

The R.L. and Hilda Alford Story

Several of you sent copies of clippings concerning a Florida Alford family which was given national attention recently because of a call from President Reagan. A longer version of this article, which was prepared from R. L.'s letter and several different news articles, appeared in *About Alford's*, but for the benefit of those who do not subscribe to it, it will be printed again.

R. L. and Hilda Clemmons, high-school classmates and childhood sweethearts who went to church together, were married September 14, 1956, in Blountstown, Calhoun Co., Florida. On Sunday, July 21, 1957, not even a year later, they were en route from their apartment to church in Alameda, CA, where R. L. was serving at the U. S. Naval Air Station. A Coast Guard ambulance ran a stop sign and broadsided their 1953 Chevy. Hilda, 19 at the time, was thrown from the car, striking her head on the pavement and fracturing her skull. It first seemed that Hilda would suffer no permanent damage; however, within a few days a blood clot the size of an orange formed in her head and cut off circulation to the brain. After surgery, it was clear that Hilda would never see or have complete use of her hands again. Although she can move her arms and legs, she has no control over them.

R. L. adapted to his wife's needs immediately. Hilda spent the next seven months in the hospital and R. L., who had been assigned light duty by the Navy, spent as much time with her as possible. Hilda drifted in and out of consciousness for a couple of months but it wasn't until she had fully recovered that she was able to recognize folks. She could holler and make sounds but not talk. She and R. L. developed signs and with great patience she could communicate some

words by spelling. Today she communicates with short slurred syllables and guttural sounds which R. L. frequently must interpret. R. L. says Hilda never tires of having to repeat herself over and over, even it means spelling out words with her hands. When Hilda was able to go home from the hospital, R. L. worked the night shift so that he could spend days with her.

In 1959 when R. L.'s time in the Navy was up they returned to Blountstown. They had both grown up on a farm, so they bought a few acres south of town. R. L. tried his hand at farming but over the years would decide to move back to town. They discussed adopting children and finally decided to try having their own children. Five years after the accident Hilda gave birth to a son. They named him Jonathan, meaning a gift from God. Three and a half years later they had a girl, Juanice. Hilda said, "I intended to have a girl before I quit. When they told me I had a girl, I cried." R. L. kids folks that he was "the only man in America who carried two babies full-term." He said he literally carried Hilda in and out of the hospital and to the doctor during her pregnancies. R. L. said that even though Hilda could not take care of the children herself, she was a good manager and offered advice whenever a problem arose. Hilda said, "They never went dirty."

According to R. L. the children had to adjust to a different type of upbringing and were deprived of some things, but he and Hilda made up for it in other ways. Jonathan, a graduate of Florida State University, said it was not until recent years that he fully appreciated what his parents accomplished.

"I never realized how tough it was

until I got older and could look back," Jonathan said. "Most days it seemed pretty normal because that is all we had ever really known. We didn't have anything to compare it to."

The most difficult time he remembers is when he and Juanice would come straight home from school to take care of their mother while his father went to work. "We couldn't get out and socialize as much as the other kids," Jonathan said.

"But I think it made us all stronger because of all the situations and ordeals we've had to go through. It's been a good life all in all; I can't really complain about anything."

Juanice, now in her early twenties, lives in Tallahassee and visits her parents on weekends. Juanice said she wouldn't have wanted her growing-up years to be any different. "I wouldn't trade it for anything," she said. "I think it's made us better people. They're just the most important people in the world to me."

"These kids grew up eating Daddy's cooking," R. L. chuckled. R. L. tried his hand at a lawn-care business and later became a Texaco distributor, but decreasing business and increasing demands of the family ended that. When he did work they had a housekeeper who would also help with Hilda, and then he took care of her nights. He has tried his hand at other part time work but his schedule is just too demanding as Hilda requires constant care and she is not satisfied with help from anyone but R. L. He has to do everything for her, bathe her, dress her, feed her, carry her and help hold her up as she cannot sit without support. When Hilda was younger she could spend hours in a

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(R.L. Alford, cont. from p. 10)

wheelchair and they would visit other shut-ins, go shopping or attend church functions. As she has grown older, however, it has become more difficult for her to sit up for long periods of time. Although impaired she is alert and understands what is said and what is going on around her.

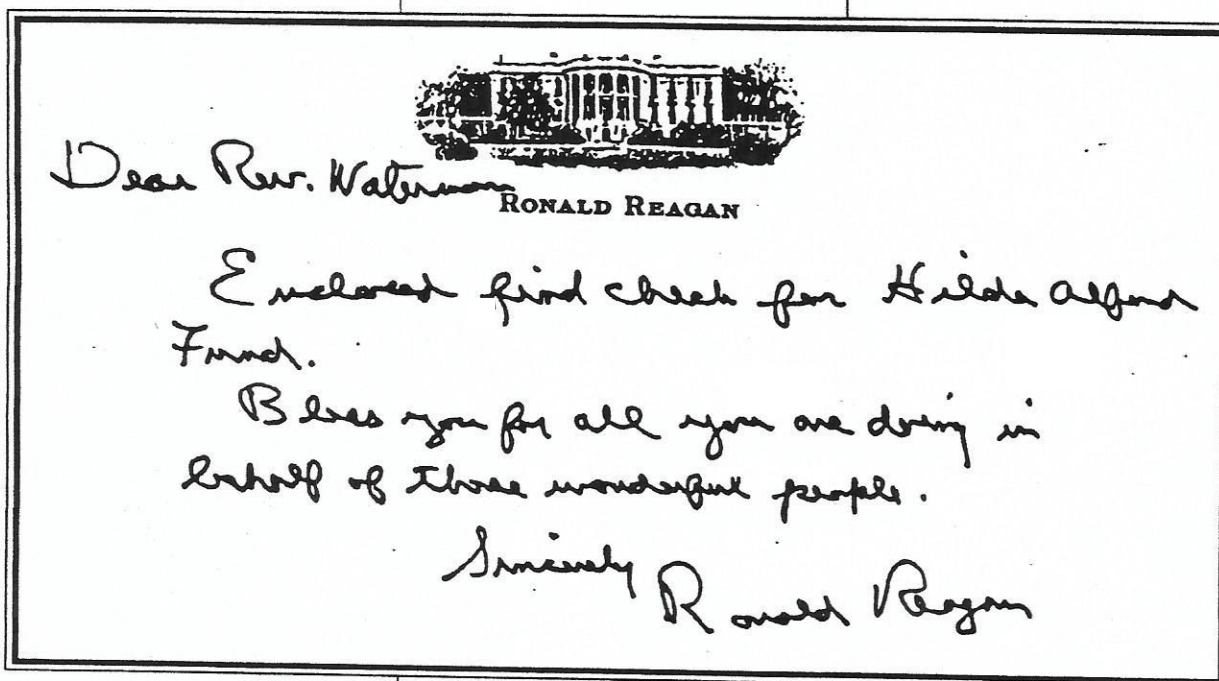
"She doesn't go many places anymore," Jonathan said. "It's almost like an event to get her to go any-

the seizures have since subsided. The Florida Department of Rehabilitative Services and Developmental Services has been able to pay for some of Hilda's medicine and help with some of the care.

After this brush with financial disaster, the family's church, The First Church of the Nazarene in Blountstown realized their plight and established a "Hilda Alford Fund." The fund raising effort got the attention of local newspapers and TV

People don't take their vows so seriously these days. I did. I meant every word."

As one who is seldom at a loss for words I hate to admit that studying these various accounts of the Alford's has left me speechless. What love. What dedication. What perseverance. What devotion. As an Alford I am so proud to have learned of one with our name such as R. L. and his family. I hope that someday I'll be able to visit briefly with these great folks, but in



where, even if it's just down the street. It's too hard on her."

The family received a settlement of about \$200,000 after the accident but that was just enough to cover many of their medical bills and not enough to cover normal expenses and bills. The settlement was exhausted years ago, and they have been unable to get insurance.

About 18 months ago Hilda started having problems with her medication which prevented seizures, and she began to hallucinate and became depressed. She was hospitalized, and

stations. The situation was brought to the attention of President Reagan, who at Christmas 1987 made a substantial contribution to the "Hilda Alford Fund." The note he included with his check is reprinted above. President Reagan also phoned R. L. to commend him for the job he had done for thirty years in caring for his wife and raising his children. Having received the President's attention, their story made the news services and was published all over the country.

R. L. says, "I'm in it for keeps, I know she'd have done this for me.

the meantime I'm happy we have made contact through correspondence. R. L., Hilda, Jonathan and Juanice have accomplished what few would dare undertake.

Those who would like to make some contribution to the "Hilda Alford Fund" should make their checks payable to the fund and send it to the Church of the Nazarene, Blountstown, FL 32424.

Gil Alford
AAFA Executive Assistant