

After Guatemala Kidnapping, Teen Sees World Differently

Bethani Thomas opened the gate so her mom could pull their car into the guesthouse driveway. Suddenly, she realized there was a gun pointed at her head.

Her mom, International Mission Board missionary Karen Thomas, screamed from the driver's seat as she scuffled with another assailant trying to steal the car. Bethani, then 13, bolted toward the vehicle to try to help.

"Mom, it's gonna be OK. God is with us," said Bethani, scrambling into the vehicle with the gunman following her.

As Karen tried to fight off the carjacker, he shoved her out the door. The vehicle—with Bethani and the thugs inside—peeled away as Karen crumpled onto the concrete.

"They've got my daughter!" Karen screamed.

As the car sped away into the Guatemala City night, two Bible lessons popped into Bethani's head.

"Paul and Job. They had nothing, and yet they were praising God," Bethani recalled. "Those [stories] were real comforts. I started praying and singing."

Bethani listened closely to the carjackers' conversation. They were cousins. The driver was nervous. The other cousin had been roped into the crime while visiting from New York. He wanted to keep things from escalating.

Struggling to stay calm, Bethany insisted the New Yorker stop cussing, even lecturing him about his involvement in the carjacking.

Meanwhile, Karen and her husband, Jeff, remembered the phone

in Karen's purse in the car. Jeff called the number; the driver answered.

Jeff asked to speak with Bethani. The carjacker refused but briefly held the phone toward her face.

"Dad, I love you!" Bethani called out.

The realization gripped Jeff: "These might be the last words I hear from her."

Jeff eventually convinced the driver to release Bethani. Within the hour, the cousins dropped her off on the side of a busy thoroughfare—unharmed. She crossed several lanes of traffic and walked toward a fast food restaurant.

But her nightmare wasn't over.

"They just took my car! I was kidnapped!" she told a guard at the restaurant entrance.

The guard didn't believe her and refused to let her use the phone to call her parents.

Diners inside the restaurant looked askance at her.

"Does anyone even care?" she thought. "Does anyone see what's going on – this huge thing that's happened in my life?"

Bethani noticed a man nearby, talking on the phone. He ended his call with "God bless you."

The man saw her and asked if she was all right. Bethani told him what happened.

"What can I do?" he asked.

The man, a pastor, helped Bethani call her dad. "Dad, this is a good man," Bethani began by saying.

Later when she was reunited with her family, "The first thing

I saw was my dad trying to run to me,” which was especially poignant since her father has muscular dystrophy; walking—let alone running—is difficult for him.

Bethani was touched, too, when she arrived back at the guesthouse where her family was staying while visiting Guatemala City. Almost all the IMB missionaries in the city were waiting there for her.

That night “the mission family became my family,” she said.

Bethani didn’t suffer nightmares or become fearful following the ordeal. Instead, she began to worry about the safety of strangers. The trauma of being held hostage in public with no one “seeing” her sparked a hyper vigilance for people she passed on the street.

At intersections, Bethani looked inside other cars, trying to discern passengers’ safety. “Is she in trouble? ... Can I help her?” she wondered.

Over time, that hyper vigilance blossomed into a gift. Today, Bethani has a remarkable capacity to “see” other people and then intervene in their lives, say her family and friends.

For example, after Bethani read a story about sex trafficking, she studied the problem while doing a school paper. She discovered a brothel in the Guatemalan town where her family lives and ministers to the Pokomchi, a Mayan people group in the nearby highlands.

Wanting to reach out to the prostitutes, Bethani convinced a friend and her friend’s mother to help. They took care packages to the girls and were able to talk with them when their supervisors were away. They even invited the girls to lunch.

Bethani carefully observed the prostitutes and discovered, “They were almost like peers. They were just girls. We’re the

same; we just lead different lives.”

Bethani doesn't call the outreach a ministry. “We've got prostitute friends,” she says simply.

It's been six years since the kidnapping, and Bethani remains keenly aware of what God has taught her through that trial. A freshman at Mississippi College in Clinton, Miss.,

she continues to use the Bible lessons her parents instilled in her since early childhood in Mississippi and Tennessee.

Rather than settling into a clique, she looks for lonely people to befriend, especially international students on campus.

“I'm a very observant person. It's something from God,” Bethani says. She constantly asks herself, “Is there someone around here who needs help in some way?”

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