

Augusta Road

neighbors

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The Smith Family

A Gift that Keeps Giving



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of Ernest Rawlins Photography



The Smith Family

A Gift that Keeps Giving

By Michelle Ward

There are some gifts that keep on giving long after they are received. This describes the life of Ashley Gwaltney Smith - daughter, mom, wife, friend, fighter, advocate - a gift giver and an extraordinary gift to all who knew her.

Ashley grew up in Windsor, Virginia on a working family farm where they still grow peanuts, soybeans, cotton, corn and raise cattle. She is the daughter of Billy and Becky Gwaltney and the oldest of three girls. Described by her parents as “headstrong and determined”, Ashley was enthusiastic and excelled in academics, athletics and graduated with honors. Charlie Smith moved several times as a child but considers Maryland, where his family still lives, as home.

The couple met during Freshman Orientation at Virginia Tech. “I knew she was something special. We stayed friends Freshman year then began dating our Sophomore year”, says Charlie. “Ashley had a way of making everyone better around her—I was no exception—my grades improved once we were together. While positive and energetic (and sometimes fiery), above all, she was kind. Kindness mattered to Ashley—not just what you do but how you do it.”

After graduation, Charlie moved to Greenville with GE and Ashley took a position with the CIA in Washington, D.C. “She loved her job and was very good at it but when we got engaged, we decided the ease of life in Greenville would be a better fit for

us and a potential family,” says Charlie.

The couple married in June 2007 and Ashley found a similar position with Lockheed Martin, where she became a tough negotiator—earning the NOVA award, a top honor presented annually. In 2012, while working, renovating their home and completing her MBA, the Smiths welcomed their first child, Charles. Just 2 years and 1 day later, sister, Katherine joined them.

One of Ashley’s passions was giving gifts—whether it was for an event or just because—she was always thinking of others. Christmas shopping was complete by Halloween—buying throughout the year and ensuring every gift was just what the receiver didn’t know they needed. “Her sisters, Hollis and Brett, tried to talk her into dialing it down when it came to getting gifts for the entire family,” Charlie says. She wasn’t having it—it was a part of her.

In 2016, at 34, Ashley was diagnosed with breast cancer. She fought hard, completing chemotherapy, surgeries, and radiation. She beat the cancer and became an advocate for others by joining the American Cancer Society’s Making Strides Against Breast Cancer Board. In 2018, she co-chaired the Cancer Walk with Bonnie Lipomi and they helped raise over \$120,000 for research and patient services.

While it was always in the back of their minds, the family enjoyed several years of her being in remission and took trips to their favorite family destinations like Dollywood, the Outer Banks and Virginia Tech football games. In July 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, abnormal blood tests led to the discovery that the cancer had come back and spread. Being determined to beat it again, Ashley began treatment. While the prognosis was challenging, “Ashley was eternally hopeful and positive—starting each day saying ‘Today is going to be a great day’”, Charlie says. Due to covid, he was able to work from home and the kids were able to be in full-time school at St. Mary’s. “She didn’t think this was going to take her. Because of her Faith, she wasn’t scared to go, yet, more saddened by what her absence would mean to her family,” Charlie says. “She was always thinking of others and with her love for gift-giving, she chose Let There Be Mom to preserve her legacy.”

The family met with Kipra Anderson, founder of the non-profit organization. She had only a few weeks to help create a lifetime of memorable projects for their family. This would be “Ashley’s ultimate gift-giving effort”. “We sat with Kipra working through milestones, what is important to Ashley and created a plan.” She wanted Charlie, her mom, and both children to receive a thumbprint necklace each inscribed with a personal message.

“Both children received quilts and bears made of Ashley’s clothes and we have at least 12 more gifts planned for the transitional milestones in their lives”, Charlie says. Ashley, at 38, passed away this past March. With the help of Let There Be Mom, the



family has a tangible way to keep her present during Charles and Katherine’s life. She will be there through the notes she personally wrote and the gifts she meticulously picked out. “I am so grateful for these gifts and the service LTBM provides—it’s an amazing and unique local organization,” says Charlie.

The family has been surrounded and supported by their families, neighbors and this community. Lockheed Martin planted a tree in Ashley’s honor and St. Mary’s, where the family

attends Church and school, has loved their family through this difficult season.

The family misses Ashley’s energetic and positive presence every day; however, Charlie says what keeps him going are “his children, their families, his faith, and his will to make Ashley proud. Ashley’s legacy is her genuine kindness and thoughtfulness. I want Charles and Katherine to know they have those qualities as well. The milestone gifts from Ashley to the children throughout their lives will instill her passion and love for them.” Charlie says, “I am thankful every day for knowing Ashley but also for having faith and, with certainty, know that we will see Ashley again and that she’s watching over us now. We will continue to live the life she would want us to live—being kind and thinking of others.”

Nominate A Family to be Featured in *Augusta Road Neighbors!*

Do you have a neighbor with an interesting story or a fascinating hobby?

We are looking for fun neighbors that would like to share their experiences with Augusta Road. We love to connect neighbors and brag on how wonderful the people are in our community. Email me at mward@bestversionmedia.com with suggestions.

LET THERE BE MOM

By Kipra Anderson

Let There Be Mom is a local (started right here in Greenville) non-profit organization with the mission of preserving the legacies of Upstate moms and dads who have been diagnosed with life-threatening illnesses. All of the families we serve have at least one child under the age of 19. It's mom or dad that are battling the life-threatening illness and facing the very real possibility of not having a future here with their child(ren). Our goal is to capture the life story of the parent in tangible keepsakes that are given to the children now and throughout their lives for future milestone events. The ailing parent **MUST** participate in the interview, as we want to make sure we are planning exactly what they want for their children.

We usually end up creating 12-15 gifts per child (depending on their age and the milestones the parent wants to mark). While the requested milestones we cover vary from family to family, some of the most requested occasions include getting their driver's license, sweet 16, prom, HS graduation, going off to college, college graduation, first job, engagement, wedding, first house, and first baby.

Many times we use items that belong to the parents to create something new and meaningful for their child. We are working with a dad who is a builder – one of his requests were gifts for his children when they become members of the



Blankets and stuffed animals were among the gifts created from Ashley Smith's clothing and memorabilia.
Photo by Mark Massengill of Ernest Rawlin's Photography

church. We will be welding some of his tools together to create a keepsake cross for each of them. Another Dad wants to mark College Graduation for his sons with a reminder of his love for travel; he had us create travel sets with a special message to "Embrace the Culture". A mom we are working with wanted her clothing sewn into a quilt for her children as a gift for now – each square is appliqued to tell the story of her life, making it possible for her little ones to physically wrap up in the mom's life. Another mom we served taught her son, at a young age, the value of being able to grow and cook your own food, when he gets his first home he will receive a set of gardening tools engraved with a special message from his mom, as well as a cutting board engraved with his two favorite recipes that she made.

On average, we end up spending approximately \$2000 per child. All of our

services are free to the families; we are supported by community donations and our fundraisers. Our biggest fundraiser, **Dine Out for Mom**, happens each year in October. This year our 15th Annual **Dine Out for Mom** is Thursday, Oct 21. Local restaurants partner with us by donating 20% of their sales from the ENTIRE day to the organization - supporters just have to go buy food (or gift cards). It's an easy way to have an impact that will last for generations. And since it is an all day event, every meal and snack can come from a Dine Out for Mom Restaurant Partner!

We use many volunteers to make the event a success. If you would like to learn more about our organization, apply for services, find out how you can help, or even where to **Dine Out for Mom** on Thursday, October 21, please visit our website at LetThereBeMom.org