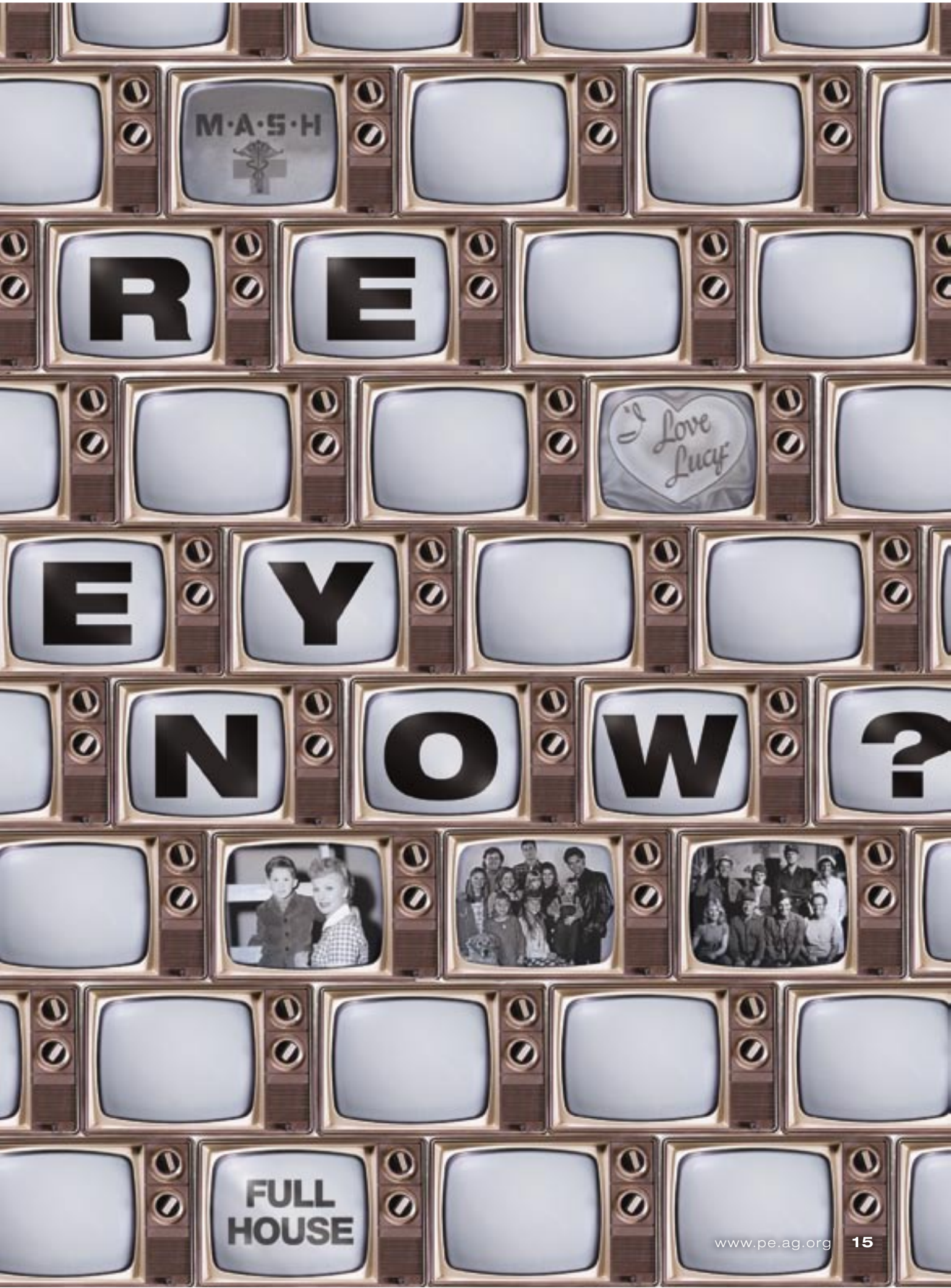




**Three sitcom stars
reflect on their lives
and faith today**

It sounds appealing. Be discovered by a Hollywood agent and offered a contract for a TV series that becomes a national hit. These three stars had that experience, two of them as children. Their futures seemed assured. But when the cameras and lights were turned off, Keith Thibodeaux, Candace Cameron and Gary Burghoff faced all the typical challenges life offers.

Continued on page 16



M.A.S.H.

R

E

E

Y

N

O

W

?

I Love Lucy



FULL HOUSE

W H E R E A R E

They discovered that personal coping strategies inevitably fall short in the quest for lasting peace and fulfillment. Each of them found that a relationship with Christ is the linchpin that can hold everything together in the shifting tides of fame and fortune.

From *I Love Lucy* to a love for Christ

By age 3, after winning a talent contest on a local Lafayette, La., television program, Keith Thibodeaux began touring nationally as part of the Horace Heidt Orchestra. He earned \$500 a week as a drummer.

That God-given musical ability also enabled Thibodeaux to land the part of 5-year-old Little Ricky on the top-rated *I Love Lucy* in 1956. Although 200 boys had tried out for the role of the son of Cuban bandleader Ricky Ricardo (played by Desi Arnaz), none could play the drums like Thibodeaux. Arnaz changed the boy's stage name to Richard Keith and hired Thibodeaux's father to work public relations for Desilu Studios.

In Thibodeaux's first season, an average of 44 percent of all homes with television sets tuned to each episode of *I Love Lucy*. Today, the week's top-rated program typically manages only about a third of that audience ratio.

Thibodeaux went on to appear in 48 episodes of

I Love Lucy and its derivatives *The Lucy-Desi Comedy Hour* and *Westinghouse Desilu Playhouse* in a four-year span.

From 1962-66, Thibodeaux had the part of Johnny Paul Jason, the

boyhood friend of Opie Taylor (Ron Howard), in a dozen episodes of *The Andy Griffith Show*.

Thus, as a child actor, Keith Thibodeaux achieved a rare feat: a recurring role on two television series



THEY NOW?

that hit number one in the Nielsen ratings.

Yet at age 15, Thibodeaux — his earnings frozen until 21 — found himself relying on the generosity of aunts and uncles in order to survive.

His father, who had brought him to Hollywood as a child actor, abandoned the family. Thibodeaux moved back home to Louisiana where his unemployed mother scrambled to earn a living and raise him and his five younger siblings.

His parents' divorce embittered Thibodeaux, and he blamed God for not stopping the family split.

Thibodeaux started smoking cigarettes and drinking beer. That spiraled into marijuana and LSD use. Being high on drugs became an everyday lifestyle. Although Thibodeaux at 19 became drummer for the rock band David and the Giants, a period of depression haunted him. "The devil had his

sights on me," he says.

In a period of particular turmoil and torment, Thibodeaux cried out to the Lord for help. Thibodeaux always had believed in his head that God existed but he didn't let the Lord rule his heart. Accepting a friend's invitation to a succession of charismatic meetings, Thibodeaux came to comprehend Jesus' atoning sacrifice. He also experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

"In a vision the Lord came to me brighter than the brightest sun," Thibodeaux explains. He describes his Paul-on-the-road-to-Damascus-like experience in detail in the 1994 book *Life After Lucy*.

"The Lord had mercy on me and showed himself as Jesus of Nazareth," Thibodeaux tells *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*. "I understood that Jesus died for me and all my sins were put on Him."

Thibodeaux began devouring the Bible every day and he persistently began evangelizing other members of the band, leader David Huff and Huff's twin brothers, Clayborn and Rayborn. Eventually the other three musicians accepted Jesus as their Savior and the

band converted to playing contemporary Christian songs. Thibodeaux stayed with the band for another decade, and many audience members gave their lives to the Lord at concerts.

Since 1989, Thibodeaux has been working with his wife, Kathy, as executive director of Ballet Magnificat!, a Christian outreach that has 300 students and two touring companies. The couple, married for 29 years, attends a full-gospel church in Jackson, Miss.

Although he doesn't excuse his father's actions, Thibodeaux reconciled with his father after becoming a Christian. "I realized how much God our Heavenly Father forgave me," he says.

Thibodeaux, now 54, still appears occasionally at *I Love Lucy* and *Andy Griffith Show* conventions.

Both series are top-10 entries among the greatest shows of all time according to *TV Guide*. The programs have been in syndicated reruns continuously since they went off the air, their popularity an indication of how Americans yearn for a more wholesome, slower-paced society.

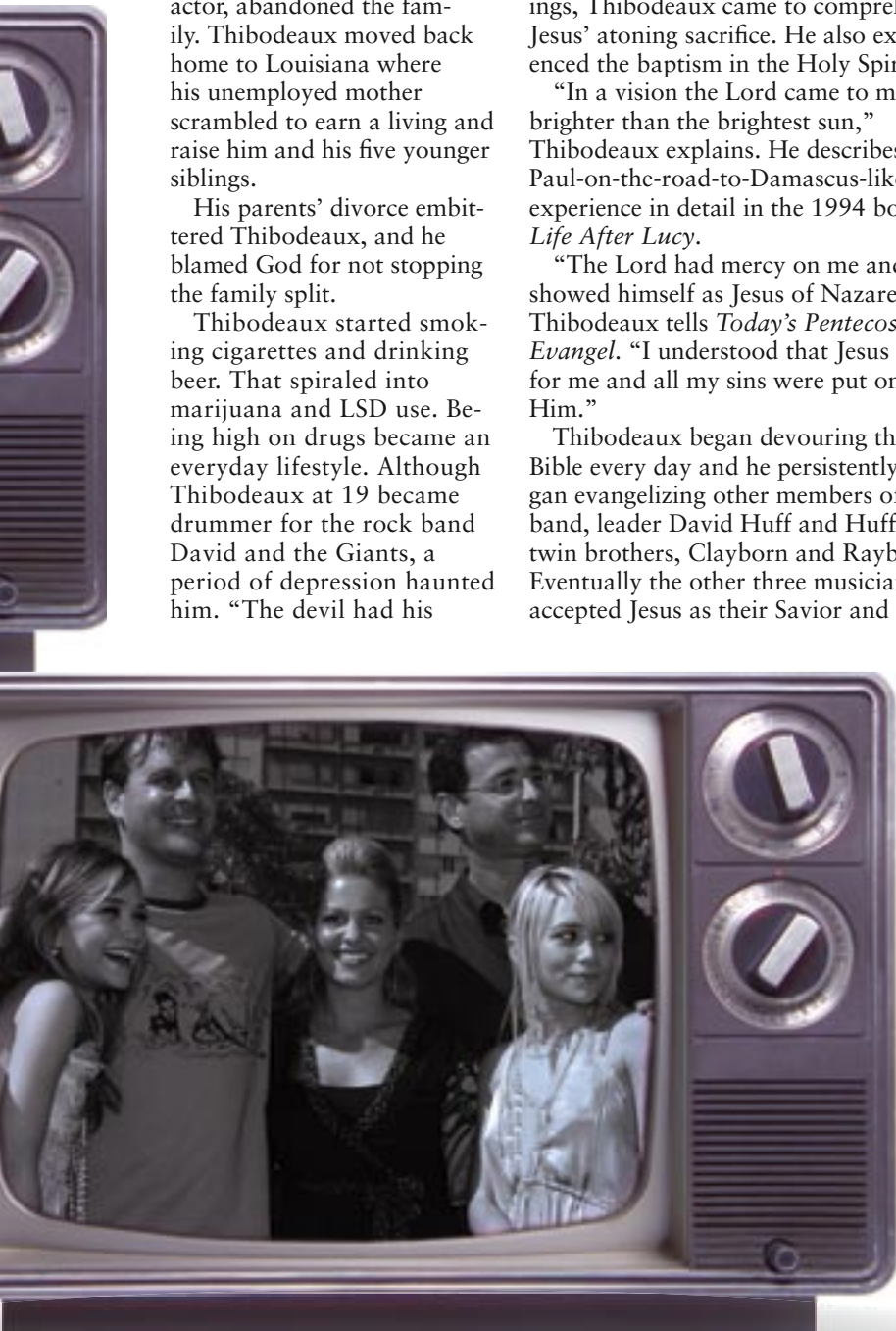
— John W. Kennedy

Full House star rediscovers her faith

Candace Cameron is best known for her role as the eldest sibling — D.J. Tanner — on the hit '80s series *Full House*. She was cast in the role when she was 10 years old and went on to play the part for eight seasons.

It was during those eight years that she would begin going to church, accept Christ as Savior, become rich and famous and walk away from the Lord.

"During my teenage years I had what one would consider a very good life," she writes on her Web site (candacecameronbure.net). "But, aside from my busy and exciting life, church had become more of an afterthought. I'd go when I had time, or when I wasn't too busy. It wasn't my first priority."



WHERE ARE



Today Cameron — whose brother Kirk Cameron starred in *Growing Pains* and later in the movie of *Left Behind* — is married to Valeri Bure, a professional hockey player. They have three children.

— Kirk Noonan

Fighting for family, life after M*A*S*H

Gary Burghoff almost never gives interviews anymore. The actor, best known for his role as Cpl. “Radar” O’Reilly in both the movie and television series *M*A*S*H*, is 62 and long retired to private life.

But in a February interview with Canadian radio talk show host Drew Marshall on Oakville, Ontario’s JOY 1250, Burghoff speaks candidly about a decision he made not long after he left *M*A*S*H*.

“Family, to me, became the most important thing,” he says of his rationale for exiting the show that defined his career. “I was not available as a father because of my work. That doesn’t stop when the work stops. Whenever you go out as a family, you’re always torn from family to deal with public recognition.”

Burghoff turned down other offers that followed. Unfortunately, leaving *M*A*S*H* couldn’t save his marriage. In the late 1970s, Burghoff moved back to Connecticut, his boyhood home, and began life as a single parent of his 4-year-old daughter.

While dealing with the divorce, Burghoff lost his father. It was a dark time, but it forced him to ask some critical questions.

“My father had said when I was in New York early on struggling as an actor that if you don’t know the Bible you don’t have a foundation,” Burghoff says. “I had told him from an agnostic point of view that the Bible was a very good book, but it wasn’t the only book. But after *M*A*S*H* I realized he might have something.

At 18 she moved out of her parents’ house and embraced the Hollywood lifestyle.

“I was able to do what I wanted because I had the money and the resources,” she says. “So when temptations arose, I’d often give in to them. But, when I stood back and looked at myself I thought, *I’m still a very good person.*”

It wasn’t until a few years later as

she read the book *Left Behind* that Cameron realized she was lacking a relationship with Christ.

“I prayed the sinner’s prayer ... in church when I was 12, but I didn’t know what my sin was,” she says, noting that she recommitted her life to Christ. “God has changed me in ways that words can’t describe. He has transformed the way I think and live my life. ... I can’t help but share the good news.”

THEY KNOW?

I had given my life over to the world instead of to God.”

For the next two years, Burghoff pursued an intense study of the Scriptures. It was life-changing.

“When you become that empty vessel that is ready to be filled,” he says, “the veil is lifted. You suddenly understand those words. That’s what happened. The Bible before was always an enigma to me. But now I could understand it. The Lord says, ‘Ask and you shall receive.’ And I was asking.”

Burghoff’s second marriage blessed him with two sons, but his growing faith created a distance between him and his wife.

“I’d married a wonderful woman,” he says, “but she was not walking the same Christian walk, so there was a great communication gap in the marriage.”

When they separated and she moved to California with their sons, Burghoff again put family before his own dreams. Although he had planned to return to his New England roots, he was determined to be a father to his sons.

“My choice was a very easy one,” he says. “I’m going to be a father to my kids first. Because that, like my walk with the Lord, is who I am. I’m a daddy.”

Burghoff moved across the country and lived down the street from his estranged wife for 12 years so they could raise their kids together.

“Fathers who don’t do that are sacrificing something wonderful,” he says. “A divorce is between two people, never between a parent and children. I know the Lord hates divorce, but He hates abandonment, I think, a lot more.”

Today, Burghoff enjoys traveling and promoting wildlife-related causes. His wildlife paintings reach a growing and appreciative audience. But spiritually, he keeps two points in focus — Christian fellowship and the Word.

“Without the Word,” he says, “I’m rootless, I have no foundation. Whenever things seem bleak, I go back to that source. If art is a personal reflection of the beauty you see in life, I want to go to the source, so I go to wildlife. I do the same thing with spiritual beauty.”

— Scott Harrup

John W. Kennedy is news editor and Kirk Noonan and Scott Harrup are associate editors of Today’s Pentecostal Evangel.

E-mail your comments to pe@ag.org.

Reaching Hearts Behind Closed Doors

Eurasia is home to some of the world’s most gospel-resistant religious groups.

God is helping us find ways to take Jesus to their world.

You can help too.

For more information, contact
Assemblies of God World Missions • Eurasia Regional Office
1445 North Boonville Avenue • Springfield, MO 65802-1894 • Phone: (417) 862-2781