

# Beauty Among Ashes

*TERRORIST ACTIVITY CLAIMED THE LIFE OF HER HUSBAND AND ROBBED HER OF JOY FOR A SEASON. TODAY, CHERYL MCGUINNESS IS HELPING OTHER WOMEN FIND HOPE IN GOD.*

On September 10, 2001, Cheryl McGuinness celebrated her husband's 42nd birthday. Little did she know it would be their last evening together in their Portsmouth, New Hampshire, home. And little did she know how drastically her family's life would change in just one day.

A former Top Gun fighter pilot flying F-14s, Tom McGuinness was a pilot for American Airlines. On September 11, he was scheduled to co-pilot Flight 11 from Boston to Los Angeles. He never made it past New York.

Cheryl had taken their two teenage children to Portsmouth Christian Academy that morning. When she returned, she sat down with her Bible and a cup of coffee. Her moments of quiet reflection turned to desperation as phone calls from friends began to pour in. "A plane has been hijacked," a friend told her. It was possibly Tom's plane.

People began to congregate at the McGuinness home to pray with Cheryl. Later, the chief pilot from American Airlines arrived at her house and gave her the official word. Flight 11 had been hijacked and deliberately flown into the World Trade Center by terrorists.

Cheryl dreaded telling Jennifer, now 18, and Tommy, now 16. By the time she arrived at their school, they had heard general reports about the devastation, and the look on Cheryl's face revealed the rest of the story. She simply told them, "Jesus called Daddy home" and reassured them that God would take care of them.

## **HOPE AMID TRAGEDY**

During the last couple of years, God has helped Cheryl rebuild her life. "It feels like my life fell to pieces and was turned into ashes," she says, "but from the ashes, I am seeing that God is making something beautiful. He is showing me the truth of Romans 8:28—that He works all things for the good of those who love Him."

Cheryl has formed a ministry called Beauty Beyond the Ashes. Her central message is that there is hope in the midst of tragedy for those who have a relationship with Jesus.

At a speaking engagement in Fayetteville, North Carolina, Cheryl ministered to many families whose loved ones had been deployed. "Being a former military wife, I told them I could understand having a family member going overseas to fight in the war," she says. She told the crowd that though trials in life cause pain, they also are a test of our commitment.

Cheryl says that as she shares her testimony, many people open up to her and ask for prayer. "We're able to encourage one another," she says. "I'm able to minister to them as they minister to me—the blessings are double."

## **HEALING COMES WITH TIME**

The McGuinness family had lived in Portsmouth for only a year when the 9/11 tragedy occurred. Their previous home was in the San Diego area, where they developed deep roots at Riverview Church, an Evangelical Free church pastored by Larry Grine. (Grine baptized the entire McGuinness family in the Pacific Ocean.)

After Tom's death, Cheryl sent regular e-mails to Grine and his wife, Annie, who responded time and again with Scriptures, prayers and genuine love. "Emotionally, Cheryl was right at the edge for a long time," Grine says. "What that led her to do was to cry out. Very few Christians weep on their knees and worship like that. That's where Cheryl met the Lord."

Although Cheryl was a “well-equipped” Christian before 9/11, Grine says her spiritual life has deepened significantly since then as she has learned to depend on God.

“Some days all I can do is groan to God on my knees,” Cheryl says. She clings to Isaiah 65:24: “Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear” (NIV).

One of the biggest sources of Cheryl’s healing has been the body of Christ. As she speaks across the nation, people encourage her and tell her they are praying for her and her family. “What my heart sees is God’s hand and Him saying, ‘I told you. Just trust Me, and My servants will show you My love,’” she says.

Two of those servants are Lynne and John McAtee of Shrewsbury, Massachusetts. After the attack on the World Trade Center, they saw a TV news story that described Cheryl’s faith and courage.

John was deeply moved and crafted an intricate wooden sculpture for her. Since then, their relationship has deepened.

Despite the tragedy, Lynne says Cheryl continually thanks the Lord for His faithfulness. “‘The joy of the Lord is my strength’ is a verse that perfectly describes her,” Lynne says.

Cheryl realizes she needs to forgive the evil that has been done to her and America. “That is what I’m working toward,” she says. “I’m not saying I have forgiven all that happened, but that is what we need to do—to have complete healing in our heart and experience the full love God wants us to have.”

## **CHALLENGES AS A SINGLE PARENT**

Cheryl and Tom were raised Catholic and shared many of the same values. After they got married, they went to church regularly and were “good people,” Cheryl says. But they didn’t

have a personal relationship with God.

Their life-changing spiritual encounter occurred about 10 years ago after joining a Bible study. "Tom noticed there was something about the men in the group," Cheryl explains, "but he wasn't quite sure what it was. The longer he went, the more he understood that it wasn't just head knowledge. Everything he understood and studied moved from his head to his heart, and that is when he made Jesus His Lord."

Cheryl followed in his footsteps. They began attending Riverview Church and became Bible study leaders.

According to Grine, Tom McGuinness was a true example of someone who was sold out for Christ. "He was living a crucified life, not for his own glory," Grine says.

Since 9/11, Cheryl has learned firsthand that God is her true source of strength and her provider. She admits that she is stronger now and closer to God than ever before.

"What I've seen from Cheryl since the tragedy is a combination of vulnerability, brokenness and a bedrock of faith that is holding her together," says Fred Cheney, who served as acting pastor at Bethany Church in Greenland, New Hampshire, during the attack on America. The McGuinness family began attending Bethany after they moved to Portsmouth.

After Tom's death, one of the difficult adjustments for Cheryl and her children was simply learning how to live without him. Cheryl is now responsible for raising two teenagers plus the many tasks Tom handled—everything from paying bills to taking care of the cars.

Toby Stowe, an accountant based in Portsmouth, met Cheryl in February 2002 when she was referred to him for tax and financial advice. At that time, he says, her healing was just beginning.

Since then Stowe has worked with Cheryl, helping her develop her ministry. “I have witnessed her grow stronger day by day as she has trusted the Lord over and over again for many details of her ministry and life,” Stowe says. “Her walk has become more confident.”

### **CHERISHED MEMORIES**

After 9/11, Cheryl felt strongly that she needed to show her children by example how the Lord was going to get them through the crisis. Today, the children are coping very well, she says. They often travel with her when she speaks and sometimes share with audiences how special memories of their father and conversations they had with him are helping them move forward in life.

Today, Cheryl reflects on the happy memories they shared. “It really didn’t matter if we were on some exotic vacation or just taking a walk around the neighborhood holding hands,” she says. “My children cherished spending time together—mostly talking. We would just hang out and really enjoy each other’s company.”

Since Tom’s death, Cheryl has found it important to continue to do things together as a family. “Slowly, I have seen us be able to laugh at the dinner table even though it’s just the three of us. Our joy is slowly being restored, and we’re learning new family traditions and new things to laugh about.”

Today, Cheryl says her perspective is “to be a servant of the Lord—more deeply committed, more deeply in love with Him.” She plans to write a book about God’s faithfulness, revealing what her experience taught her about the importance of legacy, God’s call for forgiveness and His expectations concerning servanthood.

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**Carol Chapman Stertz** is a writer living in the Dallas area.