

JIM BRADFORD

| with ANDY HARDIN

*the Awakening of*

HK DERRYBERRY

MY UNLIKELY FRIENDSHIP *with*

*the* BOY WHO REMEMBERS EVERYTHING



## Praise for *The Awakening of HK Derryberry*

“This is a story of one man’s choice to love and invest in the life of a special-needs little boy and how that one choice transformed them both. You will laugh and cry and be moved to love even the unlikely, as Jim did, and never to give up, no matter what challenges you face, like HK. This heartwarming story will change you for good!”

—ALAN JACKSON,  
GRAMMY AWARD–WINNING SINGER/SONGWRITER

“A true delight! Every person should read Jim Bradford and HK’s touching story. Your heart will be uplifted, your soul awakened. It reminds us that every life carries enormous worth. I’ve had the pleasure of meeting HK—he inspires me! I’m certain his story will do the same for you.”

—DAN T. CATHY  
CHAIRMAN AND CEO, CHICK-FIL-A

“One of our biggest mistakes as humans is placing limits on people who are different than us; people who are like HK Derryberry. Born prematurely, HK is blind, has cerebral palsy, and has countless other challenges. Yet HK is the most incredible and unique person I have ever met in my life. If you ever meet him, I can promise you’ll never forget him; and, because of his amazing memory, he won’t forget you either. This book will inspire you to look deeper into the way you see others.”

—SCOTT HAMILTON  
OLYMPIC GOLD MEDALIST

“To think that this man, Jim Bradford, worked alongside us mere mortals was a revelation. How many other people out there are doing remarkable things with their lives right under our noses? Jim and HK’s story is uplifting and an example of what love can do. It demonstrates how paying attention, and looking beyond human boundaries, can expose something greater than a physical body. It’s the human spirit.”

—CYNTHIA CROATTI  
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, UNIFIRST CORPORATION

“The journey of HK Derryberry and Jim Bradford is truly an amazing one, a moving story like no other you have ever heard. If this one doesn’t warm your heart, check your pulse. The story of this unlikely duo—Bradford, a successful and stylish business executive, and a young blind boy with multiple disabilities and raised on the margins of society—will keep you turning pages well into the night. The results, seventeen years from their initial meeting, will surprise and inspire you to be more aware of the opportunities God puts in your path all the time.”

—DR. ROYCE MONEY  
CHANCELLOR, ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

“Wow! This book is a must-read. And to think HK is my friend. What a joy it is to recommend this book to people of all ages. Jim and HK’s story is making a difference in the lives of people everywhere.”

—GENE STALLINGS  
FORMER HEAD FOOTBALL COACH, UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

“As a scientist, I was completely blown away by HK’s phenomenal ability to recall his past, but over time his story and our friendship transcended science. I am a better person for having known him and being able to call him my friend.”

—DR. BRANDON ALLY  
PROFESSOR OF NEUROLOGY, VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

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*Throw your heart over the fence and the rest will follow.*

—NORMAN VINCENT PEALE

*“I will lead the blind by ways they have not known,  
along unfamiliar paths I will guide them;  
I will turn the darkness into light before them  
and make the rough places smooth.  
These are the things I will do;  
I will not forsake them.”*

—ISAIAH 42:16 NIV

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## PROLOGUE



# An Aimless Existence

The small nine-year-old boy sat where he sat every weekend—in the fast-food dining room, at the same window table. He sat hunched, his ear close to the same old beat-up boom box that was held together with three strips of silver duct tape and tuned to one of two stations—sports-talk or Pentecostal preaching. A crooked antenna jutted out from the radio like the floppy ear of an old dog.

Pearl Derryberry, the boy's grandmother, coveted her part-time hours at Mrs. Winner's Chicken & Biscuits, especially since she had been reorganized out of her thirty-one-year career with the gas company. The modest severance and social security payments barely covered expenses for her and her grandson whom she was raising alone. Blind, with cerebral palsy, and paralyzed on his right side since birth, HK attended the Tennessee School for the Blind during the week. But without affordable weekend day care options,

## PROLOGUE

Pearl had no choice but to bring him along to her fast-food restaurant job.

Pearl checked on him regularly during breaks in her nine-hour shifts, and at some time during the day, they usually ate together, as regular customers and strangers passed their table with hardly a glance. Invisible to the world, the small blind boy perched over his broken-down radio went unnoticed but to only a few. That's just the way life had been since the accident.

## CHAPTER 1



# A Twenty-Five-Cent Cup of Coffee

My name is Jim Bradford. I grew up as the middle child of a rural northern Alabama family of five. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined my blessed life during the 1990s. My wife, Brenda, and I had been married thirty-five years and were proud parents of two beautiful, healthy daughters, Bridget and Julie. I enjoyed a productive and lucrative sales career in the textile industry, and once the girls were independent young women and out of the nest, Brenda and I looked forward to travel opportunities and checking off our bucket list of adventures we had postponed for years. Looking back now, I see that we had finally reached our definition of success, enjoying almost every material blessing we could want, and seriously pondering retirement.

We settled in Williamson County, Tennessee, in 1975, after a company transfer from Montgomery, Alabama. Williamson County is consistently ranked among the wealthiest in the nation and is also among the country's fastest-growing suburban areas. Large horse and cattle farms have given way to luxurious gated subdivisions, multi-storied office parks, and sprawling shopping malls, particularly in the northern area that borders metropolitan Nashville.

Our four-bedroom brick ranch house is situated in Brentwood, a comfortable bedroom community just eleven miles from downtown Music City. This shady one-acre corner lot was once part of a multi-generational family cattle farm with a history dating back to the Civil War. When we moved there, keeping my restored antique 1955 Chevrolet Bel Air in pristine operating condition ranked high on my weekly priority list. It was right up there with maintaining our immaculate lawn and landscape. The neighborhood homeowners' association conducted a weekly "Yard of the Week" contest from May through September. Their sign found its way onto our yard at least once every summer.

We stayed plenty busy, but I made time for weekly tennis matches with a group of longtime friends. The neighborhood swim and tennis club just two blocks down the street continued to be a summer magnet for our family. Subdivision traffic was practically non-existent most days, leaving ample opportunity for walkers, joggers, bikers, and baby-strolling mothers. All dogs were leashed. Barney Fife, with his single bullet, would have been right at home in our idyllic, crime-free neighborhood.

We enjoyed a simple lifestyle, certainly not luxurious by anyone's imagination. We drove older, well-maintained vehicles. Our lives revolved around church, and you could find us, like many good Southerners, at church at least three times a week, and more on special occasions. Actually, I had always considered myself ordinary

in every conceivable way, no better or worse than our friends and neighbors. But no doubt, God had richly blessed our family.

It was an unseasonably cool fifty-five degrees on Saturday, October 16, 1999, in my little corner of paradise. I suppose that was one reason I suddenly craved a cup of hot coffee that morning. I usually limited my daily caffeine intake to just one cup, and I had already reached my quota, thanks to the Golden Arches. But today was different. I needed more.

Winding up our usual tennis match by midmorning, my thoughts wandered to an extended list of Saturday chores awaiting me, so I quickly said good-bye to my tennis partners. Without thinking, I took the longest, most time-consuming and out-of-the-way route to Brentwood. I drove slowly, observing the charming old estates along Tyne Boulevard. My leisurely driving pace, combined with Garrison Keillor's distinctive radio voice, mysteriously intensified my coffee desire as I turned south onto Hillsboro Road. Visions of Starbucks flashed before my eyes.

I drove five miles, following my usual route east on Old Hickory Boulevard. At the Franklin Road intersection, my next decision was easy: turn right, drive one mile to Starbucks, and pay \$2.00 for a cup of coffee. Curiously, abruptly, and without thinking, I turned left and drove a short distance across a narrow bridge over a railroad gulch to a small fast-food restaurant near the edge of the Brentwood city limits. Mrs. Winner's Chicken & Biscuits was a fried-chicken joint that just happened to serve breakfast. I had eaten there once or twice, but for the life of me, I don't ever remember stopping there just for coffee.

The undersized parking lot accommodated only a few cars, but fortunately I landed a spot directly across from the building's entrance. I quickly cut the ignition and darted for warmth inside as a steady north wind made the overcast day feel even colder.

Surprisingly, I was the only counter customer that Saturday morning. Walking toward the cashier, I caught a glimpse of a small boy sitting alone by the dining room window. I looked away as I focused on my order. I spotted the restaurant's menu hanging from a colorful placard behind the counter. Another sign above the iced tea dispenser announced, "Maxwell House Coffee Served Here. Good to the Last Drop!"

"I'd like a cup of coffee, please," I said.

"Are you fifty-five years old?" came the reply.

*That's a mighty strange question to ask someone,* I thought to myself. *It's not like I'm buying alcohol and need to be carded.* Then I heard echoes of Brenda's frequent complaints about my need for hearing aids and wondered if I heard her correctly. Slightly bewildered, I turned around, thinking she might have been speaking to someone behind me. Realizing that I was indeed the lone customer in an otherwise empty fast-food restaurant, I answered feebly, "Yes."

The cashier, a short, stocky lady about my age with close-cropped gray hair, informed me that at age fifty-five, based on restaurant rules, I qualified as a senior citizen. She announced that my newly bestowed citizenship in that not-very-exclusive club entitled me to a cup of coffee for twenty-five cents, a whopping twenty-seven cents with tax! I briefly considered renouncing my citizenship just to maintain my youthful self-image but soon realized it was time to stop living an illusion. I thanked her and paid for my first cup of senior coffee.

The aroma of fresh-brewed java and hot buttermilk biscuits filled the restaurant. As I turned to leave, I was drawn back to the small silhouette I had barely noticed just two minutes earlier. From this angle I could clearly see that it was a young boy. He was not eating. Turning a corner, I saw his head pressed down over a black

plastic boom box with silver dials and a broken antenna. Three strips of duct tape held the battery cover in place. My prying eyes were drawn to the long, white plastic braces on each leg. Even from a distance I knew this boy had problems.

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