

A publication of Emmanuel Christian Center
Fall 2004



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Three Brides in Heaven
a family's story of triumph

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As you are receiving this issue, Emmanuel is nearing the end of *40 Days of Purpose*. Around two thousand of you joined small groups. By now you've established new relationships, learned new insights from God's Word, and have a new desire to live a life with purpose.

I encourage you to continue meeting in a small group. It gives you a great opportunity to relate to each other as part of the family of God. It is the goal of *Deeper* to strengthen those relationships. As you read the articles in this issue, you read the stories of your family. These are your brothers and sisters — celebrate with them, laugh and sometimes cry with them, and pray for them.

Our feature story is about a family that went through a tragedy we cannot comprehend. But more amazing still, is their deep faith that has sustained them and given them that supernatural peace that we know can only come from God. It was my privilege to spend an afternoon with Debbie. She made me more aware of the awesomeness of our Father.

Once again, sit back and enjoy the real lives of those in your family and let us know how this issue of *Deeper* has touched your life as we take you "below the surface."

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Three Brides in Heaven *a family's story of triumph*

WRITTEN BY: Angie Halama

It had been just three months since Debbie Mayer lost all three of her daughters in a car accident. She had agreed to do an interview with me to share the incredible ways God had been working in her and her family's lives in the midst of their tragedy. I was eager to hear this part of her story, but the day before the interview I was having second thoughts. Really, how much did I want to talk to a mother about losing three of her children?

The headline in the Star Tribune on January 2, 2004, said, "Three Sisters Killed in Car Crash." The story reported that on New Year's Day the Mayer sisters—19-year-old Krista, 17-year-old Nikki, and 12-year-old Jessica—were on their way to Willmar. They were going to a bridal party celebration for their brother's fiancé two days before the couple's wedding. The three were riding together in the same car, and, while making a legal pass, they hit a minivan head-on. Nikki, the driver, and Jessica, died at the scene. Krista died at the hospital.

The story quoted their father, Joe, who said, "I was very proud of them." It briefly described each girl and her activities in and outside of school. The article didn't have to say it was a tragedy—that was obvious.

And that was about all it said. But that wasn't even half of the story.

When I sat down with Debbie, I found a woman so in awe of God's provision and His ways that her enthusiasm was contagious. Debbie had a whole other story to tell, a story of hope, faith, and God's love. When I left the interview, I too was in awe of the work of God.

A Firm Foundation

Long before January 1, 2004, the Mayer family had established God as central in their lives. Joe and Debbie had led their family to follow God and His ways. The family had attended Vine Evangelical church for 20

years and then moved to their current church, Redeeming Love. Debbie worked at Teen Challenge on Sunday nights, and she would accompany the students to Emmanuel Christian Center for Sunday evening services. She had also attended the Breakthrough Conference at ECC in 2001. For a time, Nikki, her middle daughter, had enjoyed attending Sunday evening services at Emmanuel with a friend.

The Mayers knew they had a firmly rooted faith, but not until after the accident on January 1 did they understand its incredible depth and the awesome strength it gave them.

It was God-given strength that helped them go ahead with the wedding of their son, Joey, and his fiancé, Bree. The girls were supposed to have been bridesmaids in the wedding. They were excited to have Bree become part of the family, and Debbie said they would not have wanted the wedding to be canceled. So, incredibly, it was decided the wedding should take

place as planned, and it was an amazing demonstration of how God could lift this family up after its unthinkable loss. "It was the most beautiful wedding," said Debbie, "There was so much joy, [despite] the sorrow. I don't understand how that worked—it was God's supernatural grace."

As she reflects on the wedding and on the girls' funeral, which took place three days after the wedding and at which Debbie sang, she wonders how she got through it. But she knows she didn't get by on her own strength. At the funeral, their pastor said, "We've seen your lives and they're built on a Rock. They're not going to blow over. There's a foundation there."

What's easy to see in talking with Debbie is that God has used this immense loss in ways the Mayers could never have anticipated. On the night of the girls' deaths Debbie went through their rooms. "I needed to find something tangible, something I could hold on to." She found Krista's art journal, and inside she read this: "It's important for you to know [that] for me to live is Christ and to die is gain."

That incredible statement, Krista's statement of her faith based on Philippians 1:21, became the theme for the girls' funeral. Everyone at the funeral received a bookmark with a picture of the girls on it and this statement: "For me to live is _____." The blank was supposed to get people to contemplate what their lives were about. When Debbie's brother-in-law Ken spoke at the funeral he said, "What are you filling your life with? If it's anything but Christ, the equation is off. If you're filling your life with family or ambitions or dreams, to die is loss."

The statement on the bookmarks resounded with those attending the funeral. The mourners were asked if they wanted to dedicate their lives to Christ. Two hundred kids, many of them classmates of the sisters, made the decision to follow Him. And, "My dad got saved," said Debbie.

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Less than a week after the girls' deaths, the Mayers were seeing God at work in a big way. But it was far from the end of what God would show them. On the morning of January 1, Debbie felt an incredible urgency to pray and pulled Joe aside to pray with him. "We prayed, 'God, glorify yourself, whether it's in crying or laughter.'" She thought the urgency was related to the upcoming wedding. Now she sees it was much more than that.

A Harvest

"If you feel God has told you to do something in your life, and you've prayed and you feel it's what God's said, do it." Debbie shared. "I'd say that in our girls' home-going, different puzzle pieces of our lives are pulled together. Many of the seeds we planted we are seeing harvested." In their lives, the Mayers had done many things that they felt God wanted them to do, but they often wondered what impact those things had. After the girls' deaths, they began to learn these things really had made a difference.

For example, when Joey, their oldest, was attending Saint Anthony High School, he led a voluntary worship time for students. It was sometimes

frustrating. Joey would say to her that he was tired of hearing himself sing when there were few voices joining in. Debbie understood, but encouraged him to continue. When Krista and Nikki attended the high school, Debbie led the worship time, often with the girls' help. But they, too, felt frustrated that they didn't seem to be mak-

ing much of an impact. After the girls died, though, the Mayers received several letters from teachers who had been watching their kids and noticed their faith and how they walked it out. In fact, the seemingly "fruitless" worship service inspired one of the teachers to start a prayer group with other teachers at the school!

And it wasn't just teachers who noticed, but kids noticed, too. After the funeral, kids told the Mayers things like, "I've watched your kids be a friend to sinners and it has shown me how to love unbelievers." Half of the kids from the high school who attended the funeral went forward to receive Christ. The faith of Krista, Nikki, Jessica, and their family had made a difference in the lives of these kids.

As a memorial to Jessica, her basketball team presented the Mayers with a special gift. They had Jessica's jersey framed along with a scripture verse, 2 Corinthians 4:18: "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." All of the team members and the coaches signed her jersey, and they presented this to the Mayers at the year-end basketball party in front of the whole sports booster, which included first through seventh grades.

Besides basketball, Jessica also played clarinet in the school band. In her honor, at one of their concerts the band played "Jesus Loves Me," and they spoke of her faith in God. Nikki's choir wanted to sing an original song dedicated to Nikki. When a mother of one of the students heard this, she, who is a Christian, wrote words for a song about Nikki's faith. Another student's father, who is also a Christian, wrote the score. The song,

The Choir sang these words: "A life not measured by size; A life measured by the depth of the heart."

called "Nikki's Hope," was performed at a concert given by the choir. Debbie recounted the story in disbelief: "And it was performed in a public school!" The choir sang these words: "A life not measured by size; A life measured by the depth of the heart."

A Catholic confirmation teacher in a small Minnesota town called the Mayers to tell them his confirmation class had been challenged by the story of the girls' and their faith. The entire class was challenged with the idea of what it means to live for Christ. The class was changed, and the students were serious about wanting to live for Christ.

The Mayers, who live in New Brighton, have been part of a community prayer group that formed specifically to pray for the students who accepted Christ at the girls' funeral and to pray for the Mayers. Debbie said that there are people from eight different churches who attend this regular prayer meeting, and several of

them didn't know each other previously. In her community, Debbie said, "Christians started coming out of the closet."

Thinking about the impact of the seeds they had planted in their lives, Debbie said, "We really thought we were obeying God, and we found out we were. I mean we believed we were, but sometimes you don't see anything and it's like, 'Okay, my life—is it

making any sense? Is anybody being touched?' But then you find out tons of lives have been touched. It's incredible!"

Comfort and Hope

For all of the wonderful things about this story, though, the pain is still there. "It's a very hard time right now, actually. After the first couple of months the shock kind of wears off. You have to walk out the day-to-day stuff. It's very hard," Debbie told me. "I do cry every day." When I spoke with her spring was just arriving, and it made her think of what she would be doing if her girls were still here. She and Krista would be playing tennis, and she'd be bike riding with Jessica. She and Nikki would be shopping and planning her graduation open house. They would be outside, sitting and talking.

After hearing their story on the news, a North Dakota woman who had lost

a child wrote to them. The woman said, "A sudden loss of a family member is like having an amputation without anesthesia." Debbie said, "She described every feeling I was going through."

"God is just carrying us in a big way. Every time I feel like, "God, I can't do it," I'll get a letter in the mail, from probably a stranger." The letters they've received have been an important comfort to them and Debbie said it is part of what has been a demonstration of the entire body of Christ coming together to support them in their time of need. Debbie reports that they received cards and often money from nearly every church in the Twin Cities and from churches in Iowa and Wisconsin. Believers in nearly every state, as well as Germany, New Zealand, Australia, China and Israel, have sent them letters. Christian music artist Don Moen contacted them after hearing their story and invited them to a concert. Singer Sara Groves performed at the concert and she dedicated a medley of songs to the girls. Debbie was amazed that the first song Sara sang was one she often sang with her girls. A nurse in South Minneapolis wrote to them and said she had their picture on her bulletin board, and she prays for them every day. If they needed anything, she said, even if it was the middle of the night and they needed to talk, to call her. Her letter is characteristic of the expression of support they have received.

One day, overwhelmed with pain, Debbie cried out to God. She told

Him she just couldn't do it anymore and she was desperate to hear something from Him. That day a letter arrived from a man in Wisconsin. She didn't know him, but he said, "God is going to get us through it." As a brother in Christ he was standing with her family in their tragedy. He reminded her that the believer's job is to "Fix our eyes on Jesus," (Hebrews 12:2). God's job, though, as described in Psalm 34:15, is to not only watch us, but to hear our cries.

He probably didn't have any idea what those words would mean to her. They brought her back to a "dark night of the soul" she had gone through about 12 years earlier. Calling out to God at that time, Psalm 18 spoke to her and described how she felt. Verse four said, "The cords of death entangled me," but she was consoled by the words of verse six, "My cry came before him, into his ears." As those words came back to her she was moved to see that God had answered her through this man's letter, and He was saying, "I hear your cry."

Debbie said that God has kept saying the same thing to her: He will bring her through this. One amazing way God has been working in their lives is that Debbie and her husband, Joe, have fallen deeper in love. She said, "I found out our marriage is built on a Rock." As we talked, Debbie quoted scripture after scripture that has brought her encouragement and has kept her eyes on God. She said that Isaiah 41:9-10, which speaks of God calling his servant and promising to help the servant, has gotten

her through this. That Rock, the foundation upon which they had built their lives, is the source of their strength. Debbie cannot explain the mystery of how in the midst of such sorrow she has experienced such joy. The first time she went to the cemetery was on Jessica's birthday, the day she would have turned 13. She couldn't describe the peace that she felt while she was there—it truly surpassed understanding.



Besides peace, though, Debbie has hope. "We know we're going to see Jesus one day face-to-face and then we're also going to embrace our girls again." On the night of the accident, Debbie was drawn to some particular pictures of her girls. When her girls had wanted to try on her wedding dress, she had taken a picture of each of them wearing it. Looking at those pictures, God spoke this to her: "They are my brides." She has been reminded of that over and over. On the morning of January 1, her son told her Bree had a picture someone had given her and Debbie could have it if she wanted. Debbie said when she saw it, "My heart went 'Yes!' My spirit said I needed that picture." She set it aside, and when she saw it again, after the accident, she realized why she needed it. It was a picture of Jesus holding a woman, the bride of Christ. In the picture Jesus and the woman are smiling and laughing. As she showed me the picture, Debbie said, "Oh, Jesus, he's hugging my girls."

It's a beautiful image. It's not the only image God has given her to see the beauty of her girls' lives and what their lives mean now. A devotional she received from a woman in Roseau, Minnesota described a gardener who discovers his most beautiful roses missing from his garden. He wonders who stole them and finds out it was a nobleman who wanted to enjoy their beauty, so he picked them and brought them into his house. The devotional said that God picks his roses when they are

Three Brides in Heaven



Krista



Jessica



Nikki

in full bloom, and it included 2 Corinthians 5:8: "We . . . would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord." When she was reading it Debbie said, "I felt like my girls were saying that. If we offered them to come back, they wouldn't want to."

When looking under her bed for a tape of she and one of her daughters singing together, she discovered a picture she had bought a long time ago and never put up. It's called, "Gathering Flowers." She feels like that's what she's doing, gathering souls like they are flowers, picking them for the Lord. "God delights in us and He delights in those He knows are going to be His and may not be yet. And He wants us to gather those souls."

Debbie has always had a passion for the lost and has always wanted to see people get set free. She says that passion is stronger now than ever before. The story of her girls has given her a platform to share the hope she has.

"Every time I tell this story, I see even more how everything fits together; not just for my comfort, but because God is the God of all comfort. He's also the God that loves the entire world that He gave His only son, and He knows what it's like . . . All this isn't just for my comfort, all this fits together for a story, for other people to hear, and for us to walk out our part of it."

"It's like little-by-little we hear of little ways lives are being touched and you know it's obviously an encouragement to go on. And, you know, in our journey our destination is heaven. It isn't anywhere on this earth." Debbie continued, "We always say our life is not our own. Our children really belong to God. Do we believe that? No, really, I don't know if we really know that we do." But Debbie is learning what that means, "How my faith has been strengthened, is really knowing my life is not my own."

Before I met Debbie, I could only

imagine the incredible pain she and her family was going through. I could not have imagined the incredible elation I felt when I left her house after listening to her tell her story. It made me realize what an awesome God I serve. This story probably isn't one that the world would tell or even understand. But it is the best story of all.

Joe and Debbie Mayer feel they are called to share their story with others. They are available for speaking engagements, and Debbie also sings. For more information, visit their Web site: www.mayersisters.com.

