

God's grace

Injured husband finds new purpose after wife's unexpected death

BY JOHN W. KENNEDY



NOTHING'S TOO HARD FOR GOD

Linda Whited died as a result of injuries sustained in a crash that left husband James and son Jim Jr. in critical condition.



Whited transferred to a rehabilitation center in Clearfield, a town of 6,600 where he has lived nearly 40 of his 43 years. Linda arrived the following day.

Although badly battered, the couple began pondering what life would be like once released from hospitalized care. Would Jim be able to return as manager for a local auto parts store? Could Linda keep working as a medical claims billing troubleshooter once her own health problems subsided?

Whited further mulled whether he would continue as a volunteer chaplain at Clearfield County Jail.

At age 11, Whited had gone to a Pentecostal tent revival with his grandmother and was baptized in the Holy Spirit. At the meeting he felt God call him to ministry. Whited later took Berean University courses and obtained Assemblies of God ministerial credentials. He started a jail ministry where there had been none. On Sunday mornings up to two dozen inmates gathered for a service. Two Bible studies took place on Wednesday nights.

On his hospital bed, Whited remembered the blessing that Linda, the woman he asked to marry three weeks after meeting on a blind date, had been to him over the years. Although this accident certainly didn't figure in the marriage they anticipated, now they began to adjust and make plans for the rest of their life together.

Eighteen days after the collision, Whited went to Altoona for

"A lot of people have asked me why God would let this happen. I've asked that myself."

— James Whited Sr.

James R. Whited Sr. still hobbles with a leg brace. Pain flairs where tendons no longer exist. He suffered permanent damage in what remains a weak left ankle. He has no sensation in the bottom of his foot. Steel plates are inserted in his left arm and hip.

Emotionally, Whited has a difficult time retelling the events that changed his family forever. What troubles him most is the loss of Linda, his wife of 23 years.

On Dec. 4, 2005, Whited drove his wife and two children among the picturesque rolling mountains in central Pennsylvania en route to the Sunday evening service at Gospel Tabernacle, the Philipsburg Assemblies of God church where they are members. An oncoming car driven by Brandi Markel had stopped on U.S. Route 322 to make a turn.

In the wintry dark Whited saw a speeding Ford F250 pickup truck driven by James Tingle hit Markel's vehicle from behind. Markel's car traveled 120 feet, but she miraculously escaped injury.

However, Tingle's truck came into Whited's lane and struck his vehicle head-on. The truck hit with such ferocity that the crushed dashboard pinned Jim and Linda in the front seat.

Whited's Kia Sportage caught fire and filled with black smoke. John Taylor, driving in the car behind the Whiteds, smothered the flames with a fire extinguisher he carried in his auto. Meanwhile, a passer-by broke out a rear passenger window to free son Jim Whited Jr., then 17. Jim Jr. crawled out, then collapsed. The other backseat passenger, daugh-

ter Chrissy, then 13, emerged with only a bruise on her leg.

Emergency workers began laboriously dismantling the crumpled car, cutting off the roof and doors before using chains to pull the dashboard off the married couple.

Linda, pinned for 45 minutes, had two broken femurs, a fractured ankle and a ruptured spleen.

Whited remained trapped, his left arm shattered in eight places and his left foot dangling by threads of tendons.

An hour after the wreck, Whited sensed the end of his life approaching. He felt blood draining from his body. Whited prepared to meet the Lord, but then he says he saw a bright light. He says he heard a voice delivering a message: *You're not through doing My work.*

"I felt a renewal in my spirit," Whited recalls. "I knew I was going to survive the accident."

He didn't know Linda wouldn't.

Workers used Jaws of Life rescue equipment to cut Whited out of the seat and scoop him into an emergency helicopter. Earlier, Jim Jr., then Linda, had made the 12-minute flight to the trauma center in Altoona.

Jim Jr., whose abdominal muscles had been shredded, lost half his intestines. He ended up being transferred to a Pittsburgh hospital where specialists inserted two rods into his crushed vertebrae.

That Sunday night, Whited had a pair of surgeries on his arm and femur. Monday, doctors operated on his foot. Wednesday, he received a plate and bolt in his hip.

Twelve days after the accident,



James Whited Sr. is raising children Chrissy and Jim Jr. alone.

a checkup. He said goodbye to Linda, expecting to see her that afternoon.

When he returned to the Clearfield rehab center a nurse met him. Whited learned that during his absence his 42-year-old wife had gone into cardiac arrest. He arrived to see attendants performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation on Linda, but to no avail. Doctors later learned of a blood clot in her lungs.

"A lot of people have asked me why God would let this happen," Whited says in his living room, tears streaming down his face. "I've asked that myself. But one night I realized what the greatest gift of God is, second to salvation. It's free will. Had God stepped in to stop this, He would have had to have stopped the free will of that driver."

That driver, 49-year-old James Tingle, faces charges of vehicular homicide while driving under the influence of alcohol, three counts of aggravated assault while DUI,

and several other moving violations. Police say Tingle's blood-alcohol content that late Sunday afternoon was more than three times the legal limit.

Chrissy, the only nonhospital-

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ized member of the family, had to select her mother's burial plot. "No 13-year-old should have to do that," her father says. Chrissy, who lived with James' mother during her father's hospitalization, has assumed many of the household cooking and cleaning duties.

Doctors released Whited from the rehabilitation center 10 weeks after the accident, even though he could barely walk. Once home, he had physical therapy sessions three times a week.

Whited decided not to return to county jail chaplaincy, where many men are behind bars because of drunk driving offenses. He didn't even know if he wanted to fill in preaching where needed. Just two weeks before the accident he had preached at the Methodist church attended by John Taylor — the man who quenched Whited's blazing sports utility vehicle.

Dave Knepp, a friend who visited Whited regularly at the rehabilitation center and had a music ministry there, eventually convinced him to preach a sermon to other patients.

"I didn't think I could ever get back in the pulpit again, but Dave kept pestering me and I finally agreed," Whited says. "It was difficult, but it was a turning point." Since then, Whited has spoken at several area churches about what happened.

Although partially disabled from the crash, Whited has sensed a renewed calling from God to full-time ministry.

Gospel Tabernacle Pastor Franklin R. Linton has been with Whited through the difficult times, praying with him, cautioning him against isolating himself

from the body of Christ, and mentoring him in his evangelist ordination process.

"The Whiteds were faithful members of the church, and the tragedy hasn't changed their faithfulness," says Linton, who can empathize with Whited. Linton has had two brothers and one sister die in separate auto accidents.

Whited also has ministered to other men whose spouses have died prematurely and unexpectedly. He now is actively involved in Mothers Against Drunk Driving functions.

"The pain doesn't really go away; it just becomes manageable," Whited says. "Faith is the only thing that got me through this. Now every step I take re-

minds me of what I've been through. I look at it like Paul saw his 'thorn,' and Scripture reminds me of what God has done for me, not what He hasn't."

Through it all, Whited and his children have grown closer and learned to depend on each other more than before.

Although he spent a month hospitalized and had to wear a back brace an additional two months, Jim Jr. recovered from his injuries. Returning to finish his senior year at high school, he had the opportunity to preach the baccalaureate sermon.

"I know I could have easily died that night, but God spared me," he told his class. "I fully believe, and wish for Him to use me

in the most powerful ways."

He is now studying at a vocational college.

Despite the pain, both physical and emotional, Whited is grateful. "I know where my wife is, and I draw a lot of comfort from that," Whited says. "God's grace is wonderful. We talk and sing about grace all the time in church, but until we've actually been through something like this we really can't comprehend the grandness and depth of God's grace." **tpe**

JOHN W. KENNEDY is news editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

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