

by ANGELA S. SEYFRIED
Reminder Editor

GOODRICH-To agree to go forward with participating on the ABC hit TV show "Wife Swap," Kelly and Jeff Stonerock first had to hear from the man upstairs.

And to the Senior Pastor at Victory World Outreach Center (church) and his wife, God's voice was loud and clear. It would guide the couple through an experience that would enhance their faith and the way they share it with others.

The Stonerock's show "Pastor's Wife Meets Atheist's Wife" has no definite air date, but will appear at the time slot of 10 p.m. on Wednesday in the coming months. (Due to response from a controversial show about an anti-war family and one supportive of President George W. Bush, the Stonerock's tapes are being reviewed.) On the show, Kelly flew to Atlanta, Ga., to spend two weeks with the family of Amber Finley, who's husband Reggie is an atheist radio talk show host.

The couple, married 13 years, was chosen for the show from 10,000 applicants after Kelly sent in a query in November. Upon notification of their selection, Kelly and Jeff went on a six-week quest of information, insight, wisdom and knowledge before agreeing to take part, talking with Christian leaders, trusted friends and a former participant.

"Wife Swap" features men and women who switch lives with another family, often very different from themselves, for two weeks. The families experience, and usually end up with a new appreciation for their lives, or ready to make changes to improve them.

Gratitude for each other is already a thread that holds the Stonerock family-including children Devon, 10, Justin, 9, Hunter, 4, Jesse, 2, and niece Taylor, 9, and Jacob, 6, of which Kelly and Jeff have guardianship-together. Blessings are meant to be shared with others, Kelly said, which was a factor in choosing to participate. But before Kelly, 37 and Jeff, 39, could agree to sign the 20-page contract to be on the show, they had to explore the reasons they were torn between reaching others with the word of God and the effect such a move could have on their church, their position there and the representation of Christianity in the highly unpredictable world of television.

"I was willing to participate because I could see how we could help people and then the next day I'd be totally opposed to doing it," Kelly said.

The Stonerock's reconciled their inner conflict after Kelly heard from God first during a sleepless night of waking up with the subtle words, "go, go, go into the world and preach the gospel," and then on a walk that caused her to return home committed to doing the show. But Jeff had not yet received the confirmation he needed to move forward. It occurred two days later when through prayer he received an analogy that led him to believe their involvement was God's will.

Though they knew their church family well, Kelly and Jeff were unsure how they would respond. But when they told members of their involvement, the congregation broke out in cheers.

"We went in with the idea that there was a high percentage he could lose his job, but our entire church was very supportive," said Kelly.
Three weeks later taping began.

On Jan. 15, Kelly walked into the Finley home, armed with a goal to properly communicate the scripture and be open-hearted to a family so different from her own. At times she would say nothing as an alternative to misrepresenting the Bible. Having undergone many health and psychological evaluations, Kelly said she was sure she was "going to go to a decent family just different from hers."
"It was surreal," she said, "You really just do get into the limo and drive away."

Of course there were rules-no being alone with the children, changing diapers or giving baths-and although some might misconstrue the terms of swapping wives, participants do not stay in the same room as their respective temporary television spouses.
After entering the Finley home, Kelly noticed three things immediately: a photo of Reggie in a service uniform, atheist paraphernalia and antacids in several rooms, leading her to believe Reggie was under some kind of stress. She also stumbled upon a "God detector" pointing to the word "no."
"I took one look at it and said 'that's about to change,'" Kelly said with a laugh.

Likewise, Kelly said Amber took note of hunting materials around the Stonerock home and "both of us had images of these domineering men."

While Jeff tried to make Amber feel comfortable, Kelly was bonding with Amber's children, Dorian, 12, RJ, 3, and Ryan, 1 (a girl). She solved a problem with getting one child in bed at night with a sticker system. Amber's kids spent nine hours a day in daycare though she was a stay-at-home mom, while Kelly homeschools her children.
"I took the kids out of daycare and she put my kids in daycare," Kelly said.

At the Finley home, Kelly spent the first week of the swap following Amber's daily life as outlined in a manual each woman received at the beginning of the taping. She played a virtual reality video game for hours at a time and had no real contact with others except the children and Reggie. Amber worked out at Whole Life Fitness in Goodrich, attended soccer games and visited socially.

But what many are wondering is how Kelly, a Christian, dealt with someone who has no belief in God. Kelly said she was not anxious during her stay, and realized that Reggie was unlikely to change his beliefs as his career was formed around them. Kelly said she tried to encourage Reggie, who worked a lot, to spend more time with his family.

"He definitely had a blow up moment one day which was really disappointing to myself and the crew because it was supposed to be a fun day with his family," Kelly said. "He

cried, yelled and made accusations. I'm not sure it was directed at me as much as his own frustration."

Some of that may have stemmed from the fact that Kelly was not "getting much" from Reggie, she said.

"He knew I wasn't getting anything from his life," she said. "I didn't know how to tell him 'you're life doesn't bear fruit that I want.'"

Kelly thought it would be easiest for Reggie to say she felt she was better than him, which she said was not true. She also began to avoid Reggie's challenges to the existence of God, saying at one point, "My Bible advises me to avoid foolish contentions." "Jeff and I have a really happy marriage and a happy life and the kids are really well behaved and we have this from applying the biblical principles," she said. "So someone could say it was a comparison but that's not how I felt."

Back at home Amber had implemented rule changes in the second week, making the Stonerock home a "no-God zone" and charging Jeff certain amounts of money for prayer or saying God or Jesus, both of which she later admittedly regretted. Jeff also attended an atheist meeting as part of the rules.

"The only time she was laughing and smiling was when she was doing the things she's normally too afraid to do," said Jeff of Amber. "Having to take Kelly's place, she had to get out of the boxed-in life she had created."

In Atlanta, Kelly implemented procedures for a behavior plan for the children, removal of atheist propaganda and having Reggie go to Bible study since she had attended an atheist meeting. She also took a shot at Reggie's radio show, on which he calls himself "Infidel Guy" as "Bible Gal." That sparked an idea to create a Web site (www.biblegal.org) which offers live chats answering questions about Christianity and the show from 7:30-9 p.m. on Thursdays.

Though she was uncomfortable in a teaching role, Amber did homeschool at Kelly's but with an atheist tutor. But Kelly said a funny thing happened on the way to learning when the tutor, who has taught for 35 years, could not speak. She believes it is connected with Jeff's anointment of the room with oils the night before, and said there are scriptures in the Bible where God has "shut the mouths of people." The man was able to speak perfectly fine the next day.

"This man said 'I've never had this happen to me,'" Kelly said.

Coming home from the experience, Kelly said she was told by Amber that she needed more one-on-one time with Taylor.

"I can't isolate any one child having six children," said Kelly. "But I am making some of our activities more girl-oriented."

The Finley's did seem to agree Reggie was working too much, Kelly said. The couples still stay in contact.

Kelly and Jeff are not worried about what others will think, though they hope people see why they did the show, and grasp the messages they gained from the journey.

"The Bible says 'a fool answers a matter before he hears it,'" said Jeff. "That's the lesson we take to the church now is don't be so quick to judge."

And it is the most important gift they have gained, Kelly said. Being judgmental is more in line with what Kelly and Jeff call "religious thinking," which isn't the spirit of what it means to be a Christian. Such was the case when a Wiccan assistant to Kelly from the crew told her "If this show never aired, I want you to know that meeting you has changed my life." Even Reggie told Jeff he had never met a Christian like Kelly.

The experience has led to what Kelly calls in-depth life-changing conversations with residents in the community and people all over the country about judgment concerning the church and Christians and vice versa. One can't read the Bible and just skip over the part about judgment, she added.

"Sometimes I want to say 'don't call yourself a Christian until you've read the Bible and you know and understand what is said.' When I bring up the church is being judgmental, they will say 'that's me-I'm judgmental,' or someone will say 'something was said to me once and I don't go because of that.' I tell them 'you're just as judgmental as they're being.'"

"The Bible does not say 'love all but these people,'" Kelly said. "What I take away from this is a really personal drive to see Christians and the church walk in love toward others."

Local couple 'swapped', Husband and wife star in upcoming "Wife Swap" episode November 12, 2005.

Angela S. Seyfried
Editor
The County Line Reminder
reminder@lapeergroup.com
(248) 627-2843

Our Comments: This is an accurate portrayal of our motive for participation and of our experience on the show, with the family and the crew.