



## A Woman of Uncommon Courage

I first met Lieutenant Colonel Diane Williams at Madigan nearly ten years ago, and I knew almost immediately that she was a woman of uncommon substance. Some people carry a quiet authority that does not need to announce itself. It is evident in the way they speak, the way they carry themselves, the way they listen, and the way they approach life. Diane was one of those people. She was kind, but she was also firm. She had a certain bearing, a certain seriousness, and a sense of mission about her that made you understand very quickly that she was not someone to be taken lightly.

Diane was a retired Army helicopter pilot who flew Hueys and later became the first female squadron commander in Army aviation. That accomplishment alone speaks volumes. It required extraordinary competence, discipline, courage, perseverance, and a willingness to step into territory where few women had been welcomed before. In an era when military aviation was still overwhelmingly male, Diane not only entered the arena, she excelled within it. She earned her place through skill, grit, leadership, and the kind of quiet toughness that does not need to advertise itself.

Yet what struck me most about Diane was not her military resume, impressive as it certainly was. What struck me was her heart. Beneath the bearing of an officer and the confidence of a leader was a woman whose greatest mission would ultimately have little to do with helicopters, command assignments, or military history. Her most important mission would be found in the life of a wounded grandson named

AJ. Of all the missions she had flown, of all the responsibilities she had carried, and of all the barriers she had broken, this mission would become the one that revealed the deepest part of who she was.

## **A Trailblazer Beyond the Uniform**

Long before AJ entered her life in such a profound way, Diane had already demonstrated remarkable courage beyond the uniform. As a single woman, she adopted two daughters and committed herself to raising them. That decision alone reveals something deeply important about her character. It would have been easier for her to focus exclusively on her military career and the opportunities that lay before her. Instead, she opened her heart and her home to two children carrying profound developmental wounds and the painful legacy of early loss.

Anyone who has worked with adopted children understands that love is powerful, but love does not magically erase grief. The loss of one's biological mother and biological father can leave questions that linger for years. Children may wonder why they were given up, whether they were truly wanted, whether something about them was somehow not enough, or whether the most important people in their earliest world simply disappeared because they themselves were not worth keeping. Those questions can become quiet companions that follow a child into adolescence and adulthood, shaping the way they see themselves, others, and the world around them.

Diane loved her daughters deeply. She provided stability, opportunity, guidance, structure, and unwavering support. By every reasonable measure, she gave them a remarkable home. Yet even the best parents cannot completely fill a void that opened before they ever arrived. That is one of the great heartbreaks of adoption and trauma. A child may be loved beautifully and still carry an ache that no later love can fully remove. Diane could provide safety, devotion, and belonging, but she could not erase the original wound of losing one's biological parents. She could not simply reach back into time and undo what had been lost.

One of Diane's daughters carried those wounds throughout much of her life. The pain of losing her biological family never fully loosened its grip. As the years passed, she struggled to find peace with the questions and losses she carried within her heart. Like many hurting people, she eventually discovered that drugs could temporarily quiet the pain. They offered relief from memories, loneliness, shame, and the lingering ache of abandonment. She did not turn to drugs because she was a bad person. She turned to drugs because she was a hurting person, and there is an important difference between the two.

Sadly, what began as an attempt to escape pain gradually created even more pain. Addiction slowly tightened its grip, affecting every area of her life and eventually limiting her ability to provide the consistency and stability that her young son desperately needed. That son was AJ. The tragedy was not simply that addiction entered the story. The tragedy was that unresolved pain traveled forward into the next generation. A wounded daughter became a struggling mother, and a little boy who needed safety, steadiness, and reliable love found himself caught in the turbulence of wounds he did not create.

## **Stepping Into the Breach**

As circumstances became increasingly difficult, AJ's mother ultimately lost the ability to remain in the parental role he needed. I want to say that softly, because this was not a story of a bad mother who did not care. It was the story of a wounded woman whose pain and addiction overtook her capacity to provide the consistent care her son deserved. Custody was eventually transferred away from her, and it

was a heartbreaking outcome for everyone involved. No one emerged from that chapter unscarred. A wounded daughter suffered. A young boy lost the daily presence of his mother. And Diane found herself facing a decision that would alter the course of her retirement and, indeed, the rest of her life.

Most people spend decades imagining retirement as a season of freedom. They dream of travel, hobbies, friendships, long mornings, quieter evenings, and the opportunity to finally slow down after years of responsibility. Diane had earned that season many times over. After a distinguished military career and years spent raising two daughters as a single mother, she had every reason to settle into a quieter life and enjoy the rest she had richly deserved. Instead, she stepped once more into the role of caregiver. She exchanged ease for responsibility, comfort for sacrifice, and personal freedom for the demanding work of raising a child whose life had already carried far too much instability.

Diane did not do this because it was convenient. She did it because AJ needed someone, and Diane had never been the kind of woman who turned away when someone she loved was in trouble. She stepped into the breach with the same resolve that had marked her military career. She did not romanticize the challenge. She knew it would be hard. She knew there would be emotional complexity, legal complexity, relational complexity, and the deep exhaustion that comes from raising a wounded child after one has already raised children and served a full career. But she also knew that love sometimes asks more of us than comfort ever would.

### **The Long Shadow of Trauma**

For years Diane poured herself into raising AJ. She provided stability, guidance, accountability, and love. She became the steady presence every child deserves and every wounded child desperately needs. What impresses me most is that Diane never approached the situation with bitterness or condemnation. She understood better than most that wounded people often make painful choices and that addiction is frequently rooted in suffering rather than malice. Her concern was never punishment. Her concern was protection. She loved her daughter, and she loved her grandson. At times, loving both required carrying an almost impossible burden.

Diane had spent years trying to help her daughter heal from wounds that originated long before they ever met. Now she found herself watching those same wounds begin to cast their shadow across the life of her grandson. Trauma has a way of doing that. Left unresolved, it often travels from one generation to the next, not because people intend harm, but because pain that is never healed inevitably finds expression somewhere. Diane understood that reality better than most. She could not rewrite her daughter's past, but perhaps she could help alter AJ's future.

That is one of the great challenges of loving wounded people. We want our love to be enough. We want our sacrifice to be enough. We want stability, structure, opportunity, and devotion to heal everything that came before. Sometimes they do heal a great deal. Sometimes they become the very foundation on which a person survives. But sometimes the wound remains, not because the love was inadequate, but because the wound was deeper than anyone could fully reach. Diane understood this not theoretically, but personally. She had lived it. She had loved through it. And now she was determined that AJ would not be swallowed whole by the same darkness.

## **An Act of Hope**

Eventually, AJ's mother appeared to be making meaningful progress. Like every parent who truly loves a child, Diane wanted healing, restoration, and reconciliation if such things were possible. She wanted AJ to have the opportunity to know his mother in a healthier way. She wanted her daughter to have the opportunity to reclaim what addiction had taken from her. And so Diane made one of the most courageous decisions of her life. After raising AJ for years, she supported reunification and returned custody to his mother.

I cannot imagine how difficult that must have been. For Diane, it meant placing hope above fear. It meant risking heartbreak because she believed every child deserves the opportunity to know and be loved by a healing parent. It meant releasing, at least in part, the child she had protected, nurtured, and raised through some of his most vulnerable years. It was an act of tremendous courage and, in many ways, an act of profound selflessness. She was willing to endure her own pain if it meant giving her daughter and grandson a chance to rebuild what had been lost.

Sadly, the road forward remained difficult. The wounds of the past continued to cast long shadows over everyone involved. AJ once again found himself navigating instability, disappointment, and uncertainty. For a child, broken promises do not simply pass through the mind and disappear. They enter the heart. They shape expectations. They teach a young person to wonder whether love can be trusted and whether the people who say they will be there will actually remain. Yet Diane never stopped loving AJ. She never stopped believing in him, and she never stopped looking for ways to help. Even when circumstances made direct involvement difficult, she remained emotionally present in his life.

## **The Mission Never Ended**

Many people would have surrendered to discouragement. Diane never did. Military leaders understand something important. Missions rarely unfold exactly as planned. Circumstances change. Routes change. Strategies change. The weather shifts, the terrain changes, and the original plan may no longer work. Yet the objective remains the same. Protect the people entrusted to your care. Diane never lost sight of that objective.

There were seasons when staying connected to AJ required creativity, patience, determination, and courage. There were moments when lesser people might have concluded there was nothing more they could do. Diane refused to accept that conclusion. Like a seasoned commander evaluating changing conditions on the ground, she adjusted her approach without abandoning the mission. Sometimes in the military, and sometimes in life, the direct route is blocked and one must find another way. Diane did that. She found ways to remain connected, to encourage, to support, to communicate love, and to let AJ know that he was not forgotten.

The mission was simple, even when the circumstances were not. Make sure AJ knew that someone loved him. Make sure AJ knew that someone believed in him. Make sure AJ knew that he was not alone. That may sound simple, but for a young person who has endured repeated disappointments, it can mean everything. Sometimes the most powerful gift we can offer another human being is the assurance that no matter how difficult life becomes, someone remains in their corner. Diane became that person for AJ, not for a season, not when it was easy, and not only when circumstances were tidy, but over the long haul.

## **The Greatest Rescue Mission**

The more I reflect on Diane's life, the more I see a single thread running through it. Diane spent her life rescuing people. First, she served her country as an Army aviator, flying helicopters and stepping into places that required courage, precision, and resolve. Then she opened her home to two daughters whose earliest lives had been marked by loss. Later, when her daughter's unresolved wounds and addiction placed AJ in jeopardy, Diane stepped forward again. The helicopter pilot, the adoptive mother, and the grandmother were not separate stories. They were three chapters of the same life.

Her greatest rescue mission was not necessarily flown through dangerous skies. It was lived in the ordinary, exhausting, sacred work of showing up day after day for a wounded child. It was lived through school concerns, family turmoil, legal complications, emotional setbacks, and the ongoing burden of loving people whose pain sometimes spilled onto everyone around them. It was lived through sacrifice that most people never saw and through a devotion that was not celebrated with medals or ceremonies. Yet in the economy of the human heart, it may have been her most heroic mission of all.

There is something profoundly moving about a woman who had already given so much being willing to give still more. Diane could have chosen the easier path. She could have decided that she had already done enough. She could have stepped back into a well-earned retirement and allowed others to carry the burden. Instead, she stayed. She carried. She prayed. She advocated. She adjusted. She loved. And by doing so, she gave AJ something that every wounded young person needs but not every wounded young person receives. She gave him a living witness that he was worth fighting for.

## **The Power of One Person**

AJ is now standing at the threshold of adulthood. His road has not been easy. He has experienced disappointments, losses, broken promises, and hardships that many young people never encounter. Yet despite all of this, he has retained something precious. He has retained his heart. He has retained his compassion. He has retained his capacity to care about others. In a world that often hardens people, that is no small achievement.

Throughout my career as a psychologist, I have often been struck by how little it sometimes takes to alter the trajectory of a life. Not a perfect family. Not a perfect childhood. Not a perfect set of circumstances. More often than not, it comes down to one person who refuses to leave, one person who continues believing when belief seems irrational, one person who remains steady when everything around them feels uncertain, and one person who sees possibility when everyone else sees failure.

For AJ, that person has been Diane. She has challenged him, loved him, supported him, believed in him, and refused to define him by the pain he has endured. She has not pretended the road was easy or that choices do not matter. Diane is too grounded for that. But she has also never lost sight of the young man beneath the struggle. She has seen his goodness, his heart, his capacity, and his future. Sometimes that is what saves a life. Someone sees us before we can see ourselves, and they keep seeing us until we begin to believe that what they see might actually be true.

## **A Legacy Greater Than Command**

There is a tendency to measure success by titles, promotions, awards, and accomplishments. Those things certainly matter, and Diane earned every bit of the recognition that accompanied her military

career. She broke barriers. She opened doors. She proved that courage and competence were not confined to men. She helped make room for other women who would follow in her path. Those achievements deserve to be remembered and honored.

Yet as I reflect on her life, I find myself thinking less about the helicopters she flew and more about the grandson she refused to leave behind. She flew difficult missions throughout her military career. She learned to navigate uncertainty, danger, and adversity. She learned to remain calm when circumstances became challenging. But perhaps the most important mission she ever undertook was not flown in the skies above the earth. Perhaps it was lived quietly, year after year, through her unwavering commitment to a wounded child who needed someone to believe in him.

That mission required every bit as much courage as any she faced in uniform. Perhaps more. There are some battles that do not end quickly. There are some missions that do not come with clear orders, predictable outcomes, or public recognition. There are some acts of courage that look less like heroism from a distance and more like daily faithfulness up close. Diane's life reminds me that some of the most important forms of courage are not performed before an audience. They are lived in the hidden places where love keeps showing up.

### **Family Never Gives Up**

Over the years, I have come to care deeply for both Diane and AJ. In many ways, I think of them as family. I will always be in AJ's corner, and I will always be in Diane's corner, because family is not merely a matter of blood. Family is built through presence, commitment, sacrifice, forgiveness, and the willingness to remain when remaining becomes difficult. Family is forged through years of shared joys, shared sorrows, and the decision to continue showing up for one another when life becomes complicated.

When the story of Lieutenant Colonel Diane Williams is ultimately told, many people will remember her as a pioneering Army aviator, a trailblazing leader, and a woman who opened doors for those who followed. Those accomplishments deserve to be remembered. Yet I suspect her greatest legacy will be found elsewhere. It will be found in the life of a young man who, because she refused to quit, now has the opportunity to build a future brighter than his past. It will be found in the countless quiet sacrifices that never made headlines, the prayers never spoken publicly, the tears shed privately, and the steadfast determination of a grandmother who refused to abandon hope.

Sometimes that is how lives are saved. Not through a single dramatic act, but through years of faithful presence, stubborn hope, unwavering love, and a courage that quietly refuses to surrender. Diane Williams spent a lifetime serving her country, but her greatest service may well have been the love she poured into a grandson who desperately needed someone to believe in him. She flew Hueys. She commanded. She broke barriers. But the mission that may matter most is the one that never truly ended, the mission of loving AJ enough to keep fighting for his future.

And because she never gave up, AJ now has a chance. Sometimes a chance is where every great future begins.