

\$6,100 Tip Confirms God's Calling and Answers Prayer

"Our happiest server."

That's how the Lincoln, Neb., Cracker Barrel hostess described Abigail Sailors to the pair of gentlemen a little after 1 p.m. on Thursday, Jan. 2. The men, who had originally requested to be served by the restaurant's grumpiest server, were informed the restaurant didn't have any "grumpy" servers. So, the hostess offered the men the opposite instead and seated them in Sailors' area.

Smiling, chatty, bubbling with good nature, Sailors was working at the restaurant over Christmas break, having just finished her first semester of college. Her cheerfulness and genuinely warm personality stood out to her coworkers and restaurant patrons.

It would be easy to understand Sailors' disposition—her contagious smile, her laughter, her caring for others—if her life had been idyllic, but who she was and where she came from simply didn't add up.

The two gentlemen, now seated, placed their orders with Sailors, and then began a series of conversations with her as she moved about, caring for the handful of remaining customers from the noontime rush.

They slowly learned that Sailors had just started Trinity Bible College, but had run out of money after her first semester and was now working to save up enough money to return to college in the fall. As time passed, the gentlemen continued to inquire about her joyful attitude—surely she must have grown up in a wonderful family?

"At first, I wouldn't tell them anything about my past,"

Sailors says. "I just told them that I was happy to be alive, I was thankful and felt blessed."

As the conversation continued, Sailors learned the gentlemen—one an obvious senior to the other—were visiting the area. She also came to know the men were people of faith, talking about God and other things with them as she served. However, they continued to good-naturedly guess as to why she was so happy.

Finally Sailors gave in. "You really want to know?" she inquired. And then she gave them a brief, but telling overview of her life.

When Sailors, who had her last name changed to that of her foster family's, was 7 months old, her mother suffered a severe brain injury in a car crash near St. Joseph, Mo., and was no longer able to care for her five children. Sailors' father survived the crash without significant injury, but was deemed unfit to care for the children at the time.

The children were split apart and sent to three different foster homes, reunited for a short period of time, then split again and moved. Sailors and her siblings were abused frequently, with one foster father still in prison for his crimes against the children. When Sailors and two siblings were placed back with their father by the state, it wasn't any better—after years of abusing the children, he was arrested as well.

But about nine years ago, the nightmare childhood ended. John and Susi Sailors of Falls City, Neb., were leading the youth group at Good News Assembly of God at the time (they now attend Grace Church in nearby Rock Port, Mo., where Susi is associate pastor), and had been neighbors to the children in Falls City prior to the accident. Their five children were now grown, so they decided to take a step of faith and became foster parents to all five of the children—Shelby, Madison,

Joshua, Sydnie and Abigail, the youngest, who was then 10 years old.

John admits that it took a while for the girls to warm up to him due to their past abuse by their father and father figures, but over time, trust was earned and a loving relationship established.

“When they first came to live with us, the kids were like empty shells, but now they’re completely different—happy and outgoing,” John says, frequently crediting God for the transformation. “We love them just like they are our own children. Even our biological kids consider them brothers and sisters.”

Several years ago, John says Abigail decided she wanted to change her last name to “Sailors.” He and Susi did all the paperwork and the judge—the very same judge who had sentenced Abigail’s father to prison for abusing her and her siblings—granted her request.

“The way they treated us, you would never be able to tell that we weren’t their children,” Abigail says. “These were Christians who talked the talk and walked the walk. It’s not the same in other foster homes ... I’ve been blessed by God to be there.”

“Dad [John Sailors] gave us a real example of how any man should treat you, a father figure, a real good example of what a man of God is supposed to do for his family and his wife ... and Mom [Susi Sailors] was full of joy, kind-hearted, very open and loving.”

Like every family, there were still parent-child disagreements, but Abigail is thankful for the couple providing the mother and father figures she and her siblings desperately needed.

Abigail adds an unexpected insight into her faith and joy. No

matter what foster home she and her siblings were in, even when they were being abused, they always went to church—even if they had to walk to church on their own.

“We went to Sunday school, got hugs from the teachers who told me they loved me, and they loved on me,” Abigail says. “They also told me Jesus loved me, and I didn’t get that [love] at home ... that made me never want to separate from the faith as I knew Someone higher than me has faith in me and loves me unconditionally.”

As she grew to become a young woman, Sailors felt that God was leading her to attend a Christian college to better her relationship with Him, finally settling on Trinity Bible College (AG) in Ellendale, N.D., choosing to major in youth ministry with a minor in psychology. But she had run out of money after her first semester and was working at Cracker Barrel in order to save up enough funds to attend again in fall.

Although Sailors didn’t share all these details with the two gentlemen, she shared enough to leave them marveling.

But then the tables were suddenly turned and it was now Sailors left marveling—to say the least. One of the men told her that he was a Trinity alum and began filling out a check. He asked a confused Sailors how to spell her name, then handed her a check made out to Trinity Bible College for \$5,000 to pay for her next semester of school and another check made out to her for \$1,000 for whatever expenses she might have.

“When they started to explain what they were going to do for me, I just started crying. I couldn’t believe it,” Sailors says. “Some people at another table asked if I was OK, and I just told them they were ‘happy’ tears.”

Finally Sailors excused herself so she could pull herself together. Shocked, happy, stunned—the emotions and excitement of the moment were overwhelming.

Then to top it all off, when the gentlemen paid for their meal, they left Sailors a \$100 tip, which she split with another server. And although Sailors learned their names, she has chosen to respect their privacy by not sharing them.

Now back attending Trinity for her second semester, where she is a redshirt freshman on the women's basketball team—another blessing from God, she says—Sailors adds that the miracle of money has not only helped her financially, but spiritually as well.

“I figured out about midway through my first semester that I wouldn't have enough money to come back [for the second semester],” Sailors says. “I knew God wanted me here, so this whole experience has helped me feel really relieved that what I've been listening to all this time was the right voice, not just me. Having this happen was like, ‘I hear You!’”

Trinity's Women's Basketball Coach Rachael Nowell, a Trinity graduate and currently in her fifth year leading the team, says Sailors is a joy to have on the team.

“She has a servant heart and that influences everything she does,” Nowell says. “We were extremely excited to find out she was able to return for the second semester.”

Nowell, who attends Freedom Church (AG) in Aberdeen, S.D., with her husband, Jordan, adds that even before the “miracle,” Sailors was encouraging the team spiritually, sharing during a devotional time a story that illustrated whether we touch one or 1,000 lives for Christ, each one is important.

“It's a blessing to see how God has given Abigail an opportunity to impact so many more people than she imagined,” Nowell says. “As her coaches and teammates, it's been awesome to share with Abigail in her miracle that has been an encouragement to such a larger population.”

As for Sailors, she says, “I'm never going to forget that day,

the two strangers, God or that they believed in me. No words would ever cover how thankful I am.”

Yet there’s even more to the story—beyond the money, beyond the education. Sailors believes this experience is at least a partial answer to her childhood prayers.

“I knew God never left my side, never loved me any less, never wanted anything bad for me, but there are certain sicknesses in this world and people have choices to make ... but I thought, *Why me?* I didn’t understand,” Sailors admits. “But I kept hoping, believing, praying that some day God would be able to turn all the negatives I’ve experienced into something that can help other people.”

And now, the tip—which has led to multiple articles and radio and television interviews—has given Sailors a voice.

“Over the last few weeks, this has become a testimony where I can help other people,” she says. “It also confirms the fact that this is where God wants me to be, to keep doing what I am doing—seek Him, put Him first, glorify Him, and He’s going to continue to open doors for me, be there for me, and definitely has a plan for me!”