

Turning Pain Into Purpose

Paula Yorker's family secret could have been her undoing. Instead, it became the basis for her highly effective brand of compassionate and relevant evangelism.

LIKE MOST MOMS, Paula Yorker spends much of her day handling routine responsibilities: running errands, cleaning house and shuttling her 14-year-old to after-school activities. What's not so typical is how the attractive, soft-spoken 43-year-old spends her free time: witnessing to drug dealers, ministering to prison inmates and heading up outreaches in inner-city neighborhoods.

"I love church," Paula says, "but I'd rather be outside, sharing the gospel and love of Christ, versus sitting in a pew, hearing the Word of God and doing nothing with it!"

Paula's passion for evangelism—she and her husband will plant two schools of evangelism in South Africa next year—comes from a painful past that could easily have destroyed her. When Paula was 18 years old, she learned a deep, dark family secret about her origins that overwhelmed her until she encountered the love and hope found in Jesus. Today she desires to see others set free the way she was.

THE SECRET REVEALED Growing up an only child in a single-parent household near Washington, D.C., Paula often wondered who her father was. Her mother refused to talk about it—saying only that he lived in Philadelphia.

At 18, Paula announced she was headed to Philadelphia to find out for herself. That's when her mother finally sat down with her and shared the secret. Paula learned that her beloved "Granddaddy" was also her biological father. He had molested Paula's mother when she was 17 years old, and Paula was born as a result of the molestation.

Paula's mother and grandfather had never told anyone and barely discussed it themselves. He was a well-known, well-liked successful businessman in the community, and Paula's mother feared no one would believe her.

Even though the news left young Paula shocked and devastated, there was no doubt her mother was telling the truth. "Too many unanswered questions from my childhood finally made sense," Paula says.

She remembered her grandfather often lavishing his attention on her and not the other grandchildren. He bought Paula and her mother, who never married, their own home in northeast Washington. When he died, 14-year-old Paula and her mother were the only ones left any money in his will.

Paula also painfully recalled growing up with an angry and distant mother. "I would ask her why she didn't hug me or tell me she loved me," Paula says.

Paula now finally understood. "I could see the whole picture—her pent-up frustration and anger and how she had no one to talk to," she says. "It just ate away at her."

The shocking discovery took its toll on the 18-year-old as well. For weeks afterward she was in a daze.

But Paula says that with God's help she was able to forgive her grandfather. "I tried to hate him, but I couldn't; I loved him. He was always good to me."

In time, Paula and her mother were able to mend their relationship also. "From then on," she says, "my mom was very affectionate with me—always hugging me. So something beautiful came out of it."

Her mother, who was in poor health, died about 12 years ago at age 50. "She's in heaven now," Paula says. "I am immensely grateful to her for the guidance, morals and values she passed

on to me. She was the best mother she knew how to be.”

BACK ON TRACK When Paula was 7 years old and in downtown Washington, D.C., with her mother, she saw a man holding a sign that read: “Jesus is coming soon.” It was the first time she had seen a street preacher, and she listened intently as he shouted warnings to repent and be born again. “My mom had to drag me away,” Paula says. “But that day I asked Jesus into my heart.”

Paula soon found herself tagging along with “Grandma Sally,” a dear family friend who filled the void of affection and love in Paula’s young life. Grandma Sally became a spiritual mentor for Paula, who would watch intently as Sally told anyone she met about Jesus.

“It didn’t matter if they were an alcoholic, drug addict, or bank president, they heard about Jesus and got a Jesus hug!”

As a young adult, Paula started using marijuana and experimenting with cocaine. She insists it was not a result of finding out about her father and, surprisingly, it is not something she regrets.

“I thank God for allowing me to go through that stage of my life,” she says. “It brought me to a place in Him that I might otherwise never have experienced. I am very grateful to God for not taking His hand off me and for delivering me in order that I may help others.”

Grandma Sally played a crucial role in helping Paula get her life back on track. Paula eventually was able to use the pain from her past to minister to others. She tells fellow incest survivors that forgiveness is the key to their recovery.

“When we don’t forgive, we stay stuck in the past, which gives the past permission to control our destiny,” she says.

BEING RELEVANT Today, Paula and her husband, Al, and their

daughter enjoy a full life in the Orlando, Florida, area. Fourteen-year-old Sia is captain of her school's dance team and wants to become a pediatrician. The couple started a school of evangelism in 2001 that is now a thriving ministry at the church they attend. Next year Al and Paula will plant similar schools of evangelism in Cape Town and Johannesburg, South Africa.

In the meantime, the Yorkers and their "students" are focusing their efforts on one of Central Florida's most drug-infested neighborhoods. Two to three Saturdays a month, for the last year, the group has helped out wherever needed: mowing lawns, cleaning houses for the elderly and doing other odd jobs.

The group also looks for ways to have fun with the neighborhood's youngsters: playing basketball, sponsoring double-dutch contests and throwing parties such as the one in June for the end of the school year. Along the way the gospel is shared.

"After basketball one day, five young men received Christ right on the spot," Paula says.

"We don't go to the neighborhood trying to be all preachy and stiff; our intention is to serve the people," she explains. "We don't judge or condemn anyone. We're just doing what we do best, which is to just love on them."

That includes drug dealers, who also get to hear the gospel message. "When they drive by and see us, they stop and we chat," Paula says. "Sometimes they'll say, 'OK, I know what time it is. It's prayer time!'"

She emphasizes that it's all about building relationships, being consistent and being available to serve a community.

"I think the church has become so irrelevant," Paula says. "We don't know how to reach the lost or relate to the world. Our language has become stale and churchy! A relevant church

targets the needs of the people and does things with a lasting impact.”

Though Paula thrives on being used by God, she has also learned the value of taking an occasional break from ministry to spend extended time alone with Him. “We have this misconception that we have to be busy, busy, busy doing works, but what’s most important is sitting at the Master’s feet.

“Ministry is what I do, but it’s not who I am. Who I am is when I’m home cooking dinner for my family, ironing my husband’s uniform, braiding my daughter’s hair, taking my 77-year-old neighbor to the movies—just being relevant, that’s who I am.”

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