

NO. 2

LeAnn SANDERS SHELTON

ROLE MODEL

BY STEVE IRVINE
PHOTO BY ERIN NELSON

LeAnn Sanders Shelton leaves little gray area when describing what softball has meant in her life. “Well, I wouldn’t have gotten to where I am today without it,” Shelton said. “I guess it’s been my outlet. I was good at it, and after that, it’s history.”

She wanted to make sure that Heaven Harris, a Sylacauga resident, who was 13 years old when Shelton first met her, had the opportunity for a similar history.

Long before the two met, though, Shelton lost her left arm in a lawn mower accident. The Pickens County native was 4 years old when it happened. To this day, details of the accident — as well as what happened in the next few weeks and months — are fuzzy.

“The only thing I can remember about the hospital is they had a little playroom,” Shelton said. “For some reason, I remember that. I also remember when they changed the bandage on my shoulder, I was too scared to even look at it.”

More importantly, though, her life has not been defined by her accident. It’s been defined by her response. As she said, softball became her outlet. She began playing when she was 6 and found a way of life. She eventually played at Pickens County High and continued to play in adult leagues.

She wasn’t a one-armed player clinging to softball. She was an outstanding player, who just

happened to have one arm. Shelton, a standout at every level she played, was 31 when she was inducted into the Dixie Hall of Fame in 2013.

“It’s just come natural, I guess,” Shelton said.

Almost as naturally as her response when learning, through a Facebook message, about Harris losing her right arm in an ATV accident. Shelton immediately began research on how to contact Harris’ parents. She reached out through Facebook and received a call from Harris’ mother a couple of days later.

Plans were hatched for Shelton to visit Heaven in the hospital. By the time she could arrange the trip to Sylacauga, though, Heaven was already at home. Shelton, her husband, Jeremy, and young son, Gunner Lake, made the trip.

“The first time we met, it was a little emotional for me,” Shelton said. “She was shy. She was seeing someone with one arm — not herself — for the first time. It took a while for her to start talking.”

For some, that trip might have been sufficient. She came to support and accomplished that. For Shelton, however, it was much more. She needed to help Harris learn how to play softball with one arm.

She and Jeremy made three or four additional trips to Sylacauga. A local coach let them use a gym to work on fundamentals and drills. It was several hours of softball work. Harris and her family visited Pickens County, staying in a camper outside the Shelton home, for more friendship and softball.

“I kind of found my purpose, I guess,” Shelton said. “You always want to ask why things happen. I’ve asked that for about 30 years. We ask when

Name: LeAnn Sanders Shelton

Age: 36

Hometown: Reform

Personal: Husband, Jeremy Shelton; son, Gunner Lake Shelton; parents, James W. and Deborah Sanders.

People who have influenced my life: God, family and friends.

Something people don’t know about me:

The red stitches in a softball held my life together.

My proudest achievement: Overcoming the impossible and finding a purpose.

Why I do what I do:

To be a lighthouse for others facing the same situation. To help them find hope, courage and a purpose in overcoming the impossible.



something bad happens, but this is my purpose.”

One of Shelton's biggest challenges was seeing softball through Harris' viewpoint.

“The thing that was a big issue for her, on the field, was she was right-handed and she lost her right hand,” Shelton said. “She was a pitcher. I don't even remember having two hands. I don't really know if I was right-

handed or left-handed. It took her a long time to get the hang of everything, even schoolwork, writing and things like that. We had to get her over.”

Like Shelton, Harris is flourishing on the softball field. She's now at Sylacauga High.

Shelton hopes to find a ghostwriter to help her with a book on her life story. A group of film students began work on a

documentary film of her life, but the project has not been completed. She says the more people who know her inspiring story, the better.

“It's always been important, just to get my story out there,” Shelton said. “It could help somebody else, not even in my situation. It could be something different, but maybe my story could help.” 🌱