

Thank you all for coming here today to help my family simultaneously grieve and celebrate the life of Debra Lynn Gifford. I'm sure most of you know me, but for those who don't, I'm Mark, Debbie and Jimmy's son. Just so you know, if I'm unable to make it through this eulogy, Pastor James has kindly volunteered to finish reading what I've written.

When trying to write what would eventually become this eulogy, I found myself faced with a real challenge. The problem with trying to eulogize someone like mom is that she meant so many things to so many different people. She was so active and so full of energy and altruism that she couldn't help but affect lots of people from wildly different walks of life. Some of you knew her as a farmer. Some of you knew her as the administrator for the CPA business. Some of you knew her as the treasurer for the Gholson Cemetery Association. Some of you knew her as my mom. Some of you knew her as Jimmy's wife. Some of you knew her as a friend. Some of you knew her as a wife, a daughter, a sister.

She had so many roles. She meant so much to so many different people that it seemed like a massive injustice to even attempt to distill and summarize her life down into a 10-15 minute eulogy.

But it eventually hit me. You see, after mom passed away, our family received an outpouring of love from all of you. Phone calls. Facebook messages. Emails. Personal visits. Gifts of food and drink. Hugs and tears. It was overwhelming, in a very good way. Your generous expressions of love and grief and support somehow tempered the tragedy of her death by highlighting the positive impact she'd made on the world. And in speaking with many of you, several things about how you all saw my mom kept coming up time and time again.

I think all of us saw how optimistic mom could be even in the face of overwhelming tragedy. In fact, one of mom's favorite little sayings was "Everything will turn out all right." Even when I was a little kid, I remember her telling me "everything will turn out all right" even when things didn't go my way. When my grandmother passed away in 2008, I remember talking to mom on the phone. Granny Non's death hit me pretty hard even though we all knew she was sick, and while I was talking to mom she could tell I wasn't dealing with it particularly well. And she told me "everything will turn out all right." Well, I wasn't in any mood to hear that, and I kind of snapped at mom. In my anger, I told her that sometimes things don't turn out all right. That sometimes things don't happen for a reason. That sometimes the world is just mean and horrible, and that things don't always happen for the best. Mom sat there on the phone for a moment in silence, and finally she replied quietly that yeah, she knew that sometimes things don't happen for the best but, she told me rather forcefully, it's up to us to make the best out of the things that do happen.

And that's one of the things that kept coming up again and again when talking to some of you. Mom's optimism. Her smiling face even when presented with great adversity. She knew that life was frequently hard, but she also knew that it was up to us to move forward and try to find the good in whatever it was we were experiencing. In fact, if you watch the photo montage, several

of those photos were from this Christmas, when mom was in an awful lot of pain and discomfort. But you can't tell it from the photo. Her smile is ear to ear.

Mom was also incredibly selfless. She would immediately put the needs of others in front of her own without a second thought. When I was in school mom would volunteer for field trips and things like that. I only found out several years ago that on many of those field trips she bought lunches for the kids who hadn't brought any money with them. She made frequent donations to the school to help provide for kids who didn't have coats in the winter and for extra school supplies. And she did all that quietly and without any expectation of thanks or recognition. She did it because it was the right thing to do.

As she was struggling with cancer, I'd sit beside her on the couch to watch a movie, and I'd glance over and see that she really wasn't watching the TV. She'd just be sitting with her eyes closed, clearly in pain. When she spoke her voice would be strained, and it was apparent that she was really struggling. And then one of you would call to check on her. The phone would ring, and every time she'd go through the same process. She'd open her eyes, take several deep breaths, clear her throat, and answer the phone in a completely different voice. I'm fine, she'd say. Nope. No problems. Seem to be doing okay, she'd tell you quickly. Then I'd listen in amazement as she subtly but quickly changed the subject to ask you about your family. About how *you* were doing and about how your life was going. She was infinitely more concerned with how everyone else was doing than with her own struggle with cancer. And before I knew it, she'd wrangled the focus of the conversation away from herself and toward the person on the other end of the line. When she'd hang up she'd often sink back into the couch in exhaustion, but instead of resting, she'd usually spend the next few minutes updating me or dad on the person she'd just talked to.

She taught me that the only reason I should ever be concerned with what someone else has is to make sure that person has enough. And even at her sickest, she taught me that the only reason I should obsess over my own trials and tribulations is to make sure they aren't getting in the way of me helping and caring for other people.

That's how mom lived her life. She gave to people who didn't have enough, and she helped those who had trouble helping themselves.

And that might be one of the most important things my mom taught me. She taught me to be a good person. Last Saturday as mom lie in her hospice bed, two of my oldest and dearest friends came to visit her. After their visit, we all sat in the lounge area of the hospice center talking about mom and trying to come to terms with the inevitable, and one of my friends said quietly: "Your mom taught me how to be good. She taught me how to be a good person."

And I couldn't say it any better. Mom taught us all how to be good because she was good. She wasn't good because she thought she was being watched or judged. She wasn't good because she was trying to impress others, and she wasn't good because she thought she would be

rewarded for it in this life or the next. Mom was good because she thought that being good was the right thing to do. And that's just who she was. A good person.

Family was also very important to my mom. When her mother was still alive, she'd call and talk to her every morning. After granny passed away, she'd call her dad every day at the same time to check on him. When I was growing up, she treated my two nephews, Brad and Brent, just like they were her own, and after they had kids, she did the same for her great-nephews. She tried to have lunch with her sister at least once a week because staying close to her sister was really important to my mom. She loved her family dearly, but for mom, family didn't necessarily mean blood relations. For mom, family meant those whom we love the most. And she loved a lot of you a whole lot. After she called pawpaw every morning, she'd call a family friend to check up on him as well. Her nephews are two of the pallbearers, but the other pallbearers are guys mom loved just as much, and she treated them all as if they were her own kids. And just as mom would make it a point to call and meet up with her sister on a regular basis, she'd do the same for my wife. It wasn't unusual for them to talk for an hour or more on a weekly basis. If mom felt like you were family, she did her level best to take care of you, and you were welcome in her home at any time and at any event. Christmas? Come on over. Birthday party? Get here as quick as you can.

The last thing that I wanted to mention was the relationship between mom and dad. In talking about mom, I've heard people say things like "She worked just as hard as Jimmy," which, in my head suggests that it isn't the norm that the woman work as hard as the man. The thing about mom and dad is they taught me a married couple works as a team. Mom wasn't what I'd call a "housewife." Sure, she was a wife and she lived in a house, but she didn't spend her day cleaning and cooking and waiting for her man to come home after work. Mom was a farmer, just like dad is a farmer. She got up at 3:30 every morning to make sure the cows were in the barn. She'd haul hay and feed calves. She'd go out to feed the cows at four every afternoon. She'd order supplies and restock inventory, and she did all of this up until last November when she started to get really sick. She was strong and independent, and if a thing needed to be done, she did it, regardless if that thing was something a man usually did. Mom and dad were equal teammates in their business and in their marriage, and it served them well. Mom and dad would have been married 45 years in May. I can only hope that my wife and I are as happy and as successful when we celebrate our 45th wedding anniversary.

Like I said in the beginning of this eulogy, in talking to all of you over the past few days, several things kept coming up: Her optimism. Her selflessness. The strength of her marriage, and her unwavering work ethic. Debbie Gifford was an amazing woman, and as bad as I hurt right now, it makes me feel a little bit better knowing that so many of you recognized how truly special she was.

But let me be clear about something. This disease, this horrible life-stealing disease, may have beaten and destroyed my mother's body, but as I look out at all your faces, and as I reflect on her life and the indelible impact she had on all of us, it's apparent that my mom triumphed in the

end. Her love, her morality, the beauty that was her life, has taught all of us something. When we leave here today, we all take a part of her with us out into the world. That's something a disease cannot destroy.

We're going to miss her. I still don't know how I'm going to go on from this point. Some of you have asked if I'm okay, and I'm not. This hurts. This hurts so much. But there's one thing I know to be true: Everything's gonna turn out all right.