



Brittany Stover

The Selmon children enjoy a walk on OU's south oval. From left are Zac, Shannon, Megan, Adam, Gabrielle, Christiana and Lauren.

The family of gridiron great Dewey and Kathryn Selmon is one of the Norman community's most remarkable stories —and one that has nothing to do with football.

A Shining Legacy

“Mama, the war has started again. I can’t get to Christiana.” Even through the static, Kathryn Selmon recognized the panicked voice of her daughter half a world away, bringing her news of another daughter she had yet to meet. The frantic message seemed out of sync in the Selmons’ peaceful Norman, Oklahoma, home. Kathryn could picture 21-year-old Megan on the streets of Monrovia, bent over, finger in one ear, trying to make herself heard above the chaos in the streets. There was shouting in the background, people running with machetes.

“They’re evacuating all Americans. I don’t know what to do.”

Kathryn took a deep breath and struggled to find the words that would help bring her daughters home.

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

PHOTOS PROVIDED

Perhaps the only student on the University of Oklahoma campus in the fall of 1974 who was not in awe of the Selmon brothers was Kathryn Lee Forbes. The Houston freshman had come to OU to study journalism, not football, and was only mildly curious about the buzz surrounding the siblings from the tiny Oklahoma town of Eufaula.

“All you heard was the Selmons this and the Selmons that,” says Kathryn, so she was surprised when she discovered that the quiet, unassuming Dewey in many of her J-school classes turned out to be one of the highly touted, bone-crunching brothers on the Sooners’ defensive line.

A friendly rivalry developed between Kathryn and Dewey in Ned Hockman’s photojournalism class. “My pictures were better,” they still say in unison. Study groups and coursework kept bringing the two together although their backgrounds could not have been more diverse.

Kathryn grew up in white, middle-class America, moving from one urban setting to another as her chemical engineer father was transferred to Illinois, Indiana, California, Spain and England before settling in Houston.

Dewey was one of 10 children born to a black sharecropper in rural McIntosh County. His mother, Jessie Selmon, raised most of her brood in a four-room frame house without indoor plumbing or electricity, but the children grew up well-loved and well-disciplined, never

realizing they were poor. On summer days, the Selmon kids would grab spoons and pile into the back of the wagon, while their dad hitched up the mules for a trip to town and a couple gallons of store-bought ice cream they would devour before it could melt.



Lauren Selmon captured this photo of her sister-to-be as her internship in Liberia was ending.

In 1971, Dewey was named an All-State football player at the same high school where he worked as a janitor. Mornings, he cleaned the school, at noon was a crossing guard, and in the evening divided his time between football practice, farm chores and homework. He had never eaten in a restaurant until recruiters came courting his senior year. Among them was Larry Lacewell, defensive coordinator for OU, where brother Lucious already was playing for the Sooners. In 1972, Dewey and Lee Roy, his junior by 11 months, signed their own letters of intent with the Crimson and Cream.

“All three of those boys were remarkable from day one,” recalls Lacewell. “Dewey was the thinker. He always wanted to know the why and what for.” It did not surprise the coach to hear his former protégé had taken enough hours at OU to earn a master’s degree in philosophy.

Kathryn jokes that if the coaches had seen the older Selmon brothers first, they would have been disappointed with Lucious, Dewey and Lee Roy, who were the smallest of the six. With football scholarships, the “baby boys” became the first in their family to attend OU.

“Coming to Norman for us was like coming to

Hollywood,” recalls Dewey. “It was just one of those super fantastic eras to play. Everything was set for success. We had the right coaches and the right players.”

But it was more than that, he says. “I knew Steve Davis’ mom, Joe Washington’s dad, Jack Mildren’s mom and dad. You just didn’t know the players, you knew their brothers and sisters. We were like a family, all living in Jefferson House.”

Dewey says OU assistant coach Barry Switzer, who became head coach in 1973, brought together disparate forces—the Selmon brothers from a tiny Oklahoma town, Jimbo Elrod, a larger-than-life wrestler from Tulsa, fun-loving Tinker Owens—and turned them into something beyond any one individual’s ability.

“He would mold us together and not change our personalities or desires, but would bring our individual strengths to the team,” recalls Dewey. “That was his greatest gift, and we would play for him anywhere.”

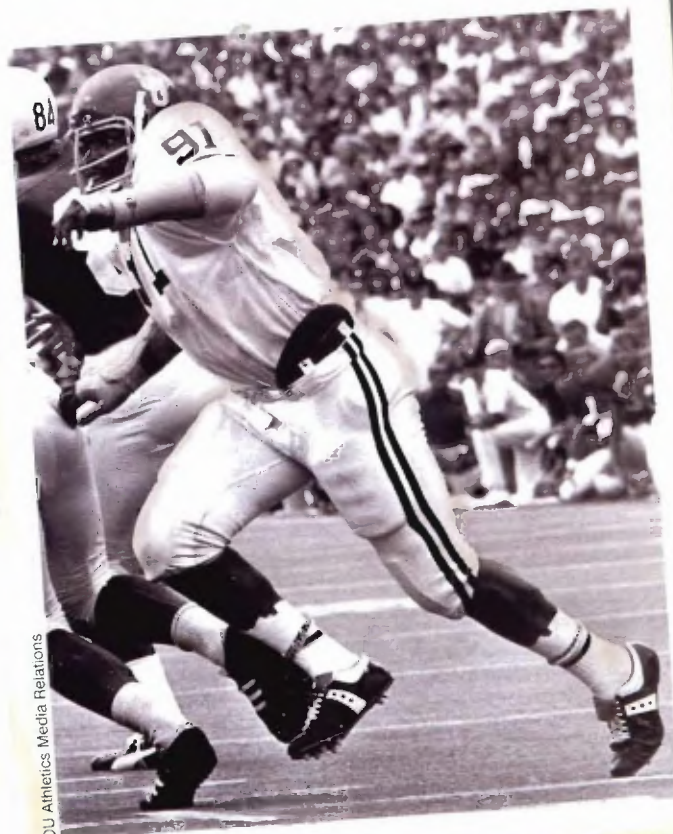
Switzer called the Selmon brothers “the gentle giants.”

“They were outstanding players, good students and model citizens. You want to coach guys like that every day,” Switzer says.

The success of those championship seasons transcended Owen Field. Every senior on that team graduated and the entire starting defense turned pro, including Dewey and Lee Roy, who were drafted by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, a 1976 expansion team. The move to Florida was bittersweet. The friendship between Dewey and Kathryn had deepened, and by the time they started dating during Dewey’s senior year, they knew it was for keeps.

“Meeting Kathryn was the best thing I did in college,” says the man who, during that same time period played on two National Championship Sooner football teams and was named a consensus All-American. They only had to convince their parents.

When Kathryn’s mother met Jessie Selmon, the two women discovered that similarities like shared values, spiritual beliefs and unconditional love for their children overshadowed color and



OU Athletics Media Relations

In the mid-'70s, the name Selmon was synonymous with OU football. Dewey worked the defensive line with brothers Lucious and Lee Roy.

until the Bucs won a game. Signs started appearing at the football games, “Do it for Dewey!” Shortly after the Buccaneers broke their 26-game losing streak, beating New Orleans on the road in 1977, Kathryn and Dewey tied the knot.

Dewey played six seasons with Tampa, followed by a year with the San Diego Chargers before returning to Norman with Kathryn to raise their family—daughters Shannon, Megan and Lauren and son Zac. Dewey started a construction business, and Kathryn turned her attention to her children’s schools and community.

She joined a group of women who were looking for a way to

“They don’t see color. They don’t see income. Both of our families raised us that way. Ultimately, the only thing of value is what you can do for someone else.”

culture. But even then there were obstacles. Dewey would have to leave Kathryn for Florida and prove himself in the NFL.

In one year Dewey and Lee Roy went from a team that rarely lost to a team that never won. Dewey inadvertently unified fans when he commented to *Sports Illustrated* that he would not marry

help the hidden homeless in the prosperous Norman community. She began organizing potluck meals, with locations rotating among local churches.

One of the women Kathryn met during this time was Harriette Leigh Kemp, who remembers the children trailing be-

hind Kathryn like ducklings as she cooked and served. Kathryn and Kemp began talking about establishing a permanent location where the homeless could count on a hot meal six days a week, along with other services to help get them off the streets.

"I was a hair stylist with an education degree," says Kemp, who is now an ordained minister. "We didn't know what we were doing. We just believed we could. Kathryn had enough faith for both of us."



Rainbow Town children gather around Dewey Selmon, who loaned his considerable construction skills to the creation of Britt Academy, giving many orphans their first educational opportunity.

The first order of business was raising money for a building. Kathryn found the idea for a fundraiser in her own home. She would auction her collection of rare dolls, some still in their boxes, that her parents had begun buying for her when they lived in Europe. Kathryn and Kemp dubbed the event "Guys and Dolls."

"We got football players to do a runway walk holding the dolls. Luckily I had an in with the football players," says Kathryn with a grateful nod to Dewey.

With \$20,000 from the auction and another \$60,000 from a federal grant, Food for Friends secured a building and started serving daily meals. Kathryn regularly recruited Shannon's second-grade class to help over the lunch hour, with Megan, 5,

Lauren, 3, and one-year-old Zac in tow.

The Selmon kids would mop floors, do dishes and serve meals. "They knew all the street people by name," says Kathryn. "They don't see color. They don't see income. Both of our families raised us that way. Ultimately, the only thing of value is what you can do for someone else."

"One year I was all excited about planning our Thanksgiving dinner," Dewey recalls, "and I was saying, 'We'll have the big turkey and the dressing and the peas,' and Kathryn's like, 'Yeah, let's not do that this year. Let's go down and serve at Food for Friends.' I was thinking, 'Now wait a minute . . .'"

In the end, Dewey kissed his giblets goodbye and spent Thanksgiving Day serving side by side with his family.

"Looking back, I see Food for Friends as a great stepping stone," says Lauren. "We started with little things, like on Saturday morning we learned there was more to do than watching cartoons. Things like Penny Power and CROP walk were fun for us. My parents got it into our heads that there is something bigger than ourselves that's important to be a part of."

At Fresno State on a basketball scholarship, Lauren's Fellowship of Christian Athletes adviser was Jonathan Lotz, grandson of evangelist Billy Graham. Lotz encouraged her to apply for an internship with Samaritan's Purse, a nondenominational evangelical Christian organization that provides aid to victims of war, poverty, natural disasters, disease and famine.

The summer after her junior year in college, she accepted her first assignment with the organization, distributing shoeboxes full of toys, school supplies and hygiene items to refugees displaced by the civil war in Liberia. When workers became concerned that rebels would take the care packages meant for the kids, Lauren enlisted the rebels' help.

"I just went over to them and said, 'Hey, we have these boxes for the kids, and they really need them.' The rebels said, 'Hop on the truck.' I got on, and they drove me over and helped deliver the boxes."

During that summer, Lauren became acquainted with a Liberian woman named Feeta Naiman, who became caregiver to more than

70 orphans in a single afternoon when she was given the choice by an armed soldier to take them in or see them killed. She gathered the children and ran, sleeping on the ground or in abandoned houses until they settled on a patch of ground near Gbarnga that became known as “Rainbow Town.” Since that day in 1997, “Ma” Feeta has protected and provided for anywhere between 80 to 300 children, orphaned or abandoned during the war.

“The more time I spent with Ma Feeta, the more I came to love the children,” Lauren says. “They had been through so much, yet they did not want pity. They had nothing, and yet they were full of such joy. It knocked my socks off.”

Near the end of her internship, she had become particularly close to one little girl, Christiana, who had latched onto her like a big sister.

“We were connected,” Lauren recalls. “Joined at the hip. The morning we were getting ready to leave, I looked down from the window of our SUV, and she is standing there dressed and ready to go. Not all the other kids were even up yet.”

“She had understood enough to know I wasn’t going to see her again, and there she was standing outside the car. As we started to leave, she turned and stretched out her arms to me.”

That image haunted Lauren—awake and in her dreams. She called her mother and said, “I think this little girl is meant to be a part of our family.”

“We had already raised four children,” recalls Kathryn. “And we thought ‘OK, how hard can this be? It’s a six-year-old girl.’”

Lauren returned to school while her parents began adoption proceedings. Meanwhile, Megan, who was studying foreign affairs at Princeton on a Pickering Fellowship, called with some exciting news.

“Mom, guess where they’re sending me?” For a research project on “Failed States,” Megan would be visiting Liberia. Kathryn over-nighted the adoption approval to her daughter, who would escort Christiana home.

When Megan called near the end of her trip, the Selmons expected to hear that Christiana was with her, and they would be in Oklahoma the next day.

Instead, she relayed the news that war had returned to Liberia, making attempts to reach Christiana impossible.

“I said, ‘Megan, you have to leave,’” recalls Kathryn. “‘You cannot reach Christiana now.’” A U.N. convoy was standing by



Kathryn Selmon, left, and Mary Britt, mother of Benjamin Britt, for whom Rainbow Town’s school is named, make new friends.



Megan Selmon delivers dolls to the children of Rainbow Town. All of the Selmon children have spent time in Liberia volunteering and working to restore childhood pleasures to a generation torn by war.



Shannon Selmon holds a young Liberian, one of many children growing up without basic human services due to an intermittent civil war that has plagued the country since 1989.

to take stranded Americans to the airport. When Megan called a few hours later, Kathryn was relieved—until she learned her daughter was still in the war-torn capital.

Megan had bailed on the way to airport, found a ride back to town and began calling contacts Lauren had given her in case of emergency. Lauren's friends swooped her to a safe zone, where she stayed until things calmed down enough to attempt reaching Christiana again.

"As a mother, I think that was one of my proudest moments and also one of the scariest," says Kathryn. "I knew Megan felt she had been assigned to bring Christiana home, and she was not leaving without her."

Once home in Norman, Christiana began a campaign of her own. She talked incessantly about her 11-year-old brother, Adam. In the upper right-hand corner on every homework paper, the little girl would write "Christiana Selmon" and underneath "Adam Selmon."

Shannon and Zac understood. "If it were my brother or sister, I wouldn't want to leave them behind either," they told their parents.

"There was not much discussion," says Dewey. "The plea was above our ability to say no." Soon after, not only Adam joined the family, but also Gabrielle. Shannon, who played basketball for OU while earning her degree in social studies education, delayed her own teaching career to devote a year to bringing her new siblings up to speed academically.

One morning around the breakfast table, Kathryn mentioned the upcoming "Make a Difference Day" and what the family could do to help. Although Adam had been in the United

States only two months, he announced he would do something on his own. In Africa, he had been a drummer, an important part of daily life in the village.

He took his drum to a city park and began to play in front of a hand-lettered sign that read "Help the orphans." Within two hours, he had collected more than \$200. His efforts were recognized by *USA Weekend*, earning a \$10,000 Make a Difference Day grant funded by the late actor Paul Newman.


The family's philanthropic efforts on behalf of Rainbow Town did not end there. By now all of the Selmons have visited the West African village, sometimes accompanied by Norman dentist and OU alumnus Bill Blum, who saw patients who had never before had their teeth checked.

In 2006, Zac and Shannon established the Shine Foundation [www.shinefoundation.org] to provide aid to Rainbow Town and to help educate its children. In the summer of 2006, Dewey put his construction experience to good use, building a school with the help of Samaritan's Purse, Shine and Touch the World ministries. Benjamin Britt Academy, named for Megan's fiance, a U.S. Army lieutenant who was killed in Iraq, now provides schooling from kindergarten through eighth grade. Graduates are eligible to attend public high school in nearby Gbarnga.

Recently Lauren began work on a documentary she hopes will fund higher education opportunities for Rainbow Town residents.

"As a filmmaker, I wanted to tell their story," says Lauren, but there is a more practical reason behind the immediacy of her project. "Ma Feeta is in her 60s. What will happen to the children when she is gone?"

"What she wants most for her children is an education. I hope proceeds from the film will help provide a college education for every one of her kids."

For Dewey and Kathryn, watching their children gain ground and tackle the odds for the children of Rainbow Town, might be the brightest Selmon legacy of all. 

Lynette Lobban is associate editor of Sooner Magazine.