

HE WANTED TO BE A MISSIONARY

By David A. Edwards

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Inspired by the example of one young man, youth in Alberta, Canada, have made missionary work a priority.

Chris Yokoyama was 17, and he wanted to be a missionary. Everyone knew it, and if you asked him, he told you so.

Some months earlier, Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles had visited a stake conference in Chris's hometown, Taber, which lies in the vast farming plains of Alberta, Canada. Elder Nelson had blessed the stake, saying that, with fasting and prayer, the missionary work in the area would flourish.

Chris had taken this message to heart, and so had his seminary teacher, Steven Scott.

PHOTOGRAPHS DAVID A. EDWARDS AND COURTESY OF THE YOKOYAMA FAMILY



Taking the Challenge

"After Elder Nelson's talk, I told my students that the Lord needed us," says Brother Scott. "Our goal that year was to know the Savior—to understand the Atonement—and to do missionary work. The students invited non-LDS friends to seminary, to lunch, or to dances and activities, and things started to change."

Chris enthusiastically shared the gospel and invited friends to seminary. He spoke openly of his desire to serve a full-time mission. As he did so, his family noticed a change in him.

"He made up his mind he wanted to serve a mission," says his father, Rod Yokoyama, "so he wanted to change his life and do all the things a missionary would be doing. It seemed like he was giving us more hugs and telling everyone about the gospel."

If you ask other teens what they remember about Chris (nicknamed "Beans"), you'll hear the same things over and over: "He was friends with everyone." "He was such a great example." "He loved everyone."



His 16-year-old sister, Aniko Yokoyama, says, "He cared about me just like a best friend. He showed me how to love everyone. And he included everyone in everything. With everyone he met,

he tried to make their day or make them laugh."



Cody-Lynn Jensen, 17, recalls, "I had English class with him, and when he would show up to class, we'd all be like 'BEANS!!' And we'd all gather around him. Everyone sat on the side where Beans was, and there were a couple of rows of empty desks on the other side of the room. He was just that kind of kid."



Laura Campbell, 16, says, "If I said, 'Hi, Beans,' I'd get the best, 'Hi, Laura!' with the most enthusiasm. He'd just make your day by saying your name and giving you a smile. Everyone knew how good Beans was."



"I think he was one of the greatest examples of a Christlike person," says Reid Walters, 18. "He'd go out of his way completely to help everyone and make everyone happy."

Heartbreak and Comfort

One Friday night in December 2008, after a Christmas shopping trip with two of his friends, Chris was killed when the car he was riding in slid on some ice and crashed into a truck. News of the accident spread quickly and seemed to affect the whole town. The next day, hundreds



Below: Jennifer Phillips (16), Darrilynn Row (18), and Brett Phillips (15), from nearby Vauxhall were also inspired to do missionary work, and they were motivated by the students in Taber.

"Once we started seeing people in Taber actually doing missionary work, then we wanted to," says Jennifer.

Darrilynn says, "It's a good experience because it helps you to strengthen your testimony."

"And studying the scriptures in seminary motivates you, too," says Brett.

of (mostly non-LDS) teens gathered at the stake center, seeking comfort. On Monday those same young people also crowded into the seminary building.

Faced with so many grieving teens, Brother Scott simply told them the truth—that Heavenly Father has a plan, that death is part of that plan, and that Christ's Atonement makes it possible to return to our Heavenly Father. He taught them that the work of bringing souls to Christ continues even in the spirit world and that perhaps Chris was now doing that work.

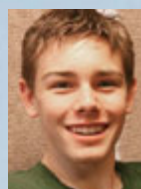


Liz Shimbashi, 17, remembers that time well. "Lots of people came to the seminary building after the accident. It was hard at school, but then people would come here, and they realized, 'Hey, seminary is a good place.' So we invited them to return, and lots of them did."

A Mighty Change

For many of the non-LDS teens, the need to be comforted grew into a desire to know more. And the seminary students, who had already been enthusiastic about sharing the gospel, now did it with a more serious purpose and deeper understanding.

"The biggest reason people came was because they saw how much Beans loved people, and through that they saw his testimony," recalls Rachel Bennett, 16. "I think they wanted to know what he knew."



Luke Nelson, 16, says, "Beans's death made me notice how other people didn't know what we know and that we're so comforted because of what

we know about the Atonement. I want to share that with everybody so they can be comforted and be peaceful and happy."



"People wanted to know the answers to questions like 'Is he going to heaven?' So they came to seminary to learn just because of his example," says

Megan Fajnor, 17.

Seminary: It's Not Just for Mormons



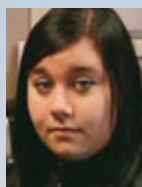
Chris's cousin, Jarred Haynes, 17, who is not LDS, started coming to seminary at that time "because it's something that he really would have liked me to do.

I wanted to learn more about what he believed, and I wanted to do something for him."





Another non-LDS student who visited the seminary at that time, Shandyn Nakamura, 17, says, “I know Beans wanted us in seminary. He tried so many times to get so many people to come here. He asked me to come. When you come here, you have a whole different feeling. You feel the Spirit, and you feel like you’re in a completely different place. I just feel loved.”



Ashley Meisner, 17, agrees. “I came over because of Beans—at first. I was kind of unsure of where I stood from a religious perspective.

So I think I needed to enhance that perspective. Then I came over, and the feeling was amazing. It was so loving. The lessons were just what I needed to hear. It helped me through a lot of things that were hard to get through.”

Having been to other Church activities with her



THE ACCIDENT THAT CHANGED THEIR LIVES

Chris Yokoyama was with two of his friends when their car crashed and Chris died. Darren Haslam, 18, was driving the car and escaped mostly unharmed. The other pas-

senger, Christopher Evanson, 18, received a severe head injury and was in a coma.

“When Chris Yokoyama died, it was really tough for me,” says Darren. “It was tough that I had nothing wrong with me, just a fractured elbow, and they—one was in critical condition just trying to survive and one had passed away. I was the driver. It was tough to see [Chris’s sister and brother] Aniko and Derrick at school because it brought the whole experience back.”

Darren received a lot of help and counsel from his family, his seminary teacher, and others. “The one thing that bothered me the most is I didn’t die in that accident, so I must be here for a reason, but what is it? I didn’t want people to feel bad for me. I wanted to serve them.”

Meanwhile, Christopher Evanson remained in a coma at a hospital in Calgary, over three hours away. He had regular visitors, including a steady stream of peers from school. After about a month he came out of the coma, but he did not regain full consciousness until a few months later.

“They had to teach me how to walk, how to talk again, to do everything,” says Chris. “That took six months, and then I got released. That was a happy day.”

While he was recovering in the hospital, Chris, like Darren, began to think about others. “Faces would flash in my mind, and I would think, ‘I want to share the gospel with them. Maybe I could talk with them once I get back to Taber.’ My desire for sharing the gospel has increased.”

During this time, many non-LDS teens were visiting the seminary in Taber, and they kept coming back. “A lot of these kids were lost,” says Darren. “A lot of them came to the seminary building, and they just broke down. I think they felt the love of Jesus Christ. They started to understand the Atonement.”

As more people kept coming, Darren was able to fulfill his desire to serve. “I’m a little shy,” he admits. “I’m scared that if I talk to my friends about the gospel, they’re going to reject me, but more and more I’m trying my best to reach out and invite people to activities and make them feel included.”

Christopher Evanson feels that he has a stronger testimony as a result of his experiences. “I just love our Savior so very much. I felt His constant love, and I built a love for Him within me. I forgot a lot of things up in the hospital, but not once did I ever forget how true the gospel is, and how much I love my family. Every part of the gospel makes sense and is true.

“Chris Yokoyama was the perfect example to me. Ever since he’s passed away, I’ve tried my best to be like him. I can say, ‘Hey, come to seminary.’ ‘Hey, let’s go to church.’ I believe it’s just a matter of time before others will start to understand the whole meaning of the Church and the gospel. They will want to be a part of it and have the Holy Ghost with them all the time.”

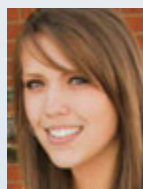
Though the accident brought sadness and trials into the lives of Darren Haslam and Christopher Evanson, they have chosen to turn their experiences into a blessing for others.



Students in the Taber seminary (top) have faced the heartbreak of losing their friend. And by sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ, they have brought healing and hope to others.

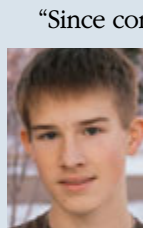


friend Liz Shimbashi, 16-year-old Jessica Stoddart knew the feeling. "It's a great feeling. I just feel like I know it's the Holy Ghost."



Cassie Hull, 18, puts it this way: "I feel the Holy Ghost there. I could tell that's it, because everywhere else it's like, sure, you can feel happy, but this is a different happy."

These and other non-LDS teens who came to seminary experienced long-lasting changes in their lives. Many have continued to attend seminary. Some have even been baptized. "I'm taking the missionary lessons," says Jarred Haynes. "And if I know that my friends who are members are not praying, I encourage them to pray or to read their scriptures. I guess I'm being a good example to them, even as a nonmember."



"Since coming to seminary, I don't get as annoyed or angry as easily anymore," says Mitchell Geeraert, 15. "I just feel a lot better throughout my days." And Chelsea Orsten, 15, says, "Seminary's really made me think of who I want to be and how I want to change. It's encouraged me and helped me get through a lot of hard things."



What Now?

For the seminary students in and around Taber, sharing the gospel is now not only a way to serve Heavenly Father and their fellowmen but also a way to remember and honor their friend Chris. And they believe that in spite of their sadness and grief, Heavenly Father has blessed them in unimaginable ways because of their faith and trust in Him.

"I believe sharing the gospel is why we're here on this earth," says Aniko, thinking of her brother. "Chris spent his time well by being an example. Now that he's gone, we all have to be an example like that. He was an example of Christ. Sharing the gospel is just sharing happiness. If you want your friends to be happy, then you invite them to learn about the gospel."

Liz Shimbashi agrees. "It'd be amazing to have the love that Beans did and to be that example. That's how I want to be."

As she reflects on the events in Taber over the last couple of years, Laura Campbell echoes the thoughts of many others: "Heavenly Father must have had something really important for Chris to do. But at the same time, so many people's lives have changed because of him."

Chris Yokoyama was 17, and he wanted to be a missionary. Everybody knew it. And for those who knew him, one thought has brought more comfort and inspiration than perhaps any other: *Chris is a missionary.* **NE**

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To see a video about Chris Yokoyama and the teens from Taber, Alberta, Canada, go to youth.lds.org.