



## Sports

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### FCA, Kelly's Celebrate 50 Years

by B.B. Branton

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With hall of fame quarterback Jim Kelly and his wife, Jill, as the featured speakers, Tuesday night's "Road to Victory" 50th Anniversary Celebration for Fellowship of Christian Athletes was a showcase of the amazing story of a sovereign God at work in the lives of today's high school and college students to baby boomers and beyond.

While the Kelly's shared their compelling life's story with the nearly 1,000 men and women at the Chattanooga Convention and Trade Center, the local FCA chapter also touched on the early years of FCA in the Scenic City as businessman Marion Gaston and Rev. Rocky Young spearheaded the start in 1961.

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Past area directors and FCA Athletes of the Year were in attendance, including 1966 recipient Rev. John Bonner who starred in football at City High and UTC, while current athletes – track star LaQuisha Jackson of Howard and Baylor baseball standout Will Copper – talked of their faith in Jesus Christ and the important work done by FCA on high school campuses.

#### The Jim and Jill Kelly Story

The handsome, talented quarterback had it all. Or, so he thought.

All-State football in high school, first round draft pick out of the

University of Miami in 1983 and a pro football hall of fame career as he led the Buffalo Bills to four consecutive Super Bowls.

But the All-American life for the Kelly's and their two daughters was turned upside down in catastrophic proportions as infant son, Hunter – born Feb. 14, 1997 (also Jim's birthday) – was diagnosed within four months with an incurable disease known as Krabbe, which effects the brain and a disorder of the nervous system which causes loss of speech and hearing.

"For me, Hunter's illness was crushing," said the hall of fame signal caller.

"The tough, devastating next eight years drove my wife closer to the Lord, while I ran as far away from God – and from her – as I could."

Jim had had great plans for his young son.

"I had his life mapped out with him being able to grow up with cousin Zach as they would be quarterback and receiver and pitcher and catcher on the local sports teams,

"Hunter would wear my No.12 as I had worn the same number as my childhood hero Terry Bradshaw," said Kelly, who grew up in a small town outside of Pittsburgh during the 1970s and the days of the Steel Curtain, the Terrible Towels and three Super Bowl titles.

Kelly had made No.12 famous in college and the NFL.

While the Lord would test him later in life, his college coach, Howard Schnellenberger, would see what the high school hotshot was like under pressure as a true freshman.

"My first four college starts in 1979 were at Penn State (win), at Alabama (loss), Notre Dame (loss) and Florida (win)," said Kelly with a smile.

Kelly had originally wanted to play quarterback for Penn State, but Nittany Lions coach Joe Paterno saw him as a college linebacker.

So Kelly headed south and beat Paterno and the Nittany Lions in Happy Valley that early November afternoon, 26-10.

But the dream of one day having his son wear his number was not in God's plan.

Frustration, anger, doubt and heartache filled their lives, until Jim realized that with his son – who died in 2005 – in heaven he did not want to live in eternity without him.

"My trademark was one of toughness, but as I said in my hall of fame acceptance speech in 2002, 'The toughest person I ever met in my life was my hero, my soldier, my son, Hunter.'

"Through my son's death, I realized my shortcomings in life, my incompleteness, and that I needed Jesus Christ as my Savior."

For several years, Jill was on a separate path than Jim.

"Inwardly we were dying as a couple, until Jesus intervened," she stated.

"I just wanted heaven, desperately. "I eventually would find the author of heaven, Jesus, in the midst of this despair of losing Hunter."

Jill, who has written three books – the latest being *Without a Word* (a memoir of how a little boy's unspoken love ... changed everything) – also realized that being a Christian was more than "wearing a cross around your neck and having a fish symbol on the bumper of your truck."

"Our son's suffering led us to understand more clearly about how God's son, Jesus, suffered for us because we were sinners in need of a Savior."

With Hunter diagnosed with Krabbe disease shortly after his birth, the Kelly's established a non-profit organization called Hunter's Hope ([www.huntershope.org](http://www.huntershope.org)) to increase awareness of the disease..

Today, they live in East Aurora, New York with daughters, Erin and Camryn, and speak of their Christian faith, involved with FCA Outdoors ministry and continue to lead Hunter's Hope.

They work for the day when a cure is found for Krabbe and will continue to share with hundreds and thousands of people across the country ... as Jill said, "the eternal hope that only comes through Jesus Christ."

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