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US AIRWAYS magazine

Insider's Guide to
STOCKHOLM

The Perfect Joys of a Nordic Summer

DOLLY PARTON

By **Liz Seymour**

The queen
of country
music says
we should
pay a lot
more
attention
to the big
dreams of
little kids.

Local dignitaries are gathered in the green and burgundy balcony lounge of the Dixie Stampede in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Trays of cheese cubes and boiled shrimp sit on the buffet table. People graze at the food and talk among themselves, but the room is filled with an air of distracted anticipation. In one corner of the room, the furniture has been cleared away and a big photographer's light set up.

Suddenly, there's Dolly, dressed in satin, sequins, and fringe. She's sporting one of her famous wigs sculpted and tucked and pinned with a pastry chef's attention to detail. She strides into the room on a pair of mile-high stilettos with half a dozen men in suits walking fast to keep up with her. "Well, howdy!" she calls in a voice that could command attention in a much larger room. All conversation stops. "She's tiny!" someone says under her breath.

Dolly Parton has entered the room — and the spell is broken. The felt-tip pens and disposable cameras come out. Someone holds up a slightly dazed-looking baby to be kissed. "You're a better kisser than Sylvester Stallone!" she says with a giggle and the little catch in her voice that's as much her signature as the big wigs and low-cut dresses. She hits her mark — a piece of masking tape on the carpet — and people take their turns in front of the big camera with her. Each encounter lasts only a couple of seconds, but during those few seconds the person she's talking to has her total attention.

Here's a woman who has sold more than 100 million records worldwide, who has won 7 Grammys and 9 Country Music Association awards, and who has been named a Living Legend by the Library of Congress, and she's still working the room as if she were a teenager scrambling to make a name for herself in Nashville. "If I have learned anything," she says later, "it would simply be don't sit there and go to seed. You have to keep reaching for the brightest star in the sky."

The stars were bright and plentiful over the Tennessee mountain cabin where Dolly Parton and her ten siblings grew up, but it required a powerful imagination to see that the stars might also be within reach. She wrote her first song when she was five, a love song to a corn-cob doll named Tasseltop; at ten she was traveling to Knoxville to appear on a local television variety show. Her shimmering, heartfelt voice, her extraordinary songwriting talents, and her astute business sense are what took her to Nashville and beyond. But it's her outsized imagination that transformed Dolly Rebecca Parton of Sevier County, Tennessee, into "Dolly," a one-name star whose voice and image are instantly recognizable around the world.

Dolly Parton the singer, Dolly Parton the songwriter, Dolly Parton the icon, and Dolly Parton the businesswoman have never moved very far from the Tennessee mountains where the young Dolly Rebecca first daydreamed them all into existence. Dollywood, the theme park that opened in 1986 in Pigeon Forge, and Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede (the Myrtle Beach theater is one of a four-theater chain) present a version of Dolly's childhood Southern mountain culture with the hard edges rounded off, but even by the hardscrabble standards of the Southern Appalachian economy, Parton and her brothers and sisters grew up poor. Her father was a farmer; home was a two-room shack "with running water — if you were willing to run 'n get it," she jokes.

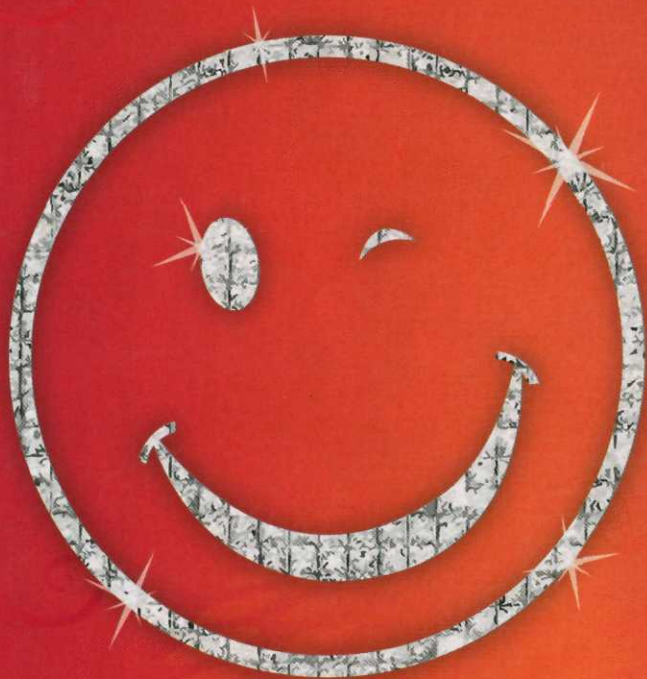
"Being poor is something I am neither proud nor ashamed of," she has said, but she has also been honest throughout her career about the damage that poverty does. Her 1971 hit song "Coat of Many Colors" recounts a real-life event: Dolly's mother, an accomplished quilter, had handsewn a patchwork coat for her out of scraps. When Dolly wore her new coat to school, her classmates laughed at the one-of-a-kind creation; so she defiantly wore the coat all day. "I would wait until school was over," she wrote, "and walk proudly



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STRAIGHT TALK

from the building wearing my coat like a banner of pride."

Helping children grow into their dreams, whatever their circumstances, has become an ongoing mission for Parton over the last decade. In 1996 she established the Imagination Library to provide a new book every month to children from birth to age five. The program began modestly in Sevier County where — despite the considerable economic impact of Dollywood —

"I feel blessed that I still have the little Dolly in my heart," she says. "I'm still the same girl that wants to squeeze every little drop out of life that I can."

the per capita income remains almost 20 percent less than the national average. Four years later, Parton took the program nationwide. Now in operation in 42 states and 4 Canadian provinces, the Imagination Library and its local sponsoring organizations serve 330,000 children and distribute close to 4 million books a year.

"I decided that the single best thing I could do to help children was to work with others to make sure they were never denied the opportunity to have books in their home," she says. The first book each child receives is *The Little Engine That Could*, the classic tale of a determined little train that makes it over the mountain despite doubters. "Books," says Parton, "are where imagination is born."

And imagination, says Parton, is the most powerful force in the world — for children and for adults. "I feel blessed that I still have the little Dolly in my heart," she says. "I'm still the same girl that wants to squeeze every little drop out of life that I can."

Want to help a child achieve his or her dreams? Here's what Parton says.

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1 VALUE DAYDREAMING.

The young Dolly used to stick a tobacco stake in the gaps between the floorboards of her front porch, put an old tin can on top of the stake, and perform in front of this improvised "microphone" for whatever siblings she could round up. She wasn't discouraged when her younger brothers and sisters lost interest: She would simply scatter a handful of corn on the dirt yard and continue the show to an audience of chickens, pigs, and ducks.

"To me, it's about dreaming in the day and in the night," she says. "Dreams have always helped me visualize my goals and aspirations. When I was a child, I could see me on the stage singing my heart out. I could see what I was wearing and where I was going. I would visit that dream every single day and as I look back, my dreams kept me focused on what I wanted to do and the person I wanted to be."

2 NURTURE A CHILD'S IDEAS.

"I was blessed to have family members who encouraged me to pursue my dreams," says Parton. Her mother came from a family of musicians; it was Parton's Uncle Louis who taught her her first guitar chords and her Uncle Billy who drove her the 25 miles to Knoxville to sing on *The Cas Walker Farm and Home Hour* when she was ten. "Daddy Was an Old Time Preacher Man," a song Parton cowrote with her Aunt Dorothy Jo, later became one of her most popular duets with Porter Wagoner.

"Whether it is your parents, or your uncles or your aunts or even the neighbor down the road," says Parton, "it's important that kids have someone who encourages them to chase their rainbow."

3 GIVE KIDS BOOKS.

In her 1994 autobiography *Dolly: My Life and Other Unfinished Business*, Parton recalls reading everything she could get her hands on: "the Bible, *The Farmer's Almanac*, the Funeral Home Directory,

the directions and descriptions on the garden and flower seed packets, all medicine bottles, catalogues, any and all kinds of mail, school books...." Even the newspapers layered over the walls to keep out drafts became part of Parton's childhood reading repertoire.

"Believe me, I was not the best student in the world," she says, "but I loved books, magazines, and catalogues. When I was growing up, we didn't have a television and rarely went to a movie, so reading was the only way to know about a world outside of the Smoky Mountains. Once I knew about that world, I wanted to get there as soon as possible."

4 SIMPLE MEANS A LOT.

In the summer, Parton and her brothers and sisters painted bracelets and wrist watches on their arms with pokeberry juice, ran barefoot, paddled in the creek, and tried to dig their way to China. "We had a ball growing up," she says. "Our playground was the most beautiful playground in the world — our Smoky Mountains. Nature gave us all of the things we needed to keep us busy and not pester Mama and Daddy too much. A child who is loved has most everything they will ever need. Although we never had much of anything, we had a house full of love."

5 FOLLOW YOUR DREAMS.

"The mission I wrote for my foundation was to help kids 'dream more, learn more, care more and be more,'" Parton says. "That holds true for adults as well as children. I still dream all the time. Sometimes you see folks who have a negative view of dreamers — people who sit around all day on their hindquarters and do absolutely nothing. These folks aren't dreamers — they are just lazy. To me, dreaming is just part of being alive, inspired, and curious about the world."

Liz Seymour is a contributing editor of *US Airways Magazine*. She writes for a variety of publications.