don’t think God meant to take Lisa or Trey away from any of us,” Cheek-Hill said. “But I do think that he sends people to complete us again.”

Twisted and Beautiful

When facing tragedy in their separate spheres of life, Ham, Bond, and Cheek-Hill followed the values they learned from the communities they had built over the years.

“I think you just need to show up,” Bond said. “Not necessarily with gifts and food but you just show up especially for those people you really, really care about.”



Cheek-Hill Family, present

From the sadness the three friends have experienced together, beautiful new beginnings have grown.

In 2007, two years after Trey’s passing, Cheek-Hill got remarried to Martin Hill, one of Trey’s

close friends (and one of the six pallbearers). Cheek-Hill and Martin gave birth to their daughter, Campbell, in 2009.

Six years after Lisa’s passing, Bond set Ham up for a blind date with one of her sorority sisters from college, Julie Campbell. The two got married on New Years’ Day of 2022.



Bond Family, present



Ham/Campbell Family, present

Ham and Campbell likely interacted at an ADPi event years before or at a Snyder Christmas Eve service, which Bond invited Campbell to one holiday season.

“It just goes to show your friends and communities really do play a bigger role in your life than you ever think they might,” Ham said.

As for Snyder, ADPi, the YMCA, UNC, NC State – they all remain the same. The people who have made up these entities over time, however, have changed.

“Our stories are ironic, and twisted, yes,” Cheek-Hill said. “But the friendships and lives that have grown out of them are so beautiful.”