

Billy Graham Chaplains Bring Hope to West, Texas

As West, Texas homeowners steered around cement barricades to return to their houses for the first time in three days, many didn't know what to expect.

What they found were caved-in roofs, shattered windows, and piles of debris scattered by the powerful explosion that shook the little town in every way possible.

But it was what one homeowner didn't find that made him uneasy.

Gary* is a West resident who serves as a volunteer firefighter a couple towns over. After a long 72 hours away from his home, which was inside the blast radius, he just wanted to get back to his house and find his cat, Tiger.

He searched the whole house – all the typical nooks and crannies where Tiger would hide out – and nothing. His cat was gone, and for a man who had just been through the worst trauma of his life, losing his furry little buddy was enough to push him over the edge.

"He was madder than a hornet," said Chuck Bender, a Rapid Response Team chaplain with Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, who spent 33 years as a firefighter in California.

Bender and his wife, Sandy, were walking through the streets of West Saturday, praying for the Holy Spirit to lead them to people in need when they spotted Gary. Much of the town is still without running water. Chuck carried a case of water over to Gary's house and set it down on the driveway.

It wasn't long before the two men struck up a conversation.

Bender noticed Gary was wearing a firefighter baseball cap. They had something in common.

"I said, 'I'm a retired firefighter,' " said Bender. "We just got to talking on his porch. I asked him if he felt like talking about what happened. He said, 'I'll talk to you.' "

Gary had responded to the fire call Wednesday night at West Fertilizer. The building was engulfed in flames when he arrived. Before he had time to get out of the car, the plant blew up before his eyes. He watched his friends, fellow firefighters, die in the explosion. One man who managed to escape the blast came running towards Gary and fell right into his arms.

"He told me that he'd had nightmares ever since," said Bender.

Gary was going through a rollercoaster of emotions, from shock to anger to grief.

Bender knew he couldn't bring Gary's friends back, so he listened patiently before suggesting they take a break and focus on the task at hand—finding Tiger.

"I said, 'I'm gonna help you find your cat,' said Bender. "I helped him make calls to animal control. I flagged down a game warden and asked her if she could help keep an eye out."

Together, they scoured the neighborhood, looking for Tiger. When they weren't successful after quite some time, they sat down again to talk. Eventually, the conversation turned to faith.

"He said, 'I was religious once, but I haven't been that way for a long time,' " said Bender. "I told him I had been down that path years ago. I said, 'I was in the same position as you. God touched my heart. He met me right where I was, and He can do the same for you.' "

Gary wasn't sure where God fit into his life, but he said he

really wanted to have some hope.

Knowing a seed had been planted, Bender let the subject rest.

"I told him, 'You've been through a lot today. I'd love to come back and talk to you again.'"

The two men exchanged numbers and promised to meet again. Bender could tell that God had lifted Gary's spirits, even though Tiger was still missing.

"When I left him, he was laughing and he was smiling," said Bender.

As he walked down the road, he said a silent prayer for Gary—and Tiger.

"I prayed, 'Father, calm his spirit and his heart. Your will be done, Father, but if that cat could come back, that'd be amazing.'"

Bender and the rest of the Rapid Response chaplains continued their day, talking and praying with the people of West. After the sun went down, the chaplains piled into their cars, hungry and exhausted, and went to find some supper.

Bender was at the dinner table inside a crowded, noisy restaurant, when he just barely heard his cell phone ring. It was Gary.

With mouths half full, the other chaplains turned towards Bender as he shouted three sweet words across the table:

"The cat's back!"

The chaplains erupted in cheers. After witnessing so much devastation, it was a small victory, but a victory nonetheless.

The Lord had answered a simple, heartfelt prayer. In the process, a seed had been planted.

“You just turn the soil,” said Bender. “I don’t know what will happen next. It’s the Holy Spirit who works, not me. I’m just the mouthpiece.”

Bender plans to go back and visit Gary again very soon. In the meantime, he’s thanking the Lord for an answered prayer and a sweet reunion.

Gary has a long road ahead, but he’s found a glimmer of hope, and that’s a start.

**Name has been changed to protect privacy*

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