

The Burden of a Secret

Paula Yorker didn't know until age 18 that she was a child of incest. The startling revelation was overwhelming until she discovered the love of her heavenly Father.

When Paula Yorker was growing up on the outskirts of Washington, D.C., she often wondered who her father was. Her single mother gave her vague answers that ran the gamut from "he lives in Philadelphia" to "he died in a car accident."

When Paula turned 18 she announced she was headed to Philadelphia to find out for herself. She never made it out the door. Her mother sat Paula down and finally shared a deep, dark family secret that had been hidden for almost two decades.

Paula found out that the man she knew as her beloved "Granddaddy" was also her biological father. He had molested Paula's mother when she was 17 years old—and Paula was born as a result of that molestation.

Paula's mother and grandfather never told anyone else and barely discussed it themselves. He was a well-known, well-liked, successful businessman in the community, and Paula's mother feared no one would believe her.

The news left young Paula devastated. "I was in total shock," she says. Even so, she never doubted her mother was telling the truth. "There were too many unanswered questions from my childhood that finally made sense," she says.

She remembered as a youngster wondering why Granddaddy was so devoted and attentive to her even though he had several other

grandchildren. He even bought Paula and her mother, who never married, their own home in northeast Washington. When Paula's mom became ill with chronic pancreatitis, he arranged for them to move in with his sister. Upon his death, 14-year-old Paula and her mother were the only ones left money in his will.

Paula also painfully recalled growing up with a mother who was often angry and emotionally distant. "I would ask her why she didn't hug me or tell me she loved me," Paula says.

After her mother told her the truth, Paula finally understood. "I could see the whole picture—her pent-up frustration and anger and how she had no one to talk to," she says. "It just ate away at her."

But the startling revelation took its toll on 18-year-old Paula. For weeks afterward she was in a daze. The shock gave way to anger, and one day Paula drove to the national cemetery in nearby Arlington, Virginia, where her grandfather was buried.

"I was angry," Paula says, "and wanted to go tell him a thing or two." Sitting at his graveside, she poured out all the heartache, anger and tears. "He had messed up my mom's life."

Paula says that with God's help she was able to forgive her grandfather. "I tried to hate him, but I couldn't. I loved him—he was always good to me."

With family secrets and mysteries now in the open (two other family members also had found out) Paula and her mother were able to forge a new connection. "Our relationship came together," Paula says. "From then on my mom was very affectionate with me—always hugging me. So something beautiful

came out of it.”

But Paula’s mother remained in poor health and died about 10 years ago at age 50. “She’s in heaven now, but part of her still lives because I live,” Paula says. “I am immensely grateful toward her for the guidance, morals and values she passed on to me. She was the best mother she knew how to be.”

A Bus Stop Prophecy

Looking back, Paula, 41, says she now feels compassion and understanding for her mother. “I’m grateful to be alive,” she adds, explaining how easily she could have become an abortion statistic.

Early in her pregnancy, Paula’s mother had decided that abortion was the only way out. “She hadn’t even started to show yet,” Paula says, “but she just couldn’t take it anymore.”

While waiting at a bus stop to go to an abortion clinic, an unknown woman approached Paula’s mother, pointed to her flat tummy and told her that the baby she was carrying would be a blessed baby and that God would use the baby to preach the gospel all over the world. Paula’s mom was speechless. She walked home and never again thought of having an abortion.

When Paula was just 7 years old, the woman’s prophetic words began coming into fruition. During a shopping trip in downtown Washington, D.C., Paula spotted a street preacher holding a sign that read: “Jesus is coming soon.”

Seeing a street preacher for the first time stopped Paula dead in her tracks. She listened with awe as he shouted warnings to repent and be born again. "My mom had to drag me into the store," Paula says. "Right then I asked Jesus into my heart."

As soon as Paula returned home she gathered all the neighborhood kids in her front yard. "I told them they needed to repent so they wouldn't go to hell," she says. "I didn't even know what the word repent meant." Even so, it became her first revival service with three youngsters praying a prayer of salvation. "I don't remember the prayer we prayed," she says, "but I never forgot that man's voice and the look of desperation on his face."

Several months later Paula met Sally, an older woman who was a dear friend of the family's. Sally quickly filled the void of affection and love in Paula's young life and became a nurturing surrogate grandmother and spiritual mentor.

Young Paula tagged along with "Grandma Sally" and watched intently as she told anyone she met about Jesus. "It didn't matter if they were an alcoholic, drug addict or president of a bank, they heard about Jesus and got a Jesus hug!"

Grandma Sally guided Paula's spiritual growth, teaching her about the power of prayer, and how to anoint with oil and lay hands on the sick. Even when Paula was going through some troubling times as a young adult and experimented for a short time with marijuana and cocaine, God used Grandma Sally to get her life back on track.

"God knew His purpose and plans for my life—and so did Grandma!" Paula says.

Setting People Free

Paula eventually married, started a family and in 1992 moved to Florida. Now, when the devoted wife and mother isn't running errands or volunteering in her daughter's classroom, she's pursuing her favorite pastime—evangelizing the lost. Whether she is stopping by a local park in a rundown neighborhood or stationing herself outside a supermarket, Paula tells people about Jesus.

She started her one-woman crusade about 12 years ago and since then has probably led hundreds of people to Christ.

“I have a heart for people,” she explains, “especially those who are oppressed. I can see it in their eyes. I just want them to know there's a better place than where they're at.”

Sharing about what she considered her shameful past was something the Holy Spirit over time had to lead her into.

Three years ago she shared her testimony for the first time at a women's conference. At the conclusion of her talk she invited women who had been abused to come forward for prayer. Nobody came.

“The enemy tried to tell me it was because God didn't want me discussing it,” Paula says. “But I just started praying even harder for God to move on the hearts of the women.”

Soon the altar was filled with dozens of women, many of whom quietly confessed their dark secrets to Paula. “God led me to have them call out the names of their abusers and to say that

they forgave them and released them into the hands of the Lord," Paula says.

At first, some women couldn't bring themselves to even say the names, but after they did, she says, there was sobbing and even screaming. "This is the type of deliverance required with abuse," Paula says. "My heart went out to them, especially when I realized my mom had kept all of that inside her throughout her life. She never got set free even though she was saved."

Paula says that shortly before her grandfather died, he accepted Christ and started attending church. She remembers the day she came running in the house from grade school and saw her mom and granddaddy weeping on each other's shoulders. She later found out that was the day her grandfather had come over to ask her mom to forgive him for his perverse deed.

"Even though my mother forgave him and they built a relationship," Paula says, "she was never delivered from the pain and torment. The church was never there for her."

Paula firmly believes that incest and abuse is a bigger problem than what many people, especially those in today's church, care to admit.

"Like my mother, victims don't want to speak out because they're afraid nobody will believe them," she says. "Instead they keep quiet. They want to keep the peace and protect the family name. But how can you do that? How can you move on like nothing happened? Like my mom, they're all bound up with things from the past."

Paula hopes that sharing her testimony will serve to help others. “Hopefully they will learn how to forgive,” she says, “and they will stop allowing the enemy to torment them. I just want God to be glorified in everything I do and say. He is the only One who can truly set people free.”

Let the Redeemed Say So

Paula Yorker isn't shy about sharing her faith with others.

Paula Yorker admits she spends her free time in an unusual way. On a chilly but sunny February morning, the parking lot of a Sanford, Florida, Winn-Dixie supermarket is busy with a constant stream of shoppers. In the center of it all stands a petite, attractive woman wearing running shoes and a black jacket over workout clothes.

She looks like a typical mom stopping off to buy groceries. But Paula Yorker isn't there to shop. In fact, the only time she enters the store is to buy a gallon of water for an elderly man's leaky car radiator.

The rest of the time, working from a pad of evangelism questionnaires, she surveys passers-by. She asks the same series of questions each time, but always with the same vigor and interest. Paula's low-key yet determined approach works—most of the people she encounters welcome her and agree to answer the questions. More often than not, the survey gives way to personal conversations about God, and Paula ends up either praying for the person's needs or leading them to

Christ.

When asked if he knows for certain that he'll go to heaven when he dies, John promises Paula he'll walk the aisle next Sunday at his Baptist church. "But John,"

Paula warns, "what if, God forbid, something happens and you die before Sunday?" John shrugs his shoulders and agrees to let Paula pray for him.

After leading her in a prayer of salvation, Paula invites "Miss Janie"—a 71-year-old woman who smells of alcohol—to church. She gets her address and promises to come by on Sunday to pick her up. "Now don't you worry about getting all dressed up," Paula instructs. "I'll call you tomorrow and check on you."

Often Paula can be found—sometimes with others from her church—canvassing other shopping center parking lots and local parks or ministering at nursing homes or a nearby prison. "I just go where the Holy Spirit leads me," she says. "It's a way of life for me."

Two years ago Paula and her husband, Albert, started a school of evangelism that is now a ministry at the church they attend near Orlando, Florida. Paula explains that they embrace the vision of their pastor, Sam Hinn, to reach the lost. "The school is our heart—that's what God has told us to do," she says. "It's all His, not ours."

The couple hold workshops on the how-tos of evangelism. They conclude with "on-the-job training" sessions in which they take the students to shopping-center parking lots and local

parks where they can put into practice what they have learned.

“But first we cover all our outreaches in prayer,” Paul says. “If we’re doing a prayer walk through a neighborhood, we’ll have a prayer session the night before, claiming that territory for the Lord.

“Sometimes believers are so anxious to rush right out and start knocking on doors,” Paula explains, “but there’s been no foundation, no preparation and then nothing happens and people get discouraged. When it becomes a way of life, you never get discouraged. Part of our training is preparing people’s minds and helping them see that it is a process.”

For more information about the Yorkers’ school of evangelism, call (386) 789-3324 or e-mail yorkinternatmin@.

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