

Helping Others to Escape Poverty's Grip

Vernon and Gladys learned in early 1934, less than two years after they married, that she was expecting twins.

Poverty, like swollen river flood water, was always lapping at the front door for this young, northeast Mississippi couple, causing Vernon to work extra odd jobs after farming with his brother, Vester.

With no financial security, the prospect of two new mouths to feed presented a huge challenge.

But worries over finances took a back seat when, in January 1935, in the rear of their two-room house, one of the babies was born, but the other died a-birthing.

Gladys and Vernon raised that remaining boy as best they could.

When the surviving twin was only 10 years old, the precocious kid sang and came in fifth place in a local talent contest and proudly received \$5 worth of ride tickets to the Mississippi-Alabama State Fair.

By age 11, like most boys his age, he very much wanted a bicycle. But Gladys knew that even with Vernon's new job as a wholesale grocery delivery truck driver, they could not afford it.

She talked her young son into a guitar instead because she could buy one at the hardware store for the much-cheaper-than-a-bike-price of \$12.95.

With his natural talents, the teenager became a pretty good guitar player.

When the family moved to Memphis, Tennessee, in search of better work, the boy started channeling his vocal gifts and his guitar picking through the musical genre of the black gospel and rhythm and blues music that he had been hearing on Beale Street.

With a socially questionable and highly risky panache, this white boy defied many social expectations and appropriated the venue options that were available to

him.

It wasn't long before Elvis Presley was on his way to becoming the "King of Rock and Roll."

As the new year begins, I have been thinking about Jessie, Elvis' twin brother who died at birth, as well as Gladys, the mother who not only lost a baby, but also was forced by life's circumstances to make do and to help to shape her surviving son's aspirations in light of limited financial alternatives.

I have also been remembering Vernon, who was born in Fulton, Mississippi, where I got my first college teaching job.

Knowing Fulton and Tupelo, Mississippi, and imagining what it must have been like in the '30s and '40s, I have a profound appreciation for the struggles that this young family surely must have faced.

As I reflect on this now-dated story of a poor family and their trials, my thoughts inevitably turn to the Albanian immigrant couples and their kids whom I know and love in Athens, Greece.

They often face powerful and genuine fear when they learn that they are expecting. Sometimes their babies also die at birth. Their kids want bicycles and other toys - the price of which is usually beyond their reach.

Although I have never met one who can sing or pick (or move hips) like Elvis, I see lots of natural talent. I also see choices that must be made - often poor choices - because better ones are just not financially feasible.

In Christ's love, and also because they are human beings made in God's image, my wife, Janice, and I care for these couples and their kids.

We want to help them to know God's grace, to have expanded opportunities and to prosper in so many ways. We want them to have the chances at life which we have had and which many of our fellow American believers have had.

We know that it is the exception, rather than the rule, that an Elvis Presley comes along. And we also know that this world can only tolerate and celebrate a limited number of Elvises.

So, we and many PORTA partners keep on giving of ourselves and our resources to keep the doors of PORTA open.

To borrow from Elvis, we are convinced that Almighty God does not want Albanians in Athens to be “Lonesome Tonight” or to live forever in “Heartbreak Hotel.”

✘ [Bob Newell](#), a former ministry coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in Athens, Greece, has recently relocated to Texas, where he will continue his work with PORTA - the Albania House in Athens. He blogs at [ItsGreek2U](#). A version of this article first appeared in the January 2016 edition of *The Newell Post*, Bob and Janice Newell’s monthly electronic newsletter. It is used with permission.