



A Daughter's Prayers

By Aida Rogers

Photography by Patrick Wright
and courtesy of Ginny Dent Brant



Patrick Wright

From her Lake Keowee home, Ginny Dent Brant talks about her father's journey from the White House to world missions. Right: Harry Dent was a close advisor to President Richard Nixon, shown together in the Oval Office.

She laughs and calls herself “chicken-liver” and “city slicker,” but somehow Ginny Dent Brant found the courage to go to Yemen to visit hospital missionaries working in a dangerous land. She laughs again, recalling herself as a stuttering, introverted child, so shy she couldn’t look up to greet even those she knew. But now this bubbly and forthcoming woman sings and speaks in churches, describing how God worked miracles for her and her family. In fact, Ginny Dent Brant laughs a lot, testament to a faith that saved her despite her awkward introversion, her mother’s depression, her husband’s cancer, and her famous, frequently absent father who later descended into severe dementia. Now, at 55, this Columbia native, former teen model, and new author looks back over her life and marvels at how God was in charge all along.

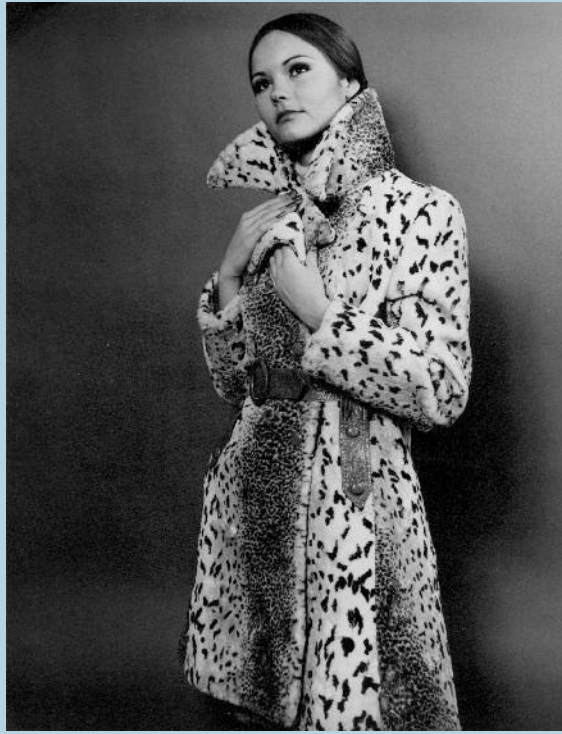
“I’ve learned not to make plans,” Ginny says, affirming that God’s plans are always better. That’s a lesson she learned the hard way. Of course, life wasn’t easy for the four children of Harry S. Dent, the St. Matthews native and lawyer who worked the inner circles of Washington, D.C., for years. Known as the creator of “The Southern Strategy,” which brought the Republican Party to prominence in the South, Dent was a loving husband and father with an addiction to politics. As one of President Richard Nixon’s advisors, Dent narrowly avoided prison during the Watergate scandal. He and his family lived under the threat of indictment for two to three years. That fear, along with moving three times between Washington and Columbia, sent young Ginny searching for help. She found it through Christianity and a Young Life chapter in Washington.

“I had nowhere else to look but up and that’s what deepened my faith,” she explains during a recent visit to Columbia from her home in Clemson. “When you’re 17 years old and your dad tells you, ‘It looks like I’ll be going to prison,’ you’re looking for answers and help and I knew my little unpowerful self wasn’t going to be able to handle these problems.” She recounts her experiences in her book, *Finding True Freedom: From the White House to the World*, published last year by Christian Literature Crusade Publications. The title pinpoints how her father, always so passionate about protecting America’s freedoms, found the ultimate personal freedom through Jesus Christ.

But it took years for him to discover what Ginny learned as a

teenager. Returning to Columbia after Watergate, Harry Dent opened a law office, advised politicians, and continued as chairman of the South Carolina GOP. Betty reared children. Ginny says that six years of her vigilant praying finally brought her parents to Christ. Though tempted to preach to her parents, she followed the advice of a trusted counselor and simply prayed for someone her parents respected to bring them the gospel. In the meantime, she left notes and Scriptures for her father on his pillow, and found the strength to obey her heavenly Father more than the earthly one she adored. Against her father’s wishes, she enrolled at Columbia Bible College – now Columbia International University – and earned a degree in biblical education. Harry Dent hadn’t believed such a degree would bring Ginny much success. But she insisted on giving up a promising modeling career to focus on cultivating the inner beauty espoused in the Bible. She also married her high school boyfriend, Alton Brant, a dedicated Christian.





Left: In this November 1970 photo, Ginny, left, and her friend Jean Olson Cunningham visit Harry Dent at the White House. **Center:** A teen model, Ginny poses in a fur coat. **Right:** Senator and Mrs. Strom Thurmond host the Brant family — Ginny, Alton, and son Joshua — in the Senate Dining Room in 1983.

In time, Ginny's parents embraced Christianity when their Columbia neighbors, Jack and Betty Matthews, shared their own faith. More witness came from Chuck Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship and the first of Nixon's aides to be incarcerated. In prison, Colson learned his calling: prison reform and bringing Christianity to prisoners and their families.

Soon, Harry was as fervent about his faith as he had been about politics. "As my sister Dolly says, 'When he put that passion into the Lord's work, you could not stop him,'" Ginny says. "He was the purpose driven Harry before Rick Warren wrote the book."

Ginny's own book chronicles her father's purpose after his conversion. He found it in Romania, where he visited with evangelist John Guest in 1990. Dent saw a repressed nation struggling to establish itself as a democracy after decades of communism, and thought they could use someone with his governmental smarts and Washington contacts. Between 1990 and 1999, he made about 20 trips to the Eastern European country, bringing South Carolinians with him to help improve its medical, business, economic, political, and social systems. He helped forge a sister-city relationship between Columbia and Cluj, and developed a relationship with Romanian President Ion Iliescu, which helped the country lobby and attain Most Favored Nation trade status. Dent told President Iliescu he would do it for the Romanian people in exchange for their religious freedom. He also helped plant churches and train new Romanian pastors for that country's underground churches.

Harry Dent did so much for Romania that when he died in 2007, Ginny was struck by the incompleteness of his *Washington Post* obituary. There was no mention of what her father had accomplished after he left Washington. To her, Harry Dent had lived a vastly different

and satisfying second life serving God. Ironically, he even spent a year in biblical study at Columbia International University, which he had once dissuaded his daughter from attending. Readers might suspect she wrote *Finding True Freedom* to counteract that Washington obituary, but that's not so. She says she wrote it to illustrate how God worked through her father to improve life in Romania. She saw it firsthand when she accompanied him on a ministry tour through the country. At that time, God showed her how He had answered her prayers. It was then she also felt God telling her that times would be growing harder. Later, she realized that He had been preparing her for her father's devastating, 10-year battle with Alzheimer's disease, her husband's prostate cancer, and the uncertainty of living in an apartment in Clemson while waiting three years for her home in Spartanburg to sell.

It was during this time that she hit her lowest point. Exhausted by the weekend trips to Columbia to help care for her father, worried about her husband, disoriented by not living in her own home, Ginny felt the depression that struck her mother years ago. At Christmas 2004, Ginny's twin sons and Alton had to lead her by the hand to the car for the family visit to Columbia. An hour from Columbia, the Brants saw a double rainbow. Young Harrison told his mom it was God's sign that things would be all right. And Ginny realized that God was still at work on His plan. "I look back and I realize that God providentially was knocking on the door of my heart before the major things happened," she recalls of her teenage years. "He was preparing me to be strong when I was normally a weak person, so that when the trial came, I would have the strength to endure and the hope to get through."

Ginny looks like her mother and acts like her father, people say. After earning her bachelor's degree from Columbia Bible College, she earned two masters degrees from USC, in elementary counseling and elementary education. She was an adjunct professor in childhood growth and development at USC Upstate and Converse College before Alton, who holds a doctorate in special education administration, accepted an associate professorship in American sign language and



Ginny Dent Brant speaks and sings at the 2008 opening of Alunis Baptist Church in Romania. The church was built with help from Faith Baptist Church in Swansea, SC.

deaf studies at Clemson University. Ginny is now a guidance counselor at Orchard Park Elementary School in Westminster.

Alton, a cancer survivor, and Ginny are active with their local Republican Party. Though he would like to see his wife run for office, Ginny would rather help others get elected, much as her father did. She is president of Laity Alive and Serving, a non-profit organization Harry Dent founded in 1985. Serving the needs of Romanians and the deaf, Laity Alive merges the causes of Ginny's father and husband. Alton Brant's parents were deaf.

Her own passion is world missions. As a trustee of the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, Ginny visited Yemen and Gaza in 1997, two places she never wanted to go. She also visited underground churches in China. Living in countries where freedoms are so restricted opened her eyes to what Americans take for granted and fueled her admiration for Christian missionaries working in unstable lands. *Finding True Freedom* pays tribute to them, also to her parents and the holy power that has guided them all.

"You have to look at life for what God brings your way," Ginny says. "You just have to pray and live and work where He opens the door." **ROC**

For more about Ginny Dent Brant and *Finding True Freedom: From the White House to the World*, visit www.ginnybrant.com. The book is available through her website and at Family Christian Stores.

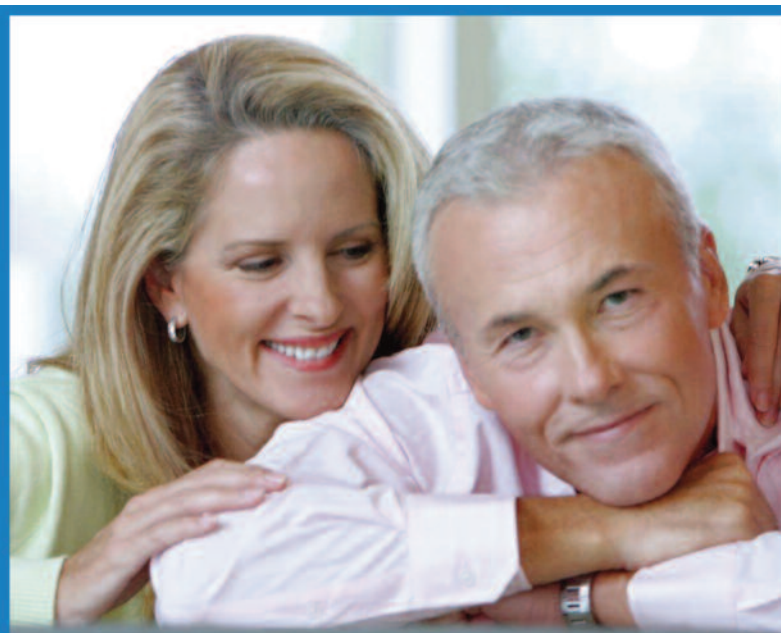


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