

# Unexpected tragedy, unforeseen miracles

By Scott Harrup

Austin Haley boldly shared his faith in Christ.

If there's a buckle to the Bible Belt, then Noble, Okla., is as good a candidate as any. The town of 5,500 in the southern reaches of the Oklahoma City metroplex has dozens of churches. But there are still plenty of families with little or no exposure to the gospel.

That fact disturbed Austin Haley, a little evangelist now honored by the Noble community with a planned bronze statue downtown and a splash pad at a local park. Standing on the largest piece of playground equipment at school, he would gather an interested group of children around him.

"I want to know here, who knows Jesus and who has Him in their heart?" he would ask.

One or two shy admissions of "I've never heard about Jesus" would materialize from the pre-K crowd. That was the cue Austin needed.

"Well, let me tell you, Jesus loves you. You need to get to know Him. Jesus is the best superhero of all."

Had local anti-religion activists caught wind of the public school outreach, there would have been precious little they could do. Because Austin Haley was 4 years old, his right to free expression on his own playground among his friends would be very difficult to contest.

"He'd go everywhere with his Bible," says mom Renee Haley, 32. "He wanted to carry two or three to the mall, even though he didn't know how to read, and I'd have to ask him to choose one. Then he'd ask people at the mall, 'Do you know Jesus? Jesus loves you.'"

## Dockside tragedy

The biblical record of the life of Christ includes His well-known analogy between fishing and evangelism. "Come, follow me ... and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19; Mark 1:17, NIV).

So perhaps it is only natural that Austin, by now 5, felt so comfortable on the lakeside dock near his home fishing with family. On Aug. 3, 2007, he'd plunked down a line with his grandfather, Jack Tracy, great-grandfather, Jim Gillum, and little brother, Dalton. Then the unthinkable happened.

Shots were fired from an adjoining property. One bullet hit the water near the fishing dock. A second struck Austin in the head. His grandfather later told reporters he thought the family was under attack. He picked up Austin's lifeless body, grabbed Dalton's hand and rushed to the family home about 200 yards away.

"No words can describe how Jack and I felt viewing his little body," Renee says.

Austin was rushed to the Norman hospital, about 10 miles away, but was declared dead on arrival.

Austin's death was not the result of aggression, the family learned three hours later, but of unbelievable negligence. Two Noble police officers had been called to remove a snake hanging from a neighbor's birdhouse. After trying to dislodge the snake with the handle of a hoe, the officers decided to shoot the reptile. The second shot at the snake resulted in Austin's death.

"When Austin was born, he was a miracle," Jack Haley, 38, says,

his voice breaking with emotion. "We had tried a year and a half to have a child and were told it would be hard to have children. But we believed we'd eventually have a baby. Austin was the perfect child for us. I really lived through him."

Another miracle came with the birth of brother Dalton two years later. Austin and Dalton were extremely close, and Dalton has continued to grieve from the loss of his brother. He later told his parents he saw Austin carried to heaven in the arms of Jesus.

Austin's death became an ironic fulfillment of one of his father's worst nightmares. Jack had lost his father and brother when he was almost 5, and had always feared he would die and leave his wife and children in need. Now, Austin at the age of 5 was taken from them.

## Bedside prayer

"The grief comes in waves for me," Renee says. "Sometimes the waves are small, other times, huge. But God is always larger than those waves. He always sends peace. When the grieving is too hard for us to bear, He always gives us peace that passes all understanding."

One source of that peace is Renee's treasured memory of her final night praying with Austin at bedtime. On the night of Aug. 2, at Austin's bedside, Renee listened

to her son pray for God to heal his grandfather. Jack Tracy had been ill with a liver disease. When Austin was finished, he turned to Renee.

"I want to pray for you too, Mama," he said. "I want God to heal your body, so we can have another baby in our home," he stated with great faith.

After Dalton's birth, Renee had suffered severe side effects from a later miscarriage. For a year, her health was battered. Austin's request seemed very perceptive, and Renee wondered if God would use Austin to prepare her and Jack for another blessing in their home.

In the months since Austin's death, Jack Tracy's liver enzyme levels have been completely normal. And Renee Haley believes

she is holding the answer to Austin's prayer for her.

Just over nine months after Austin's death, Jack and Renee welcomed the birth of Gabriel Jeremiah Haley on May 16, 2008. They dedicated their son at Noble Assembly of God on Aug. 3, the first anniversary of his brother's

death.

"We named him Gabriel because that was Austin's middle name," Renee says. "We named him Jeremiah after Austin's favorite verse, Jeremiah 17:7."

"Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in Him," Jack quotes.



## Little preacher

"I will always remember Austin and how he stood and quoted verses at church on Sunday evenings," says Noble Assembly's Pastor Steve Lance. "He was a little preacher, and to the glory and praise of God, his life and love for the Lord is still preaching today."

Jack and Renee discovered through word of mouth and e-mail reports at least 70 people have made decisions for Christ upon hearing of Austin's life and death. Perhaps the largest group at any one time were the 15 inmates who accepted Christ when a fellow prisoner shared Austin's story.

The Haleys still grieve from Austin's loss but are grateful for the people who have given their hearts to God through hearing of the tragedy. This Thanksgiving, Jack and Renee continue to offer thanks for the five years they had with their son and the ever-widening influence of his brief life. **tpe**

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The Haley family