

Love on the Front Lines

Justin and Michelle Erb were 20-something newlyweds when God sent them to the Philippines as missionaries.

This is really a love story. Boy meets girl; boy prays for girl; boy marries girl; boy and girl head to the mission field.

It all began when Justin Erb joined a 24-hour prayer team for a young woman he hardly knew. Justin had recently dedicated his life to the Lord and experienced a radical transformation that wiped away years of bitterness and rebellion. As a teenager, he had been in a gang and had used drugs and eventually sold them. One of his friends started purchasing weapons to protect their drug business-and that's when Justin began to worry.

"I had an overwhelming sense that I was going to end up in prison or dead," remembers Justin, now 29. "I had no clue it was God showing me my future."

Then something amazing happened. Justin doesn't remember how or why, but in 1997 he ended up at the revival in Pensacola, Florida. "I don't know why I went, and I don't remember the trip there," he says. "I don't even remember the message. I just remember God searching my heart."

During the altar call, Justin went forward to commit his life to the Lord. "I felt such a weight on my shoulders," he says. "As I got closer, I couldn't even stand. By the time I got to the altar, I was on my hands and knees as the tremendous weight pushed me to the floor."

God radically transformed Justin's life-and the burden he

carried was gone. "The day I got saved," Justin says, "God put missions in my heart. I thought that's what all Christians did. That next year, He showed me one thing after another in my life, and I had the grace to throw it all out-drinking, drugs and more."

Justin moved to Orlando, Florida, joined a church and heard about a member of the church who was about to go on a missions trip to China. Michelle Sunderland had also recently committed her life to the Lord. A freshman at the University of Central Florida, she was active in Chi Alpha campus fellowship.

During her trip to China, her team was to secretly take Bibles across the border of this communist country and deliver them to persecuted Chinese believers. Justin signed up to pray for Michelle while she was in China, finding it amazing that someone would sacrifice her safety for the sake of the gospel.

Little did he know that Michelle was wrestling with exactly that issue. She knew there was danger in what she was about to do. "What is the worst that could happen to me?" she asked her team leader.

Her team leader replied that on previous trips some Bible couriers had been detained and arrested, and although there was no record of any being killed, Michelle had to be ready for all possibilities when dealing with a communist, atheist government. As with any missions trip, the leader wanted Michelle to know that she had to be prepared to give her life for the gospel if necessary.

Michelle was taken back by the blunt answer and had to deal with the fact that she was not fully ready to give her life if

need be. Thankfully, her team encountered no problems, and they successfully delivered hundreds of Bibles and teaching books to believers inside China.

For Michelle, the experience was life changing. The last day of the trip, she clearly heard the Lord ask, "Will you go?" He didn't say where, when or how, but simply asked if she was willing to go to the mission field full time.

"Before my eyes flashed all the things I knew I'd have to give up in order to say yes," Michelle remembers. Among them were certain friendships, a full university scholarship, the hope of a degree and "my whole desire for what I wanted my life to be-the perfect American dream with the white picket fence, two cars and a dog. I knew I was going to have to get rid of that."

Michelle wanted to obey, but she also wanted joy in doing so. "I was going to say yes to the Lord, but I wanted to enjoy doing it." As she returned to school for her sophomore year, she prayed that God would change her heart.

God started answering that prayer. "I'd be getting ready for class, and all of a sudden I'd be on the floor crying out for people around the world. I'd actually see faces of different people. I thought something was wrong with me, so I didn't tell anyone."

Anyone except Justin, that is. Justin had asked Michelle about her China trip, and as their friendship grew, he shared that he too was experiencing the same unusual weeping for people he'd never met. They had no idea that God was giving them a burden for people around the world and leading them to

intercede for the lost.

When it came time for Michelle to enroll for the spring term at college, she realized she had no desire to take any more classes. "The desire was completely gone," she says. "I didn't realize it had been happening all that time. It was an exchange-He was taking out my desire and putting in His desire."

She gave up the rest of her scholarship, and she and Justin moved to Pensacola to attend Brownsville Revival School of Ministry. They later joined the FIRE (Fellowship for International Revival and Evangelism) School of Ministry.

Michelle and Justin married in December 1999 and knew they were in Pensacola to get trained for missions. "Whenever we had the opportunity, we took short-term trips," Michelle says. One was to the Philippines, where God spoke to some of the people on the trip about becoming a long-term team.

"He didn't tell us where we'd go," explains Michelle, now 26. "The location was really secondary. He showed us that our team would be like the New Testament church, living together in community and having all things in common. It wasn't something we tried to orchestrate ourselves-to pick good co-workers or people with good giftings. All of us knew we were supposed to be together. That would be a demonstration to the people around us of what the body of Christ is supposed to be."

Fire in the Philippines

In January 2003, five families moved to the Philippines and became the FIRE International team in that country. They are

based in Davao City on the island of Mindanao, where most people are Roman Catholic, although they do not practice the Christ-centered Catholicism found in the West. Instead their religion is a mix of Christianity, paganism, superstition and idol worship.

A cab driver, for example, might have statues of Buddha, an elephant god, a frog god, Jesus and Mary all lined up across the dashboard of his car; but if you asked him his religion, he'd reply "Catholic." Most people do not have a personal relationship with Jesus; most have never heard that such a thing is possible.

There are also Muslim areas of Mindanao; some Christian missionaries have been kidnapped in these areas and even killed, including New Tribes missionary Martin Burnham, who was martyred in 2002.

The FIRE team in the Philippines has a number of overall goals. Foremost is that their relationship with God be the foundation of team ministry. "Before we even got there," Justin explains, "God told us to spend the first six months in the Philippines in prayer-not evangelizing or going out to the streets. So that's what we did. We wanted to know what God was already doing in the city, where His heart was for the people, what had already taken place."

When the six months of prayer ended, "His hand was on everything we did," Justin remembers. "We'd put forth a little effort and see great results. We knew that would be the foundation of everything we did; our relationship with God had to be No. 1."

Another goal was to work with local churches and ministries, to find out what God was already doing there and cooperate with it. "God connected us with Christians who are the spiritual elders of Davao-people who hold positions of spiritual authority beyond titles," Justin says. "We wanted to come with a servant attitude to help the pastors and people already there, rather than as missionaries fresh out of Bible college ready to conquer the city for God."

A third goal for the team is directly from Ephesians 4: "To train, equip and send out Filipino ministers who will preach the gospel in their nation and the nations of the world," according to their mission statement. The FIRE team has added four words from Philippians 1:20 to describe their commitment: "by life or by death."

With that focus, the team launched Davao City Discipleship Training Center (DTC) in January 2004. Although the school includes classroom work, the real training takes place on the streets. Explains Justin: "That's the principle Jesus used; He taught the masses, but everything He did, He brought His disciples with Him. As the Lord is teaching us, we're pouring it back into our students."

The team's desire from the beginning was to start something that they would immediately pass on to the nationals. "We aren't to be the center focus; they are," Justin says. "So from day one we started training Filipinos to do the work of ministry. We're always telling them that they are the ministers."

As a result, this year the students are doing what their teachers were doing a year ago. The DTC students are all Filipinos and come from many different backgrounds. "We wanted

those who were completely sold out to Jesus, so we actually prayed God would sift the school,” Justin says. “We wanted 10 sold-out to God rather than 100 lukewarm. By the next semester, enrollment dropped, and we had the spiritual climate we wanted-passion and zeal.”

The Poorest of the Poor

One of the poorest parts of Davao City is a garbage dump that is home to thousands of people. Known as “Smokey Mountain” because of the plumes of smoke rising from the smoldering trash, the dump stretches for a mile down the side of the mountain. Adults and children alike live in makeshift shacks amid the filth.

When Justin and Michelle first saw it, they were overwhelmed by the need-shacks everywhere, no running water, children playing in the garbage and rampant disease. The team planned a small outreach and shared a simple gospel message.

“At the time it didn’t seem like anything really happened,” Justin says, “but a man came up to me and said: ‘I want you to have a Bible study here. I’ll show you the place.’” The man walked with Justin through the dump, showed him specific shacks where he wanted the team to start Bible studies and introduced Justin to the people living in them.

Two weeks later when Justin returned, no one remembered the man who had showed him around. In fact, no one had seen him before, and no one has seen him since. Justin and Michelle believe God sent an angel to show them exactly where the Bible studies were to be held. Since that time, the team’s ministry to the people living on Smokey Mountain has exploded, with

more Bible studies than they ever expected.

The team also wanted to do something about the water situation. The water people drink on the dump is polluted because of contamination from the runoff from a pig farm upstream. Many children have worms, bloated bellies and illnesses from drinking it.

First, the team bought four huge water tanks and had a tanker truck bring in 4,000 liters of water twice a week. The team is now working on a pumping system that would pipe in water from a reservoir several miles away.

The team's long-term goal, however, is not to make the dump habitable, but to move people off the dump-to houses and farms where they can raise their families and make a living. The team is in the process of buying land and eventually pigs or other animals that will provide food and a source of income so that the people can become self-sustaining. So far, the team has relocated more than 50 families from the dump-but there are hundreds more still living in squalor.

The team must find funding for all these projects, as well as funds for their own day-to-day living expenses. "Some people mistakenly think that we're fully funded by FIRE International," Michelle explains, "but we're responsible for raising our own support"-about \$2,500 a month for each team family.

From Pensacola to the World

The Erbs, who now have two children, Jeremiah and Rejoice, are among the hundreds of missionaries who came out of the

Pensacola revival. Some have wondered if the revival has died out because it's not at the level it was a decade ago. Others believe God simply pushed open the four walls of the church and spread the fire around the world. All over the globe are young missionaries such as the Erbs who were touched by that revival, and they are seeing the fire ignited in Pensacola spread around the world-radical conversions, powerful baptisms and passionate worship.

The Erbs' story really is a story of their love-not just for each other, but also for the Lord of the harvest. And that is the greatest love story of all.

Elisabeth Farrell has written frequently about foreign missions for Charisma.

For more information, call 704-782-3566 or visit www.clm.org. Send tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, Attn: Justin and Michelle Erb, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.