

# Sydney's Promise

**Killed in a church shooting, Sydney Browning never had a chance to meet the 62 second-graders of Granada Primary School. But today she's changed their lives, thanks to a university's 11-year promise fulfilled.**

Some things are hard to make sense of, like the evening of Sept. 15, 1999, when Larry Gene Ashbrook walked into Wedgwood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, and opened fire, killing seven people before turning the gun on himself.

The first to die was a woman named Sydney Browning, the children's choir director and a teacher at an alternative school for at-risk youth. The 36-year-old had been sitting on a sofa in the foyer, chatting with friends as she waited for choir rehearsal to start. Somehow she came into Ashbrook's line of sight, so he shot her in the head and kept walking, ultimately firing more than 60 rounds.

The shooting sent shock waves across the country, making front-page headlines. Police found no explanation for the rampage, no connection between the troubled loner and the church.

A thousand miles away in Browning's hometown of Phoenix, the former president of her alma mater, Grand Canyon University (GCU), was determined to see some good come out of the tragedy. So Gil Stafford did something that, to some, made little sense for the cash-strapped Christian school: He offered full scholarships to 62 elementary-school students—second-graders at the time of Browning's death who attended a low-income school in west Phoenix. In another decade, if they met GCU's admissions requirements, their college tuition would be fully paid. GCU called them Sydney's Kids.

"It was a tribute to her, her life and what she did," Stafford

says. "Those children were under-served, underprivileged, disadvantaged children that are representatives of the thousands and thousands and thousands of kids in Arizona who are shown no respect because of the color of their skin or because they can't speak English or just because they have poor parents. The connection of the two was what Christian people should be doing. It's the thing Christians should be doing every day of their life."

Despite nearly closing its doors in 2004 and losing track of most of the kids, GCU has made good on its promise. Fifteen students started their freshman year this fall, and two more are to begin next year.

The move has brought the independent Christian school national media exposure on Fox News and CBS Radio. But for Daron Beck, the scholarship he received is no publicity stunt; it's a miracle.

"I think it's a blessing that God just took that tragedy of Sydney Browning's death and [made] it into a miracle and gave scholarships to 62 second-graders," Beck says.

Grand Canyon CEO Brian Mueller says the benefit isn't one-sided; Sydney's Kids is helping those who knew her heal. "Her life ... was obviously cut short," he says, "but in another sense it wasn't, because she continues to live on through those kids who are going to school."

## **Shining a Light**

Sydney's family says the 1985 GCU graduate would likely be  humbled by the honor but also a little amused. She was a fun-loving singer and basketball player, but she hadn't been a standout student until her college years.

Her parents say they imagined her being involved in ministry, as a church administrator perhaps, but they didn't expect her to gravitate toward helping at-risk youth. Sydney had almost

finished college when she took a job at Arizona Baptist Children's Services, a residential treatment home for youth.

"We didn't really know that it was more than just a passing fad," says Sydney's father, Don Browning. "It just developed. Like a lot of kids, she needed a job and that was available and it was close."

Her work with troubled youth wasn't easy; her friends remember her coming home with a black eye after having to restrain a teen. But the Brownings say their daughter grew more and more committed.

After she graduated from GCU with a degree in criminal justice, Sydney moved to Fort Worth to attend Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, where she studied religious education. She became director of the children's choir at Wedgwood Baptist Church and took a job teaching at an alternative school for at-risk teens called Success High School.

"They named it that as a wish," Don Browning says. "Some of the kids had criminal records; some of them, this was their last chance. ... She loved teaching those kids."

On Saturdays, Sydney often played basketball with some of her students. Browning says the teens became protective of Sydney, and they believed she'd watch out for them. Once, after a shooting near the school, her students asked if she'd take a bullet for them. "She said, 'Yes, I will,' " Browning recalls, "'because I know where I'm going.'"

Still, Browning never expected to have to face that possibility. He was attending the Wednesday night service at his own church in Phoenix when he found out Sydney had been shot. He and his wife, Diana, were called into their pastor's office and told there had been a shooting accident and that Sydney had been hurt badly.

"We flew there that night," Browning says. "As we walked in, her good friend was sitting there and she shook her head no. We really thought that was true from the start, that she had been killed. ... We just had that feeling."

Funeral services were held at Southwestern Baptist Seminary and Success High. A large memorial service at Texas Christian University drew thousands and was broadcast on CNN. Then-Texas Gov. George W. Bush even attended.

Browning told the crowd about the first church solo his daughter ever sang, "This Little Light of Mine," and led them in singing the tune. "Through her death, it has shined more than we could have ever imagined," he said.

That was nearly a year before Stafford called and asked permission to start a scholarship in Sydney's name. The Brownings welcomed the idea, but no one really knew what would become of it.

## **A Promise Kept**

Two days before the Wedgwood church shooting, GCU was celebrating. The college was marking its 50th anniversary, and two second-grade classes from Granada Primary School had been invited to sing "Happy Birthday."

The teachers were both GCU graduates, but Granada had been targeted for other reasons. Most of its students were from low-income families, some of whom spoke little English, and many ended up at poor-performing high schools. It was a community GCU wanted to reach more effectively.

The children came, sang off-key, ate the sack lunches the college prepared for them, and went back to elementary school.

Then Sydney Browning was killed.

Grand Canyon mourned; there were still faculty and even some former students on campus who knew Sydney personally. The college held memorial services and honored Sydney on campus, but Stafford felt it wasn't enough. Then one day he remembered the Granada students, who were so much like the youth Sydney spent her life serving, and the idea for the scholarship came to him.

The college's board embraced the idea, and the school established mentoring and tutoring programs to help ensure the students' success. Just over a year later, Stafford presented the offer to the now third-graders and their parents.

"I don't think they fully grasped the magnitude of what was being offered to them," says Kristi Thomas, who taught one of the two classes offered scholarships. "In many cases, there was a language barrier."

Lisa Mabbitt, the other class' teacher, says she and Thomas were also in disbelief. "I don't think any of us even realized that 10 years from now all of this would transpire," Mabbitt says. "I remember Kristi and I saying, I hope they stay on top on this. I hope they stay in contact with Grand Canyon."

The outreach started strong, with students participating in tutoring programs and summer camps. But soon the students started going their separate ways and by the time they reached middle school, GCU had lost touch with most of them.

The Baptist university itself was in trouble. More than \$17 million in debt, GCU was days from closing its doors when a businessman purchased it in 2004 and converted it into an independent, for-profit college. Mueller says the college is financially healthy now, thanks to growing online enrollment. Roughly 3,000 students take traditional courses on-campus while another 37,000 are enrolled in online master's or doctoral degree programs.

Jessica Reyes says her mother never gave up on the college.

She called the school regularly to remind them of the offer and eventually connected with admissions counselor Jennifer Hatch, who took it upon herself to see if GCU would honor its commitment.

Mueller says reneging on the offer was never a consideration. He says outreach is part of the college's DNA, pointing to regular initiatives such as community clean-up days and second-language programs for immigrants.

"It was something we were going to do as soon as I heard about it," Mueller says of the scholarship. "The Christian mission of the institution has always been something that's been alive and real, and Sydney's Kids is just a reflection of all those other things."

It took a year and a half, but Hatch and two students' mothers tracked down 15 of the original students who wanted to take GCU up on its offer. Many of the 62 could not be found, but Mueller says the scholarship will remain available to them.

Shannon Carter says Sydney's Kids is a tangible reminder that her older sister's life wasn't lived in vain. "There's a richness now in her death that I didn't expect," Carter says. "Good people die every day, and because of different circumstances, they're not always recognized in that way."

As a third-grader, Reyes didn't understand the opportunity she'd been given. But she trusted her mother, so whenever they'd drive by GCU she'd point and say, "That's my school." Today she's a freshman with plans to become a pediatrician. "It's overwhelming to think how I have been given this so easily," she says. "It's just a blessing."

At a dinner to honor Sydney last September, Reyes was one of 15 students who received plaques as a symbol of the gift they'd been given. It's made of glass and inscribed with a paraphrase of Gen. 50:20, words that help GCU make some sense of Sydney's tragic death: "What man intended for evil, God

intended for good.”

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To learn more about Sydney Browning and her scholarship,  
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