

Teen's Tragedy Helps Youth Find Christ

Surfer Bethany Hamilton says the shark attack that cost her an arm has led others to Jesus

Hundreds have reportedly accepted Christ through the testimony of teen surfer Bethany Hamilton who lost her arm in a shark attack nearly two years ago.

Bethany, 15, said she prayed that God would use her and bring something good out of losing her left arm while surfing on Halloween 2003 off the north shore of Kauai, the Hawaiian island where she lives. Bethany's prayer has been answered and then some. Her story of how her faith grew rather than wavered has turned the teen into an internationally recognized personality.

Bethany, who nearly died and lost more than half her blood from the attack by a 14-foot tiger shark, has spoken of her relationship with God on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, MTV's *Total Request Live*, *Entertainment Tonight*, *The Tonight Show*, *20/20* and in *People*, *Time* and *Glamour* magazines.

"I don't pretend to have all the answers to why bad things happen to good people," Bethany wrote in her autobiography, *Soul Surfer: A True Story of Faith, Family, and Fighting to Get Back on the Board*. "But I do know that God knows all those answers, and sometimes He lets you know in this life, and sometimes He asks you to wait so that you can have a face-to-face talk about it.

"What I do know is that I want to use what happened to me as an opportunity to tell people that God is worthy of our trust, and to show them that you can go on and do wonderful things in spite of terrible events that happen," she continued.

A member of the North Shore Christian Church in Kauai and the No. 1-ranked amateur female surfer in Hawaii when she was attacked, Bethany has been unshaken.

After her recovery, Bethany surfed again the day before Thanksgiving 2003. In January 2004, 10 weeks after the attack, she was fifth in her age group in the 2004 National Surfing Championships and has qualified to compete again this year.

Bethany has garnered several honors, including the 2004 ESPY Award for Comeback Athlete of the Year and the Gene Autry Courage Award.

In addition, *Soul Surfer*, which was released in October, has sold more than 350,000 copies, and is selling "very, very well" in Australia and England, according to Lauren McKenna, senior editor of MTV Books, which published Bethany's book. "I'm not surprised at all by her popularity because Bethany's story is amazing and everyone who hears it is as touched as I was," McKenna said, noting that *Soul Surfer* mentions Bethany's love for Jesus in every chapter.

"Bethany's faith is absolutely real and genuine. How could it not be? The girl was back in the water within one month of her accident. It could only be her strong faith in God that made that tremendous feat possible."

Bethany's brother, Noah, who created and maintains her Web site ([http://www.bethany.com](#)), said she has received more than 50,000 letters and e-mails from youngsters and adults since the attack. "We have had well over a thousand people e-mail or write in to say they have either rededicated their lives or asked Jesus into their heart for the first time," Noah Hamilton, 23, told *Charisma*.

Bethany pointed out that some of her friends have accepted Christ since the attack. Her Web site message board is replete with messages about her faith.

"You have inspired me to realize that God has a plan for

everyone—including me!” an e-mail from Katie said.

“I read *Soul Surfer* as soon as I got it on Christmas Day,” another e-mail writer noted. “I loved it, and Bethany has changed my life in one big way! I no longer have trouble telling people that I am a Christian and that I love and believe in our Lord. Thanks, Bethany, for helping me to become a better person and a better Christian!”

Besides the message board, Bethany’s Web site features photos, surfing videos and her testimony. Web Evangelism Bulletin has called Bethany’s Web site “Web evangelism at its finest, reaching young and old surfers alike (and maybe even some folks who don’t surf at all).”

Noah Hamilton said his family has been surprised by his sister’s appeal.

“When she first got attacked, we never thought it would last past three months,” he said.

“Now, I think this is all God’s plan. She’s the best-known surfer in the world. She’s known worldwide for her faith. I believe God is preparing her for big things. She’s got the opportunity to be a role model. I think people see her as real and not fake. That’s God revealing Himself through her.”

Indeed, the demand for Bethany has not waned. Negotiations are ongoing for a big-screen movie based on *Soul Surfer*, which could be released by 2006. In June, Revelations released Bethany’s perfume line. The fragrance, which comes in bottles shaped like a surfboard, is called *Stoked* for girls and *Wired* for boys.

“We get 20 offers a day for Bethany to do stuff,” Bethany’s mother, Cheri Hamilton, 51, told *Charisma*. “We turn most of them down. But we liked this one. The perfume company donated \$10,000 to Bethany’s charity of choice, which is World Vision.”

For the last year, Bethany has sponsored a “compassion child” in Peru through World Vision. She is working with the not-for-profit Christian humanitarian organization to raise money for children with disabilities.

Bethany is scheduled to travel to Sri Lanka this summer to help World Vision with tsunami relief. She has a fund-raising goal of \$50,000 for her Surfing for Children in Crisis campaign.

“I’m told that the children are really scared of the ocean because of the tsunami,” said Bethany, who has received approximately \$100,000 in donations for medical expenses from the shark attack. “I want to show them how to have fun again and not be afraid of God’s creation. It sounds like such a rewarding opportunity and a great way to help and share the love of Christ with them.”

Steve Thompson, pastor of North Shore Christian Church in Kauai, a 200-member nondenominational church, said Bethany has a genuine concern for other people. “It is remarkable in a youth her age that she is even aware of other people and especially those who are hurting,” Thompson, 52, told *Charisma*. “She has a genuine love for others. She has a strong, confident sense that what she is doing is God’s will for her.”

Although she doesn’t have one favorite Bible verse, Bethany said Romans 8:28 “means a lot” to her regarding her shark experience. “Through it all, I just believed that God would take care of me and everything would be OK,” she said.