

# Sunday Brunch



Kevin  
Sherrington



File 1988

Longtime coach Gene Stallings poses with his son, John Mark, at the Stallings' ranch near Paris, Texas. John Mark, who had Down syndrome, died in 2008 at 46. "The saddest day of my life was when he died," Stallings said.

## Family first

### Stallings takes charge in challenges away from the football field

Gene Stallings endured the most tortuous training camp in college football history, Junction's storied tale of triumph over hellish adversity, and it still didn't prepare him for what would come.

When his son, John Mark, was born with Down syndrome in 1962, he learned just how personal adversity could be.

And when his granddaughter, Anna Kate Gunn, was diagnosed with diabetes at 11 months, he learned that lessons never end.

But life defines us by how we handle our problems — big and small. As a Texas A&M football player surviving Bear Bryant's first camp or a 29-year-old head coach at A&M or building a national champion at Alabama, Stallings met challenges like a middle linebacker filling a gap.

His family travails have been answered with no less determination.



Family photo

**Anna Kate Gunn**, granddaughter of Gene Stallings, was diagnosed with diabetes when she was 11 months old.

Doctors told Gene and Ruth Ann after their only son was born that he might live a year, maybe two. Even if it were longer, he'd need to be institutionalized.

But Johnny grew up strong

and sweet and loved under the care of his parents and four sisters. Wherever Stallings coached, at A&M or with the Cowboys or Cardinals or in Tuscaloosa, Johnny was a galvanizing presence, featured in national magazines and on TV. He competed in Special Olympics, served as grand marshal in parades and warmed the heart of everyone he met until his death at 46 on Aug. 2, 2008.

"My life wouldn't be nearly as rich if it hadn't been for Johnny," Stallings said last week.

"I miss him every day. The saddest day of my life was when he died."

Stallings' life these days is filled with A&M, Alabama, his ranch in Powderly, Texas, outside his hometown of Paris, and, as always, family.

Anna Kate's story first became a focus when she was diagnosed with Type I diabetes before she was a year old. A CareFlight helicopter carried her from Waco to Dallas,

where she was treated at Children's Medical Center.

Now 13, she competes in basketball, soccer and gymnastics because of medical advances such as insulin pumps.

"Her mother and daddy have done an outstanding job handling her," Stallings said. "It's a fine line you have to walk when you have kids with these kinds of problems.

"But kids need to feel like they're normal."

Only a cure can ultimately make it possible, which is why Stallings raises money for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation. He'll be the key speaker at the JDRF's Dream Gala on March 26 at the Hilton Anatole.

Stallings calls money the "key to research," and he hopes to help raise enough to one day find a cure.

"When that happens," he said, "I'll be ready to die."

Hard to believe he'd back down even then.

ksherrington  
@dallasnews.com