



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Jim & Jill Kelly: A Family Restored – Part 1

Guest(s): Jim and Jill Kelly

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Dr. James Dobson: Well, hello everyone. I'm James Dobson and you're listening to Family Talk, a listener supported ministry. In fact, thank you so much for being part of that support for James Dobson Family Institute.

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome to Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh. Whether you are single or married, you know that not every marriage is perfect. It takes a lot of work, grace and a close walk with God to make a union last for a lifetime. Now on today's classic broadcast, you're going to hear a heartfelt interview that Dr. Dobson did with Jim and Jill Kelly. Jim Kelly is a Hall of Fame quarterback who played for 11 years with the Buffalo Bills. But despite his success on the field, his personal life and his relationship with his wife Jill we're in turmoil today. We'll look back to the beginning of their relationship and discuss the marital problems they faced and the parenting obstacles they dealt with.

First though, if you enjoy what you hear on family talk each and every day, make sure you get a copy of our 2023 Broadcast Collection. The five disc CD set is also available as a digital download, and we'll be happy to send it to you as our way of thanking you for your gift of any amount in support of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute today. Now, this collection includes interviews with guests like Charlie Kirk, Dr. Del Tackett, Lieutenant General Jerry Boykin, and more. To reserve your copy, all you have to do is go online to drjamesdobson.org/2023. All the information you need to complete the transaction is right there on that page. Again, that's drjamesdobson.org/2023. And thanks so much for your prayers and faithful financial support of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. And now without further ado, here is our own Dr. James Dobson to introduce our guest on today's edition of Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: Jim, of course, is known to football fans everywhere as a Hall of Fame NFL quarterback. He actually went to the University of Miami. I'm not going to hold that against him. But played quarterback there. And then was drafted in the NFL and played for the Buffalo Bills from 1986 to 1997 and led his team to four Super Bowls between 1990 and 1993, and that is a big deal as every football fan knows. And he's married to Jill. Jill is the founder and chairman of Hunter's Hope. That's an organization which seeks to confront the threat of a disorder, it's also a disease, which do you call it?

Jill Kelly: Krabbe disease is what we call it. It's a leukodystrophy and a lysosomal disorder. Those are big words that most people-

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah, genetic is what that means, right?

Jill Kelly: Yes. Right.

Dr. James Dobson: Right. And that has all kinds of neurological implications.

Jill Kelly: Right.

Dr. James Dobson: Yes. What we're going to talk about that is we'll learn that cause is something that's very close to the Kellys heart. Jill has also written a number of books, including her memoir called *Without a Word: How a Boy's Unspoken Love Changed Everything*. And that's what we're going to talk about. Hey, well, I want to explain, these folks live in Aurora, New York, right?

Jill Kelly: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: Western New York.

Jill Kelly: Right.

Jim Kelly: Right outside of Buffalo.

Dr. James Dobson: Right. And you all jumped on a plane today with short notice and flew all the way to Colorado, and we're going to do this program and then you're going home later today. But the fact that you would come here and be with us means a lot to me, and I really appreciate it. Jill, I'm going to start with you. How did you meet this man? How'd you all get acquainted?

Jill Kelly: That's a popular question these days.

Jim Kelly: Yeah, because we both have different memories of exactly what occurred on that night. But no, they weren't too crazy.

Jill Kelly: Well, I just graduated from college. I was invited by some friends to go to a party at Jim's house. He was notorious during the Super Bowl years and really throughout his NFL career of having parties at his home after every home game. And all the players would go. So a friend who knew a friend knew a friend, you know how that goes, invited myself and a sorority sister friend of mine to go to his party. Of course, we are going. We went to the party and eventually somewhere in the middle of the night we were introduced to each other, and that's when we officially met. And towards the end of the evening, Jim was flirting here and there throwing ice cubes at me from across the room. And then-

Dr. James Dobson: You did that?

Jim Kelly: That's one of the things that I don't remember about this conversation here.

Dr. James Dobson: Jill, you were skeptical of this man to some degree.

Jill Kelly: Oh, well, yeah, of course. I mean, Jim was the Hall of Fame quarterback. Everybody knew who he was. Everyone wanted a piece of him in some way. And I was fresh out of college and very naive, but yet caught up in all that his life meant. And so I was attracted to him in that sense, but not enough to allow myself to just fall into that. So that night, at the end of the night when we met, he asked me for my phone number, and he actually put it this way, he said, "So how do I get ahold of you?" And I said, "Well, you don't."

Dr. James Dobson: Did you?

Jill Kelly: So I left without giving him my number. And it just so happened that that was a good thing to do.

Jim Kelly: Yeah, it was. And then it ends up this way is because I found out she had a boyfriend. That's why she said that she couldn't give me her number. And then when I found out she broke up with her boyfriend, I called her. But I knew she knew I was going to call her. So she broke up with him knowing that that phone call was coming pretty soon.

Jill Kelly: He's got a good story.

Jim Kelly: Of course.

Jill Kelly: Isn't it good? Good.

Jim Kelly: And look where we are today.

Jill Kelly: Right.

Dr. James Dobson: How long did it take you to get married?

Jill Kelly: We dated for probably about four years, and then I moved to Florida with some girlfriends of mine from high school, and then Jim eventually asked me to move in with him. At this time, neither of us are walking with the Lord. We do not have a relationship with Him. We're raised in very moral households. So I took into consideration what my parents would think and how they would feel about that decision. But I knew it had to be my decision, and I chose to move in with Jim.

Dr. James Dobson: Did you know it was wrong?

Jill Kelly: I knew that it was not the right thing to do, but I didn't know the magnitude of the decision at the time because I was selfish. I was living for myself and wanting the things of this world and what a lifestyle with Jim could offer. So I moved in with Jim and four months later I was pregnant. And we share this. And whenever I have an opportunity to speak at women's events, I share this because it's part of my testimony. It's part of what God has redeemed in my life. It's a decision that I made and that Jim made during those years of not walking with the Lord. But I'll tell you, I am absolutely for abstinence, and our girls will be abstinent until they're married. Right, Jim?

Jim Kelly: You better believe it.

Jill Kelly: We've got this all figured out. They'll be abstinent. And they know our story. I've been set free and I don't carry any shame with me because Jesus has paid the penalty for that shame, and I'm not going to walk in that guilt or shame when I know that He has also redeemed her life and that she has prayed fervently before her daddy came to know Jesus. She was fervently praying more than anyone for his salvation. So God got ahold of her heart and not only has He redeemed us, He redeemed her.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, the first child was not Hunter, is that right?

Jill Kelly: No. No. Hunter was our second child.

Dr. James Dobson: Second child. Were you married by then?

Jill Kelly: Yes, we were.

Jim Kelly: Yeah, it was a pretty exciting story because we were very blessed to have Erin. And then of course Jill and I got married, and then that's when my football career became no longer. I decided to retire from the game. I played ever since I was a little boy. And I remember that day, it was January 31st, 1997 when I decided to walk away from the football field and start focusing on the family. And Jill was pregnant at the time. Of course, two weeks later on Valentine's Day, which is my birthday, our son was born. When he was born, I mean, first thing I said was, "I thank God that he's healthy." From that point on, after he became sick at four months of age, that's when Jill's and myself's direction started going opposite directions.

Dr. James Dobson: You began to suspect that there was something not right with Hunter.

Jill Kelly: Oh, yeah. But we did. We took him home from the hospital, and he seemed absolutely fine. But it seemed very shortly after he was home, maybe within the first week, two weeks, he became very irritable and was crying almost all day except for when he was sleeping. So initially you're talking to the pediatrician, they said, "Well, he's showing signs of colic probably, so stop nursing and try formula and try different sorts of bottles." And so we did that. So initially he was

diagnosed with colic. And we knew, "Okay, no, this has got to be more than colic. It is taking him an hour to get an ounce of formula down."

So that alone, and he's crying at the same time, so you're thinking, "Something is seriously wrong." And so we went in for a well visit. And mind you, this is a well visit, a visit when you're expecting to go in there and they're just going to measure him and measure his head and his body and tell you all these great things that he's continuing to progress. And we walked out that day with a diagnosis of cerebral palsy, and we were shocked, but we-

Jim Kelly: Shocked.

Dr. James Dobson: Devastated.

Jim Kelly: I was floored, devastated. You name it.

Jill Kelly: We knew though that you can start intervention, and that's exactly what they said. "You can start intervention right away, physical therapy, occupational therapy." So we did that, immediately we started intervening in every way that we could. But still, and a mother knows, as a mom, you just know. And then he would start to have seizures. And eventually we did see a neurologist when Hunter was four months old and he was diagnosed through a blood work, some tests through blood work with Krabbe disease. And when we sat across from our neurologist, she said, "He has been diagnosed with Krabbe disease. He will not live to see his second birthday. And there's no cure, there's no treatment, and if you would like, we will put a feeding tube in." And these were-

Dr. James Dobson: Because he couldn't swallow?

Jill Kelly: Right.

Jim Kelly: Exactly, yeah. And then it got to a point where I said, "God, why? Why son born on my birthday? Why does he have to be sick?" And I was mad at God. Anybody that tried to make me feel better, wind up making me feel worse. And that's when I said very shortly after that, within months after that, Jill and I went totally separate ways as far as our belief. Jill wind up seeking the Lord, and I wind up running away from the Lord and-

Dr. James Dobson: And running away from Jill through a degree.

Jim Kelly: Pretty much we ran away from each other, yeah. And it really almost ruined our relationship, our marriage, and it took a hit for eight and a half years. We were not very good communicators. Jill would run to her mother, talk to her mother about things. I would go to my brother's. We would never talk amongst each other until we sat down with a marriage counselor. And then we started talking about things. And also I started learning things when Jill was writing this book that I never knew about her. Until we started communicating is when we finally

started realizing more about each other. But from that point on, Jill went through a lot.

Jill Kelly: And Jim is so right, and I'm sure, Dr. Dobson, you know this in dealing with families for many years, that men and women deal with tragedy totally opposite. And my expectations, I heaped expectations on Jim that he was never able to fulfill. They could only be fulfilled in Christ. I didn't know that though until I knew Christ. So here I was dealing with my own grief and not necessarily the loss of Hunter because he was still alive, but the loss of our hopes, our dreams, just all that I knew that Jim had wanted in a son. That I had given him the son and now the son is sick. And wrestling with Hunter's 24-hour care. I mean, he was 24-hour care nonstop around the clock. And we had a two year old.

Dr. James Dobson: You actually had to sleep with him or did sleep with him.

Jill Kelly: Oh yeah. I slept with him for eight and a half years. So heap that onto a marriage.

Dr. James Dobson: Because? Explain why.

Jill Kelly: First of all, by the time he was eight months old, he was on oxygen 24 hours a day and he needed suctioning and he was on a feeding pump and he needed chest therapy every four hours.

Dr. James Dobson: Can you imagine that?

Jill Kelly: And as he got older, his complications got worse. I mean, eventually he wasn't able to blink anymore, and we had to monitor his eyes with special gel and putting special things that my mom made for his eyes. And then he had his hip dysplasia. So all those things. But I have to just emphasize that. So here you have this family in complete turmoil, and we are treating Hunter like he's dying for the first year and a half of his life because that's what we were told. We are hopeless until our great hope, until Jesus intervened, and then we all started living. And that was the beauty of when Christ did intervene and when I wanted Heaven for very selfish reasons.

When Hunter was diagnosed, I believed that here's this little boy. He's going to go to Heaven. I didn't understand the things of Heaven. I didn't understand the things of God or His son Jesus. I didn't know any of those things, but I wanted heaven. So for selfish reasons, I'm running after Heaven. But I find Jesus, the author of Heaven, praise God. And Jim is running in an opposite direction. So I am consumed at home with Hunter and seeking after God. And Jim, he's working, providing for the family, doing NBC, ESPN, all of those things, but running away from everything that was going on at home.

Roger Marsh: I'm Roger Marsh, and you are tuned to Family Talk. We have reached the midpoint of Dr. James Dobson's conversation with Jim and Jill Kelly. Now before we rejoin today's broadcast, I want to express our gratitude for your generosity toward this ministry. The James Dobson Family Institute is completely supported by you, our faithful listeners. Learn how to partner with us to fight for families by visiting drjamesdobson.org or calling 877-732-6825. Okay, let's return now to the remainder of Dr. Dobson's interview with Jim and Jill Kelly, right here on Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: You had hoped when Hunter was born and diagnosed that that would pull Jim back into the family, didn't you?

Jill Kelly: Well, I assumed because that's what happened for me. I mean, all of my priorities changed, and then when the Lord intervened in my heart, I mean, then everything changed. But yeah, and that's why I say when I say expectations, and now I see how they were not right. My expectations on Jim probably helped to push him away to a certain degree, and God had to do that work in my heart, and it took time and it took self-control and all of the things that I was lacking when I was living apart from the Lord.

Dr. James Dobson: Jim, what were you thinking during that time?

Jim Kelly: Well, the whole thing with Hunter was, and Jill, we just looked at things differently. One of the things, I was born and raised in a family of six boys. I was always told never to cry.

Dr. James Dobson: Five of them played football, didn't they?

Jim Kelly: We all played. So all six of us played.

Dr. James Dobson: All six.

Jim Kelly: We played beat on each other. You name it, we did it. But I was always told never to cry. When I'd start shedding tears as a kid, my brothers would say, "I'll give you something to cry about." And they'd hit you harder. Imagine being raised six boys. So my way of grieving over Hunter was not to cry until I was on my own. I now know that that really hurt her because she at times probably thought I didn't care. And she was used to holding Hunter a certain way, and this is one of the things that drove me a little further away, when I would hold him, I was never holding him the right way. And even though Jill, because she was there with him every single day, and because we both loved him so much, but that almost drove me away from holding Hunter because I never could do it right.

But now as I look back on it and see all the things that Jill went through, I'd like to smack myself upside the head because we do, we handle things differently. When she ran to Jesus, I ran away and my own way of going to my buddies.

She'd have Monday night Bible study, I'd be watching Monday Night Football. So nothing wrong with Monday night Bible study because that's when I usually have our men's fellowship now.

Jill Kelly: Or nothing wrong with Monday Night Football.

Jim Kelly: Exactly. But the bottom line is we handled things so differently, and that was what was driving us apart. And then I'd come home, but I didn't have Jesus in my heart and I didn't know that. But until I did, I can look back on it now and say, "Now I know why I did the things I did. Now I know why Jill did and said the things she did." Because she was trying to bring me in when I was running from it, because early in my career, I had the good Lord pushed on me and it turned me off. When-

Dr. James Dobson: You mean people tried to witness to you?

Jim Kelly: Oh, in our locker room, too many times. And I'm always one, to be a leader, I always said, "It's not what you say, it's how you say it to somebody." And I think some of the players on our team went about it in the wrong way. I really do. It's not what you say, it's how you say it to somebody. How you get them to believe in your beliefs, whether it's on the football field, whether it's in your church, or whether it's in your business, being able to have people understand where you're coming from and have the passion to have them seek for it and understand where you're coming from. And it took me a while, but finally I got it.

Dr. James Dobson: You guys were a family in a great deal of difficulty, weren't you?

Jim Kelly: Yes, we were.

Dr. James Dobson: I mean, your marriage is falling apart. You've got this little boy that you both love, and yet the demands of taking care of him must have been exhausting.

Jim Kelly: It was exhausting for not only Jill, but exhausting for her mother. We had a lot of people in and out of our homes. And then we decided to have another girl. So we added to the family with a girl by the name of Camryn. And thank God Camryn, she carries the gene like Jill and I do. Eryn, our oldest daughter, our 15-year-old doesn't carry the gene at all, so she never has to worry about it. Then there's Hunter who has the disease. So we hit every element of Krabbe leukodystrophy you can.

Dr. James Dobson: He lived for eight years, didn't he?

Jill Kelly: Unbelievable. He lived to be eight and a half years. And it's just a testimony that God ordains every single day that we've been given. And Jim will give praise to the way my mother and I cared for Hunter. But I know without a doubt, and I'm thankful that we were able to take care of him, but I know that it was Christ

alone who sustained Hunter, who provided joy in the midst of all of his suffering. And ultimately, it was our one and only son, his suffering that brought us to the only suffering of Christ. And I can say these things because I have buried myself in God's Word because I had nowhere else to go. And that's how I felt. So for years, and I feel even more desperate for the Lord now than I did when Hunter was here. But I literally consumed myself with the Word of God, and I am still consumed to this day for survival.

When Christ intervened and we started to treat Hunter like he was living, we started to treat him like he was living. We took him snowmobiling. Yes, we had the oxygen in tow. Yes, we had the suction machine next to us in a separate snowmobile. But we treated him like he was living. So we were going to allow him to have every opportunity, horseback riding, and he loved horses. He loved, loved, loved his sisters, and they spent a ton of time with him, and they still miss him desperately. But Jim, doing the things that he was able to do with Hunter, you probably want to share those.

Jim Kelly: Yeah, because you have to do the guy things. And I know we would sit down and we'd watch football games together. And what I would do with Hunter, I'd sit down and if Buffalo Bills weren't doing very well that particular day, I'd say, "Hunter, we're going to take a little intermission here." I'd go over to my archives and pull out Daddy's football games, which we usually won except in the Super Bowls, but we won't talk about that. But I'd pull out some of the good games and show him how Daddy would drop back and I'd replay the good plays.

Dr. James Dobson: And he would understand the games?

Jim Kelly: Oh, yes.

Jill Kelly: Yeah.

Jim Kelly: Oh, yes. And you can tell because when we used to sit down and watch games together, or I'd dress up, I'd have my camouflage outfit on, and I'd do turkey calls with him, I'd do out calls and do all my calls with him, had them all, I'd show them all, or do the rescue heroes, he would seldomly need suctioning. And when his mind is on something that he really, really enjoys and he's feeling good, you don't need to suction him. And that's when you continue to keep doing what you're doing. But just love those times. And then having Jill and then take him snowmobiling and some of the things that you would think for a child that couldn't walk, talk, couldn't really do anything, had no motor skills. But inside you knew he was loving to be able to do those things. It just is unbelievable.

Dr. James Dobson: He really did that without being able to even express himself, bring you all to the Lord and to each other.

Jim Kelly: And so many other people too.

Jill Kelly: Oh, yes.

Jim Kelly: It wasn't just us. It took me a little bit longer, but Jill, her mother, her father.

Jill Kelly: My father.

Jim Kelly: Her brother.

Jill Kelly: My brother.

Jim Kelly: And sister-in-law.

Jill Kelly: My sister-in-law.

Jim Kelly: My brother.

Jill Kelly: Jim's brother, his wife.

Jim Kelly: So many people. Because I mean, he never spoke a word, but he changed so many people's lives. And even through our foundation, when we have families coming up to us, holding their children in their arms and thanking us for our foundation and thanking us because they knew by our son's suffering, we are helping others. And automatically, I rewind the tape back to when Hunter was diagnosed, when all those people kept coming up to me saying, "Jim, you are a chosen father. Through your son, you will change lives."

It took me a while to understand that. I get it now. It did, it took me a while. It took years. But I finally get it, and I wish I would've known how it feels, and I wish I would've got it a long time ago because right now I'm on a cloud that we are flying and we are now helping people. And I always say this because Hunter, even though he'll never get to run out on the football field and hear 80,000 screaming fans, he's going to do greater things. Without speaking a word, he's going to change the lives of thousands and thousands and thousands of kids.

Dr. James Dobson: Our time has really gotten away from us. I want to make reference to the title of your book again, *Without a Word: How a Boy's Unspoken Love Changed Everything*. So where we're going, and I'd like to do another program with you, is that the Lord used Hunter to heal your relationship.

Jim Kelly: Amen.

Dr. James Dobson: He's in Heaven today. He's not with you, but he played a role without being able to speak. Will you stay with us next time and we will pick up right here?

Jim Kelly: Sounds good.

Jill Kelly: Yes. Thank you.

Roger Marsh:

What an incredible story about how God moves in our lives through all the ups and downs. If you want to hear more about Jim and Jill Kelly, be sure to join us again tomorrow for part two of this powerful conversation right here on Family Talk. They'll be sharing with Dr. James Dobson about how they repaired their marriage after dealing with some very hard challenges. And by the way, if you'd like to listen to today's program again, or if you'd like to learn more about their ministry called Hunter's Hope, visit our broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk.

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Announcer:

This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.