

THE GREATEST MIRACLE

On a bright September day our youngest daughter, Erica, was in a serious car accident. She was flown to the hospital, and after hours of emergency surgery, we received the terrible news: our beautiful, vivacious, 17-year-old daughter had died.

The next few months were agony for us. We endured her birthday and Thanksgiving and braced ourselves for our first Christmas without her. People warned us that the holidays would be difficult, but no amount of warning could have prepared us.

Besides feeling overwhelming sorrow and despair, I was jealous of other families who were together and happily celebrating. I bitterly wondered, “Why us? Why weren’t we granted a miracle like the ones others speak about?”

Amid my despair, I remembered a time that our ward held an activity called “Christmas in Bethlehem.” Ward members came dressed up as if they were living at the time Jesus was born. Erica, who was four years old at the time, wore a hand-me-down long, white dress and a scarf wrapped around her head. The culmination of the evening was a reenactment of the Nativity in a mock stable decorated with bales of hay and a manger. A young couple with their newborn played the parts of Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus.

As we gathered around the nativity, I noticed

that Erica was missing from my side. I panicked until I caught a flash of her white dress near the nativity. Then my panic shifted from fear for her welfare to fear that she would disrupt the scene. I was about to call out to her, but I paused and watched as she made her way to the manger.

Erica quietly knelt next to Mary and looked up at her as if to get her permission. Then Erica reached out and tenderly caressed the sleeping baby. I was not the only one who noticed. Others soon quieted and watched as she knelt close to the baby. A tender feeling permeated the group as they realized that this baby was the Christ child for Erica.

In my grief, this Christmas memory brought feelings of peace and comfort as I recalled my young daughter’s devotion. My mind

had been full of questions about life and death—questions that didn’t seem to matter as much before Erica’s death. As I pondered the Resurrection and the Crucifixion, I identified with Mary. She loved her newborn Son, and she later endured terrible pain and anguish as she witnessed His suffering and death. Christ was not spared the cross, and Mary was not spared her grief.

At Christmas we celebrate the beginning of the Savior’s life on earth, but for me, His birth will now always be wrapped up with His suffering, death, and Resurrection—the Atonement. Because the Savior broke the bands of death, I know that Erica’s death will not be final. That is the miracle to be thankful for—the greatest miracle of all time. ■

Ellen Knell, Utah, USA

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AN ANSWER TO HIS PRAYERS

I was not feeling the Christmas spirit. It was December of my senior year in high school, and college applications and my final Laurel project loomed before me. I hoped to find a volunteer opportunity that would flesh out my college applications and double as my Laurel project. Luckily my student council adviser asked my friend Jessica and me if we would organize a school toy drive for a local charity.

I delegated most of the work to the project committee. I had them create a bulletin board featuring a large thermometer that indicated the number of toys donated. We thought that was enough advertising, and we spent each lunch period collecting donations. Students donated few toys, however, and the thermometer remained low.

Strangely, our adviser began setting aside some toys. When Jessica and I asked what she planned to do with them, she told us that a teacher at the school had recently been diagnosed with cancer. After struggling to teach while going through treatment, he had decided to take a leave from work. With the holidays approaching and medical bills piling up, his family wouldn't have much of a Christmas. Our adviser suggested that we wrap the set-aside presents for them.

My heart was touched. I had been looking at my service project as a means to serve only myself, not others. I decided to triple our goal for donated toys and to start a monetary collection

for the teacher and his family.

Jessica and I visited classrooms and championed our cause. The response was enormous. Teachers, staff, and students gave toys and money to help the family. We soon surpassed our toy goal, which amazed the charity. We also collected more than \$1,000 for the family.

As we carefully wrapped the gifts we had collected and purchased, I realized that the testimony of service I was receiving was just as great as the gifts we were giving. I can't express the thrill I felt as we secretly watched the family discover the gifts we had

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anonymously left on their porch.

A few months later, Jessica and I were asked to teach a seminar on service projects. We explained what we had done without mentioning the teacher's name. A girl raised her hand and stood. Tears flowed as she spoke. The teacher was her uncle, and she described how much our service had meant to him. She said it was an answer to his prayers.

What a joy it was that holiday season to come together in heartfelt service and know we had made a difference. ■

Lindsey Leavitt, Nevada, USA



I CAN DO THIS!

It was evening during the Christmas season, and a heavy blanket of snow lay on the ground. For months my companion and I had braved the cold German weather, knocked on doors, and handed out copies of the Book of Mormon. Even then, 15 years after World War II had ended, many Germans were wary of Americans.

But that night Ingeborg Bienmuller was to be baptized. On the long bus ride to the United States Air Force base, however, she was quiet. I sensed her growing feeling of distress.

As we approached the bus stop, Ingeborg turned to us and said, “Do

you know how difficult this is for me? The Allied forces killed my husband in the war, and bombing raids killed many other family members.”

She touched her leg. “I was hit with shrapnel from a sulfur bomb. My leg will never heal. I don’t know if I can go in there.”

We sat silent as her words sunk in and the bus came to a stop. Ingeborg sat rigid. My heart pounded. I prayed she wouldn’t turn away in fear.

She then rose from her seat and declared, “Heavenly Father has given me a testimony of the truthfulness of the Restoration. I know the Book of

Mormon is true. I can do this! Elder Atkin, please help me walk.”

We made the long walk to the gate, Ingeborg’s breath coming hard as we passed the guards. We changed into our white clothing and found the pool at the base. The pool became a sacred place, and peace settled over us. The distress on Ingeborg’s face changed to joy as she stepped into the water and was baptized a member of the Church.

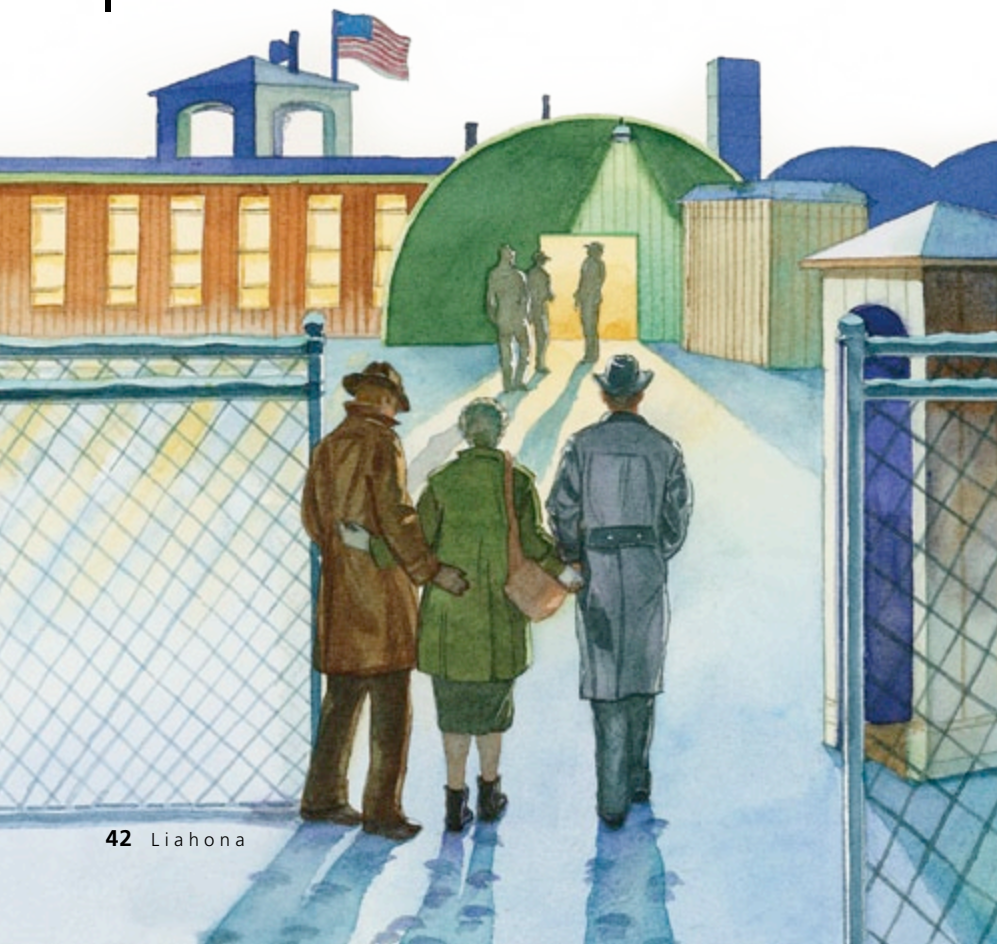
“The night the elders left a Book of Mormon with me, I was thrilled,” she told us as we rode home. “I stayed up reading until I came to Mosiah 18, where Alma invites the people to be baptized: ‘Behold, here are the waters of Mormon . . . and now, as ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, . . . what have you against being baptized?’” (Mosiah 18:8, 10).

She softly continued, “I fell asleep reading those words, and I had a dream. I was standing near a beautiful body of water like the Waters of Mormon. On the other side of the water stood people dressed in white—my family! My husband, who had been killed in the war, was smiling and beckoning me to be baptized.”

That night Sister Bienmuller became a member of the Würzburg Branch and one of the many in Germany who eventually overcame their fears and joined the Church. ■

Roy Atkin, California, USA

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WE CAME FOR OUR GIFTS

When I was a member of our district presidency, I helped coordinate an activity in which the members of our district donated toys to poor children living in the city of Soacha, Colombia. We had a wonderful response from all the members. Not all the gifts were new, but most were in good condition.

As we finished loading the gifts on the buses that would

take us to the city, a young girl came up to me with a plastic ball that had been heavily used and was scratched. I held the ball in my hand, wondering who would have donated such a beat-up ball. With some disdain I tossed it under the seat.

When we arrived, our youth began singing Christmas hymns. Their music, along with their Christmas hats, attracted a large group of children. When we started handing out the gifts, those children called other children. Soon we had given out all our gifts.

When we were about to leave, I saw a boy about eight years

I silently hoped that I would be as eager to bless others as the older boy was to bless his brother.

old running toward us, holding his little brother by the hand. When they arrived, the older boy said, “We came for our gifts.” His innocence left me without words and touched my heart.

I explained to him that the gifts were gone. He responded, “It doesn’t matter if my gift isn’t here, but my little brother’s must be here.”

Then I thought of the ball I had tossed under my seat. I told the boys I did have one more gift but that it was a humble one.

“It doesn’t matter what it is,” he said. “That is the one.”

I got on the bus and found the ball. When I gave it to the little boy, his joy overflowed. Jumping with gratitude, he said, “A ball! That is the present I asked the Christ child to bring me.” He continued to dance around happily as he and his older brother went away with their treasured gift.

I quietly stood there and wept as a warm feeling of peace and gratitude enveloped me. The concern and selfless care the older brother gave to his younger brother touched me, and I silently hoped that I would be as eager to bless others as the older boy was to bless his brother.

As the boys happily walked away, I was reminded of the Savior’s love for us. He did not even forget a little boy on a mountainside who had asked for a simple ball for Christmas. ■

Walter Emilio Posada Rodriguez,
Colombia

