



# Jason Mirikitani... A Survivor's Story

by Lonnie Moore

Photo by Kate Larsen

Jason and daughter Abby on the Zipline tower at the Shiloh Camp

Jason Mirikitani is truly a Miracle Man. Viewed logically, there is no way he should be alive but if you don't notice the scar that looks like an erratic part in his hair, you won't even suspect he ever had a problem. He is half-Japanese, his father was born in a Relocation Camp where Japanese-Americans were held during WWII. His mother is a stroke-survivor. Jason's father still coaches wrestling at a junior college and is a member of the U.S. Martial Arts Hall of Fame.

The Mirikitanis are tough! No doubt that helped Jason in his time of greatest trial.

Today Jason is Executive Director of Shiloh Summer Camp, a marvelous facility, designed to meet the special needs of troubled, inner-city youth. This camp is especially intended for young men and women who, without some sort of intervention, are likely headed for lives which involve gangs, drugs, poverty, perhaps incarceration or shootings, prostitution, or domestic abuse. It's for kids whose neighbors might be drug-dealers, who might not have enough to eat, who don't have much hope for the future.

Shiloh, known in the Bible as "a place of peace", is located in the heart of Oklahoma City, on 47 acres of wooded hills, open fields, streams and a small lake, on 63rd Street just east of Santa Fe Avenue. The camp offers a variety of activities. These activities include sports of all kinds, team and individual, a good fishing lake, and visual and performing arts. Other activities available are horseback riding and the care and grooming of horses, the Challenge Tower and Ziplines (a fun ride across the camp on a steel cable and pulley that is a favorite of many).

OM: Let's talk about you first. Tell me about yourself.

JM: I was born in St Louis, Missouri, went to school there and was on the wrestling team. During high school I worked at camp Kanakuk and with K-Life, Christian camps for young people, and enjoyed that very much. I graduated from Washington University in St Louis with a degree in Marketing and Management and while in school I interned with Proctor and Gamble. I did six interviews to get that job as an intern. It was a good job and I enjoyed it very much. It paid well and they gave me a company car. After my graduation they offered me a full-time job. The competition was quite fierce for this kind of job. I felt blessed and honored to be offered the job, so I accepted and was to begin work that fall.

That summer I got the opportunity to work at Kids Across America (KAA) and that really changed my life. I grew up in a fairly middle-class neighborhood and certainly had been around all races and classes in school but never really realized how some people lived. At KAA these were kids who didn't have any fun in their lives except for playing basketball in the street. They did not have a personal relationship with the Lord like we were trying to share. I realized that my heart was not in selling soap; it was for kids and ministry. I went to the P&G manager who had hired me, told him about my decision and plans; he thanked me and wished me well.

A friend with Kids Across America told me that the Rev. Mike Hays, Pastor of Britton Christian Church, Oklahoma City, and a group of Christian leaders in OKC were building a camp much like KAA and were looking for a director. He thought I would be perfect for the job. Jill and I came to OKC to interview for the job. A thing that really impressed me about that interview was that the people, among them the pastor of Holy Temple Baptist Church, the pastor of All Souls' Episcopal Church, Wes Lane, Oklahoma County District Attorney, held hands and prayed over the land - which was nothing then but overgrown grass. These people, different races, different denominations, different personalities, were together because they love God and love poor kids. It seemed like the answer to our prayers. We took the job and moved to Oklahoma City.

OM: Then the accident happened.

JM: On January 15, 2002, my wife, Jill, our daughter, Abigail, along with Jill's father and brother, were traveling near Beaumont, Texas, on the way to Jill's grandfather's funeral. We were in an 'SUV wannabe'; it

was a very windy day and I can only speculate about what happened. I do not remember the accident; know only what I have been told. For some still unknown reason, the vehicle swerved, went over the concrete median and collided with a tractor-trailer rig. I was driving and Jill was in the back seat immediately behind me. That part of the vehicle took the greatest impact. Jill was killed instantly and I was critically injured. Jill's father and brother were slightly injured; Abigail was not injured and, according to a witness, did not even cry.



Wedding day pic

The witness, Troy Dick, an Army career counselor, had been trained in handling medical emergencies and said that something just told him to go home that way, that day, at that time - a little earlier than usual, and a route he did not travel normally. He saw the car fly over the median, collide with the tractor-trailer rig and roll, forward and sideways. He stopped immediately and ran to help. He determined right away that Jill's father and brother were not seriously hurt, Abigail was OK, there was nothing he could do for Jill, and that I was alive but very seriously hurt. I had an open fracture on the right side of my skull. As terrible as this sounds, my brain was on my sleeve. Mr. Dick took clothing from a suitcase and made a compress for my head, almost certainly saving my life.

I still don't remember the accident and it was months before I even knew my wife was dead. I've been told that medical authorities didn't think I would make it to the hospital, felt sure I wouldn't survive brain surgery, and, even if I did, what would my condition be? There were four or five times the doctors believed I was going to die, for sure. The fact that I was in really good physical condition before the accident no doubt helped me survive and even eventually recover.

OM: Talk about the recovery.

JM: When I was able to leave the hospital, my folks took me to their home in St Louis. My father became my physical therapist and my mom was my occupational therapist. I had to learn everything all over. It was strange. I couldn't remember how to brush my teeth or walk, had to wear diapers for a while, didn't know the letters of the alphabet - but often quoted scripture verses. I give my parents credit for my recovery.

OM: But now you seem to function very well on your own, and as a single dad, too.

JM: Jill and I had bought a home and, when I was able, Abigail and I came back to Oklahoma City so that I could return to my work at the camp. People in our church were terrific during my recovery. They took care of the house and yard for me, and helped with the things that needed to be done here. I'm still learning a lot about being a single parent. I'm an OK cook. I've learned about detangler and conditioner for her hair so that brushing it isn't such an ordeal. I still have a lot to learn but we manage just fine. I get a lot of help from my church family.

OM: How did the camp function in your absence?

JM: We had a small but dedicated staff including a young man who served as interim director while I was away. I was able to return to work in time to prepare for camps the summer of 2003.

Shiloh Camp is the result of efforts of a group of dedicated church and civic groups, and individuals, with a mission to transform the inner-city by reaching out in Christ's love to encourage, equip, and empower youth and their mentors through sports, arts, and adventure camping. The statistics are alarming: almost 20% of children under the age of 18 live in poverty; each year nearly 10,000 Oklahoma kids drop out of school. Shiloh camp is working to improve the odds for children caught in this situation by teaching them value systems they need to lead lives of integrity.

A donation of \$220 will sponsor a child to camp. To get more information about Camp Shiloh you can log on to [shilohcamp.org](http://shilohcamp.org) or call (405) 858-7011.