

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Announcer: Marcia Mitchell is the founder of Little Light House, a faith-based mission to assist children with a wide range of developmental disabilities including autism, Down syndrome, and cerebral palsy.

The program is not only a facility for students, but also serves as a training ground for professionals and volunteers throughout the United States and other countries who are learning to reach out to special needs children in their communities.

Marcia and her husband Phil gave birth to their daughter Missy who was born with a rare condition leaving her legally blind. With no facilities in Tulsa to help Missy, Marcia and her friend Sheryl Pool opened Little Light House in a small building, eventually expanding to a 22,000-square-foot facility.

In 2013, the Oklahoma Center for Nonprofits named Little Light House Oklahoma's top nonprofit organization.

In her oral history, Marcia talks about the many unusual circumstances, which Marcia calls miracles, that led to Little Light House serving thousands of special needs children. Here's the story now, on the podcast and website VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 7:30

Killing Flies

John Erling (JE): So today's date is November 15th, 2024 and my name is John Erling. Marcia, would you state your full name, please?

Marcia Mitchell (MM): Marcia Jo Mitchell.

JE: And where are we recording this interview?

MM: In my home in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma.

JE: Your birth date?

MM: 08-18-1945.

JE: And that makes your present age?

MM: 79.

JE: This is the only time I get to ask a woman their age.

MM: (Laugh) And get away with it?

JE: Because it's legitimate. Right. Right. I should say that I've known you. You've known me down through the years, but we connected recently since we were both inducted into the Tulsa Historical Society Hall of Fame. We should also say that inducted were Sam Combs, Pat Crofts and Michelle Hardesty.

Now, as we begin to tell this story, I should caution our listeners that if you don't believe in miracles, this may be tough for you to listen to. I'm reminded of when the US hockey team upset the Soviet Union at the 1980 Winter Olympics, Al Michaels famously said, "Do you believe in miracles?" And then he said, "Yes." So if you, the listener, believe in miracles, then come along.

So, Marcia, where were you born?

MM: Tulsa, Oklahoma.

JE: Your mother's name? Maiden name? Where she was?

MM: Marilou Smith and she became Marilou Mobley.

JE: And where did she come from and grow up?

MM: She grew up here in Tulsa and some people might remember Marilou's Pastry Shops and my mother was Marilou of Marilou's Pastry Shops.

JE: Where was that located?

MM: The main bakery was at 18th in Boston and they had a chain of 9. I was in Utica Square and then they had branches in Sipes stores and all over Tulsa.

JE: Wow, so you had access to that.

MM: I grew up in the back of a bakery.

JE: What was her personality like?

MM: Very outgoing, very much the life of the party. Both of my parents had extraordinary work ethics.

JE: Your father's name?

MM: Joe. William Joseph Mobley.

JE: And he was from where?

MM: He was from Florida. He was a southerner.

JE: And then how did he come to Tulsa? Or how did they meet?

MM: He was working for Armor and somehow Armor ended up doing business, somehow, with my mother's parents' bakery. And that's how they met. And eventually my parents went into the bakery business. So my grandfather retired from it, but he had, evidently, one of the very first bakeries in Tulsa, I think. Miss Smith's Bakery.

JE: And then his personality. What was he like?

MM: My father? A very hard worker, very serious. All business.

JE: What would you say you drew from either one of them? Probably that work ethic?

MM: Well, for one, they had us in church from the time we were very little. And, yes, I think work ethics. I learned a lot just from watching them. They used a lot of creativity.

I never realized it until years later, but I learned a lot about marketing from them. I remember they had yellow pastry sacks, yellow boxes, with blue print on them that said Marilou's. So their sacks, and their boxes, and everything that went out of the bakery with pastries was bright yellow. So if you saw somebody carrying a bright yellow box, you automatically knew it was Marilou's. So it was kind of a constant reinforcement, kind of a constant advertisement. And that stuck with me.

I think the other thing that really stuck with me is the old phrase, "The

customer's always right," and they really believed that, and they really adhered to that philosophy. And I watched my mother, as someone might bring in a loaf of bread and say, "You know, this was a little dry," or whatever, and she was always, "Oh, my goodness. Well, here, let me give you a fresh loaf of that bread. And by the way, have you tried our new fruit nut bread here? You've got to take this home and try it." I watched that, you know, all my growing-up years because they didn't sell the bakeries. They ended up selling it to a corporation of men right after I got married in '67. So they had it over 20 years.

They also taught me hard work. I actually started working in the back of the bakery when I was four and worked in the back of the bakery all my growing-up years.

JE: What could a four-year-old do?

MM: Well, you might wonder, but actually my first job, they had these room size-ovens, okay? So a lot of heat coming out of them. But the problem was they also did deliveries to all their branches. So there were these screen doors that were constantly opening and closing. So they were constantly battling any flies that would get in. They had fans to keep them out and so on. But my dad just was, "You know, we've got to keep these flies out." So my first job was killing flies and I got quite good at it. And he paid me a penny a fly.

JE: (Laughing)

MM: And that all worked well until I got so good at it that one day -- and one day I stayed with it all day long and I killed 100 and I got a dollar bill. First dollar bill I'd ever gotten. I was so excited that I went up front and was telling all the customers about what I earned, how much I earned, how I earned it. From that point on, I folded boxes. I never got to kill flies again.

JE: Do you have brothers and sisters?

MM: I do have a sister -- older sister. And I had a younger sister who passed away when she was four and a half.

JE: Okay.

MM: She was special needs.

JE: Oh, really? That's interesting, isn't it, as to what you ended up in. What was her name?

MM: Her name was Kathy Louise.

JE: And then your sister?

MM: Jane Anne.

JE: Okay. Grade school. Where did you go?

MM: Lee!

JE: Lee Elementary.

MM: Lee Elementary.

JE: Now it's called Council Oak

MM: Such great memories.

JE: Then on to junior high?

MM: Horace Mann

JE: And then to high school?

MM: And then transferred. My parents moved out close to about 71st & Birmingham when I was in ninth grade and I started to Edison and went to Edison 9th, 10th and 11th and 12th grade. Then went to Drury College -- Drury University in Springfield, Missouri -- and came back home and began teaching at Edison.

JE: In high school, did you participate in any extracurricular activities?

MM: I did. I was in drama club and so I did a lot of assemblies, you know, the devotionals for assemblies and so on. I was in a couple of the productions, but it wasn't really like a major focus, but I did enjoy that kind of thing.

JE: Did you ever perform? Were you an actress?

MM: A little bit, a little bit. No big lead roles in high school. But then when I got to college as a theater major, I had some major roles.

JE: Okay. You said you became a teacher.

MM: I came back home and began teaching where I had graduated from Edison.

JE: Right. And what year did you graduate?

MM: I graduated in '63 and I started teaching there in '67.

JE: And that was drama?

MM: Speech, and drama, and English.

Chapter 3 – 9:15

Missy is Born

John Erling (JE): And then -- you and Phil -- when were you married?

Marcia Mitchell (MM): In '67.

JE: '67. Alright.

MM: I graduated early. Actually, I graduated in 3.5 years.

JE: Okay. I had gone summer, winter, summer, winter because at Drury University, they have a summer program: summer theater and children's theater. We taught creative dramatics to children. And we always did one big production. One summer, we did Wizard of Oz. One summer we did Alice in Wonderland. I can't remember what the third one was. But anyway, we did a production each summer. And so, because I had gone to summer school and usually took an additional academic course while I was doing that, I had enough credits to graduate at midterm my senior year.

JE: Why did you choose Drury?

MM: Great question. My sister had gone there for a short time. And so I was familiar with it. I loved the idea of... I'm kind of a small campus girl and I

love the fact that it was a small campus and I had been told that it was 40 acres of christian atmosphere.

JE: Oh. (Laughing) How many years, then, did you teach at Edison?

MM: Three. Three years. So from 67 to 70 then I retired to have our daughter.

JE: Let's talk about that because, when she was born, obviously, you were very excited. But was it in the next 12, 24 hours that you felt -- you kind of wondered?

MM: I cannot tell you how badly I had wanted a baby girl and everybody had said "You shouldn't want a boy or a girl, you should want a normal, healthy baby." And I wanted a normal, healthy baby -- girl. (Laughing)

And so you can't even imagine my joy and delight when the doctor said, "Well, it's a girl!" And I just was almost hysterical with joy. And then they brought her around for me to see and she was beautiful.

I went back to my room. I had a few minute-moments with my husband. I asked him if he thought there could be anything wrong. And he said, "No, no, no." And part of the reason was her hair was very white. In fact, the nurses had nicknamed her "Little Snow White," and there was something about her eyes -- couldn't put my finger on it. But so I, you know, had slept that night feeling everything is okay.

The next morning, the pediatrician came in and he said, "Well, I guess you know you have a very special baby."

And I said, "Well, I knew that; I didn't expect everybody to agree. But, yes, she's wonderful."

And he said, "No, I don't think you understand. You see, she's very special because she's very rare. Only one in 50,000 babies are born like her. She's been born with a very rare condition, which, among other things, means that her vision is going to range somewhere between less-than-normal and blind. You're not going to know where it's going to fall for about five years. But I can assure you she will be, at best, legally blind."

And my whole heart and being froze on that one word. And interestingly, John, when I was in college -- you asked what roles I had played or had I had any lead roles. One of the lead roles that I was given in college was to play Helen Keller in the *Miracle Worker*.

And so when I heard that word, I didn't hear anything else the doctor was saying. My whole heart, and mind, and being raced back to, actually, a time when I was a little girl and I used to sit out on the porch step, reading to a little friend of mine because she was totally blind. We were best friends. And then she introduced me to her piano teacher, and I took piano from him for years and he was totally blind.

And then I went away to college and was awarded that role. And so for three months, I prepared for that role. I did all kinds of things blindfolded. I went around the dormitory, blindfolded. I had somebody go with me, take me to the grocery store, blindfolded. So I did a lot of that kind of research. And I learned so much during that time; it was just a wonderful experience.

And I came home and began to teach school and discovered I had a blind student in my classroom -- totally blind student.

And so when I heard that word, my mind just raced back to all of those experiences. And some might think, "Well, you had to feel prepared," but I didn't. I was crushed. And for the next three days, I cried when there weren't any visitors in the room. And I asked one question over and over again. It was "Why? Why, Lord? Why, why? How could you have done this to us? I've been a Christian since I was 12 and I just didn't understand how or why."

And the third day, Phil was late getting there. He was supposed to have been there earlier. And so like any typical wife, I wanted to know why he was late. He was evasive, which made me more curious. And finally he began to try to put it into words. And he said, "As I was driving here," he said, "I just began to look at this big wide world and wonder: 'How will we describe it to Missy?'" Her name was Michelle, but he immediately nicknamed her, Missy. "How would we describe it to her if she can't see?"

And he said, "As I thought about that," he said, "Honey, I just began to look and see things in a way that I've never seen them before. As I searched for words that would describe the sky with those fluffy clouds, you know, the landscape, the grass..." He said, "All of a sudden, I realized it's not just a big green mass, but it's trillions of tiny individual blades of grass." And he said, "It's the color and the color contrast." And he said, "I watched a bird in flight and I thought, 'How would we describe that to her?'" And he said, "I saw it for the first time."

And as he shared with me, I remember looking at the roses by my bedside and I noticed that they suddenly became more brilliant in color than they had been just moments before. And I think -- I've shared with people -- I think what happened was that, together, we began to see in a whole new way. And I think the most important thing we began to see that day was that this was not something God had done to us, but we began to realize this was something God had done for us; because he had blessed us with a baby who had begun to teach us before she could even talk. And, strangely, she began to lead us closer to the Lord before she could even walk. And so, that day we decided -- we knew we had some rough times ahead -- but we decided we can't get any more blessed than that.

JE: So then did you sense, then, even in the next 2,3 months that her sight was not able to follow?

MM: was born in August and we really couldn't tell. We grew concerned because she wasn't developing as rapidly as other babies her age. She wasn't smiling at us when we smiled at her. She did not seem motivated to move about. So I became very, very concerned and I was -- as I mentioned -- I was an educator. So as an educator, I knew the importance of early intervention. I knew that the first six years of life are the most important learning years we ever experience. And so I was concerned.

And so we began to search for an early learning program, a developmental program, for visually-impaired children and infants, only to discover there was absolutely nothing in Tulsa for those children until they reach the age of six, which is oftentimes too late. There have been children who reached the age of six, who were blind or visually impaired, who by the time they reached the age of six, were so developmentally delayed because of a lack

of stimulation and lack of early intervention that they were misdiagnosed and placed in classes for the mentally challenged.

Chapter 4 – 7:04

Child's Study Center

John Erling (JE): What about her hearing?

Marcia Mitchell (MM): Her hearing was amazing. I would be holding her and all of a sudden she would perk up -- she has Nystagmus, which is a jerky movement of the eye -- and her eyes would begin to quiver.

And I think, "What is it?"

And I would listen real carefully and I'd hear an airplane, or I would hear an ambulance, that I hadn't heard before. So yes, her hearing was phenomenal. It is true. It seems like oftentimes they say, you know, "When you lose one's sense, others begin to compensate," and hers definitely was.

JE: Yeah. So how long did you live with this?

MM: I was a worrier. I'm not proud of that. You asked me about my parents and kind of what influence they had. One thing I'll always be grateful to my mother for: When I was a little girl, she used to say -- I guess I was a worrier from the time I was a kid -- because I remember as a little girl she would say to me, "Marcia, honey, don't worry so much. You just pray."

And, so, I was worried. Finally, one day, I remembered that. And I thought, "I just have to pray." And so we began to pray that God would send us someone who could help us. Because even though I'd had all those experiences with the blind, I had no idea how to help one -- help a blind person.

And so I began to pray. And, quite by miracle, and it's the only way I can put it. It was someone who told someone, who told someone, who told someone we knew, who told us about a program in Oklahoma City that

worked with deaf/blind children and infants. And that was the closest place we had heard of. And so we wrote to them and asked if they would see us and they said yes. However, they really just serve deaf and blind. So for a month until her appointment, I worried about the fact that Missy wasn't deaf because I knew she wasn't deaf.

So I dressed her up in her best frills. Why I thought that would make a difference, I have no idea -- but, just in case. I thought, "I'll make her so adorable, they won't be able to refuse her."

And so we went over to a place called the Child Study Center at Oklahoma City. They worked with OU Med. It's a big house -- old, old home. And they had social workers, and physical therapists, and speech therapists; they had a wonderful uh transdisciplinary team.

I remember them having us. We met with a social worker for about an hour and then we all went in this big room and they said, "Just put her down in the floor."

And I said, "Okay." So I sat her down and there were probably six or seven professionals standing around a circle with us. And as I stepped back away, I thought, "Oh, Missy, don't do anything wrong." Now, what she could do wrong, I'm not sure, but I didn't want her to do it.

And all of a sudden the first thing she did was she stuck her thumb in her mouth and I thought, "Oh, don't do that! Don't do that! And with that, one of the professionals swooped her up and said, "Oh, Missy, that is so good, baby doll! That is wonderful! That is wonderful!"

And I looked at them like, "...What?"

And they said, "Oh, you don't understand. You see, she has discovered her midline."

And I said, "Her midline?"

And they said, "Yeah, her midline! You see, we have an arm on the right, an arm on the left, leg on the right, leg on the left, and the center is our

midline. Our mouth is in our midline. If she has discovered her midline, she can do all kinds of things: She can play with toys where she has to bring both hands together, she can feed herself. There are so many things! This is wonderful!"

I tell you, my esteem as a parent in that one moment grew. And I learned so much just in that one moment. For one, to appreciate the small milestones -- just the tiny milestones. And, from that moment on, they were teaching us. And so they developed a program -- just on a legal pad -- they wrote out different activities that we could do for her when we got home.

So, basically, we would go over and they would instruct us on how we could help her. For a month, we would carry out those activities and return a month later. They were simple activities. You might think, "What can you do with a five-month-old?"

Well, they suggested that I wear a certain kind of perfume -- the same kind, lots of it, all the time. Phil was to wear a certain kind of men's cologne -- same kind, lots of it, all the time. Because that way, when we walked into her room, if she could not see -- and we still didn't know, really -- that if she could not see or see very well, she missed what a "normal-sighted" baby... A normal-sighted baby in a crib sees Mommy come into the room and do something over here, do something and they feel secure. Mommy's here. But a visually impaired baby doesn't get the benefit of that. So if she could smell that Mommy has come into the room or Daddy has come into the room, then they get that.

So they taught us all kinds of little things. They had me carry her on my back in an infant carrier for as long as I could stand her. I thought, "What's that gonna do?" Until one morning, I tried it, and I went in, had her on my back and I went in, and I thought "She's smelling bacon frying. She's feeling the heat from the oven door opening and closing, and the cold from her refrigerator door opening and closing. She was learning. She felt the vibration in my back as I spoke. She could feel my posture changing."

All of these things are things that a blind baby might miss out on. So we learned so much from them and are grateful to this day for their influence.

JE: And felt that she was beginning to progress.

MM: She was. In fact, within a few months, she was functioning on what they said was a normal developmental level and we were just overjoyed.

JE: Yeah. You probably wanted to talk to somebody in Tulsa maybe, or even some other parent -- or parents -- that had a child like this. Did you find any?

MM: Well, we did. But you know, how do you go about that? But we heard from some friends about some people that we knew of -- we didn't know them well, but we just knew of them -- and had heard that they, too, had a visually-impaired child.

And, so, you know, we thought about calling them, but it was awkward. We didn't know how well they had adjusted to their situation and we just didn't. And, little did we know, they were hearing about us. They thought about calling us, but they didn't know how well we had adjusted to our situation. And so they felt awkward calling and so neither called the other.

Chapter 5 – 8:57

Miracle Morning

Marcia Mitchell (MM): And then, I call it “the miracle morning” One, beautiful spring, Sunday morning, we were all ready to go to church -- and it takes a lot to get ready to go to church when you have a baby. But Missy and I were standing out next to the driveway waiting for my husband, Phil, to back the car out of the garage. When all of a sudden, he closed the garage door and said, “We can't go.”

And I said, “What do you mean? We're all ready to go to church.”

He said, “I'm sorry, the car's dead. We can't go.”

And I said, “But can we just walk to church?”

He said, "No, it's about 10 miles to church."

I said, "No, I mean, just to the church down the street."

We had not been there before. So he said, Okay, but hurry up. I don't want to be late. If there's two things I can't stand, it's being late to church and the other is having to sit up in front; and if we're late, I know we'll end up in front. So hurry up."

And so we rushed down the street. It was only a couple of blocks away from our house. Southern Hills Baptist Church. And knew how much Phil did not like to have to sit in front. So I was praying that we could slip into the back. But that was not to be because we stepped into the lobby and it was empty. There was no one there. Stepped into the back of the sanctuary and it was packed, absolutely packed; and the service had just begun. And I was thinking, "Maybe we should just turn around and slip out," when all of a sudden, an usher spotted us, smiled broadly and motioned for us to come forward.

Well, I knew he was already too far forward to suit my husband. But nevertheless, we began to follow him. And he kept going, and going, and going, until he reached the second row from the front of the church where he ushered us into -- believe it or not -- literally the last two seats available.

And those last two seats available just happened to be right next to this couple that we had been hearing about for over a year and a half. By that time, we were able to meet their beautiful little girl that day. Their names are Pat and Cheryl Poole. Their daughter's name is Charmin-- precious, beautiful child with some other challenges besides her vision. And we became very, very close friends and of course, told them about the program in Oklahoma City right away.

John Erling (JE): But isn't there a story behind why were those two seats open?

MM: You know, that's an interesting story. And not many folks know that. But, yeah, as a matter of fact, I learned years later that there had been a couple

sitting there and someone had come up from the church staff and asked if they would be willing to help out in the nursery that morning. And that couple said yes. And because that couple said yes, those two seats were vacated to pave the way for miracles that would continue on for the next five decades.

JE: So then you were able to tell them then about Oklahoma City and they didn't know that did they?

MM: They knew nothing about Oklahoma City. And so, very soon, we were taking the trips together: Just Cheryl, the mother, and Simon, and Missy, and I. And it was on, like, our second visit that the professionals there said, "This is not gonna work for Charmin. She needs much more than what we can offer to you on a once-a-month basis. She needs daily therapy, she needs daily physical therapy, daily speech therapy; she needs, you know, she needs a lot of help and we can't do that just once a month." And they said, "Are you sure there's not anything in Tulsa?"

And we said, "we've been everywhere..." And so they just felt bad; and all the way home we were sad; and feeling, honestly, quite depressed. And then finally, one of us -- neither one remembers who said this to who -- but one of us said to the other, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if Tulsa could have something like the program in Oklahoma City?" And, so, the more we thought about that, the more we thought, "You know, why not? Surely we could find a director, or an administrator, or a program that's already in existence that would be willing to start a program like this. It's got to be a school, a hospital, a medical center -- someplace."

And so when we got home, we began to search and we made a list of all the places we were going to go. And we began to visit all of these different officials. And one by one, they told us the same thing over and over again: "I'm sorry, ladies, we don't have the staff," "I'm sorry, ladies, we don't have the space." "Sorry, ladies, we don't have the budget." "I'm sorry, ladies, this is just premature for us. Maybe in a few years." But we knew that a few years would be too late.

And, so, I was ready to give up, honestly. And Cheryl had this incredible childlike faith. She just believed. She said "No, we're to keep going." And so

she said, "Let's go visit just one more." And that one more was a pediatrician -- well-known pediatrician. So we went, we set up an appointment. We went and by this time, we had really ... we had really practiced our presentation. So when we went in, we told him about all the different places that we had been, all those that we had already consulted with and sought help from and the time and again that we had been turned down. And when we finally ran out of things to say, there was a silence; and then I remember him sitting up, leaning across his desk, looking over his reading glasses at us and saying, "Ladies, I'm just gonna tell you something: If you want this center, you're going to have to build it yourselves."

Well, I had had enough (Laughing). I was all kinds of done with hearing that. And, so, I was furious. I thought, "He knows there's no way that we can do it. Cheryl was a house housewife. I was a retired school teacher. We didn't even know what a 501c3 was, much less did we know how to start a 501c3 or a center!"

We were seeking help because we didn't know how to do it. So it was ludicrous for him to say such a thing as that to us. And so I expressed my irritation all the way down the hallway; and then I expressed my irritation all the way to the car. In fact, we had been sitting in the car for quite some time and I was still expressing my irritation, when all of a sudden it dawned on me. Cheryl hadn't said a word. In fact, she was sitting there with the most angelic looking expression on her face and then it hit me. I said, "Oh, Cheryl... You're not thinking what I think you're thinking." And she smiled. And I said, "Cheryl, we wouldn't even know where to begin to start a program like that."

And she smiled and she said three words: "But God does."

I said, "Okay, I know that's true. But, Cheryl, if all those doctors and administrators think it's going to be so expensive, I don't even know how expensive it would be. And we don't have a dime to begin a program like that."

And she smiled and she said, "But God does."

And, John, for the first time in my life, I came face to face with a question, and that was: Did I really believe what I had always said I believed? When I was a little girl, I used to memorize scriptures about how God could do anything. And I got little stars on a chart for it. And in Sunday school, I would sing hymns about how God could move mountains. And all my growing-up years, I had believed that God could do anything. I had had a close relationship with the Lord and I had always believed that. But did I really? Because here we were, facing a situation where we had nowhere else to go but God. And so, in short, I decided I had to find out the answer to my question. And so, I, with a great deal of fear and trembling, took Cheryl's hand of strong, childlike faith and we dared to believe God for a 20th century miracle. And we took a giant leap of faith.

Chapter 6 – 9:50

Little Light House Born

John Erling (JE): Where did that leap take you?

Marcia Mitchell (MM): Oh, my. That was in the spring of '72. And, so, now I have to tell you: her husband was in the banking business. Mine was in the savings and loan business -- both of them extremely conservative. And so you can only imagine their expressions when we walk in and say, "Guess what we're gonna do?"

And when I told my husband, the newspaper had slowly come down and he said, "Honey, you don't have a beginning knowledge of how to do that."

And I said, "I know, but God does."

He said, "Yeah, but you don't have any money and you're going to need a lot of money."

And I said, "I know, but God does."

And I just began to quote Cheryl, but Cheryl was quoting scripture. And, you know, when you begin to really believe scripture, God can do amazing

things. And so I think it was kind of like you would pat a child on the head and say, "Okay, go build your playhouse," or, "Go build your fort," or whatever. That's pretty much what their reaction was.

But we began to pray and we knew our husbands made sure we knew we were gonna have to have money. And of course we knew that; we didn't know how much. But it just so happened, right at that very same time, there was a Lions Club auxiliary that was trying to get back together. They had kind of dissolved and I was -- Phil was the Lions club member. And I went to that meeting and one of the ladies said, "Well, I tell you what: I would really like to reorganize. But if we do, I don't want to just sit around and sip tea all day, I want to do something meaningful. I wanna do something we can really sink our teeth into and make a difference. I mean, really make a difference in Tulsa."

She kept going on like this and I was with someone who knew a little bit about our dream and she finally nudged me and she said, "Why don't you tell him about your dream and your idea?" And so I did. And that evening when I left that house, there were 15 other ladies dreaming our dream. And not only that, but we had decided to have our first fundraising event. I was so excited. I had never ever been a part of one of these before, but we decided to have a garage sale. We scheduled it for soon thereafter and it rained the whole weekend. But my spirits were not dampened. I walked into the living room, and I said to my husband, "Well, honey, guess how much we made?"

And he said, "How much?"

And I said, "\$65!" (Chuckling)

He lowered that paper again. He said, "Oh, honey, you don't understand. You're gonna need at least 2 to \$3000 just to get your doors open. That's assuming you've got doors open, which you don't; you don't have a location. You don't have anything right now."

So that afternoon, I was out driving and returning some things -- something, running errands -- And I said, "God, it's up to you now, because I have no idea how to raise 2 to \$3000. And if that's what it's gonna take, you're

gonna have to tell us how. And I haven't seen that much money raised since..."

And then it suddenly hit me: My last responsibility at Edison, when I was teaching, was to direct the ninth grade play. And we had done the Wizard of Oz and I had had the most talented students on the planet, I thought. And so I thought, "Well, we raised about \$1200 for that class..." And I thought, "Maybe I've never been really great at finances," but I thought, "Maybe if we did it several times, rather than just one show, we could raise two or three times as much."

So I went home, and I called Cheryl, and I told her the idea, and as I was telling her the idea, I was getting more and more scared about how would we actually do this. But when I finished telling, she said, "That's it! That's what we're to do! We're to do -- you can direct that play! You can do it all over again!"

And I said, "But Cheryl, I haven't seen my students in two years. I don't even know where they are. I don't even know how to reach them."

She said, "Don't worry, God will make a way; and you just start trying to reach them. You start, you know, working on that."

And anyway, she got all excited and her childlike faith kicked in. And, to make a long story short, within the next month and a half, all of those kids had agreed to come back and do that production one more time. Some of them still had their costumes. My tin man did too, but his costume was made of sheet metal and he had grown six inches so it didn't work.

But at the end of August, we had done I think six different showings of the Wizard of Oz. The Recreation Center for the Physically Limited had allowed us to use their auditorium. We had raised close to \$3000.

JE: Wow.

MM: And on the last night, I was standing at the back -- so proud of my students. It was really a wonderful play. One of the workers at the rec center was standing next to me and I'd kind of gotten to know him a little

bit. He was a driver and did all kinds of things for them there. And he said, "By the way," he said, "Where's your center going to be?"

And I said, "I don't know."

He said, "Did you know that there was just an article in the paper that said you're opening in three weeks?"

And I said, "Yeah..."

And he said, "But you don't know where you're opening?"

And I said, "No."

He said, "What are you looking for?"

I said, "We just need a little place." We had only found three other children -- or they had found us. They had heard what we were doing. So we had 5 students. We knew we wanted five volunteers. The Child Study Center in Oklahoma City was going to guide our teacher who had just graduated from Tulsa University. And I said, "So we just need a little place."

And I began to describe it to him and he said, "You know what?" He said, "We've got a place like that just next door that we're just using for storage. Why don't you come around in the morning and let me show it to you and see if that might work for you."

JE: Next door of the Recreation Center for the Physically Limited.

MM: Yes. 1007, South Utica. And so the next morning, I met him. We literally had to fight our way through the shrubs to get to the front door. It was so overgrown because they were just using it for a storage place.

And I went in and it was perfect. There was even a sink that was down at child height. And I understand that at one time it had been a doctor's office. And so, for some reason, he had kept the sink down low, so he could just sit on one of those stools and roll over to it.

And a perfect little room for parents to be able to observe between two classrooms. It was perfect. It was probably only about 700 square feet. It was tiny, but it was beautiful. We knew we would have to strip the floors and repaint the walls and do some major work on the yard to be able to even let people in the front door. And I hand-painted a sign. If you could see it, you could understand why I'm not real proud of it. But I hand painted a sign with a lighthouse on it.

And we had been actually working one day on my dining room table when attorney had called -- our attorney had called -- and said, "I'm working on these papers for you. What are you calling this?"

"We hadn't even thought about that. So we'll call you back." So we thought, we thought, well, there's a lighthouse for the blind in New York. So this is gonna be for little ones. So maybe we could call it Little Light House. And so we had gotten in touch with them and asked if they would allow us to use that name and they said yes. And so The Little Light House was born.

And on October 3rd, 1972, five little children, and five volunteers, and one very dedicated teacher who had agreed to take the job before we could guarantee her of a salary or a roof over her head began.

JE: And her name?

MM: Christy Schneider, Christy Danes Schneider. And she was amazing. When we ran out of space, which we did within nine months; our pupil rate had tripled within the nine months. She came up with the idea to attach the little children's chairs to ropes and we would hoist them up to the ceiling and then lower them back down for snacks and lunch. But during the play time, they would be hoisted up to the ceiling. She came up with all kinds of amazing, brilliant ideas and sought help from the Child Study Center who eventually felt like we were moving on our own. And so they returned to Oklahoma City and we continued on our own.

JE: So then did you have volunteers?

MM: We had five volunteers that first morning. We started our day with what we called "flock." I think Christy came up with that term. And The Little Light House has flock to this day and flock is the time when our staff come

together to pray and to have devotionals each morning. And they are still doing that to this day, even though there's, I think, over 80 on staff now. So it's a bigger group. But, anyway, that was our beginning.

Chapter 7 – 7:42**File Cabinets and Smocks**

Marcia Mitchell (MM): At the very beginning, someone advised us we should have tuition and we followed that advice for just the first year and it was \$10 a month. Hardly even worth speaking of, but we had parents who couldn't pay that. They had been so devastated by all the medical expenses they had incurred that they were just wiped out. And so we did away with the tuition and it has been tuition-free since 1973.

John Erling (JE): I can only imagine the thrill that these parents -- who didn't even know who to talk to initially -- those that came to The Little Light House that day, how thrilled they must have been. They connected with people who had the same kind of problem.

JE: John, so much of my time, when I remember those early days -- hours and hours and hours of my time -- was spent on the phone by parents calling: "I hear that you're starting this." And they were so desperate for somebody to just to talk to. I would be on the phone for hours talking to these parents. And yes, they were absolutely jubilant to finally have to a say.

One little boy had been born without a nose, and they had had to build him a nose, and so he had had extensive challenges. I had another little boy who was hydrocephalic and cerebral palsy -- just severe brain damage. Had another little boy -- I mean, they were all so different. Another little boy was totally blind. He had two glass eyes. Then there was Charmin, you know, with her physical challenges. And then there was Missy, who just was visually impaired, and trust me when I say, you know, after seeing all the multiple problems and learning that, at that time, the average child with special needs had 2.2 handicapping conditions.

So very quickly, we realized this can't just be for the blind because we were having to meet the other needs. In other words, this child's blind, but he also has cerebral palsy. We've got to have a physical therapist, this child's blind, but he also has these other needs. And so because we ended up having to add physical therapy, occupational therapy, et cetera, speech pathology, et cetera, we within two years -- or within a year and a half -- dropped the requirement that they be visually impaired and began to accept any child with any special need.

MM: So did you come, then, to a need for a full-time director?

JE: Yes, immediately. We knew we needed that. There's so much to do. We had no forms. No forms for parents to fill out; we had no forms for employees to fill out. We had nothing. We didn't even have a file cabinet. And Cheryl was pregnant at the time. And so, by default, I got to play that role. I started out as executive director and ended up remaining in that role for 41 years.

MM: Did you have furniture? What were the physical needs?

JE: We didn't have -- Oh! I take that back. We did have ... I think that our husbands kind of... there was kind of an irony here. They said we could have \$65 -- which is how much we had raised on that first garage sale -- to buy equipment.

And so we went to the Tulsa public school warehouse. And I don't know if you know this, but they still sell stuff dirt cheap there. We were able to get huge bookcases for like \$7. So we got children's tables, and chairs, and bookcases to hold our equipment and so on there. That's kind of how it all began. I think we were able to get a desk from there too. They didn't have any file cabinets. So we began to pray for a file cabinet. I don't know if you've read the story, but one day a file cabinet starts coming through. We had this very narrow door. My office was the entry hall to this little house.

And I look up, and there's this file cabinet coming through the front door and I think of, "What on earth?" I knew we didn't have the money for it. And so the guy finally got on the -- I said, "Sir, I'm sorry, but we did not order a file cabinet."

He said, "Well, I was told to deliver this to this address."

And I said, "Well, you're gonna have to take it back because we can't afford it and we didn't order it. So you're gonna have to return it."

He said, "Lady, I was told to bring this here and I'm leaving it."

And it turned out that one of the ladies from the auxiliary that I'd helped to organize, she had picked up on the fact that we needed a file cabinet that had had it donated. And, you know, we learned something because we had prayed for it and we learned something that day. We had to pray very specifically for things and we began to pray very specifically.

Probably one story that I haven't shared in years... The children, whether they were eating or they were doing finger paints, or whatever, they would end up covered with whatever. And so we knew we needed smocks for them -- just little aprons -- and we had looked into it. But, actually, my sister had looked into seeing if she could find some for us and we decided it was too expensive, we couldn't afford them. But she had gone into a well-known little kids clothing shop.

One day when I was out with her, she said, "Let's run in here." There was one -- I think it was called "Marge McInerney's."

She got us around there and I said, "I don't have time. I've got to get home."

She said, "Please? Just for a few minutes."

So we walked in this place and I've not said a word to anyone and this lady that works there walks up to me and she's got this catalog -- not a word has been spoken. But this lady walks up. She says, "Aren't you Marcia Mitchell?"

And I said, "Yes."

And she said -- she introduced herself -- and she said, "I understand that you need some smocks at The Little Light House for your children."

And I said, "Yes."

And she said, "Well, will these work?" And she's pointing to these darling smocks.

I said, "Uhh... yes..."

And she said, "Well, if there's something wrong with these, we've got all -- look at these, there's all kinds in here. You can just take your pick."

And I said, "I'm sorry, I don't understand." It was obviously -- merchants, you know, the price -- I couldn't figure it out. And I said, "Well, how much are they?"

And she said, "Oh, you don't need to worry about that."

And I said, "Oh, well, I'm afraid we do."

She said, "No, no, no, no! We're -- this is on us. You just pick out however many you want, and what colors you want, and I will get them."

Well, I am like, "What on earth?!" And so, finally, I walked up to the counter and I said, "Ma'am, I'm really sorry, but have we met? How did you know me?"

And she said, "Well, there was an article in the paper the other day about The Little Light House and your picture was a part of that article. And so I recognized you and, a while back, somebody was in here asking about smocks, but I'd never heard of The Little Light House at that time. But after reading that article, and I recognized you from the picture, you walked in here and I just knew God was telling me I'm supposed to donate those smocks."

And so, you know, I left that day just so in awe of God, you know? We could have gone to any other children's clothing shop, but God had directed us there. And that was one of just countless miracles that we experienced during those first few years. Just God's divine, miraculous provision.

Chapter 8 – 8:05
Twelve Hundred

John Erling (JE): Then I would imagine the enrollment was increasing. And then how are you going to get all these children into that Little Light House?

Marcia Mitchell (MM): Well, we were bulging at the seams. (Chuckling) In fact, we knew that any time they were gonna come in and say, "You can't have -- you can't keep operating here," the health department or whoever. So we began to pray again that God would somehow give us a bigger place.

And one day, this gentleman -- he's a real character. His name is Don Morey, a wonderful guy. He was an administrator, a church nearby; and he came, he walked in. He was an all-business kind of guy and he said, "I'm an administrator for Emanuel Baptist Church. And we're not too far from here and my wife has been on my case to come by here. And she saw something on TV about y'all the other night and she said I need to come by here. So I'd like a tour."

Well, I took him on a tour, which took about two minutes because there it wasn't far to go. We came back in. He said, "This is a really good program you have here."

And I said, "Well, thank you."

He said, "But this is the most rinky-dink facility I've ever seen." And he said, "You need a bigger place."

And I said, "Yes, we do."

He said, "Well, okay. Thank you for the tour."

He left and, the next day, he called and he said, "Tomorrow is Saturday. I'd like for you to meet me at Emanuel Baptist Church. Are you getting that little teacher of yours? Meet me."

I said, "Okay."

So, he goes, "There's something I wanna show you."

I said, "Okay."

So I went in and told Christy. Well, the part of the story that I love is because Christie was just -- she was so in tune with the Lord. A few days prior to that, I had walked in, she was sitting at one of the children's tables which served as her desk. She had a big piece of butcher paper out there.

And I said, "What are you doing?"

And she said, "I'm designing our next facility."

I said, "Okay..."

And she said, "Marcia, it's going to be wonderful. I think the ideal thing would be to have, like, a big room with some like little rooms off of it. So we could take the children into those little rooms and do one-on-one with them." And she said, "And then, over here, we'd have another big room with some other little rooms off of it." And she's just describing.

And I said, "Christy, we're barely making it month to month. We never know where the money is going to come from. There's no way that we can afford a place like that."

And she looked at me and she was just incredulous. And she said, "Marcia, God knows our needs. And if God knows our needs, he's preparing a place for us. And if he's preparing a place for us, I just want to make sure he understands exactly what we need."

So she was designing the blueprints for God. Well, that Saturday we met this gentleman at Emanuel Baptist Church. He took us up to the third floor of Emanuel Baptist Church. And he opened, he said, "Now you're not gonna be able to go in here," but he said, "But I want to open this," and he opened the door and it was a huge room stacked with chairs. It was wall-to-wall chairs, stacked up three and four high.

And he said, "We can't go in because we're using it for storage." He said, "But those little doors over there just open up to little tiny classrooms; they're little bitty, but there's, as you can see, there's like five or six over there." He took us down the hall, another big room with little rooms off of it -- exactly matching Christy's blueprint. And so he offered us that space, the church approved it, and very soon thereafter, we had moved into our second facility: Emanuel Baptist Church.

JE: So, then, I would imagine the enrollment grew. And then that means money, expenses to meet every month. I believe your husband, Phil, had some concerns.

MM: He did, he did, he -- bless his heart. You know, his father was in the savings and loan business, he was in the savings and loan business. And that's when savings and loans were, you know, at their peak and it was hard for him. He had taken over just kind of managing the finances. We had put a board of directors together, but he was really the only finance guy on the board.

And one day he said, "Honey," he said, "We can't keep operating this way. We just can't."

You have to understand that my husband's an easygoing sort. He's very laid back, kind of opposite of me. And he was pacing, which I found quite amusing because I had never seen him pace or stew, and he was stewing, and he was pacing and I said, "What is going on?"

And he said, "We've got to have \$1200. We've got to have \$1200 at the end of this week. We don't have it." And he said, "We never had that much money come in and, you know, or I, and --" he said, "I don't know, honey, you don't understand. We have to pay these bills. I mean, you just kind of, you know, by faith, blindly go along. But we have to pay these bills."

And I said, "Well, I know, but..." I said, "Look at what all God's done and how he's provided." I said, "Surely he'll provide again."

He said, "\$1200?"

I said, "Well, I realize that's a lot. That's a lot."

Well, the next day I walked in. And sometimes people would send the checks to our home address just because they knew of us or whatever. Well, the Lions Club had our address. They didn't have the Light House address. The Lions Club had sent a check. I walked in and Phil's standing there looking very sheepish.

I said, "What?"

He said, "You are not gonna believe this."

And I said, "What?"

He said, "The Lions Club has decided to begin donating \$200 a month to The Little Light House."

I said, "You're kidding! That's wonderful!"

And he said, "That's not all. They've decided to make it six months retroactive. So this check is for \$1200." And then he looked at me and he said, "I'll never doubt again." And he would, if he were sitting here, he would tell you that, sure, there were those times when he did, but it was a huge thing for him. It was a huge faith boost for him. And it was just one more time when God had demonstrated that if we will pray, and if we will trust that He will make a way that He will provide.

So we continued on walking by faith and God continued to provide and 50 years later, the most remarkable thing -- and I pray my world can hear this -- that in 50 years, even though we have no federal funding; we do not receive United Way; we do not receive insurance reimbursements, and no tuition. So we really do not ever know where the money is going to come from. Our budget is now over \$4 million a year, but we've never gone a dime in debt.

Even our facility, which we finally were able to move into our first permanent homesite in 1990; we had moved into another church that was all on one

floor, which was wonderful. Southside Christian Church were gracious enough to allow us space there. And from there, we finally were able to move into our first permanent facility that we were able to design specifically for children with special needs at 36 & Yale where we still are. And that first facility was a \$2 million project and it was built debt free.

Chapter 9 – 7:26

Tulsa Public Schools

John Erling (JE): But let me come back. You entered into an agreement with Tulsa public schools.

Marcia Mitchell (MM): Yes.

JE: So that's state or federal money, I suppose, that's coming in, right?

MM: Well, they approached us and asked if we would provide programs for children that were demanding services. Because, at that point in time, public law 94-1-42 had been passed, which provides a free and appropriate education to every child with special needs in the least restrictive setting.

So the public schools were having more and more families demanding services. We had approached them to see if they would provide therapists for us early on. And they had laughed and said, "We can't put..." We were in the little house at the time. They said, "We can't put our therapists over there," and I can understand.

So then once we moved into Emanuel, they had heard a lot about us and they called and asked if they could have a tour. And so we said, "Of course."

And so we took them on a tour and they were very impressed. The program had really developed by that time and we had hired some therapists and so on at that point in time, but we desperately needed teachers because our teachers were really, really overextended.

And so the head of the special ed department at that time came into my office and he said, "You've got an incredible program going on here." He said, "You know, you're doing what they're really asking us to do." He said, "How about if we enter into a contractual agreement where these kids that are wanting services, we send them over to you. We put those kids and your kids on both Little Light House rolls and public school rolls." And he said, "We will hire some additional teachers for you. We've got some great additional equipment for you. It's pretty high tech equipment."

This was like a dream for us. We'll just enter into this agreement and it sounded good. I remember asking him if separation of church and state could be a problem and his response was, "Don't worry about it, just don't say anything." We entered into that agreement and that lasted for about three years.

JE: Well, then the enrollment had to really grow then.

MM: It grew dramatically. It skyrocketed. We had over 30 kiddos by three years later, a pretty substantial staff that represented all the different therapies and so on.

But there were problems that arose with some families that disagreed with the fact that we were praying in the classrooms. We had Bible posters on the wall. We used a Bible-based curriculum and we prayed in the classrooms. And so there were families that disapproved of that and they went to the public schools and, really, public schools didn't have much choice. They demanded that public schools -- demand -- that we cease prayer in the classrooms, the Bible-based curriculum, take the Bible posters down and that we eliminate all of that.

And, John, you know, the fact of the matter was we knew God opened those doors and we had made Christ the cornerstone, and we didn't feel that we could turn our back on Him. He had provided for us. He had made it possible for it to open it; it was His ministry. We knew the only way that it was there is because of Him. And, so, our board of directors met way into the night -- two o'clock in the morning -- one night. At the end of the meeting, they had determined that we would not compromise.

We did lose a few board members who disagreed and they felt like we couldn't possibly make it without public schools. And so we went through a very difficult time in the next year and a half because they did pull out -- and pretty much close to overnight. I mean, it was in a matter of just like a month or two, they had pulled out, we had lost the teachers, therapists, the equipment.

Our pupil enrollment dropped from over 30 down to five. Actually, it was three or four. I think it went back to five pretty quick. But it was very small. Many of our staff ended up going to work for public schools. Really, the only ones that were left were those who were totally devoted followers of Christ that believed Christ should be the cornerstone or the ministry should not be, and they remained. But we went through a very, very difficult year and a half.

JE: So then you had to wonder if the school should even continue.

MM: I did. And there were times when I ... (Chuckles)

One time in particular, I said, "God, why? Why?" Because it was hard, you know, it was like we were barely existing. And so donations fell off, our staff were voluntarily going without paychecks, sometimes up to seven payroll periods. And so I felt responsible as the head of it. It was, you know, it was hard. And I remember one time saying, "God, this makes no sense. You know, this public law has been passed -- public schools now have to do this. Why, why are you -- why, why don't you just let us close? Why don't you just let us close?"

And I got no answer. I said, "When did you ever..." just in frustration and irritation, I said, "When did you ever ask anybody else to do anything that made no sense whatsoever?"

And I was silent and then just one word came to my mind and heart: "Noah."

And I thought, "Yeah, that didn't make sense. Why should he build a boat, you know? There was no rain. Why? It made no sense. He was building something that made no sense."

And there was a wonderful board member at that time. And I shared my story with him -- that experience -- and I remember him saying, "Marcia, that was God speaking. And one day, there is going to be a flood of children that is going to need this ark. We are to keep building."

Well, today we have almost 500 children on our waiting list. We're serving over 250 each year.

Jerry was right. There was a flood coming and God did know what he was doing, and Christ is still a cornerstone at The Little Light House.

JE: And so when we see that facility at 36 & Yale, that's really an ark. (Chuckling)

MM: It's an ark. It is an ark for sure.

JE: Right. Right.

Chapter 10 – 5:26

Fleece

John Erling (JE): Christy, who was your first teacher. Did she stay with you through all of this or what?

Marcia Mitchell (MM): She married and her husband is a pastor. And so they had to move away. They were in another town. But she was a godsend, literally a godsend. And I will be forever grateful. God also raised up several others that, on a spiritual level, were mentors to me -- spiritual mentors.

I had been a Christian since I was 12. And even in college, I led devotionals in my dorm and so on. But, you know, I've never really been taught how to pray. I had never really been taught how to study the word of God. You know, I read a little scripture each night before I closed my eyes and went to sleep. But I really had never been taught how to pray specifically. And these young women happened to have graduated from Tulsa University and they were part of Westland Foundation at TU and they had truly been

discipled, and they discipled me. And had they not, I don't know how I would have made it.

JE: So I know you were in a financial funk, I want to call it. Miracles were not happening like they had been. Staff was going without paychecks. Depression, I suppose, would set in and maybe, at home, they were told, "You've got to bring in more money." So about that.

MM: Things continue to go in that direction. It lasted a year and a half, which, you know, I can say that so easily, "a year and a half." But let me tell you a year and a half is a long time when you're really struggling. Finally, our board of directors, they were so concerned that we were all beginning to question, "Is this really God? Does he really want us to continue?"

And so we had read a little bit about fleeces in the Bible. Our board decided to lay a fleece before God. And they decided to ask God -- it was a very large amount of money -- to come in.

We needed enough to come in in several months to bring our staff. We asked him to provide enough to pay our staff to date -- everyone. And by the way, every staff member got paid, in full, ultimately -- just late. But that was by their volunteering themselves to do that. So our board felt like, "You know, we just can't keep doing this."

And so they said, "Lord, if you want us to keep going," we asked that by January 1st of 1978, I believe it was, "that we will have enough money to have our staff paid to date and all bills paid." I don't remember the exact amount, but I do remember that we meant it.

The other thing was that we were all well-determined, agreed. No one would tell anyone on the outside about this fleece. No one was allowed to contribute to it because we didn't want to manipulate it. We wanted to know it was from God. And so we just said, "God, if you want this, that you've got to provide, and it won't come from any of us, it's going to have to come from people who don't know about this fleece."

And so the day before January 1st, 1978, I went down to the office and we were actually on break and I went down and, John, I had poured so much of my

heart and soul into this. I just, you know, I had such mixed feelings because, in a way, I was so tired, I just wanted it over, to be honest.

But on the other hand, I just felt like it was of God and I just couldn't imagine that it would close. The families that were still there were so grateful for it and loved the fact that it was a Christian center.

And so I went in to get the mail. We still needed \$1000 and I got the mail and I sat down and began opening it and the first envelope was for a couple of \$100, and the next one was for, like, \$100.

And there was one envelope left and I said to "God, this is up to you. It's yours and you opened it; it's up to you to close it."

And I opened that last envelope: It was a check for \$1000. And I just began to weep.

I had come to find out that that was from a couple. I later found out -- months later -- it was from a couple who had already given us a check for \$1000 earlier, but they felt strangely impressed that they were to give another check for \$1000. And I was able to tell them how God had used them. And, from that time on, God has continued to provide and continued to bless the ministry.

Chapter 11 – 6:36

Did God Tell You?

John Erling (JE): You were beginning to think that you needed a permanent location.

Marcia Mitchell (MM): Yes, desperately. The church was, you know, needing more and more of their own space. They had been so gracious to us at Southside Christian.

JE: At South --

MM: Yeah. They had been so gracious to us -- allowed us to go in and remodel their educational building. But we knew we needed our own facility and it took us about seven years.

But we began to look for (Chuckles)... We looked for buildings and everything we found was just... wouldn't work. You know, children with special needs have very specific needs in the way of facility. There's a lot of things that just, you know, you don't -- ideally you don't want a lot of stairs -- and it's just a lot of things; and we just couldn't find... We would get pretty serious about something and then it would fall through.

But early on we found this one piece of property, you know, in our dreams we would build. We found this one piece of property and it was at 36th & Yale. It was just ... It was on a hill and, I don't know, it just seemed so perfect. One of the reasons is because we wanted to be equally distanced between ORU and Tulsa University because we had a lot of volunteers and students come and do practicums there. And so that would be ideal -- and 36 & Yale was right there.

We thought, ideally, we would be across the street from a park. It was right across the street from a park and maybe even next door to a church where we could share parking. And it's right next door to a church where we could share parking. I mean, everything was perfect. In fact, right after we saw it, we nicknamed it The Promised Land.

So we began to really look into it only to find out that... Well, but before that, I called a friend of mine who lived about a block over and she went for a walk every day -- every day -- rain or shine, from what I understand. And she would pray as she walked.

So I called her and I said, "Phyllis, I've got something for you to pray about." I said, "You know we believe in praying specifically."

And she said, "Oh, yes."

I said, "Well, here's the deal: We have fallen in love with this property at 36 & Yale."

She said, "Oh, yeah. I walk by there every day."

And I said, "Well, could you pray that The Little Light House could have that property?"

And she said, "I absolutely will."

So anyway, we began to look into it, only to find that it was tied up in some legal issues with zoning and so on. And the owner wasn't interested in selling. So we continued for two years to look at other properties. A couple of years later, I'm in my office and my assistant comes in and says, "Marcia, there's this gentleman on the phone who wants to talk to you."

I said, "Okay." And so I picked up the phone.

So he says, "Is this Marcia Mitchell?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "This is," and he identified himself. I knew of him. I had run into him at church, but didn't know him well. He said, "I have a question for you." It's a deep voice. "I have a question for you."

And I said, "Okay."

And he said, "Did God tell you that The Little Light House is to be located at 36th & Yale?"

And I said, "I beg your pardon?"

He said, "Did God tell you that The Little Light House is to be located at 36 & Yale?"

And I said, "Well, uhh... I will tell you this: that we love that property. We've nicknamed it The Promised Land and it would be perfect for what we want. We have wished that we could get that property," I said, "Why are you asking?"

And he said, "Well, because I own that property." And he said, "I've been dealing with it for some time," And he said, "I've got an opportunity to sell it;" And he said, "But the weirdest thing..." He said, "I keep waking up, and keep having this dream, and keep waking up with this thought that The Little Light House is supposed to be there." He said, "But I can't afford to give it to you." And he said, "So, I finally went and talked to my dad who's my kind of a financial advisor to me. And I told my dad, 'You know, I just keep having this crazy idea and, you know, I've got this great opportunity,'" I think he was out of Texas. "So I've got this great opportunity," and he said, "It's just kind of crazy that I keep having this reoccurring thought, don't you agree? It's crazy!"

And his dad said, "Yeah, unless God does want The Little Light House there."

And he went, "Dad!"

Well, anyway, he just kind of said, "Well, my wife ... she's good at usually... good business head on our shoulders. And so I went to her, I said, 'Gwen, I keep having this crazy thing...' and told her all about it. And I said, 'It doesn't make sense.'" He said, "There's no way I can give that to them or they can't afford what I need. And he said, it's crazy, isn't it?"

She says "Yeah, unless God does want them there."

Well, by this time he was exasperated and so he finally thought, "I'm not going to talk to them about it anymore. I'm gonna go talk to my financial advisor at my bank and I'm not gonna tell him about this crazy thing that keeps happening to me. I'm just gonna tell him, 'I'm ready to sell,' and ask him what he thinks about this deal."

So he did. He tells him all about it and the offer that he's had. And he said, "What do you think?"

And then they said, "So you're ready to sell?"

And he said, "Yeah, I am. I'm ready to sell."

He said, "Well, if you're ready to sell, would you consider selling to The Little Light House?"

And Ralph said, "You gotta be kidding me." So he said, "So I came back to my office and that's why I'm calling you. I just need to know: Did God tell you?"

And, long story short, as you know, we did end up ... It took us years to raise the amount of money that we needed, but we were able to eventually raise it and moved into that facility debt free.

Chapter 12 – 13:16

New Building

John Erling (JE): And so then you're thinking about more money for building and all that kind of thing. Is there another miracle working here?

Marcia Mitchell (MM): Yes, there was miracle after miracle in terms of the amount that we needed to be able to build that. And then years later, as you may know, we expanded that facility because we had such a long waiting list. I think that total was \$16 million. So it's now a 60,000 square foot facility that's tailor-designed to meet the needs of children with special needs.

JE: There's a great story about this little gentleman who came to your door.

MM: It's a wonderful lesson for me. One day, I had this great, great gal -- darling personality, loved to talk. The only problem was she loved to talk more than she liked to do administrative work and I really needed her to do administrative work.

And so, one day, I was leaving for a speaking engagement and I was very burdened because we had just had a fundraiser that had been rained out, and they weren't able to have it, and we weren't able to have it, or people who were going to do it for us were not able to carry through with it. So I was just burdened about that.

Anyway, so, I was heading out and I said, "Laura, listen: I really need for you to focus today because we've got to get this, this, this, this, this done." And I said, "Now" -- we're on break, the children weren't there -- and I said, "So if anybody comes, you know, please welcome them. But please try not to, you know, try not to get too involved chatting, okay?"

"Okay!"

"Okay."

Well, so this gentleman -- kind of khaki pants and it's kind of a threadbare shirt -- walks in and said, "I was wondering if Mrs. Mitchell is here."

And she said, "No, I'm sorry, she's not."

And he said, "Well, I really wanted to meet with her. I wanted to know more about this place."

And she said, "Well, I could tell you." So, of course, she goes right into her chat mode and she takes him on a tour and comes back and sits down and in her wonderful way, begins to talk with him. And she said, "Well, what brings you our way?"

And he said, "Well, my wife loved this place and she died." And he said, "I just wanted to come see what this place was all about that she was always talking about." He said, "I want to come back when Mrs. Mitchell is here. Do you know when she'll be back?" And she told him he said, "I'll be back, but I don't want you to tell her that I'm coming, okay?"

She said, "Okay." She didn't.

That afternoon, I was walking out of my office and this old gentleman walks in. I said, "Well, hello, how are you?" And I introduced myself, and he said, "Do you have a few minutes?"

I said, "I sure do. Come on in."

He came in, and he took out his hanky, and he just began to weep. And he's telling me about his wife and he said, "She loved this place. She really loved this place. I lost her recently and said she wanted me to bring you a gift. I

was going to do it. But I really wanted to see what this place was all about first. And I especially wanted to see if you all would take time for an old man. Your assistant did and you did. And so I want to give you this from my wife and I." It was for the exact amount that we had just lost on this failed fundraiser.

JE: So what was the amount of the check?

MM: \$6,000.

JE: Wow.

MM: It was just the exact amount that we needed. And I learned a lot that day. God really impressed upon my heart: "You know what? Love all people. Treasure all people. Take time for all people. And trust Him. I also realized the value of my precious assistant -- err, secretary -- at that time: that her wonderful way with people, God was using in a mighty way. So I never again said to her, "Try to stay focused."

JE: Right. But your staff had been sacrificing. I think you needed \$18,000 to pay the staff in full? \$12,000 to keep all bills paid. You basically needed a total of \$30,000. And then one day a lawyer calls.

MM: Oh, yeah. That actually has happened any number of times where we have needed a specific amount and had an attorney call and say, "There's been an estate that has been tied up in probate, but I'd like to bring a check over to you," and it's been for the exact amount. At one point, it was about \$30,000. At another time, years later -- decades later -- it was \$400,000.

JE: So your board said, for adequate funding for the rest of the year, you needed \$219,000. And by the target date, that amount had actually been received. So then you build -- new -- a building, as you've already referred, to a debt-free basis. So your board had decided we're going to build a building. Now, obviously, we have the land.

MM: So we needed an architect. The board narrowed it down to three architectural firms and I was to do the final decision. The one thing we

knew is that the needs of these children are so unique and we didn't want it to be a cookie cutter school.

So I met with the first group. They walked in: tie, and sharp, and slick and they had big portfolios and they showed me all that they had done. It was very impressive. And one of my questions to each one was, you know, "What have you done that would qualify you to build such a unique facility that has such unique needs as ours?" And like I said, they would pull out these beautiful pictures of buildings that they had done and so on. And so that was the first.

Then the next group came -- kind of same thing, you know: coat, tie, very professional. Sat down. It's kind of the same scenario.

Then the next guy came in; and he's in a tie, but you can tell he is really uncomfortable. I had met him -- I didn't know him well -- but I had met him and his name is Jim Stanton. Jim said, "Uh... Marcia, do you mind if I take this tie off? I'm not used to wearing a tie." Took the tie off, or loosened his tie, anyway.

So we talked a little bit about the building and I said, "Jim, what have you all done that would uniquely qualify you to build a facility that has such specific needs as this has and not your typical cookie cutter?"

And he looked at me and he said, "Boy, my boss would probably kill me for saying this." He said, "But I gotta be honest with you." He said, "I don't know that we've done anything that would qualify us to do this." He said, Marcia, "I would have to be on my knees every inch of the way."

And I knew right then and there he was our man and he was the architect that we hired and did a magnificent job.

JE: So then he broke ground. July 27th, 1989. So then a Rotarian called. Here we have another miracle story.

MM: We had no playgrounds. We were gonna be playing mud pies a lot because we had no playgrounds. And out of the blue -- I had forgotten about this, this had been years ago -- a Rotarian called and said, "We've got

an anniversary," this downtown rotary, "...we've got an anniversary coming up and we want to do something special." And I think it was gonna be they were gonna be wanting to spend it in the neighborhood of \$75,000.

He said, "I told this committee of men: 'I do not want to just build a monument for people to look at in Tulsa, we've got enough monuments. Let's do something that's gonna make a difference.'" And he said, "So I'm calling you to ask: Is there a need that you have that hasn't been met yet for this building?"

And I said, "Are you serious?"

And he said, "Absolutely."

And I said, "We have no playgrounds."

And he said, "That sounds like a great project." He said, "Let me take it back to the group." So he did; the Rotarians approved it. Well, the only thing is they needed somebody to design these unique playgrounds for these kids -- can't be your typical playground. So I called Jim. I said, "Jim, I know you're not a landscape architect; you're a building architect, but can you help us with this?"

He said, "Marcia, I don't have any training in that." He said, "But let me kind of check around and see if I can -- to see what I can learn about it."

And he called the architect for the City of Tulsa -- I think his name is Greg Warren -- and said, "Can you advise me on this?" He said, "I don't know what I'm doing, but they don't have any money to hire anybody and they've got somebody wanting to do these playgrounds. Can you advise me on this? Because you've done playgrounds all over the City of Tulsa."

The guy said, "Who's this for?"

He said, "The Little Light House."

He said, "I just enrolled my daughter there. I will design your playgrounds."

JE: (Chuckling)

MM: God just constantly amazed us with how his ... through his divine connections. You know, you've heard the old saying, "You gotta have connections." My saying is, "You've got to have God, because God has divine connections."

JE: Then you had other contributing additions: Ronald McDonald's Children's Charity and Farmers Insurance Group contributed additions. Then you needed, for your building, automatic doors.

MM: Yes, we ... desperately, because the parents are, you know, pushing strollers through the doors. They can't -- it's impossible. We had to have automatic opening doors and we needed a double set of them and those were going to be very expensive.

And the builders kept saying, "You know, we need to know. We need to know if y'all are gonna do this or not." But they were so expensive. They're kind of out of our budget.

Actually, Jean Winfrey, who was with me at my side for the majority of my 41 years there, she had an incredible faith and she could better tell this story. But, bottom line: she ended up getting a phone call with an offer saying, "What do you need?" I think it's from Walt Helmerich saying, "What do you need that you don't have yet," on the very day that we had to make a final decision -- one way or the other; they were going to put doors in one way or the other -- we had to make a final decision and Walt called her and said, "Hey, I've got this amount of money. What do you need that you don't have?" And we were able to build those doors.

JE: So then was that his foundation that had contributed \$150,000?

MM: Yeah.

JE: And an additional \$50,000, and then asked if there was another project and it would cost 14 or \$15,000. And so there you had the door.

MM: John, you know, I've said this so many times: "God knew what he was doing when he put The Little Light House in Tulsa, Oklahoma because I

truly believe this has got to be one of the most -- if not the most -- benevolent communities on the planet.

JE: I would say amen to that. April 7th, 1990 is a move-in day.

MM: (Chuckling) Yes. And I remember that we had needed sod. And so our board members, our staff members, and all the volunteers that we could round up, all of us were carrying -- sod is heavy. That was hard work. But we all got out there in our jeans and carried and laid sod down on that property to have sod. And it was a great grand opening.

JE: So that's April 30th of 1990?

MM: 1990.

JE: And the first day of school and the new permanent homesite.

Chapter 13 – 14:12 Outreach to The World

John Erling (JE): This has gone beyond Tulsa.

Marcia Mitchell (MM): Yes.

JE: First of all in the United States -- some other states that have modeled your plan.

MM: Yeah, we now have a Little Light House in central Mississippi, also in central Kentucky and -- Lord willing -- we're getting ready to open one in Oklahoma City.

But it actually goes beyond that, too, in that, years ago, God... In fact, we're working on a third book right now that will share with our world how God -- it's called God's Divine Connections -- how God divinely orchestrated the beginning of our outreach to places around the world.

I had never known conditions existed like they exist in many developing nations. I had never known the paradigm that existed toward children with special needs. I had never known that there are children with special needs that are taken out in Africa that are taken out into the bush and left abandoned, left to die. I had never known there were children actually put to death because they're different.

I hired an amazing young woman, Margie Stone. She was a licensed psychometrist, and occupational therapist, and a neurodevelopmental specialist. I was blessed to be able to hire her; but when I did, she said, "I would love to come. I would love to serve as your educational director, but I'm committed to missions. And I will still want to take some short-term mission trips. If you will allow me to do that, I will come on staff."

Now, I knew what a contribution and what a contribution she did make. So I allowed her to come on. And after her first trip -- mission trip -- she came back, I ... That day center, the center was closed. I was down there working by myself. She came in at that facility at 36th & Yale. And we had... it was several years after we had located -- that we had built -- the building. God just so blessed us after that. We had computers in every classroom, we had state-of-the-art equipment. It was just amazing.

Margie walked in. I said... We had sent with her... We had an overabundance of Crayolas and some art supplies we had sent with her on this trip -- mission trip. And I said, "How did it go?"

And she's telling me all about it. And then she kind of sighed and she said, "Marcia, we have so much here and in other nations they have nothing." She said, "Let me just give you an example." She said, "The Crayolas you all had sent?" She said, "We passed them out to the children; and they sat, holding them in their hand. They had no idea what a crayon was or what to do with it." She said, "Marcia, we've got computers in every classroom. We have got trained professionals that have so much to offer." Somehow, we've got to reach out to our world."

And Margie, really, and God, really spoke to my heart that day. And I didn't understand it, but I felt that God was saying, "I have done this so that you can reach around the world and impact your world -- impact these children across the globe." And God just began to orchestrate.

Probably the next significant step that occurred -- that we write about in this book -- is a young social worker in mainland... Well, she was actually in Hong Kong while it was still England -- a part of England. She heard that in mainland China -- in Nanning, China -- that there were orphanages where the conditions were really, really deplorable. And she couldn't believe that it was true what she was hearing. She just couldn't imagine. So she decided to go there, and she did. She found five babies to a crib -- no diapers. The cribs were rusting. She found death rooms where they would take babies when they were dying and leave them -- abandon them in those death rooms.

And so she... It broke her heart. And so she had gone just for a day or two, she said she decided to stay and that the end of the first day, she went to the director of this orphanage and she said, "Could I take a baby back to the hotel with me?"

Now, can you imagine that happening here? And he said, "Sure."

So she said, "I'd like to take this baby in the death room."

He said, "No, no, no! You don't want to take that. Take a healthy baby with you."

And she said, "I'd like to take that baby. And so she took that baby, took it back to the hotel, and she began to nurse it back to health. And stayed -- extended her stay -- and continued and was able to nurse it back to health. Took it back and got another one. But then began to realize this one began to fail to thrive again because of the environment.

Long story short, her name is Kit Ying Chan. There's been a reader's digest article written -- a story written -- about her. She became so frustrated with the whole situation that she thought, "You know, there's got to be something that can be done. I need homes. I need homes for these babies." And she began to do some research and found out that the required retirement age at that time for women in China was 45. And she thought, "There's all these 45-year-old women and older out there that could be foster mothers to these babies!"

And so she went to the government and she proposed a foster parenting program -- first ever there in China -- and began a foster parenting program and began finding homes for these babies and making a huge difference.

The particular official that she had worked with happened to be a very kind, caring individual. They knew that they had a lot of children with special needs. And so he asked her if she had training in that area.

And she said, "No, I don't."

He said, "Can you get us training? We don't know how to help these kids."

She didn't know, but she had graduated from University of the Nations in Hawaii -- Youth with a Mission. So she contacted her dean in Hawaii, okay? So now we've gone from Hong Kong, to mainland China, to Hawaii. She contacts this dean in Hawaii and asks her if they could provide.

She said, "We've got an incredible opportunity here. And, you know, can you provide it?"

Carol -- Doctor Carol Boyd -- said, "No, we cannot. But I know somebody who might have an answer."

So Doctor Boyd in Hawaii contacts Maureen Harbinson, a British lady who's now living in Canada, and asks Maureen if she happens to know of anyone who would be able to provide such help. Maureen has just returned from a trip to Tulsa where she volunteered at The Little Light House. And Maureen says, "I know just the place." So Maureen tells her about it. And long story short, a few months later, three government officials -- communist government officials -- from China who had never stepped foot in the United States; Maureen from Canada; Doctor Boyd from Hawaii; and Kit Ying Chan from from China; and the head of her organization, Youth with a Mission all come to The Little Light House Tulsa and that was the birth of our program because they invited us to come to China to begin providing training to their people on how to work with children with special needs. And that was the beginning, also, of our understanding of the need to change the paradigm.

So my job -- my role -- when I went, was to share success stories of people with special needs, you know -- oh, my goodness -- there's phenomenal success stories. There's the woman who has no arms that flies in airplane. There is, you know, the kid with Down Syndrome that's the movie star now. I mean, there's so many wonderful success stories of individuals with special needs. So I was able to share those success stories, including one about my own daughter, and one of our team members whose physical therapist has a learning disability and was able to share how she had overcome that. So just to give them a vision of what these people can do, you know?

So since that time, we have sent teams into 14 nations and provided training in 14 different nations. Now we have an online -- we call The Academy; I don't know if they mentioned it at the luncheon, but it's called The Academy. And it is free online training in multiple areas of special education and therapy for anyone in the world they can go on. And now therapists can even receive CEUs for those courses.

We had two young men that came from Kenya and they have now built a school. They started out with 14 students and they now have hundreds of students that they are teaching. They will eventually move more into special ed. Right now, they've just started with kids that didn't have a chance to have school. When they were telling us about it, they said, "You know, they have to walk home two miles for lunch and then they walk back two miles for the afternoon session."

I said, "Why in the world? Why don't they just bring their lunch?"

And they said, "Because their parents don't have their lunch yet. It takes them that morning time to be able to get food for them." So, yeah. So now we are reaching India, have reached Haiti, China, Philippines, Russia. Anyway, many others.

JE: With your expertise that goes there, and any funding, obviously, is provided by the countries or even the government?

MM: Sometimes the countries and, otherwise, at this time and up to this time, we have continued only using earmarked funds for that.

JE: Okay.

MM: In other words, it's individuals who really want to see us reach children around the globe. Otherwise the funds stay here in Tulsa.

JE: Well, I did visit The Little Light House, had the luncheon and all. I was struck by the different programs that you had to accommodate the many needs. That was amazing to me. And I was thinking, "How did you come up with that?" But I suppose professionals were able to write a program for people at every -- or children at every different -- levels. I was struck by the... when the building seems to be not-straight hallways. If those of you who drive by that building, there's a curve to it -- and tell us why.

MM: Our architect was aware that the children with autism don't do well with corners. And so he built the whole thing in a curve. So there are no, like, "Walk down the hall, take a left." It's all built on a curve -- but used this approach, which has been amazing.

In fact, I was leading a tour one day of a family from California. I did not know that the teenage daughter was on the spectrum and the parents commented to me, they said, "She is so calm." They were just amazed at how calm she was as we were walking down this hallway; there's just something very calming about it. So yeah, it's just the very design of it; it was specially built. We have sensory rooms. I think probably one thing I would love our world to know, and one of the most unique things about The Little Light House -- besides the fact that it is Christ-centered and it's tuition free -- probably the most unique thing is the transdisciplinary team approach that we use. In other words, in most settings, a child would be in an educational setting and then they might be pulled out for physical therapy, brought back to the classroom, pulled out for speech therapy, brought back to the classroom -- so on and so forth. Whereas with ours, we have speech therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, we have low-vision specialists, we have assistive technology specialists. So, so many different kinds of specializations and they all work together so that a child that is in the classroom, being worked with by the physical therapist, the teacher can see what the physical therapist is doing with that child. When that physical therapist leaves, that teacher can continue that same

thing, whereas a lot of times, it's out of sight and, so, vice-versa. So the therapist and the teachers all work together as a transdisciplinary team. That's very, very difficult to find.

Chapter 14 – 18:50

Missy Adopts

John Erling (JE): I was thinking the program is very faith based. Are there people who come from other faiths? And they say, That's fine. You want to talk about your faith? We talk about ours at home, but I really need your service." Does that happen?

Marcia Mitchell (MM): Children from all faiths are welcomed at The Little Light House. We have families from all different faiths. Our staff members are all Christians. They are all devoted followers of Christ. Our board members are as well, but our children come from all different walks of life and all different faiths.

JE: Tell us about Missy. Now, today, here we are in 2024. We're in November. How old is she now? And what is she doing?

MM: She is 52 and she actually graduated from Oklahoma Baptist University. And then she was a music major and for years she traveled the country doing contemporary Christian gospel concerts and sharing her testimony.

One particular story I might share with you: When she was 16, she was really struggling because all the kids would get driver's licenses and she was really hurting -- badly. And so one night -- I was already in bed -- she came in, crawled up on my bed, had tears streaming down her face.

And she said, "Mom, I need to know why."

I said, "Why what, honey?"

"Why?! Why was I born like this? Why was I born with this visual problem? I need to know why."

Because she couldn't get her driver's license. And I thought, "Where is my husband when I need him," first. And then I prayed and then I answered her this way: I said, "Darling, you can ask that question for the rest of your life and you will probably never get a satisfactory answer because theologians have been debating that question for centuries. But if you will choose, instead, to change that question from 'why' to 'how' -- how God can use your circumstances for good -- He will show you great and mighty things. But you must ask him how."

And in her testimony and her concerts, she would share that that night, she went running back to God and found His arms open. And she began to ask Him how He could use her circumstances for good. And He began to reveal to her that already He had used her circumstances for good by starting The Little Light House and all the thousands of children who had been served because of her. But also that He could use her circumstances for good if she would share her testimony. So that's when she began doing concerts. She was just 16 at the time, but she started doing little concerts then.

JE: Had she been signing as a child?

MM: She had been taking voice, yes.

JE: But as a child did you should notice it? 5-6 years old?

MM: She took gymnastics initially --

JE: Okay, but how do you start singing?

MM: -- which scared me, and she fell on the balance beam, and we started taking voice instead of gymnastics.

She had been taking voice for years, and of course then went on to Oklahoma Baptist University and majored in voice and music, graduated with a degree to be able to teach. But for several years she travelled. She travelled -- flew -- all by herself.

I once said, "How in the world do you find your seat?" You know that, because I knew she couldn't see those tiny numbers.

And she said, "I just start visiting with somebody while I'm waiting, and find out what seat they're in, and I follow them on the plane -- watch where they sit -- and I can figure it out from there (Laughing).

JE: So she can see...?

MM: She can see. She doesn't see as well as you or I. But, at the age of 32, she called. She was living in her own apartment and she called and said, "Mom, Dad, I have found a doctor at Johns Hopkins Hospital that is getting legally blind people driving and I'm going there; I'm going with or without you. But I'd like for you to go with me."

Well, when they're 32 and they've made up their mind, you kind of have to go along with it. And so I went with her and -- long story short -- he was able to fit her. This doctor was passionate that legally blind people should be able to drive if they could see the white lines of the road, if they could memorize the shapes of signs. You know, a stop sign is a different color and a different shape than other signs. And if they could memorize those, they should be able to drive.

He fitted her with state-of-the-art contact lenses and state-of-the-art glasses that had to be ground there. They couldn't even be ground in Oklahoma. And she came back and was able to get her driver's license. And so she's been driving since she was 32. She has never caused an accident in 20 years.

And then years ago -- it's about 12 years ago -- she working on her masters in counseling at Oral Roberts University. And one of her professors there suggested to her that she enter the Tyson Foods Gold Medal Mom Contest by entering an essay about her mom.

And she didn't really pay attention to what the prize was or anything. She just thought, "This would make a nice Mother's Day gift for my mom. And so I'll write something." Pretty good writer. So she wrote something; and we got notice that there were thousands of entries across the United States that

we were in the finals for it. And Missy began to panic because the prize was two round trip tickets to the Beijing Olympics, and turns out she won.

So she calls her Dad and said, "Dad, you and Mom are going to Beijing!"

And he said, "No, we're not. You're going to Beijing!"

Well, she was the one who always said, "Look, I know you all like to go to the Philippines and China, all these different places in Russia. That's fine for you. But I'm called to the United States of America where there's always hot water and electricity. So you all go, I'm staying here."

And her dad says, "No, you're going to China."

So we went to Beijing together. We were working with a center there. It was one of the many that I was mentioning that we had started working with called New Day Center. A wonderful organization started by two Americans who left everything and went there and started a wonderful organization that takes children -- Chinese children, orphans -- who have operable conditions that if they get the surgery, they can be adopted. If without it, they cannot and -- or likely not.

I had worked with them, had a relationship. I said, "We've got to go visit."

And so we went there and they had -- oh my goodness. I can't remember how many -- little tots and Missy just lost her heart. And when we came back she said, "I want to be a mommy; and I want to adopt one of those."

So we began to look into it called Dillon. Dillon was a wonderful organization.

JE: Jerry Dillon?

MM: Dillon Adoption Agency, yeah. She called Dillon and Dillon said, "We're sorry. They're closed. They will not allow single-parent adoptions." Missy's never married. Mr. Right just had never come along.

And so Missy said, "Well, we got to pray for either God to raise up Mr. Right, or for him to change the Chinese laws."

Now, wouldn't you think it would be easier to raise up Mr. Right than to change the Chinese laws? But that's not what happened. He changed the Chinese laws over the next two years. Two years later, a representative that I was working with -- he had interns at the lighthouse; he actually lives in China. And anyway, he was visiting, overseeing these Chinese interns and he came into my office to visit with me about some things.

And when he was leaving, he said, "By the way," he said, "Was it your daughter that was looking into single-parent adoption but they were closed?"

And I said, "Yeah."

He said, "They've reopened; they're open to single-parent adoptions."

I called Missy. She started that day and nine months later, we were on our way to China to get Kaylee.

She had to have sponsors. In other words she had to have somebody for a backup plan if something were to happen to her. We're her backup plan. And so we all went to China to get our sweet Kaylee.

And then, a couple of years later -- about a year and a half later -- Missy said, "I really think she needs a sibling," because we were going to spoil her rotten.

And so they began to look through. There's actually something called RainbowKids.com and you can decide. You can say if you don't feel that you would be adequate to serve a child that's like 24/7 care or visually impaired or CP.

Well, anyway, Missy said she could take a visually-impaired child. Anyway, Kaylee had said that she wanted a baby sister. She said, "You want a baby sister or you want a playmate sister, like an older sister, like your age."

She said, "I want a baby."

Well, Missy would go through these. She said, "What do you think, Kaylee? You think this one?"

"No, that's not my sister. No."

"What about this one?"

"No, no, that's not my sister."

This went on for months. And one day, Dillon called and said, "We've got this kiddo. Her file's been locked but it's just come unlocked. You want to take a look?"

I sent it to her. Missy opened it up. She said, "Kaylee...?" This child was like -- I said ... Kaylee was two and this child was right at two -- no, three. They were three. And, so, it's the same age almost. And she said, "What about this one?"

And Kaylee looked at it and went, "(Gasping) That's her! That's my sister and I miss her!"

Well, where that came from I don't know. But anyway, that was our Mia. They're eight months apart. And we then went with Kaylee over to get Mia and they're so thankful to have them.

JE: Yeah. Neither one of those were special needs though, were they?

MM: Kaylee had microtia of the left ear, meaning it's just a little tiny piece of an ear and it's closed; so there's no hearing from that ear and she also had corneal glaucoma. When she was found in a warehouse district, policeman had found her in a box and they thought she was totally blind. Her eyes were swollen shut. "Ayi," which is what they call their nannies, that took care of her at the orphanage, prayed over her and nursed her eyes back to health.

So she wears glasses but she can see and she's a dancer. Anyway, Mia actually had spina bifida. And I thought, "Oh, my goodness. She's gonna need the

Light House. But our waiting list was forever long and I thought she'll never make it in because I have to put her at the end.

So I had talked to our therapist before we went and I said, "I'm gonna probably be in touch with you." I said, "I don't know. I don't know what to expect. You know, she's spina bifida."

So we got her. She was like the Pillsbury Doughboy. She was just... there was no muscle tone at all. When we put her down, she walked with a shuffle. This child can't walk and they had told us not to change their clothes until that night when you change into their pajamas because that makes them feel insecure. You kind of want to because nothing matches. And so, anyway, Missy put her pajamas on, took her shoes off, and Mia walked across the room like you or I would.

And I was like, "What?! What is going on?" She had shoes on that were two sizes too big and she'd been trying to keep them on all day long. So those are our two sweet grands and we just adore them.

JE: Well, you've just shown me a picture of them and they're beautiful. So both of them were a special need.

MM: Actually -- technically -- yeah, but you would never know it today.

JE: No, no, no. Well, you've written your book -- which I read and which is the reason I was able to lead you on this -- Milestones and Miracles. I'd highly recommend it. You'll probably start reading it and can't quit. And then you have another: God's Work, God's Ways. You're a gifted writer and a speaker. You are called upon to speak, I know. And you alluded to a third book that you're working on.

MM: Yes. Divine Connections.

JE: Right. You know, I was just thinking: That pediatrician who told you, "You're going to have to build it yourself." He actually did you a favor.

MM: Yes.

JE: Because if he'd said, "Oh, yeah, it's already built. It's right over here." You'd have never had this journey.

MM: No.

JE: At all. None of it. So, while it was hard...

MM: God used him.

JE: He did you a favor.

MM: Yes, he did.

JE: Right.

MM: He did indeed.

JE: Well, I want to thank you for sharing your story with us and to Phil -- I know he's in the house here somewhere that he can hear, because he was there with every step of the way for this story and what The Little Light House means to our community and the thousands of children who have been affected. To finish this: I know there are many who have gone on to live good lives. Any unusual lives that developed because of The Little Light House?

MM: I think ... Probably the one that comes most quickly to mind right now. Peter and Belden in Kenya because they have made such an impact on so many children. And as we have gone over there to provide training, they have opened up other opportunities for countries that are bordering Kenya to come in.

We have heard, time and again, the impact that it's had on the paradigm. Probably my favorite story of all that represents the paradigm shift in third world countries. I was present for -- and I'm so glad that I was -- we were in China. A hospital there had asked us to come and we had taken a team of therapists and teachers. They were very clear: they did not want us to talk about our faith, but we were there to teach. And there were caregivers, doctors, nurses, parents, and -- there were hundreds there at this.

So we had done about a full day of sessions; and the next day at the about -- we had done, like, the morning sessions -- and we decided that afternoon to allow people to come to the microphone and just talk about maybe what they had learned or any impressions they had had.

And this one sweet little Chinese lady -- had very broken English, but had a little bit of English -- came to the microphone and she said this: "Where I come from, we have always seen these children as trouble but since you have come and you have been teaching us, we now see these children as flowers with potential to blossom. So we thank you for that."

And that's our dream: that we can help our world to see that these children are flowers with the potential to blossom. And I have seen time and time again these children transform the lives of families. I don't think I have ever met a sibling that I didn't have tremendous respect and admiration for. These children mold their siblings into precious, and devoted, unselfish, amazing human beings. I've never seen an exception to it. There may be but I've never seen an exception to it. And I've been exposed for 50 years now.

The parents are transformed and these families will tell you they would not trade, no matter how -- even 24/7 -- no matter how much they have to pour, no matter how many days and nights they have to spend in hospitals, et cetera, et cetera, they are transformed and they would not trade a minute with these precious children.

So there's a book written years ago that actually transformed my life because it is so connected with me because of the loss of my little sister. But it's called Angel Unaware. And Dale Evans Rogers wrote this book and tells the story of how their little girl -- what Dale believes -- their little girl might have told our heavenly father shortly after she joined Him in heaven and talks about her earthly mission. And I believe God uses these children, if families will open their hearts, and if our world will just open our hearts, to hear these children have such valuable lessons to teach us.

JE: Yeah. Many who listen to this now will be taught and we hope that we can hear others, have others say, “Hmm. I didn't even know that was available in our town.”

Thank you. Thank you for telling this story for VoicesOfOklahoma.

MM: Thank you so much. It's been an honor.

JE: Thank you.

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