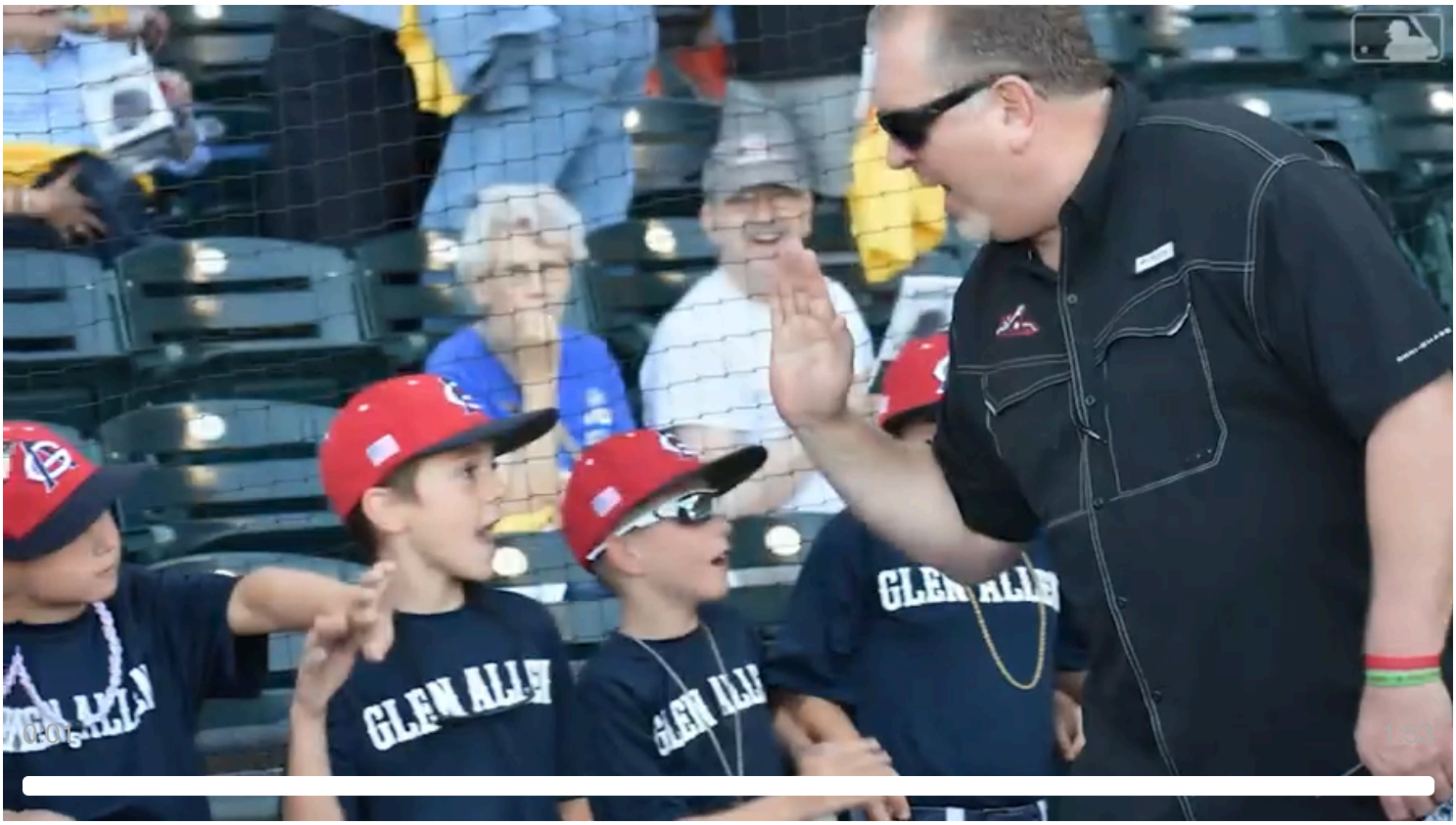
# The guy with the outrageous pants? He's a Minor League front office legend

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Benjamin Hill

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*Benjamin Hill travels the nation collecting stories about what makes Minor League Baseball unique. This excerpt from the* Baseball Traveler *newsletter, presented by Circle K, is a mere taste of the smorgasbord of delights he offers every week. Read* the full newsletter here*, and subscribe to* his newsletter here*.*

Nearly 30 minutes into a wide-ranging interview regarding his long career in Minor League Baseball, Todd "Parney" Parnell paused to make an emphatic point: "I literally, literally, literally have not one pair of jeans, one pair of khakis."



What he has are "Parney Pants," over 100 pairs of them. Like snowflakes, no two are alike, but what they have in common is that they are loud, colorful and make an immediate impression. Just like Parney himself. Although now "semi-retired," he's been in the game over parts of five decades – from Reading to Kannapolis to Altoona to Richmond -- and his influence extends throughout the entire industry.

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"In this business especially, it's just so intertwined," he said. "One story leads to the next story. One relationship leads to the next relationship. ... It's been a very special life for a little kid from Locust, North Carolina."




Or perhaps not-so-little kid. Parney said that, in Locust, if "you were a bigger dude," like he was, "you played all sports." His athletic pursuits continued until he had to accept the fact that "like most people, I wasn't good enough." He was a Pennsylvanian at that point, having moved to Philadelphia at the age of 13 and then going on to attend Harrisburg-area Messiah College (his parents were missionaries).

Working in sports was the next best thing to playing, so Parney set his sights on breaking into the industry. His professional career kicked off close to where he was living at the time, when Chuck Domino -- a legendary executive in his own right -- hired him as the Reading Phillies' director of sales and marketing in December of 1989.

"As Chuck tells the story I was panting on the phone. I was so excited about getting that job," said Parney. "Reading's just an amazing place for Minor League Baseball and I learned a lot from Chuck."



Parney set a goal to be a general manager by the time he was 30, achieving it when he was hired to lead the Piedmont Boll Weevils prior to the 1997 campaign. This Kannapolis, N.C.-based Philadelphia affiliate was located just minutes from where he grew up.

"That's where I coined the phrase 'We're Un-Boll Weevil-ble,' which actually got some speech therapist teachers mad at me because they said I'm teaching people to say things incorrectly," he said. "Eventually we were instrumental in getting Dale Earnhardt Sr. to become an owner, and we changed the name ... to the Kannapolis Intimidators."

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"The Intimidator" was a hero of Parney's, but Earnhardt never got to see his namesake team play as he died in a tragic crash two months prior to 2001 Opening Day. Earnhardt's public memorial service was held at the Intimidators' home of Fieldcrest Cannon Stadium; Parney recalled counting license plates from 37 states in the parking lot.




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Kannapolis was part of the greater Charlotte market, so Parney and his staff "did a lot of crazy stuff" to get attention. The craziness continued at his next stop, Altoona, Pa., home of the Curve, where he went from a "small fish in a big pond to a big fish in a small pond."

"There's no such thing as a bad idea," said Parney. "Start at yes and go backwards from there."

This mentality led to the Curve's "Awful Night" promo, in which typical ballpark entertainment is flipped on its head to make it, yes, awful. For the first Awful Night, in 2002, Parney attempted to give away his recently removed gallbladder. This, perhaps, was his most notorious stunt in a career full of them.

"[The doctor's] giving me this line, like hazmat issues and stuff like that," he said. "I didn't want to hear it! But we took pictures of my gallbladder and the first 500 fans in attendance got a picture."




Parney segued from his Awful Night reminiscence to a heartfelt statement. Gallbladder giveaways are illustrative of a larger philosophy, you see.

"I don’t think you can care too much. I just don't think so. And so all that stuff gets mixed into the mixing bowl: the passion, the caring, the commitment, the everybody being all in. When you have promotions like [Awful Night] it just ends up working out when everybody cares so much and they're one team."

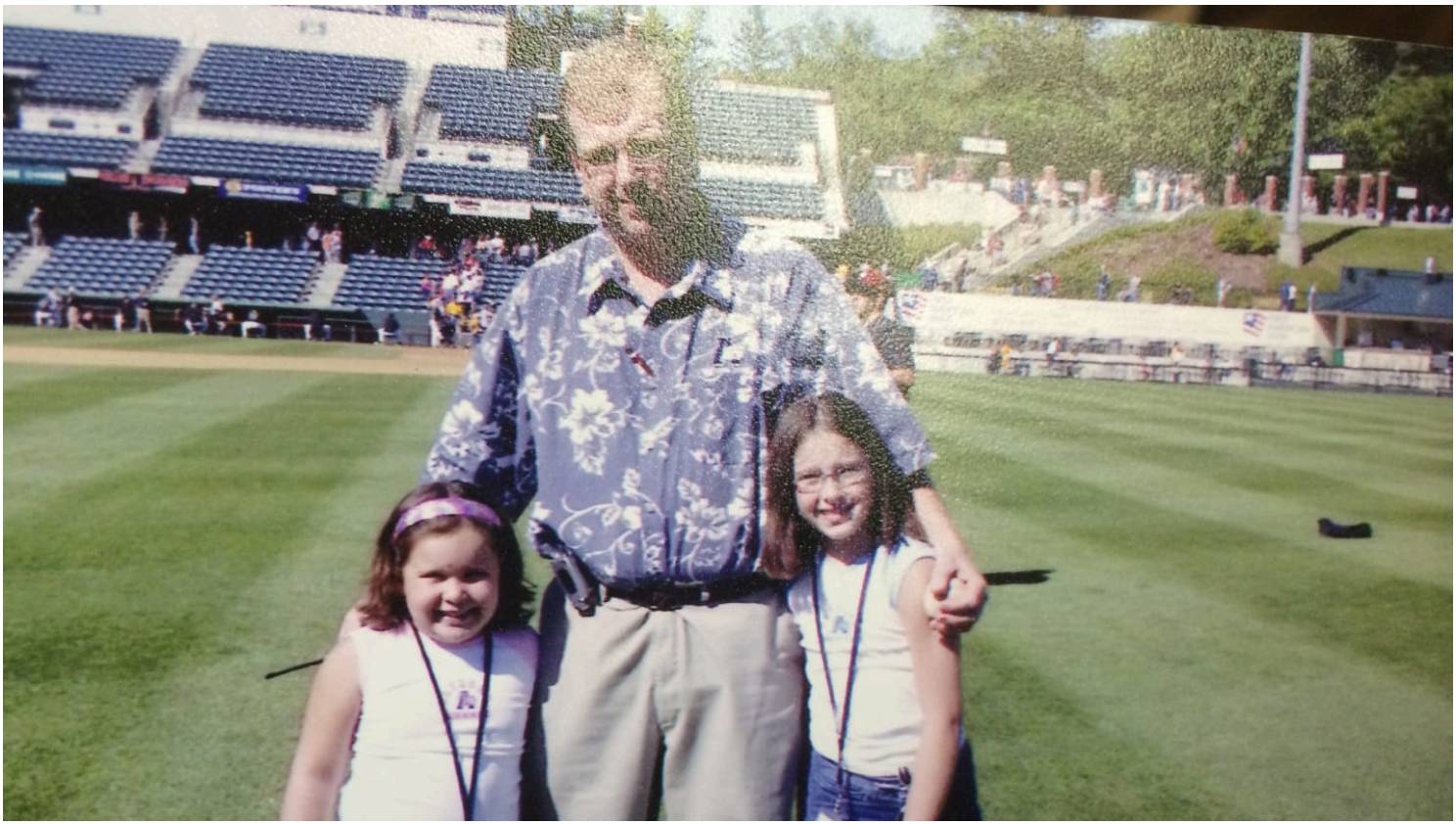
Parney was initially a team of one at his next stop, as he was the first on-the-ground employee of the Richmond Flying Squirrels. Everything is connected: The team's chief operating officer was Chuck Domino, the first person to give him a job.




Parney established the Flying Squirrels' all-in culture and operating philosophy while also working to get a new ballpark built in place of The Diamond (that new facility, CarMax Park, finally opened this season). After Flying Squirrels games, a motley combination of staff, players, coaches and visiting guests gathered at "Parney's Pub" -- also known as his office -- to decompress and compare notes.

"We've been able to create those cultures where everybody cares about everybody," he said. "One of the things that I've always said is we like to run this as a family business. We just all have different last names."

So many memories. So many stories. Parney, older and wiser, now recognizes that "Minor League Baseball was probably an addiction for me."



"I'm not proud of this at all, but I remember when my kids were young on Christmas morning. We opened up presents and I went, 'All right, I'll be back in a few hours. I'm going to the ballpark.' Like, what the heck did I need to go to the ballpark for?"

Baffling-in-retrospect moments like these, along with concerns about maintaining health amid the grind of the baseball season, led Parney to transition to his current state of "semi-retirement." He's still a regular presence at Flying Squirrels games but it's no longer an all-consuming gig. He speaks with paternal pride about the front office members who now run the show, as well as leaders throughout the industry whom he mentored along the way.

"I'm really proud to have a Bill Walsh coaching tree in Minor League Baseball," he said.

Oh, and then there's his podcast, Parney Time, and the book he's working on and aspirations to join the national speaker circuit to impart his leadership philosophies. The concept of "slowing down" is only relative to the breakneck pace at which he had previously operated.

No matter where Parney goes from here, one thing is certain: He'll be the guy wearing the ridiculous pants.

"The pants became a symbol, a tangible symbol, of everything we do to be different," he said. "Being different in how you think and how you meet with people. People are attracted to different."

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