

BACK FROM THE ABYSS

When missionary Gary Witherall's wife, Bonnie, was slain by a gunman in a Lebanese medical clinic, he thought he might lose his faith, but he found God's grace instead.

By John Blake

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Gary Witherall walked on an empty stage before a Fayetteville Baptist church congregation and raised his hands in surrender.

"I have nothing," he told the hushed audience. "Nothing. My wife is not sitting there. I don't have anything."

That day three years ago was the first time that a mass Atlanta audience would meet Witherall. It was just two weeks after his wife, Bonnie, had been shot to death by a man as she tended to young women in a Lebanese medical clinic. Gary and Bonnie were Christian missionaries.

As he paced the stage that Sunday, searching for something to say, Gary publicly forgave his wife's killer. His decision was broadcast around the world. The British native was called a model of Christian forgiveness. People asked him to speak at their church. Then the news cycle moved on and he faded from public view.

But Gary's ordeal was just beginning. In the months ahead, he felt as if his "skin was being ripped off" by the pain of his loss. He missed the warmth of Bonnie sleeping quietly next to him at night, eating German crepes with her for breakfast on the balcony of their apartment.

He also felt drafted into a role he didn't want to play, so he started turning down speaking requests. "I'm not going to be the hero guy, and I'm not going to be a freak," he said.

Yet this month, Witherall steps onto the public stage again. This time he knows what he wants to say. He'll talk about an eerie experience he had one night that helped pull him out of his "abyss." He'll talk about why he can't wait to go back to the very place where he lost Bonnie.

And he'll also talk about a pivotal meeting with a stranger in Chicago who didn't see him as a freak or a hero. She saw him as a kindred spirit.

Now 39, Witherall is fuller in the face but still looks like the man who paced the stage three years ago.

He's overflowing with energy and words, talking rapidly in his British accent, greeting visitors at the Midtown Community Church near Georgia Tech on an October morning.

Witherall is an Atlanta resident now, having moved here in 2003, just several months after his loss. Both he and Bonnie were members of Operation Mobilization, the interdenominational Christian missionary group based in Tyrone. The group has at least 4,000 missionaries scattered across the globe, most of whom work from OM ships that travel the world.

He's surfaced again this month because he wants to share his story in "Total Abandon" (Tyndale House Publishers, \$14.99), written by him and Elizabeth Cody Newenhuyse. He may have faded from the secular public's view, but he's traveled the evangelical circuit as a speaker after being signed by the Ambassador Speakers Bureau & Literary Agency to sort through his speaking engagements. For the past year, he has lived in Peachtree City in a house loaned to him by a benefactor.

Witherall said he feels "driven in my spirit" to share because it might help others who lost someone, even if it means him having to relive the pain.

But he does guard against revealing too much during his public talks.

"I protect myself by skirting very carefully among certain stories that make a big impact but don't take me down an emotional avenue," he said.

Constant reminders

On Nov. 21, 2002, Bonnie was shot to death by a man at a prenatal clinic in Sidon, Lebanon. She helped poor, pregnant Palestinian women prepare for childbirth at the clinic, occasionally giving some a Bible or a Christian tract. Gary, who worked at a church, usually slept in when Bonnie worked at the clinic in the morning.

Even when he's not being asked to talk about that day, he's somehow reminded. He'll go to a Starbucks and someone will ask him if he's the missionary whose wife was killed. He'll read a book and stumble on a passage about Bonnie's death. He even was watching a Discovery Channel special on Muslim-Christian conflict when he saw a horrific sight.

"Before I could deal with it, there's Bonnie's body on a stretcher," he said. "I had never seen the footage before. I didn't even know it existed."

The murder became --- to some --- a symbol of Muslim intolerance. Web sites devoted to Bonnie popped up all over, filled with angry e-mails about Muslim hatred of Christians.

"We are at WAR with ISLAM. The sooner we ACCEPT the TRUTH the sooner we will WIN!" one blogger said after hearing about Bonnie's death.

Those sentiments, though, anger Witherall. He has a deep affection and respect for the Muslims he met in Lebanon. He said he doesn't blame a group for Bonnie's murder.

"Stop treating them like they're all fanatics, like they're all going to go around shooting people," he said. "There are a lot of wonderful Muslims there. We have to start seeing Arab people as people."

He's already visited Lebanon several times since Bonnie's murder. He misses the food, the beauty of the Mediterranean Sea, the Arab people's love of leisurely conversation and their hospitality.

"I feel more at home in southern Lebanon than I do in England or in the U.S.," he said. "People really care about me there."

Once, when he returned to Sidon, he drove by a coffee shop where he and Bonnie had befriended the Muslim owner. He was telling his companion how much he liked the shop's owner when --- as if on cue --- the man walked out of the shop and spotted Gary.

The shop owner bolted across four lanes of traffic as cars slammed on their brakes, said the Rev. Buddy Hoffman, Gary's friend and companion that day.

"Gary gets out of the van, runs over [to] the man and in the middle of all this traffic, this man just bawls on his shoulder," Hoffman said. "You could see the love that was there and the sorrow this man had."

Gary loves it so much he can't wait to return. "I wish I was there right now," he said.

Reassessing life

"Lord, here we are in the Middle East. How many people will die in this city of Sidon today without knowing YOU? How can I worry about my life or Gary's life when tens of thousands of people may die and face eternal damnation today? Lord, my life is already hidden with You. I know You. I have the truth. There is nothing they can take away from me." --- Entry from Bonnie's journal, reprinted in "Total Abandon."

To understand why Gary wants to return to Lebanon, one must understand the missionary subculture that nurtured and formed Bonnie and him. Bold gestures, dramatic proclamations and risk-taking are all part of that world.

And "love for Jesus," Witherall said.

"We had counted the cost and knew the dangers," he wrote in his book. "We felt that Jesus lived in the same way, with few possessions, no home, and an itinerary that took Him to places where people would possibly want to kill Him."

The Voice of the Martyrs, an interdenominational nonprofit group dedicated to helping persecuted churches worldwide, claims that thousands of people are martyred each year for Jesus.

Those kinds of numbers might deter some, but for some the numbers function like a beacon. They stand as a test of commitment --- how far are you willing to go for Jesus. In the Christian missionary subculture, tales of courageous missionaries who gave their lives are circulated in books, magazine articles and films as inspiration. Bonnie's death, for example, is already the subject of a song and music video called "Wear the Crown" by Bill Drake, a Georgia missionary. It includes home video of Bonnie in the clinic.

Drake said he was struck by Witherall's willingness to be "authentic in the middle of enormous grief."

"The guy is the real deal," Drake said. "He's been there, done that and got the T-shirts and the scars."

Gary and Bonnie meshed with this subculture. They had been conditioned for it by other sources as well. One story they loved to read together was "The Dead" by James Joyce. Their favorite lines came near the end when a character concluded:

"Better to pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age."

Yet people who become missionaries also quickly discover that there's another side, devoid of glory and passion. It can be lonely and hard work. Missionaries give up everything --- their language, car, friends, family.

"It means giving up Wal-Mart and Walgreens and clean streets and safety and working electricity," Witherall wrote. "It means you might be going into a war zone."

It can also mean giving up your faith, Witherall learned.

After Bonnie was killed, Witherall said he fell into an emotional abyss. Right after her murder, he drove to a friend's house in the mountains above Beirut for rest. But he couldn't sleep because people started flooding the home with telephone calls: relatives, church leaders, people he didn't even know. He insisted on taking all the calls, crying so hard at times that his body shook. He finally unplugged the phone and flopped in bed, his face swollen from crying.

He felt alone and empty. He felt like giving up his faith.

Then something happened, Witherall said. The room seemed to explode in light and Witherall said he sensed someone --- Jesus --- talking to him. The voice said step back and look at your life. It's been good. Then he felt somebody envelop him, though he was alone.

"I felt like his arms were hugging me," he said. "You ever get a hug from a real good friend? ... I can't explain it. Anytime I read Scripture, I understand in a new way, 'The Lord is my shepherd.' "

That halted an emotional tailspin.

"I would have completely backslidden and turned against Christianity," he said.

Soon, however, Witherall would discover another set of arms waiting to hold him.

Emotional connection

On Jan. 8, 1956, five missionaries traveled into the jungles of Ecuador to evangelize to a tribe known for brutality. The men, after receiving signs from the tribe that they were welcome, were killed with spears and hacked by machetes. One of them was Roger Youderian, a former Airborne Ranger who fought in the Battle of the Bulge.

Years later, the wives of the missionaries went back to the same tribe to forgive the men who killed their husbands. Some of those men became Christians. The story, told in a popular book called "Through Gates of Splendor," has inspired missionaries for almost 50 years.

Not long after Bonnie died, Witherall was speaking at the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. After his talk, a young woman named Helena told him she'd been inspired by his story. She told Witherall that her mother was dying of cancer. Her grandfather, she said, was Roger Youderian.

Hundreds of people approached Witherall after his talk that day, but he remembered Helena. Her story stood out. They agreed to keep in touch via e-mail.

In December 2002, Helena's mother died exactly one month after Witherall lost Bonnie. She sent him an e-mail that read: "My mom and Bonnie are having the best Christmas ever."

As both encouraged each other in the following months, they became closer. Witherall was concerned that no one would want to be with him because of his experiences, though.

"I thought I was definitely out of the box of what someone would want to marry," he said. "'Don't marry me out of pity.' "

But he felt a deep emotional connection with Helena. Both went on a missionary trip to the Cayman Islands in 2004. During the trip, they decided to visit Cuba, and in Havana

Witherall asked Helena to marry him. She said yes. They were married New Year's Eve 2004 by Witherall's friend Hoffman, pastor of the Grace Fellowship Church in Snellville.

"She understands Gary better than possibly anybody else that could have in his life," Hoffman said. "She also understands how good can come out of bad."

Drake, the musician who dedicated the song "Wear the Crown" to Bonnie, also knows Helena. He said her temperament complements Witherall's.

"She is quiet but solid," Drake said. "She seems unflappable."

Helena doesn't talk publicly about their marriage. He said that she wants to be protected from media coverage. Gary, however, said Helena's loss --- her mother and grandfather -- - also helped him grow closer to her.

"She has that legacy in her life," Gary said. "She understands."

And now the missionary who once had nothing has something, a new life, new hope --- and someone who understands how good can come out of bad.