

The Faith of a Young Martyr

Her generation is lost in selfishness. But 25-year-old missionary Brianna Esswein gave her life to reach Nigeria with the gospel.

American missionary Brianna Esswein, 25, of Cypress, California, attended the wedding of a good friend on Saturday, December 11. Photos show her wearing a long, golden gown and a bright smile. A few hours later she and seven other staff members and students who were in Nigeria with Youth With A Mission (YWAM) were killed in an auto accident. Though she was not martyred at the hands of Islamic terrorists or anti-Christian protesters, Brianna in a very real sense died for her faith.

Raised the eldest of three children in a Christian family, Brianna stood out among other young people her age, many of whom are focused on only their own needs and desires. She was deeply committed to the Lord and touched the lives of thousands of souls who remembered her long after the encounter she had with them. Each time Brianna served someone else, she grew more steadfast in her resolve to grow in Christ, more sure of her call to the mission field.

For Brianna, missions work started at age 16 when she participated in an outreach to Mexicali, Mexico, with her friend Heather Worthington. She came back changed.

"She was kind of an introvert," Brianna's mother, Mary Kay, told Charisma. "It unfolded that she was committing her whole life to the Lord, and not long after that she decided she wanted to dedicate her life to missions."

From that moment forward, every spring break, every summer, every portion of time Brianna could carve out of her school schedule, she served on missions trips. In 1996, Brianna decided she wanted to "serve Christ no matter what the

cost”—and she was prepared to act on her commitment.

In 1999 she and her mother, a nurse practitioner, began serving on the foreign missions field together. Mary Kay was particularly delighted by Brianna’s interest in medicine. Together they went on a medical missions trip to Nicaragua sponsored by Mercy Ships, during which they put their skills and their hands together to help children in need.

“I was a nurse already and she was my translator. She knew Spanish. It was a really special time for us,” Mary Kay says. During Brianna’s spring break the following year, they served together again, this time in El Salvador.

In 2002 Brianna graduated magna cum laude from California State University in Long Beach, California, with a bachelor’s degree in nursing. Three years later she earned a master’s degree in missions and intercultural studies from Wheaton College with the same honors.

“Because of her nursing,” her mother says, “we became closer. It was a joy for me to get to know her better, and as our career paths became closer the bond was deeper. But our spiritual bond was closer as well.”

In less than 10 years, while completing high school and earning two university degrees, Brianna went on medical missions to Mexico, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Romania, the Dominican Republic, Peru, Ecuador, Sierra Leone, Togo, Benin, Ghana and Nigeria. During that time she served with Mercy Ships, YWAM, Youth for Christ and Medical Missions International. She also received training at a Youth for Christ summer institute, a YWAM Discipleship Training School and a Focus on the Family Institute.

In the summer of 2005, Brianna attended a YWAM Birth Attendant School in Australia and received training in midwifery. From September to December she put the training to good use as a midwife at a hospital in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, where she

delivered four babies. Through her experience, Brianna drew closer to God.

“The birth of a child is always a special moment,” Brianna wrote in her YWAM Christmas letter. “As a mother catches a glimpse of her new child there is a new understanding of the greatness of God’s love and the miracle of this new, created life.

“A sudden understanding of the depth, the height, the width and the length of the love and compassion of Christ suddenly comes upon me as this new mother beholds the sight of her precious child. The joy in her eyes takes away any of the pain and suffering she has just come through and as I see her joy I am able to join in and celebrate her triumph with her.”

Not all the birth experiences Brianna participated in were positive, however.

“Unfortunately not every delivery comes with a happy ending,” she wrote. “We have seen many tragedies as well along the way. Even though we are in a hospital we still face the common circumstances of a developing country, including lack of resources, lack of education and poverty.

“Joy comes slowly in these circumstances, and many times I find it difficult to see how God is working, but I trust that He is there and as I come alongside these grieving women, somehow I learn how to show them Jesus’ compassion as He reveals Himself to me.”

The Christmas letter arrived the day after Brianna died.

Personal items trickled in during the next few weeks. Brianna’s journal was delivered on January 25, the day that would have been her 26th birthday. Mary Kay found joy and strength as she read Brianna’s words.

“My heart breaks and my hope falters but never dies because my

hope is secure in Him—even when He doesn't act how I want Him to," Brianna wrote. "Hope is compassion. Hope is One coming to suffer with us.

"You are my God and I will trust in You. I will believe in You and I will put my faith in You because only in You is hope realized. Only in You does hope come to fruition and I know that hope will be completed in You."

As a Grain of Wheat

When she penned those words, Brianna had no way of knowing how her hope would be made complete. And she had no reason to believe she wouldn't experience it on this side of eternity.

She and other YWAM hospital staff and medical students were on their way to the ordination of a local pastor and friend, Ikechukwa Chukuka, when the accident occurred. Seventeen of them were packed into a large passenger van. Another group of students and staff were riding in a station wagon behind the van.

Well into the two-hour drive, the two vehicles came upon a truck that had stopped for a pothole in the road. The passenger van swerved to miss the truck. "They couldn't do anything to stop it. Everyone in the first row died—the driver and two others. Three died in the second row," Mary Kay says. "And two more died."

When the van came to a stop, the truck took off. The police followed and caught the driver.

Three accident victims in the van remained conscious. They broke windows and worked their way out of the vehicle, then began to triage the accident scene.

The station wagon had fallen behind the passenger van, but when it arrived on the scene, the occupants leaped from their car and began treatment on the unconscious ones who were

struggling to live.

Brianna was unconscious and died shortly after she arrived at a local hospital. Three other victims were flown to Ghana. Three were flown to South Africa. One accident victim remains in a rehabilitation facility where she is slowly recovering from her injuries.

The Essweins remember their older daughter's assessment of the previous evening's events.

"Bri told us she'd had a wonderful time on Saturday at a Nigerian wedding [of a doctor they worked with at the hospital] and she was excited to go to the ordination of a pastor from their YWAM base on Sunday," Mary Kay and Dan wrote in a letter of praise to God for all the provisions He's given the Esswein family since Brianna's death. "She was looking forward to having communion for the first time since she had come to Nigeria."

Instead, as sister Krista, 23, said, "She was able to commune with the Lord at the marriage feast of the Lamb."

Brianna may not have been expecting her physical life to end that day. But she had laid it down years before for the cause of Christ—along with all aspects of self—as an entry from her 2003 Discipleship Training School (DTS) journal shows:

"As a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies before it can bear fruit, I will die daily to my own wishes and desires. I will die to my dreams, to my thoughts and to my will. Through this death I will rise daily as well to the life that is lived in and through Christ. His life will permeate through me every second.

"I will lose my life here so that I may live the life that He has called me to, a life of both joy and suffering. I am willing to live and die for my Lord and will follow Him to the ends of the earth, knowing that it may cost me everything but

that there is no greater joy than serving my God, and only through Him can my life and my joy be made complete. I will be His bride.”

A Dedicated Life

Becca Carter of Pittsburgh, a YWAM midwife who had served with Brianna and the only other American involved in the Nigerian accident, seemed to confirm that Brianna had attained her goal. After recovering from head and back injuries, she went to visit the Esswein family in California and sang for them a wedding song she had written and shared prophetically with Brianna before her death:

“Now the winter is over / The rain has come and it’s gone / The flowers are blooming and singing can be heard / Arise, my love, and come away.”

Carter had observed Brianna firsthand in Nigeria and saw that her devotion to God was real.

“Early one morning in Nigeria,” she says, “I woke up and went outside—quietly, because the African sun was just waking. Bri was awake too, and she didn’t know that I saw her—dressed in her pink robe with our huge binder of praise songs out ... singing a capella love songs to her Creator.”

Brianna had developed a habit of basking in God’s presence at sunrise, as a fellow student at the YWAM DTS confirms:

“Brianna was one of the most beautiful people I ever met, inside and out. She was always awake at the crack of dawn, seeking out God and His Word, and always one of the last to bed, making sure everyone was taken care of.”

Another DTS student, Esther Kramer, also identified Brianna with the dawn. “I saw just a glimpse of Brianna’s life,” she says, “but this verse describes how I saw Brianna in her walk with Jesus: ‘The path of the righteous is like the first gleam

of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.' She really became brighter and brighter like the sun in her walk with Jesus."

Wheaton College friend Melody Scott uses different imagery to describe Brianna. "Bri was the aroma of Christ. ... She extended tenderness and compassion to everyone—literally everyone—she met. She bore Christ's eyes, His hands, His heart. She was truly the aroma of Christ; she left His fragrance," she says.

Scott and others at Wheaton saw Brianna as a worshiper, too. "She had a beautiful voice," Scott says. "At Wheaton, professors were always asking her to lead the class in worship. I can still hear her singing—see her lifting her hands and worshiping God with her whole heart."

Family members who knew Brianna best concur with the assessment of her by her friends and mission associates. "When I think of Bri, the first thing that comes to mind is her depth in 'late-night' chats on the couch," says brother Matt, 20, who is currently pursuing his degree in missions.

"Every time I talked with her I felt encouraged and emboldened to be an example of Christ. ... Her life and now her death further challenge me to live to glorify God alone in any way possible."

Matt shared the goal of creating a financial base for foreign missions with Brianna. They hoped to "[raise] up leaders to guide their own people and be a sending ground for future missionaries." Now that Brianna is gone, her family is working to fulfill this goal. More than \$50,000 has already been donated through the Esswein's local church.

At Brianna's memorial service, representatives from Wheaton College, Focus on the Family and YWAM gathered to celebrate the young martyr's amazing life.

YWAM International President John Dawson said that he was

deeply impressed with Brianna's dedication to both Christ and the mission field. According to West Coast Director John Bills, each time Dawson has been asked to speak since her death, he has highlighted this dedication.

"He says that she was fulfilling her life's purpose and that her life was not a loss because of the impact she made," Bills says. "This young girl's dedication speaks volumes. She was willing to lay her life down at any time."

Though Bills was in Perth, Australia, helping the surviving accident victims through their trauma when Brianna's memorial service was held, he has been with the Esswein family since that time. Skilled in bereavement counseling, he was a natural fit to assist the Essweins during the grieving process.

"This is a remarkable family. They are very solid in the Lord. ... They are trusting and praying that Brianna's life will be a shining testimony to those who hear about her life and [that they] will respond to the call of missions."

The Esswein family is currently planning a trip to Cameroon in central Africa to speak at a conference at which Brianna was originally invited to speak. Though they do not plan to visit the accident site, they are hoping to coordinate some additional stops in which they can "share Brianna's life and minister to the [YWAM] staff," Bills says. "They don't want to focus on the accident. They want to focus on her amazing life, her dedication to the Lord."

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