

Real Life Soul Surfer Refuses a Spirit of Fear

Dangling her arms in the sparkling blue water off Kauai's North Shore, 13-year-old Bethany Hamilton rested on her board and waited patiently for the perfect wave.

It never came.

Instead, a shark—14 feet in length and deadly in intent—approached Hamilton and snapped off her entire left arm.

Although the beast ingested part of her body that October morning, it never came close to consuming her spirit. "It was Jesus Christ who gave me peace when I was attacked," she says. "I just kept remembering, 'The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus,' (Philippians 4:6-8)."

As a young girl growing up in Hawaii, Hamilton was surrounded by a family who loved Jesus and loved surfing. She followed in their footsteps, giving her life to Jesus at age 5, and entering her first surf competition at age 8.

"I just kind of grew up with an amazing lifestyle of knowing God and having a personal relationship with Him and being able to surf some of the best waves in the world," Hamilton says. "And then I started competing and was doing really well as an amateur surfer."

But then came the morning of October 31, 2003, and her encounter with the shark.

Less than one month later, Hamilton was back on her surfboard.

"I had really wanted to get back in the water," she says. "You know, the doctor took my stitches out and was like, 'OK,

you've gotta wait one more week to let the stitch holes heal.' And I was, like, really bummed that I had to wait that extra week. But I ended up getting back out there the day before Thanksgiving and the shark attack happened on Halloween."

Today Bethany is a professional surfer and her story has been turned into a new feature film, "Soul Surfer," which comes out April 8. Bethany says she and her family are very pleased with the movie, and the way it portrays their faith and the beauty of surfing.

"It was scary at first," Hamilton admits. "You never know what Hollywood's going to do with a true story. But my family and I were very involved throughout the whole process, so were able to just give feedback and input on different scenes, and how we would do things and how we would say things."

And what Bethany and her family did and said at the time of the shark attack and what they still do and say today are a direct result of their faith in Jesus Christ.

"Having a belief in Jesus Christ and knowing that He is our Savior and what He has done for us, and how we're called to live it, helps us have unity in making decisions, and how to approach life, and how we're supposed to live," Hamilton says.

She is blessed to be surrounded by family and friends who encourage her to keep growing in her relationship with God. That influence is especially important as she spends so much of her time in the competitive surfing community.

"Surfing, like a lot of action sports, is pretty selfish," she explains. "It has quite a party scene, and just kind of an unhealthy lifestyle often. So, it's living by example and being firm in what I believe in and how God wants me to live and honor Him in everything that I do."

As Bethany continues her successful surfing career, the memories of a near-fatal shark attack don't slow her down. And

her relationship with Jesus Christ motivates her to strive to be the best at whatever God calls her to do.

“My favorite Bible verse right now is 2 Timothy, 1:7: ‘For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.’”

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