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SPEAKERS

Allison, Gwen



Allison 00:02

Hello, homemakers and Welcome to Season Seven of the art of home podcast, where we are exploring how homemakers cultivate a place to belong. I'm your host Allison weeks. I am a wife, a mom to four grown kids. And I have been practicing the art of home for 30 years. We have a great season lined up for you in the weeks to come. We will be hearing from Homemakers at all different stages. And we will dive deep into the importance of how we use words in the home based on a chapter out of Edith Shaffers classic, The Hidden Art of Homemaking. I don't want you to miss a single episode so make sure you are following or subscribed to the show on whichever listening app you use. Also, be sure you're subscribed to our weekly newsletter. And if you are make sure it's not going to your junk mailbox. Every Friday during a season of The Art of home, not on breaks, but during the season, you will receive homemaker Happy Mail. Our newsletter always includes updates and links for what is new that week, as well as what's coming up. If there's anything new on the horizon, or even just an idea that we're tossing around, the newsletter subscribers will hear about it first. I will let you know what my family and I have been up to that week. And I often share something from my homemaking story, including recipes, memories and resources that I think might be helpful for you in your practice of the art of home. It's totally free and we will not spam your inbox with tons of email I promise. Just click the link in the show notes. Or go to the artofhomepodcast.com/subscribe. You may have noticed that our historical homemaker hints are not appearing in every single episode. They will be back but in limited editions of The Art of Home, you won't hear them on every single episode just due to time constraint, I value your time and I want to bring you the best content possible in a timely manner. Which means keeping the episodes to around one hour or maybe a little less. So never fear Mrs. Child, Marion, Margaret Sangster and other friends from the 19th century and early 20th centuries will return during some of our shorter interview episodes. We have a great show for you today to kick off this new season, I'm chatting with my friend Gwen Cunningham, about her 36 year practice of the art of home. Gwen worked as a social worker and a group home supervisor while keeping a home with her husband Paul, who taught high school. Together they raised three kids and just recently gained another adult child in Paul's daughter, Jen, who sought out her birth father about four years ago. God is telling an amazing redemptive story through them, which Gwen graciously shares with us in this interview. Besides that, she has so much wisdom

to impart the kind that comes with years of experience, and it is my honor to share with you Gwen's story of home. All right, I am here with my friend Gwen Cunningham. And before we go back to the beginning of your story, could you just tell us a little bit about who you are today.

G Gwen 03:16

Okay, well, I'm a wife of 36 years. My husband is Paul. I'm a mother of three children, Seth, Logan, and Jessica. And a stepmother of Paul's daughter, Jen, who we just met four years ago, this month. And a grandmother of seven. So Jen has six children. And Jessica just had a baby that's nine months old. I'm a retired school social worker. And right now I'm involved in the AWE ministry, helping teach the class with Sandi Goforth. And I'm a real estate investor. We have some rental properties and I'm learning to be an artist.

A Allison 04:01

Man. You are a busy lady. Yeah, I can't wait to hear all about these things. That's awesome. Okay, so let's let's jump back to the very beginning. When did you become a homemaker?

G Gwen 04:16

Well, I was thinking about it, I think when I moved into the dorm in college, okay, because I was so excited to have matching bedspreads and room and all that. So that was probably 40 years ago.

A Allison 04:35

Okay. All right. Did you have roommates in your dorm?

G Gwen 04:39

Yes, I had one roommate. We lived in an old dorm. And so the rooms were big and it was nice. That's fun. I lived there two years and then I moved off campus into a house so that was really fun. Wow. Yeah, that was big time. Of course, my roommate. I shared a room with the Girl and then the third girl had her own room. So we had matching bedspreads and dishes and pots and pans and all that. That's so fun. So

A Allison 05:09

how did that work out? Did you have skills? When you started kind of keeping your own little home in the dorm? And then in your your college house?

G Gwen 05:18

Yes. Well, I have one sister, she's younger than me. And so my mom taught us to cook and she taught me to sew, I've made a lot of clothes. That was back in the 80s, when girls made their clothes sometimes. And we had to clean the house every Saturday. So we learned all all that stuff. And then my dad taught me, you know, like to mow the lawn and to change the tire on my car, that type of thing. So I think I was fairly independent. Yeah, in like doing my laundry and cooking, but it was a learning curve at first figure out how to plan a menu and go to the store and buy all the stuff. And I think that's a real eye opener when you have to start doing all that work yourself. I agree. Yeah. And then I'm like, Oh, my gosh, my mom spent so much time.

A Allison 06:15

Yeah. Was she a full time? stay at home mom? Or

G Gwen 06:19

did she work always worked, okay. Which makes me admire her even more, because she worked all day. And then she came home and did all this stuff, and then drove us around to all our lessons and Girl Scouts and stuff like that. So yeah,

A Allison 06:35

I mean, it's like having two jobs really. So is your sister older than you are young, she's

G Gwen 06:41

younger than she is younger. Okay, three years younger. Okay, so we were pretty close in age, as far as you know, being able to help with chores, although we were very grumbly and didn't like to do it. So I feel bad about that now.

A Allison 06:55

Yeah. I mean, I think most kids are like that. So well. Okay. So how about after you? When did you meet your husband?

G Gwen 07:03

I met him my freshman year in college. Okay. And then we dated all throughout college. And then we got married after I graduated. I was in my first year of graduate school when we got married.

A Allison 07:15

Okay. And so then how was it different going from living on your own as a college girl with

roommates to living now as a married woman?

G

Gwen 07:26

Um, well, I think a few of the main things were getting used to living with a man instead of a woman. And then, oh, my parents paid for my college. And so I worked like in the summers, but that was my spending money. Right? Right, and really worry about money. But then I got married, and I'm in graduate school, and he's doing whatever he can to earn money. So suddenly, I had to think about how much I was spending at the grocery store. Shop on a budget and I got really into couponing. That's when you know, back when they had three, you know, three, multiply the coupons times three and stuff like that. Right? Right. It was always fun days looking at I save \$30 I know. I know.

A

Allison 08:17

That was a yeah, there were there were even shows about like coupon clipping people and stuff on TV. That was a big thing. Well, what was a something that was was that you would you say budgeting was one of the hardest things for you to learn how to do or were there any other skills in the home that you had a real steep learning curve for?

G

Gwen 08:36

That the shopping on a budget, but also, my parents were from Nebraska and they were meat and potatoes diet all grew up in Mexico on the mission field, and he liked rice and beans and Mexican food. So I didn't know how to cook that. So I didn't know how to cook anything he liked. But my mother in law, Helen, his mom, she just took me under her wing and taught me how to make everything that he liked to eat. And so Oh, that's that was really, really fun to get to. Yeah, bond with her over that.

A

Allison 09:12

Do you feel like you've kind of mastered it over the years?

G

Gwen 09:15

Yeah. Although he'd be happy if we ate beans and rice every day, but I don't really like it that much.

A

Allison 09:24

What were you studying in graduate school?

G

Gwen 09:25

G Gwen 09:25

Social work. I have a master's in social work. Okay.

A Allison 09:29

And then you said you were a retired school social worker. And so you did that all throughout your kids growing up.

G Gwen 09:36

I did work throughout my kids growing up. I wasn't in school social work till the end, I was more in medical field. Okay. I started off Lumpkin state school working with development, developmentally delayed people. At that time, they were trying to move people out into group homes instead of being institutionalized To the ones who are higher functioning. And so I was involved in getting group homes set up and overseeing them to make sure they got good care. And placing people in those homes. And so we when we moved to Seguin, I worked for a little mom and pop group home. They had two homes, it was an elderly couple that owned them. So I was the administrator of that and the social worker. So

A Allison 10:28

well, that's really interesting. I don't know anything about group home situations. I mean, anytime I hear the word home, my ears kind of perk up, because that's, you know, what we talk about here. So yeah. What is that like? And I mean, what can you just explain what a group home is? Sure,

G Gwen 10:44

well, there's different levels of cognitive functioning. So you have high level people who they could cook, or they could take care of their clothing or in go to a job. But they need supervision, because they don't know how to manage their money, or they can't drive that type of thing. And then there's, you know, lesser functioning people who maybe need more care with their daily bathing or eating and that type of thing. And so I was in a level, one home, which was the highest level of functioning. And so we had staff that would teach the people how to cook. And they would not do the cooking, but they would watch them and help them, make sure they were safe and that type of thing. The staff did the shopping and and all that. But then the residents, they had to maintain the home, do the chores, they did their own laundry and that type of thing. And then they went to a sheltered workshop during the day to work. And then some of our residents actually had jobs in the community. Like, we worked real closely with Schlitterbahn, and we had three or four of our ladies that were greeters there, and they would put the armbands on people and see if they had questions or anything. So

A Allison 12:05

Schlitterbahn is a local waterpark. Just putting that out there for the audience. Well, that's why I thought not everybody. Well, I mean, we have listeners in Germany, and they might be like I

thought, not everybody. Well, I mean, we have listeners in Germany, and they might be like, I don't know. So how did you see? I mean, because I'm just thinking of the connections here between a home with a nuclear family, mom, dad, kids, versus this kind of a home situation. You know, were there parallels there? Did they make, did the people in the homes make connections with one another? Where they were like functioning as a family?

G Gwen 12:35

Yeah. Because, you know, they had a sit down dinner, and breakfast. They packed their lunches and took those to work with I imagine they worked, ate lunch with their friends. But so yeah, I mean, they had like a chore chart. So maybe two or three people were involved in cooking, or others were doing the cleanup. And they ate meals together. They did activities together. Cool. So yeah, it was kind of like a family in our case. Because it was so small. And our, our, the owners were Christians, and they they paid well, they gave bonuses. So we our employees stayed for, you know, some had been there 10 years. So they were like family, too.

A Allison 13:21

So how did it affect your role in your home? The work, you know, working, because like we said with your mom, this is like having two jobs when you you're trying to run your own home and have a full time job. But then also just your perspective on your home. I'm just curious as to

G Gwen 13:41

well, it was difficult because I was on call 24-7. So I could have been there all day and walk in the door and my pagers going off. Okay, somebody fell or in I would have, you know, there was certain protocols that had to be followed. And so it seemed like there was always interruptions. Yeah. When I worked at Lufkin state school, I can remember like, being disappointed or, you know, kind of feeling sad about something. And I would just go out to the unit where the people were basically in a vegetative state, and just walking around in there, and I was like, I don't have any problems. Yeah, so yeah, I don't know if that answered the

A Allison 14:28

question. Yeah,

G Gwen 14:29

I was just I do think that it helped me because there was so much structure in the group homes, and especially like the training, we would have a goal like so and so will learn to iron their clothes. And we would break it down into steps like firstly would learn to turn the iron on and set it to the right temperature and they would learn how to do a shirt or whatever. And so when my kids were really little, just like trying to get them all ready in the morning for school. I had this aha moment one morning because my son Logan, who's very sequential, he would get stuck. Well, there was one morning that his clothes were in the dryer. And he couldn't get

dressed yet. But that, that messed up his order, and so he couldn't go on. And so I made like these little charts similar to what I would do at the group homes with the training, but I did it like for kids, and I made this staircase and I had little picture of them. And so it had all his steps for getting ready, and he could go up the stairs. And so that really helped him see, okay, I can skip this step and go on to the next one. So yeah, but and just help learning those cognitive learning styles of my own kids. Because Logan was so sequential, but that's why he's a good pole vaulter. So it's very sequential. Yeah. Everything right in this perfect order.

A

Allison 16:01

Oh, that makes sense. Okay. And I'm sure we're going to talk some more about that, because I have questions about that experience. But But going back to the working in the managing the home and all of that, what were some of the things that you did, to sort of set and keep priorities? Because it's a lot to juggle? You know, and how did you get it all done? Are you a list maker? Or are you What did you do?

G

Gwen 16:22

I am and that was one of the biggest challenges was just the time and the energy to get everything done. I made a lot of lists. I prayed a lot. Sometimes I just cried. I guess I can remember just going to bed at night just being so tired and thinking of all the things I did wrong, or you know, I was yelled at the kids or. But if the Lord's mercies are new every morning, and my husband was very supportive, because he was a teacher, you know, I kind of had to work because teachers don't make a lot of money. But he had the time to be home and do things with the kids. So it was a good balance. And he helped a lot. And then as the kids got older, they just had to help. But that was a hard balance, too. Because their school, they had so much homework. And I didn't want to load them down with chores when they were spending a couple hours at home doing homework. So it was always hard to know what the right thing to do was but then, you know, I just had to make them do some things, especially when they got like into middle school, I can do all the laundry by myself. So it was like five loads a day of laundry just to keep everybody in track uniforms. And yeah, band outfits and all that stuff. It is a lot.

A

Allison 17:49

It is a lot. So how did you keep your spiritual growth a priority during these years?

G

Gwen 17:55

Um, I remember a conversation I had with my mother in law, Helen one time. Because I was really struggling with how do I have time to spend with the Lord and to fill my cup? And she's, and I was expecting her to say, well, you know, this is a hard season and there'll be other seasons. And she said, Well, you will make time for what's important to you. Oh, I was like, Oh, yeah. And so I don't mind getting up early. So I would get up early and just have my time in the Bible and prayer and just the reinforcement that on the days that I did that everything went a little more smoothly, and I seem to have more energy. Kept me doing that. Yeah, I

mean, I wasn't perfect. I didn't do it every day. But that worked for me. Cool, just to give my day to the Lord and and do my work as unto the Lord. Because in my jobs, the more work I did, the more there would be to do. And so and I had to really learn to just be okay with not getting it all done and saying it'll be waiting here for me tomorrow when I come. So, but I have a family too.

A Allison 19:15

Yeah, yeah. What about expectations? So were there some expectations that you might have brought into married life family life that you had to let go of or that didn't match up with reality?

G Gwen 19:32

I think so. You know, when I think back on that time, I think we were so clueless. I don't know that we really like envisioned what it was going to be like to be married. And but I think like looking at my parents, they were a very traditional gender role model of expectations. So I did expect my husband to go around at night and lock all the doors like my dad did or to keep the cars in perfect repair in he just that wasn't the way he was raised. And so I have had to change those expectations, some and some just expressing. I feel safe when you lock the doors. Cuz I grew up in Houston and he grew up out in the country where?

A Allison 20:24

Yeah, that's a big difference. Yeah. That's a big difference. what about some particular special challenges that you may have faced in your homemaking journey?

G Gwen 20:39

Well, I think I childcare was so hard. And when I had my first baby, Seth, to me, that was just like this huge mountain, like, how do I find somebody to babysit? And how do I know they're going to be good, and that they're going to take care of him. And that just seemed so daunting to me. And then later, just having a big important meeting, and sure enough, one of the kids would be sick. So what am I going to do, but God is so gracious. And when we lived in Seguin, we got involved in this childcare Co Op. I don't know if you've ever heard of one. No, it was started with a group of people in the La Leche League. They were breastfeeding mothers. So it was random women that didn't know each other. But they they formed a it was 12 families, and they had bylaws and everything in so they had tickets, you would earn a ticket for each hour that you babysat. And then you could spend those tickets when you needed a babysitter. And so it was all very formal, like there was rules about if your child has a temperature, you have to call if they are okay with babysitting, that's fine. And if not, you need to let them know. And and so there was a big resource for babysitting that was free. And so we had monthly meetings. This was back before there was cell phones or apps or anything where we would have our Roll Call and our ticket count where you would say how many tickets you have. And then so whoever had the least tickets, or is the one you're supposed to call off to babysit so that they could earn some and sometimes people would say, Hey, I'm going to need tickets in a few

weeks, I'm going to have a babysitting night. And so every buddy would be like, oh, yeah, well, we'll have a date the babysitters already provided. And so that was good for having a date night because by the time you pay a sitter, you don't have any money left, anywhere. And especially with three kids. But as far as for working because I worked part time. And there was three of us women in the coop that worked part time and we had the flexibility. So we arranged our schedules so that one woman was babysitting while the other two were working. And so that worked out really great. And it didn't cost anything and then our children had these great friends. And another part of the coop was that we had a playgroup once a month at a different home. So the kids all knew each house and the parents and they were very comfortable, and it was fun for them to go there. So it wasn't stressful to leave them with someone where they're crying because they don't want you to leave. So yeah, that was really great.

A Allison 23:40

That's really cool. I've never heard of that. Well, let's move on and talk about hospitality. Okay. So what are some practical ways that you show hospitality?

G Gwen 23:50

Well, first of all, I like to look up definitions of words. Okay, so I was talking to my daughter about what do you remember about hospitality? And she's like, Well, what do you really mean by hospitality? So the definition is the friendly reception or treatment of guests and strangers. The quality or disposition of receiving and treating guests and strangers in a warm, friendly, generous way. Is that how you understood it? Yeah. Yeah. So that's cool. Well, so with my own family, I think that I showed hospitality by helping us to have a clean and comfortable, peaceful home and a place for them to have their friends over. And healthy food. And I did ask my daughter, what do you remember? And that's what she said, like, our house was always peaceful. Yeah. We've never had a TV. And so in the evenings, we would sit around in the living room and read books or listen to music, and that's what she remembered like listening to jazz music. That night in the evening, so I highly recommend it as my kids were reading on a college level by the time they were in middle school, that's amazing. So and they love to read.

A Allison 25:12

Wow, that's very inspiring. I know that I had a few friends growing up who didn't have a television and you know, they were the oddballs, right, it was so odd that they didn't have a television, but I think it's as a parent, now I can look back and I can say, Wow, kudos to their parents for making that choice. I think maybe it's a little harder in this generation, because we carry a whole entertainment, you know, industry in our pocket. But it's good to hear that you feel like it was worth going against the grain or swimming upstream in that way. And you saw the results of it and your kids.

G Gwen 25:49

I feel very blessed that I have a husband that's willing to do that. And was most women, I tell you, No, we don't have a TV. They're like, Oh, my gosh, the TV's on all the time at our house. And it drives me nuts

and it drives me nuts.

A

Allison 26:02

Was this your idea? Was this something you presented to him.

G

Gwen 26:06

We did an engaged couples seminar at our church before we got married. And they recommended you don't have a TV, your first year of marriage. Oh, really. And we just we really enjoyed it. And then we were too poor to buy one anyway. But people would offer I will give you a TV, but we didn't want one. And then when the kids came along, it was difficult. They felt like they were missing out sometimes. And I remember Paul would somehow mentioned in class to his students that we didn't have a TV and they'd be all your poor kids. I feel so sorry for him. What do y'all do? And he's like, Well, we go outside and play hide and seek or we ride bikes, or we go sailing. And and then by the end of it, they're like, Oh, I wish we didn't have a TV.

A

Allison 26:57

Yeah, I mean, it's, it's automatic. It's easy. You just sit down and turn it on and veg out, you know, and yeah, I get that. And especially for busy moms who have been caring for kids all day long. When the kids are at home, sometimes you just want to plop them in front of the TV and just let them zone out. So you can have a minute to breathe. And the last thing you want to do when dad gets home is now have to think of things to do. But it doesn't have to be complicated. Like you said, just put some music on, read some books, play some games together, go out I think another thing that I noticed about we used it, we had a TV, but we would limit screen time. And they would have like an allowance that they could use for screen time. And when they weren't using their allowance for screens, screen time they could. They had a list of things. It got to the point where they behinds on a board, you know, so I made like a list. Here's what you can do when you're not watching TV. And it really forces them to have to use a different part of their brain. Learn how to be creative and figure out go outside and write figure out what to do with themselves. And I think if you ask my kids now, they would probably say yes, that was we hated that you limited the screentime in them in that time. But we're so appreciative. Because I have really good strong readers to for the most part, my boys, I think they all had adventures together that they might not have had otherwise going outside romping around in the woods and things like that. So I'm not against a little bit of screentime. So mom can have a breather. I did that. But to put some limits on it, I think is really wise. So

G

Gwen 28:36

well. We didn't watch movies we would that was back in the day when you go to Hastings and rent a movie. So they weren't totally deprived, right?

A

Allison 28:48

How do you think that homemaking builds community build stronger communities? How does it

affect communities?

G

Gwen 29:00

Well, I think people are so lonely. And just to get an invitation to come to someone's home is just makes you feel so special. And it just doesn't happen that often anymore. I think maybe people feel like their house has to be perfectly clean. And I remember when we were building our Smithson Valley house, and it was Jessica's birthday and all it was the studs because we would stay out there every weekend. And I just had her birthday party there and they had a good time. But now when I look back on pictures of it, I think that's so pathetic that we were there but people were happy to come

A

Allison 29:45

you had it in the house that was just framed?

G

Gwen 29:48

Yes. We were building it ourselves. Right took us four years so I couldn't put our whole lives on hold. And every week we lived in Seguin and we were driving, we were driving out every weekend and we would just stay. We had. This is hilarious, but we built this tool shed and I had a microwave, a refrigerator and a crock pot in there and air mattresses. And we would just stay in there all weekend. So we didn't have to drive back and forth in a while back. You know, my son Logan is 30. He's almost 31 We were talking about something and he said, Yeah, I remember we were so poor. We lived in a tool shed. Please tell me you didn't ever tell your teachers we lived in a tool shed! No. Oh my gosh.

A

Allison 30:41

So how old were your kids when this during this time?

G

Gwen 30:45

Seth was nine. Logan was seven and Jessica would have been five. Okay, so they were little that Seth was running a jackhammer. And they helped. They were just complaining about this the other day, they we filled all like hundreds of sandbags for the foundation. And they were out there, I bought them each little shovel, and they filled sandbags for weeks. But at the time, we were going to this church where the original church members had all built each other's homes, so they could be debt free. Wow. So like our pastor, I don't know if he was a like a registered electrician, but he knew how to wire houses. So we built a house for another family in our church. They were also he was a teacher at the high school. And that was so fun, because it was kind of like an Amish barn raising, all the people in the church would come out the men would do the building, and the women would bring all the food and and so we kind of carried that over to when we moved out here because there was no way we could afford to live out here. And so like our pastor came, and wired helped us wire the house and taught us how

and in people from the church, we come out on the weekends and help. It was really fun. That's really so we built that house. And then we decided to downsize when the boys went off to college. So we built this house here on the north side of the lake.

A

Allison 32:12

Let's let's talk about some of the seasons of homemaking. What was the most difficult transition for you as a homemaker?

G

Gwen 32:20

I think because I enjoy my kids so much when they went off to college. That was the hardest time just letting go. Yeah. Not knowing, you know, are they ever gonna come back. But also, it was figuring out who I was now that I wasn't a full time mom, right? That was really hard. But I read this book, it was by Barbara Rainey about the empty nest. And my takeaway from it was that a lot of women deal with that loss by filling their life with busyness. And they don't really work through the grief or be purposeful about what their next season holds for them. And so when she recommended that you take a year, and make no commitments, and so we did that, and I really feel like we needed a year just to rest. Yeah. And that was after the last one left the home. And so I spent a lot of time praying about you know, what are you? What does God have for this next season of my life? And, and so that was real good. So I would recommend that to anybody that yeah, is dealing with all that it's really hard. It is really hard, but it's hard now to as they get married. And now my daughter has a baby of knowing my place and when advices appreciate it and when it's not. Right. And my daughter and I've had some good conversations about that. And just asking for grace. And I have said you're just gonna have to give me grace, because this is all new territory for me, right? I don't know how to be the parent of a woman with a baby. Yeah, a grown woman. That's not my little baby girl anymore.

A

Allison 34:17

Yeah, yeah. It's a totally different experience. It is I agree. So what is homemaking look like in this season. Right now. I know that you guys pretty recently earned a new family member. You gave him your family member that you were unaware of. So can you talk about that

G

Gwen 34:36

a little bit? I will let my husband's happy for me to talk about it. So when Paul was in high school, he had a little girlfriend and they got pregnant. And they told their parents and their parents packed up and moved her away and forbade them to see each other. And so that was a really hard time for her and they and for him And they made her put the baby up for adoption. And so he really didn't have any say in what happened. So all his life, he's wondered about that baby. He didn't he knew it was a little girl. But he never had any hope to find her because in Texas, adoptions are closed, right? And so, but four years ago, and this is kind of a long story, but four years ago, she put her DNA on that ancestry.com. Now, he never had his on there. And the birth mother never had hers. Okay. But she connected with some second cousins. And they were like, well, we don't know anything to help you. But when she was 12, she had done this

heritage project and contacted the adoption agency. And they said, Well, we can give you this non identifying information. So because she knew that her birth father's grant parents were missionaries in Mexico, and that her birth father was born in Mexico. Well, then those second cousin said, Oh, well, that's the Cunningham's. So they connected her with Paul's sister. Who never knew that all this had happened. That's how hush hush. It was this was back in the 70s. They she didn't really know. And so she kind of thought, well, maybe it was Paul's older brother, but he's dead. And so that was really disappointing for her. But she said, I'm gonna send this to my brothers, because there was two brothers left. And we were out on our boat when I get this message, that this person is looking for her birth father, and I showed it to Paul, I said, maybe this is your daughter. And he's like, I'm not going there. Oh, and so I just prayed. And the next morning, he woke up and he said, The Lord spoke to me. And he said, I'm bringing you your daughter, don't turn her away. And so all this was happening on Facebook Messenger. So we sent her a message, because he doesn't have Facebook. So we send it online, we sent her a message. And he was very vague. He said, I'd like to try to help you find your birth father, but could you explain how you got to this, right? And so she explained all the thing that I just said, and so he's, so we're sitting on the couch, texting on the phone, and he goes, Well, my parents were missionaries in Mexico. And I was born there. And I gave a child up for adoption around the time you were born in San Antonio. So it looks like I'm your father. And so she texts back. Wow. Hi. So we're just bawling. And so then, you know, we're stalking each other on Facebook well. So we learned that she's lived three hours away, all these years, oh, my gosh, and she had five children at the time, one was adopted. And they were just starting the adoption process for a little boy from China. And her father, her husband is a pastor and a fireman. And she's leads worship in their church. She has a beautiful voice. And so they texted for a while, about a week, and then she asked if she could come visit. And so we set that up, she came by herself and Paul's pacing in front of the window watching for her and she drives up and he just runs out. And she just gets out of the car and didn't even shut the door, and they just run to each other's arms. And that was just so sweet. And I was like, she was so brave. We could have been axe murderers.

A

Allison 38:58

Oh, my gosh, thank you for saying something funny because I'm starting to cry. Yeah. Oh, that's amazing. So

G

Gwen 39:07

at that time, he's like, Well, do you know who your birth mother? Is there anything? She said, No, I had no nothing. He said, Well, when you're ready, I'll help you find her. And so we sent the birth mother a message on? Well, we knew, like kind of the year range that she got married. So I was able to find the marriage records online and know what her name was now. And I found her on Facebook and sent her a message but I don't think it really went through because I wasn't friends with her. But anyway, we sent a message because he felt like he needed her permission to give that away, but we never heard anything back. And so then in the meantime, a few Well, a few years before this, Paul had told our boys They weren't at the dating he had kind of told them just very vaguely his story kind of as a lesson, be careful things can happen that you're not planning on and and then a couple that was when they were in high school, but then, like two years before we met his daughter, her name is Jen. I mentioned something to Logan about him having that sister. And he's like, what? I don't remember that story. You mean

we have a sibling out there? Well, he tells Jessica gets her all upset because she wasn't part of that man discussion. And so she got all upset. And Paul was mad, you know, like, this was my business. There's no hope of ever knowing her. Right? Just drop it. So that was two years before we mentioned. So then, right after we made contact with Jen, we happen to have been going to Jessica's house with her husband. So we printed out a picture of the birth mother and one of Jen and Paul shows it to him. Do you think these people could be related? And just like, Yeah, I do. I think they could. But who are they? And he says, Well, this was my girlfriend in high school. And this is your sister. Oh. So we just a lot of crying back then. Yeah, tears of joy. So then shortly after that, we went to her home and met her family and the kids and and we've just been getting to know them and spending time with them. And she asked him what his favorite worship song was. And he told her and so she recorded it, I'll send it to him. She's like, don't listen to this when you're at work or anything. He didn't listen to her. So he's sitting there just bawling. And his helper comes in or you're right. And he's like, Well, no, I'm not alright. Anyway, it's just been. So then long story short, finally, the birth mother. A month later, the birth mother contacts us what's going on. So he was able to talk to her on the phone, and she gave him permission to give the phone number and, and so they've connected and they've become very close. And then on her side of it all these years, she's had this shameful secret. I mean, her husband knew, but she never told her own children. And she was so worried about how they were gonna react, but they took it well, and she's free from the secret and now they have their own relationship. And then the parents who were always wondering, did we do the right thing? They have a relationship with Jen now too. And it's just been such a cool God story on how he took something, especially for Paul that was traumatic and shameful and has just redeemed it. And I know it's a blessing because I know a lot of adoption stories don't turn out. Yeah, not happy. But but so we got to keep the kids while they went to China to get Luke in. He's been so fun to get to now. He's just an adorable and they're all they're all fun. We're getting to know them and starting to make our own memories together.

A

Allison 43:21

What a great story. And so a lot of your homemaking now is Is grandma. homemaker. Yeah,

G

Gwen 43:27

I'm Nana, we really built this house for them. Because we didn't have room in the old house for them to have a place to sleep in everything. So that's contributed to the design of it and all. That's been.

A

Allison 43:42

That's so great. Well, thank you for sharing that story.

G

Gwen 43:45

I think everyone that hears it gets something healing for their own story. That's been my experience.

A

Allison 43:53

Absolutely. So let's talk about the tasks of homemaking in rapid fire. q&a time. You ready?
Okay. A homemaking task that you love

G

Gwen 44:03

making the bed. Because the whole room looks great. It does.

A

Allison 44:08

It's high yield. minimal effort. I think so anyway, how about one that you hate

G

Gwen 44:16

grocery shopping? I hate going I hate putting everything away. I hate carrying it in from the car. But I am thankful that we can afford good foods. So yeah, that's a blessing.

A

Allison 44:27

So are you a go to the store shopper or do you do curbside pickup?

G

Gwen 44:32

Well, when I was working, I started doing curbside and it was so wonderful. But now that I'm home, I will do it like at a holiday or Yes. If the kids are coming because it's such a time saver, but it is more expensive. Yeah, it is and then they don't advertise but everything's 3% Higher.

A

Allison 44:54

So well how about a task that you grew to love

G

Gwen 44:58

doing laundry? So I used to have to haul everything to the laundromat. Oh, I did do. And then when we were even our first house, we didn't have a washer, but just having such a convenient appliance and previous houses, we had a clothesline and I just love that. It was almost like a break and a timeout just to go outside and hang the clothes on the line and listen to the birds and was refreshing.

A

Allison 45:28

A Allison 45:20

Yeah, I'm trying to convince my husband to put up a clothesline in the backyard, but he's not buying it.

G Gwen 45:34

Well, it does cut down on our carbon footprint. That's true.

A Allison 45:38

And if it's sunny, like it is today, I mean, stuff dries like that. Yeah, it's dries so fast.

G Gwen 45:43

Well, and I will put the towels out and then toss them in the dryer for 10 minutes. And that makes them soft. just

A Allison 45:50

fluff them up a little bit. That's a good idea. All right. How about your worst homemaking fail?

G Gwen 45:55

Well, I had two big ones that come to mind. Okay. When we first got married, and we had our little apartment, and my parents came to visit, I planned all these fancy meals. And when they left, I realized I was in the kitchen cooking the whole time. I didn't even get to visit with them. And so I learned that that wasn't really a smart thing to do. And the other one was, well, we've had two Thanksgiving fails. So my first time to cook a turkey. I bought one of those aluminum pans at the grocery store. And it's all done. It looks great. I'm pulling it out of the oven and that whole pan just crumbles. Oh, no. And all that grease just poured into my oven and on the floor.

A Allison 46:46

Oh man, that's terrible.

G Gwen 46:49

And then this one wasn't my fault. But we were at my mom and dad's new house for Thanksgiving a few years ago. And we were cooking something and shut kind of slammed the oven door in the hole. All the glass just shattered. And glass went into all the food.

A Allison 47:00

A Allison 47:08

So there was a bunch of dishes in the oven, cooking various things. Oh, no. So did you have to order your Thanksgiving dinner? I

G Gwen 47:16

think we just got out a can of beans or something. The turkey wasn't in there. But it was some vegetables.

A Allison 47:23

Oh no.

G Gwen 47:24

It was just a problem with the oven. That's crazy.

A Allison 47:29

Oh my goodness. Okay, well, how about a memorable homemaking achievement? Well,

G Gwen 47:37

I have to say what kind of to one is raising three kids who are upstanding citizens are self sufficient and they're, they're pleasant to be around. I enjoy their company. That's a win. They're they're each have these qualities of hard work and perseverance and discipline and an adventuresome spirit. I'm real proud of them. That's awesome. And the other is just building our houses actually making our home literally.

A Allison 48:07

Yeah. Yeah. And you did it very creatively. Especially this one. I love all the cool things that you did and all the faux finishes. Yeah. I mean, you would never know you guys. She did Faux Marble that unless she told me it was oh, I wouldn't have known. It was Yeah, it's pretty amazing. I still think you should teach classes. But anyway. Okay. How about your top three homemaking tips.

G Gwen 48:30

Okay, well, one sprouts from the weekend of my parents is meal prep before company comes so you can relax and enjoy your

A

Allison 48:39

guests. Yes, absolutely.

G

Gwen 48:43

Number two, have each child pick one friend and pray for that friend together during bedtime prayers. I did that with my kids. That's great way to teach them to think about other salvation. Yeah, our kids were in public school. And I do feel like they were alright to their friends and in the families that we knew. So that's great. I love that idea. And then the last one, don't feel like you have to do what the world does like having your kids in a million activities. Live your life with margin in time, finances and emotional energy. Don't be conformed to the image of this world. Those are great tips. And margin was one thing. I guess you know, how we dealt with our challenges that we've talked about having that margin, like having an inexpensive house gave us margin in our finances? Yes. And even though we both worked, but because we had the summers off, we had the margin in our time to spend with our kids. And the emotional energy, even just from not having a TV just having Time to be with our kids. Yeah. And then community, community has always been a big part of our life. Yeah. And we've always hosted a community group, I don't think we talked about showing hospitality to others. But we've always had a community group in our home.

A

Allison 50:18

Yeah. I love that you talk about margin, because that's something that I talk about a lot when I talk to young moms, and I had to learn the hard way, that margin is essential and necessary, because you just you never know what life is going to bring and what the Lord is going to allow. And if you filled in all the space, you have no room to breathe, and nowhere to move to. And, but the way, you're also explaining it as being very intentional about leaving margin, so that you have time to spend with your children, or you have space in your budget to not be so stressed out. And maybe you can work a little bit less, because you've chosen to live a lifestyle that's, you know, below your means. I think that's really smart. So thanks for bringing that up.

G

Gwen 51:05

It's so hard, though it isn't even now. Well, especially now that I'm retired, I find so many people have ideas about my time what I should do with it. And there's so many things like that I've always wanted to do. And there's so many good things to do. But I I easily find myself more busy than I want to be. And it's a constant struggle to reevaluate what I need to be doing with my time. Mm hmm. You're nodding here? Yes.

A

Allison 51:38

Yes, I agree completely. All right, let's talk about the art of home for a little bit. To you're an artist. How do you see homemaking as an art?

G

Gwen 51:51

Well, I think of art as like a vision or an idea that you have. And then you have to figure out all the pieces and the process and put it all together. And then you get to enjoy what you've made, and that it's unique. And so in our home, making any homemaker has that ability to have a vision of what you want your home to look like what you want the culture or the atmosphere of your home to be and then use whatever skills you have, whether it's crafty, or sewing, or if it's more like organization, and time management, all of those things can be put together to make a unique work of art, I guess. And for us, like just being able to make the parts of our home that we've made, that's especially fulfilling and satisfying. And I also feel like our creativity is a reflection of God's character. And so when we when we are creative and express those skills, people can see and feel the presence of God in our homes.

A

Allison 53:13

Absolutely. So how about finding beauty in things that can be on lovely and mundane and monotonous when it comes to, you know, just the practical side of keeping and running a home? Where can we look for beauty? Or where did you look for beauty?

G

Gwen 53:35

I think reflecting on that. It's the key for me was to focus on the long term, result and benefit. And also on gratitude, which I know we'll talk about that in a minute. But like my daughter was saying, she remembers our home being restful and peaceful. And, you know, our day isn't going to be peaceful if we can't find our socks in the morning and the kids can't find their homework. And there's no clean clothes to wear. And everybody's late getting out the door. And, you know, when I worked at the elementary school campus, I had to help with car duty. We're unloading the kids and it would make me so sad to see parents yelling at their kids as they're getting out the door to start their day instead of blessing them and having a peaceful morning or you're not late and so all those things are exhausting and they have to be done over and over every day. But if you can focus on that end result. And then the other part of that gratitude. I mean, I can be grouchy and complaining because there's so many dirty clothes everywhere or I can be thankful that I have a wash are in dryer. Yeah. And I have money to buy clothes and thinking about, you know, other people don't. And I guess I saw a lot of that when I was working as a social worker in the schools too. So I'm sure, yeah, I'm sure.

A

Allison 55:15

So why is gratitude important as to the homemaker, but for

G

Gwen 55:19

me, it changes my attitude. And like I said, I can grumble, which I'm learning that God really hates that. Yeah, that's a big sin, grumbling and complaining. And so if we can be grateful, I remember one time complaining about something that my husband and I do. And as in this group, I didn't really talk about this, but I was in a mom's in touch prayer group, while my kids

were going up, but I was complaining about something he didn't do. And this one woman who was there, her husband was disabled, and he couldn't really get out of bed. And she's like, I would love it, if my husband could make a mess on the floor. You know, or not pick up his socks. And that boy that made me feel about this talk.

A Allison 56:05

I had a very similar experience with my kids, we, we went to the same dentist, and I would make dentist appointments for everybody on the same day, because that was just easier, right. And so I had, we were homeschooling and I had all the kids with me, and they were, you know, probably like, I don't know, 10 was the oldest and then their stair stepped every two years down from there. And we're all in the dentist office. And I've got books, and it's a tiny office, and they're being kind of loud, and I'm trying to, you know, keep everybody quiet and entertained. And I just I said something to the receptionist about oh, I'm sorry, they're making a little bit too much noise. And she was actually the, the dentist, it was a small practice. And she was the wife and he was the the dentist. And so she helped him run the office. And she just looked at me and she said, Oh, honey, I would love it if my daughter could make noise like that. So come to find out her daughter was severely disabled and, you know, functioned cognitively like as a as a as an infant, basically. And I just was like, okay, yeah, I'm not, I need to really think about that the next time I get irritated with my kids, because they're being loud or, because that's really just about me, like, they're just embarrassing me. And that's just pride.

G Gwen 57:19

It's a matter of perspective. It really is. Cool.

A Allison 57:24

Well, let's talk about homemaker support and community to end our time. We do need each other. And what were some ways that you were able to foster or seek out community in your home again, years, you mentioned mom's in touch?

G Gwen 57:39

Well, I've always been in some type of mother's prayer group. And so that's been really helpful to me. And I think it's really important. And a lot of why my kids are doing so well is I believe in prayer, and that God wants us to pray over the little things. They're having trouble with their multiplication tables, we'll pray about it. Absolutely. And then the childcare Co Op was really a lifesaver. I mean, both of our parents were not too far away, but you know, several hours away where they couldn't just come babysit anytime, right? So that was huge. And then our church body helped building houses together. It made something that was hard, really fun, and really built some deep friendships.

A Allison 58:34

So what advice would you give to a younger woman coming behind you, for her homemaking

So what advice would you give to a younger woman coming behind you, for her homemaking journey?

G

Gwen 58:44

I would say don't expect to have things perfect overnight. To have a beautiful house and new furniture. I mean, most couples, I'm almost 60 years old. And this is the first time I've had brand new living room furniture. And so I think most couples, it takes decades to build that repertoire of the nice things that you have. And I remember my roommate in grad school, she got married, they went out and charged up their credit cards and their house looked fabulous. But they bought everything on the credit cards. And I was like even then back before I really knew about money and budgeting I thought I think they're gonna be sorry, they did that. So that's one thing. I don't know. Well, I think people have heard that story about the rocks in the jar. Or if you put the sand and the gravel in first, there won't be room for the rocks, which are the important things. So I think we need to identify what are the important things, what do I want my children to come away with? Or what do I want for my marriage, and make sure we make time And for that, and then fill in with the other stuff. And it'll and always works out when you do the most important things first. And then the last thing is just to remember that this world is not our home. I think that really keeps my perspective. Right.

A

Allison 1:00:19

Those are good words of wisdom. Thank you. Thank you so much for sharing this.

G

Gwen 1:00:25

I felt so nervous at the beginning, but

A

Allison 1:00:29

it wasn't too terrible. Oh. All right. I hope you have enjoyed this homemaker portrait of Gwen Cunningham. Okay, who else was ugly crying when she told the story about Jen and Paul meeting for the first time? Wow, what a beautiful story of redemption and restoration. And yes, as Gwen said, I know that not every adoption story ends so well. But there is one that always ends well, for those who seek it. Paul writes, in Ephesians, "God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to Himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do. And it gave him great pleasure." And the apostle John has quite a lot to say about being adopted into the family of God, "But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God... See how very much our Father loves us for he calls us his children. And that is what we are." You see, my friend, you may not have been separated from your birth parents, maybe you are. But all of us are separated from our Heavenly Father. And in his great love and compassion, he has made a way for us to be restored to him. But when the right time came, God sent His Son born of a woman subject to the law. God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as His very own children. "And because we are His children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out Abba, Father. Now you are no longer a slave, but God's own child. And since you

are His child, God has made you his heir." If you're far away from God, either because you have drifted from his side, or you've never sought him out, can I encourage you to run to him today, he is waiting to meet you, running towards you with open arms ready to give you a home in him. If you want to know more about how to be adopted into God's family, and have a forever home in him, click the link in the show notes or go to theartofhomepodcast.com/foreverhome. I would love to hear from you. If you have questions about this, or need prayer, please send me an email or leave me a voicemail on our contact page on the website, or send me a message in Instagram, it would be my honor to pray for you, and to hear how God is writing his story of home in your life. Thank you so much for listening today. If you found value in this or any episode of The Art of home, would you give the show some love by sharing with the homemaker you know, who could use some encouragement and inspiration. If you feel so led, you can also contribute financially by leaving us a tip in our virtual tip jar, buy me a coffee, click the link in the show notes or go to buymeacoffee.com/theartofhome. These are one time gifts in \$5 increments, which is about the cost of a fancy cup of coffee. And every little bit helps to offset some of the costs of producing this podcast. So thank you very, very much for your generosity and your support. And really I covet your prayers. The next time you're having your prayer time if God brings the art of home podcast to mind send up a prayer of thanksgiving and just a prayer of His provision for this podcast for it to accomplish the purposes that he has for it in the world. I really appreciate it. Well that's it for this episode. We will be back next week with another homemaker portrait. Don't forget to subscribe to the newsletter. Until next time, keep practicing your art of making a home