

Serving the Lord, Falling in Love

Two weeks in Grenada.

Sure, it may sound like the name of the latest chick flick out in the theatres.

But for Ken and Marilyn Sides, it was the beginning of a real-life romance, albeit the furthest thing from either one's mind.

Shortly before Hurricane Emily slammed the island of Grenada on July 14, 2005, Ken Sides had just sold his furniture manufacturing business near Hickory, N.C., and started volunteering for Samaritan's Purse.

Marilyn, one of the first Billy Graham Rapid Response Team chaplains, was also deployed to minister in Grenada, where she met Ken for the first time.

Two innocent weeks together. Very little interaction, in fact.

"I could tell he loved the Lord," Marilyn said. "I watched him from afar serving the Lord and I remember thinking he was such a neat man."

Marilyn had been single for 10 years after her first husband (Steve) died in 1995 following complications from heart surgery. They had been married 27 years.

"I prayed, 'Lord, if you ever give me another husband, I would like him to be like Ken Sides,'" said Marilyn, who felt the Lord had told her to wait 10 years before remarrying. "Little did I know what God was going to do."

About a month later, Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast in what was the the costliest natural disaster in U.S.

history.

Ken and Marilyn were both deployed to Biloxi, Miss.

Well, well, well. Fancy meeting you here.

"I was still bleeding from my separation," said Ken, whose first marriage lasted 33 years. "I always tell people the Lord sent her to me to bind my broken heart."

'What took you so long?'

Nineteen months was long enough for Marilyn to know Ken was the one.

"Through the ups and downs of Mississippi, it brought us closer together," Marilyn said. "I got to see Ken react to different problems in love and prayer and with integrity."

"A lot of (the Samaritan's Purse volunteers) were young and in their 20s. We just became kind of like mom and dad at camp."

For Marilyn, after a full decade of ministering on her own, she felt God confirming inside her that another chapter was about to begin.

"When you're serving by yourself, that's also wonderful," she said. "But when you're serving with someone else, it just enhances what you are doing."

Still, that day at The Cove in Asheville, N.C., Marilyn didn't know what to think. The two were there for a Rapid Response training course and during some down time, Ken asked her to visit the Chatlos Memorial Chapel.

Their relationship had progressed to the point where maybe, just maybe, he might be popping the question.

"I thought he was going to propose to me in the chapel, but he didn't," Marilyn said. "All we did was pray, 'Lord whatever you have for our life, let it be.'"

This threw Marilyn off. But in reality, Ken just wanted to propose outdoors.

"We went outside to the bench right outside the chapel," he said. "I got down on my knee and everything."

Marilyn's first response? "'What took you so long?'" Ken recalls. "But then she said 'Yes.'"

'We're Humbled and Thankful'

Ken still marvels at the story: "We give God all the glory for getting us together."

More reserved than Marilyn, being a Rapid Response Team chaplain wasn't something that came naturally to Ken, but being around Marilyn 24/7 quickly rubbed off on him.

"We're humbled and thankful to be here," he said of serving as Rapid Response Team chaplain coordinators. "This has been a tremendous blessing."

Ken and Marilyn have seen God's healing power at work in so many different types of disasters, it's hard to keep track.

"We were in Haiti four or five times," Ken said. "We've been to the fires in California. The tornadoes in Alabama. The floods in the upper Midwest. Hurricane Ike in Texas. The tornado in Macon."

But through it all, he's seen one constant. Pain is pain. And hurting people need the hope and healing that only Christ can provide.

"At first, they're just happy to be alive," he said. "Then a hopelessness sinks in and we try to give them the hope that's in Christ. So it's not so much about what they just lost."

And that's where Marilyn's gift of compassion comes in. One of Ken's favorite sayings is "there goes your new best friend" as soon as Marilyn meets someone and she can only laugh because,

oftentimes, it's true.

"But if we were all compassion oozers, we would be no good," she said. "Somebody has to hold the fort down."

Even if Marilyn's is out connecting with those who are hurting.

"Ken will say, 'I don't know how you sit there for hours and listen to people like you do,'" she said. "But he's one of my biggest cheerleaders. He is the wind beneath my wings. He'll tell me, 'God has designed you for this.'"

And at the same time, Marilyn sees God's perfect plan unfolding every time Ken preaches a message.

"Ken has a heart to preach and he's an awesome preacher of the Word," she said. "I'd rather hear him preach than anybody—OK, anybody but maybe Billy Graham."

'To be able to give them some hope'

On July 21, Ken and Marilyn will celebrate their five-year anniversary.

In a lot of ways, the past five years has flown by for Ken. And stood still. All at the same time.

"It seems like we've been married forever," he said, then quickly covered his tracks. "And in another way, I can't believe five years have gone by so quickly."

But the past five years have been some of the most eternally rewarding that Marilyn can remember.

"To be able to serve in this capacity with your husband," she said, "and know that both of your hearts are to serve the Lord and to reach out with the gifts the Lord has given you to those who are hurting."

Ken and Marilyn each have two grown children—Ken two boys and

Marilyn two girls. They each have three grandchildren, or as Marilyn puts it: "I have six now."

It may not be your traditional family mix, but Ken and Marilyn wouldn't have it any other way. "It's been wonderful," Marilyn said. "It's a unique way to serve the Lord together."

And the memories have been countless.

"Just meeting those people and to be able to give them some hope," Ken said. "And then seeing them smile. Seeing them hug Marilyn. And to give them a Bible and watch them cling to it."

Marilyn still can't believe that she's been able to serve in a capacity so rewarding as the Rapid Response Team. While trained and equipped, she still feels overwhelmed at the responsibility to share in this capacity.

"I always feel inadequate," she said. "Every time I go to meet someone, I pray to the Lord, 'Please show up, please show up.'"

And then He does.

And it never gets old.

"And knowing you've just stood there—doing nothing, but being a conduit of His love—it's amazing," Marilyn said. "Because you know there's no way you can do that. All you can do is be that person God sent. It's truly the most profound thing."

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