

“I wasn’t supposed to live”

Mutilated in a January wreck that killed his wife and left his 18-month-old daughter without a mother, Jason Mirikitani relies on faith in God to help him beat the odds. As his memory and physical strength return, the Oklahoma City man maintains his – and his deceased wife Jill’s – dream of building an inner-city camp.



Jason Mirikitani, standing in the amphitheatre in front of a Christian cross at Shiloh Summer Camp in Oklahoma City, displays a Christmas 2001 family photograph. On Jan. 15, his wife, Jill, died in a car wreck that critically injured him. Their daughter, Abigail, 18 months, was unhurt.

By Bobby Ross Jr.
Religion Editor

On the Sunday before everything changed, Jason Mirikitani preached – and his wife, Jill, sang – at the inner-city Oklahoma City church where they had become such a big part in such a short time.

As Britton Christian Church pastor Mike Hays recalls, Jason’s message that morning focused on how men and women in the Bible endured difficult times yet clung to God.

The sermon title: “When you can’t see His hand, you can trust His heart.”

Jason, 30, a chisel-cut former start high school wrestler who grew up in St. Louis, Mo., area, remembered his disappointment at losing a state tournament match he should have won his senior year.

Only years later did Jason learn the circumstances of the young man who upset him to win the Missouri Class 4A championship, he told the congregation. God, he said, used the mat accomplishment to help the man and his father restore a broken relationship.

“In all our pain, God has a purpose,” Jason said.

Jill, 32, was Jason’s partner in ministry, his bride of nearly 2 ½ years and the mother of their daughter, Abigail, born in September 2000. A Texas native, she earned her master’s degree in vocal and performing arts.

At the service that day, Jill sand “I Can See.”

The song reflects on the hopelessness of two men who witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Their heartache turns to utter joy when they the Savior has risen from the grave.

Shiloh Summer Camp

Jason Mirikitani hopes to be recovered enough to lead Shiloh Summer Camp this summer. The camp, 601 NE 63, is 47 acres of wooded hills, open fields, streams, and a small lake at the home of Eagle Ridge Institute. For more information, call 858-7011 or click on <http://www.shilohcamp.org/>.

That message resounded powerfully as Hays prepared for today's Easter services. "With Jason's sermon and Jill's song," Hays said, "I believe God was preparing us for the event that was coming."

'Everybody loved them'

Jason and Jill had joined the Britton Christian Church, 922 NW 91, soon after moving to Oklahoma City two years before.

The couple had met in Dallas where Jason worked for five years with K-Life, a ministry dedicated to mentoring and discipling teen-agers. The Mirikitani's came to Oklahoma to start a Christian summer camp offering athletic and arts programs for poor, urban children.

Hays knew Jason through his work with the Kids Across America camp in Branson, Mo., to which Britton Christian takes about 75 children a year.

When Oklahoma City religious and community leaders sought a charismatic director to launch the Shiloh Summer Camp on 47 acres of wooded hills, open fields and streams at 601 NE 63, Hays immediately thought of Jason.

Jason became the camp's executive director, and Jill oversaw arts and drama.

At Britton Christian, which averages Sunday morning attendance of about 200, Jill started a youth choir, and Jason organized a class for young married couples.

Often, the two would amuse young and old alike their Uncle Leroy and Miss Celia skits. Jason would strum a guitar and sport "big Billy Bob teeth," as Hays put it, while Jill donned a Southern belle outfit.

The congregation would howl as Jason made cracks such as, "Miss Celia, I know you a book overdue at the library, because you sure look *fine*."

Two and a half months later, the laughter gave way to tears.

Life and dead

Jason can't remember the wreck. All he knows is that his wife is dead, and by all accounts, he should be, too.

"I wasn't supposed to live," he said, greeting a visitor at the Shiloh Camp, a one-time patch of overgrown grass where an amphitheater and a ropes courses now stand.

A gravel road leads to the camp, where leaves crackle under the feet of scampering birds. Only the not-too-distant roar of Broadway Extension traffic belies the urban location.

On this mid-March day, Jason wears a bandage on his left hand and sports a bright pink scar that runs from his right eye all the way to the back of his head.

Talkative and reflective, this intelligent young man, who graduated fourth in Kirkwood (Mo.) High School's 425-student class of 1989, seems far removed from the person who weeks ago wore a diaper, could not count to four and forgot to spit after brushing his teeth.

"From what people tell me, I'm really blessed," he said. "There were like four times that they thought I was going to die for sure."

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Hero in the making

On Jan. 15, the day of the wreck, Jason was driving a 2000 Sport east on Interstate 10 near Beaumont, Texas.

He, his wife and daughter – along with Jill’s father and brother – were headed to her grandfather’s funeral.

“Basically, the vehicle swerved,” said Jan Mirikitani, Jason’s mother.

Whether he swerved to miss something in the road or to avoid another automobile, nobody seems to know.

Staff Sgt. Troy Dick, an Army career counselor in Beaumont, said he misread his watch and left work early that afternoon.

“Just something told me to go home that day at that time,” said Dick, 38.

Driving west on Interstate 10 about a mile past the small town of Winnie, Texas, the Houston resident said he saw a four-door sedan fly over the concrete median and collide with a tractor-trailer rig.

Jason’s vehicle flipped forward once and sideways four times.

Dick immediately pulled to the side and ran to help.

Jan Mirikitani said she has no doubt: Her son would be dead if not for Dick.

“It is my belief that Troy Dick was on there by accident,” she said.

Dick first spotted Jill’s dad – who had a possibly crushed cheekbone and a torn right ear – in the front passenger seat. Just behind the dad in the back seat was Jill’s brother, who had suffered minor cuts.

In the driver’s seat, Dick found Jason, who had an open fracture on the right side of his skull. As Jason described it, “My brain ... was on my sleeve.”

In a sworn statement, Dick characterized the situation more delicately: “I picked up a rag from one of the suitcases on the ground, replaced the flap of skin and hair, then applied the compress to the wound.”

As another passerby held the compress, Dick evaluated Jill’s wounds. Seated in the back beside Abby’s child-restraint seat, Jill had no pulse.

“From the angle the crushed roof was forcing her body ... I could not extend her upper body to try CPR,” Dick wrote in his statement. “The baby appeared unhurt and was not crying.”

Unable to save the mother, Dick turned his attention to Jason, he told *The Oklahoman*.

“I said, ‘Jason, you’ve got to hold on for your daughter, because you’re the only she’s got,’ “ said Dick, who couldn’t help but think about his own daughter, age 11.

“I was trying to keep him from slipping too far into shock. Subconsciously, I think he heard me.”

Dick said God used him as an instrument that day.

“I think it’s a miracle,” he said, “that the man’s alive and doing as well as he did.”



FAITH

Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

Hebrews 11.1

God in control

Surely, Jason would die on the way to the hospital. Or so the experts thought.

They also figured he'd never survive brain surgery. Doubted he'd make it out of ICU. But the experts didn't understand Jason's physical and mental toughness or recognize the value of the hundreds of prayers on Jason's behalf, his mom said.

"Nothing about this is an accident," she said, "God's been in charge and in control from the beginning.

"As Jason said, 'We may not understand God's hand, but we can trust His heart.' ... Jason has been a servant his whole for God. God has something special that He's going to do in his life.

Jason's dad, Ron Mirikitani, 58, has coached wrestling for 32 years at St. Louis Community College at Meramec.

A member of the U.S. Martial Arts Hall of Fame, Ron Mirikitani's first martial arts lessons came as a small child. They were taught by Jason's grandfather, Frank, behind the barbed wire of a Relocation Camp where American citizens of Japanese descent were herded during World War II.

Jan Mirikitani, 56, is a strategic planning and management consultant who survived a stroke nearly 20 years ago.

This family is *tough*.

The Mirikitanis raised Jason, his mom said, to "put on the full armor of God."

When Jan first saw Jason in the hospital, he had a large plaster cast on his head and blood in his eyes. It would be before he could remember anyone and weeks before he could begin to comprehend that his wife was gone.

Basic information – such as the color of UNO playing cards or letters of the alphabet – escaped him. Yet, he often quoted Scriptures and once even told the crowd gathered around his bed, "Look, I'm going to pray. We should all sing every verse of 'Amazing Grace.' And I'm going to preach tomorrow."

After Jason recovered well enough to fly home to St. Louis with his parents in February, his mom began taking him on brisk mall walks, where she'd challenge him physically and mentally. She'd quiz him on decimals and fractions, historical figures and his recollections of people he knew.

At one point, when he could tell her who Cleopatra was, he joked, "Mom, most normal people wouldn't know that."

A living tribute

Within a few weeks of leaving the hospital, Jason regained most of his memory. In just the last month, he learned that his wife had not survived.

It's a fact that he's not certain he's totally grasped, even as he removes her name from his checking account and his home deed.

"I really, really miss Jill, because Jill was a great person whom I loved," he said. "look at the pictures and I'm going, 'Who is that pretty girl?' I'm like, 'Oh, yeah, that's my wife, who's not even alive anymore.'

"So, I wish I could call her. I wish I could talk to her."

Before, Jason and Jill would lie in bed and talk at night.



DETERMINATION

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:13-14

“Now, I lay down and lay kind of still, because my head kind of hurts, and I don’t talk to anybody,” he said. “It’s just me in bed by myself.”

However, Jason said he trusts totally in God’s will and believes the Lord a reason for taking Jill to heaven – and leaving him and Abby behind.

He intends to return to Shiloh this summers and continue building the camp.

“It’s still a dream,” he said, standing below a wooden cross at the camp. “One day, I believe we’ll have a chapel. We’ll have a gym. We’ll have a sports complex. We’ll have cabins.”

As he prepares to move home to Oklahoma, Jason contemplates child-care options for Abby.

A resilient child, Abby, now 18 months old, hasn’t seemed to miss her mother, her dad said. She stayed with her maternal grandparents during Jason’s hospital stay but later rejoined her father at his parents’ house.

After Jill died, Jason’s mom encouraged mourner – instead of sending flowers – to pay a child’s way to Shiloh as a living tribute to Jill’s memory.

“Jason knows God called him to Shiloh, and he and Jill gave their hearts their,” Jan Mirikatani said. “He’s going back to finish the work that God called him to.”

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