

Biography
Genevieve Belville Rollyson



By Carol Belville Rosebrough



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Graduation Portrait*



Biography

Genevieve Belville Rollyson

Genevieve Belville Rollyson, “Jenni,” was born on December 13, 1925 in Ironton, Ohio, the second born, but first living, child of Bessie Reed and Lindsey Belville. Jenni is one of those unsung heroes that has made this earth and life a better place, but she has never been formally recognized for her contributions. She has overcome enormous obstacles to achieve a good life for herself and she has helped many others in the process. She deserves to be recognized for her efforts and the positive influence she has had on others, so this biography may help give her the honor she deserves.

Ironton, Ohio is a very small community on the Ohio River that has large industrial complexes along the river and yet has the country and hills on the other side of the town. Bessie and Lindsey both grew up in the countryside in poverty and Lindsey was so determined to do better for his family that he became an enterprising entrepreneur.

Lindsey Belville’s first successful business was a tobacco brokering business where he made large tobacco buys from local farmers and then resold the tobacco at an auction to the large tobacco companies. He supported his family



Jenni’s first photograph, taken in the front yard of the farm of Wesley and Rozetta Sheets Belville, her grandparents, in 1929.



Carrie Elkins Reed
Jenni's maternal grandmother

much difference. She also considered trips to her mother's parents a real highlight as they were close and she really enjoyed being with them.

However, the year Jenni was nine, the tobacco Lindsey purchased was stored in a warehouse awaiting the auction sales, and a fire destroyed everything. The tobacco was uninsured, and Jenni's life was changed forever. Everything was lost, including the family home he mortgaged to buy

through this effort, but before every buying season he mortgaged the family home to make the tobacco buys, and then he would repay the loan after the tobacco companies paid him. Until Jenni reached the age of nine this system worked for Lindsey, and Jenni lived a fairly uneventful life. Even though the family was still poor, Lindsey was doing all right with this tobacco brokering business, and since most everyone else in the town was poor also, it didn't seem to make



Bessie Reed Belville
Jenni's Mother

the tobacco. Even today she has a vivid memory of three large men coming to their home from the bank to assess the value and tell the family that they would have to be moving. This occurrence so traumatized Jenni that since then she has never wanted to have any debt on her home for fear it could be taken away.

Bessie Reed Belville was quiet and withdrawn, and when Lindsey lost the family home, she was really sad, but the disruption didn't really change her. However, Lindsey did change. He became more volatile and unable to cope with frustration. He carried this trait for the rest of his life. Even though Lindsey had difficulty coping with the business loss and the frustrations of starting another business, he never resorted to alcohol to solve his problems, nor was there ever any alcohol allowed in the home. In the transition period between businesses, Lindsey moved his family twice before they settled in a two-bedroom house that



Lindsey Belville in front of the house he built after losing the family home and his business



Jenni as a young teenager at home on the front porch. One of her life-long friends, Patricia Leighty, lived in the house next door.

Lindsey built, and Lindsey started his next business, but this time he owned and operated a strip coal mine. By this time, two younger brothers and a sister had been added to the family.

Jenni has maintained lifelong friendships with many of the girls she met in school: Helen Rice from grade school; Alfreda Wyant, June Henthorne and Gloria Blagg from high school; and later Irene Clay joined this group. They even had a Euchre Club that played together for over 40 years, disbanding only recently. Even though Jenni moved to Florida years earlier, the Club continued meeting and she joined them every time she visited in Ohio.



Jenni, standing in the schoolyard of Whitwell Elementary School, which was next door to her good friend Gloria Blagg's home

At 17, Jenni met Jim Rollyson, who was one year older, and she married him in February of her senior year after she turned 18. These were the years of WWII, and young marriages were commonplace. Jim and Jenni had one child, Carla, who was born just 11 months after the marriage while Jim was overseas in the war. Carla would be 18 months old before Jim would ever see his daughter.

While Jim was overseas, Jenni lived with her in-laws, as Mr. Rollyson had suffered



Lindsey Belville at work at his coal mine

a stroke and Jenni helped Mrs. Rollyson care for him. This act was the beginning of a lifetime of Jenni helping relatives in trouble.

Jenni's ability to be thrifty also started during these years, as she saved \$500 while Jim was overseas, and that was from the \$80 per month allotment she received for their daughter, Carla. From that \$80 she had to purchase milk, shoes and clothing for the two of them. Little did she realize that she and Jim would take that \$500 to make a down payment on a machine to make Venetian blinds, and the supplies they needed to start production, and from that small beginning they would grow the business to be worth millions.

After starting this business, they left the Rollyson household for one of their own, and used the detached garage to expand their business. While Jenni was actually working to produce the initial product they were selling in this business, she also kept the books for this new business, plus she kept the books for her father's new business, the coal mine. At the same time, she was mother to Carla, and then Mr. Rollyson suffered another stroke. This stroke was more severe

and he moved into Jim and Jenni's home to receive around-the-clock care from Jenni, as well as her husband Jim and his sister and mother. Jim and Jenni even gave up their own bedroom to Mr. Rollyson, and they moved to a sunroom that Jenni was also using for her office.

Even though Jenni administered shots to Mr. Rollyson throughout the night, he still ended up losing his life anyway. But then, just two weeks after Mr. Rollyson died, Jenni's mother was diagnosed with leukemia, which required many doctor and hospital visits, and Jenni provided the transportation for all these trips. One of these trips was to University Hospital in Columbus, Ohio, which was nearly three hours away from Ironton. This particular visit lasted 30 days with Jenni staying full-time in Columbus, arriving at the hospital every



Jenni with some of her High School friends, with whom she has retained a close friendship her entire life. From left to right: Bonnie Jean Jackson (cousin), Jenni Belville, Helen Rice, Gloria Blagg. The group is standing in front of Jenni's maternal grandmother's home in Ironton, OH. Note the four stars in the window behind them representing Jenni's four uncles - George, Carl, Walter, and Jeff Reed - serving in WWII at the time.