

# Fear, faith and forgiveness of Dawn Smith Jordan

By Deena C. Bouknight

Photography by Allen Anderson



**D**awn Smith Jordan is an enigma to many. Some know her only for the tragedy she endured twenty-four years ago when a man brutally murdered her teenage sister. For weeks, the Smith family's agony played out on local and national television. Then, the inevitable made-for-television movie, *Nightmare in Columbia County*, aired on CBS, compounding the pain.

But others know Jordan as Miss South Carolina and a professional singer. Winning the state crown the year after the murder and later becoming second runner up in the Miss America pageant opened many doors of opportunity for Jordan. She won scholarships that funded a music degree from Columbia College, which led to a career that has taken her around the world. A recording artist with Urgent Records, she also has authored two books — one about her sister and the other explaining the inspiration behind the songs she writes.

But Jordan says it's her faith she most wants to share with others. Her faith to overcome her fears and to forgive is the heart of her message as keynote speaker at women's retreats and conferences nationwide.

As Jordan says, "I have seen how only the Lord could take the very broken pieces of my heart and life and use those very things to speak hope and healing to other people, especially women facing similar circumstances. The Lord can and will take the brokenness of our lives if we will simply be willing to open our hands and give them to Him. And then we will be amazed at what He does with them. 'Many will see and be amazed and put their trust in the Lord' (Psalm 40), because of what they see He has done in our own lives."

*"You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance"*  
(Psalm 66:12).

## Fear

It happened May 31, 1985. Just a few days from her high school graduation, Shari Smith stopped her car in front of her family home in Lexington County, got out at the mailbox and was abducted. Seeing Shari's car outside, her father commented to his wife, "Shari's home." When she failed to come in, though, Bob and Hilda Smith found their daughter's car still at the mailbox, the engine running, the door open and her purse inside.

Jordan, twenty-one at the time, lived in Charlotte and performed at Carowinds amusement park. Her mother called to tell her Shari was missing and that a patrolman would drive Jordan home to her family.

While a team of law enforcement officers camped at the Smith home during the search for Shari, the kidnapper repeatedly called the family, toying with them by telling them Shari was still alive – when he had killed her within twelve hours of the abduction. It was five days before they found her body; almost a month before they caught her killer, Larry Gene Bell. In that time, he also killed a Richland County girl and continued to call the Smith home, even describing how he'd taken Shari's life.

"There was fear on so many levels," says Jordan. "Fear of what he was doing to my sister, fear of him killing her, fear that she would become dehydrated because she didn't have her medicine (for water diabetes), fear of what it was doing to my parents, and fear that he would try to get me (which he threatened on the phone)." Even after Bell was sentenced to death, Jordan imagined that he might escape from prison and come after her. "Fear can paralyze you if you let it," says Jordan. "We have things happen that we didn't choose, but we can choose how to handle it. I decided to embrace the fear each time."

## Faith

"Shari's murder was the first major test of my faith," Jordan says. "We were so close. We sang together. She encouraged me. I prayed so hard that God would spare her life... not take her from me. And when He didn't, well, I remember going outside when I learned that she was dead and I was just screaming on the inside. I told God, 'I'm not going to believe in you anymore! I'm not going to pray to you anymore!'"



Jordan says her anger toward God did not last long. Her mother, father and brother were so grounded as Christians that they hugged, prayed and even sang *Amazing Grace* together in their living room during those devastating days. Jordan claimed Proverbs 3:5-6 as her lifeline: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways

acknowledge Him and He will make your way straight."

But Jordan still struggled to understand Shari's death. "I had to make a choice to trust Him, to go on, to hold onto Him. It was Shari's letter that tremendously enabled my faith – and it still does. She had a choice, to have fear or to have faith. She chose faith in a moment when the fear was unthinkable." (See sidebar: *Last letter*)

A few years after the murder, Jordan married and had two children, Hannah and Ross. In 1997, against her wishes, the marriage ended in divorce. She says that as a single mom, she was already standing on a strong foundation. However, she had to choose again whether she would allow the trial to strengthen her faith or diminish it.

"It was a heartbreak that I could not imagine could happen to me... a physical pain," she says of the divorce. "But I kept a prayer journal, clung to my Bible, prayed and read other books. My relationship with God grew during that time. I realized that you can't save a marriage on your own. I decided to focus on what I had, instead of what I'd lost."

Even though Jordan worried that her ministry would also suffer from the divorce — acknowledging that because of it, some churches withheld invitations for her to sing or speak — her testimony of faith has become a beacon for many women.

She hopes also that her children will find her a living testimony of her faith. "My daughter recently

said I was her role model – along with Carrie Underwood – and that meant so much to me.

"Fear or faith. Sink or stand. When we choose to stand on the truth of God's Word instead of the shifting sand of our life's circumstance, we will actually flesh out those truths. But it's still a choice we have to make."

## Forgiveness

An even harder choice for Jordan has been forgiveness. “The mire is always going to be there in one way or another, and so many of us choose to continue to wallow around in it. But when we do, we cannot move forward. We can choose to be victims or we can choose to be victorious.”

Jordan believes that her mother was so heartsick over her daughter’s death, that God overwhelmed her with a forgiving heart. When Larry Gene Bell was captured, the Smiths were asked to come to the sheriff’s department to make a positive identification of his voice, which they’d heard many times over the phone. While she was there, Hilda Smith said to Bell, “I know that you are the man that killed my daughter, and yet I can honestly look at you and say that I don’t even hate you.”

“It had to be God speaking through her,” writes Jordan in her book, *Grace So Amazing*. “I sat in awe.”

Jordan says that she could not forgive Bell that quickly, nor could her brother, Robert, or father. But a few years later, as Bell sat on death row, he wrote her a letter telling her that he had accepted Christ as his personal Savior and asked for her forgiveness. “How dare he!” was Jordan’s instant reaction. She put the letter in a drawer for two years.

Gradually, though, God began to take her to passages about forgiveness (Colossians 3:12-13; Ephesians 4:32; Matthew 18: 21-35). “I thought I had forgiven him, but realized I hadn’t. It was another choice I had to make. I sat down and wrote him a letter. It wasn’t filled with warm fuzzies, but I knew that (God) had already paid the price for that man.”

Jordan wrote to Bell about God’s unchanging grace toward her during those terrible days. “His grace is what has brought me to this point in my life, and it is His grace that has caused me to write this letter to you. Although I can never forget what you did to my family, I want you to know that I have forgiven you.”

In the letter, she shares with Bell some of the gospel message, tells him that she prays for him, and shares her lifeline verse of Proverbs 3:5-6.

When she felt it was the right time, she also wrote her ex-husband a letter of forgiveness. “It creeps up on you time and again,” she says. “I have to revisit forgiveness. But I realized that unforgiveness wouldn’t bring Shari back and it wouldn’t bring my husband back. Unforgiveness hurts the unforgiver and I wasn’t going to let that happen. My mother was able to do amazing things after Shari’s death. She was a great example to me of the power of forgiveness. I might have lost a sister, but she lost a daughter.

“The Lord brought me to a place of seeing that the choice to forgive brings healing and wholeness to the one willing to forgive, and He sets the prisoner free.”

*Deena C. Bouknight lives in Columbia with her husband, Gary, and two children, Justin and Madeline. She is a home-school mom, literature teacher at Excelsior Academy, and free-lance writer for newspapers, magazines and books.*



## Last letter

Before he killed Shari Smith, Larry Gene Bell told her to write her last will and testament. Afterward, he mailed the letter to her family. Shari’s final words still strengthen Jordan and many others:

*I love you Mommy, Daddy, Robert, Dawn & Richard (her boyfriend), and everyone else and all other friends and relatives. I’ll be with my Father now, so please, please don’t worry. Just remember my witty personality & great special times we all shared together. Please don’t even let this ruin your lives, just keep living one day at a time for Jesus. Some good will come out of this. My thoughts will always be with you & in you! Casket closed.*

(After a personal note to Richard, Shari continues.) *Mom, Dad, Robert & Dawn, there’s so much I want to say that I should have said before now. I love y’all! I know ya’ll love me and will miss me very much, but if ya’ll stick together like we always did – ya’ll can do it! Please do not become hard or upset. “Everything works out for the good of those that love the Lord” (Romans 8:28).*



**To learn more about Dawn Smith Jordan’s ministry and to order her CDs and books, visit [www.dawnsmithjordan.com](http://www.dawnsmithjordan.com).**