

Behind The Scenes: God Saved Dr. Kent Brantly

By Melissa Strickland



Here's what's going to happen." The voice on the phone was urgently brusque. "You're going to hand the phone to Amber, and I'm going to tell her that her husband will be dead in just a few hours. And you are going to stand next to her and comfort her—and you cannot cry." It was less than one week before that the same voice, which belonged to vice president of programs for Samaritan's Purse, Ken Isaacs, had interrupted my sunny Saturday visit to the farmer's market with the words "We have an international incident on our hands. Get to the office immediately." There was no further instruction or information. I looked at my husband and said, "Either someone has been kidnapped or one of our doctors has Ebola." When I arrived at the Samaritan's Purse "ops room," I learned that it was the latter. Dr. Kent Brantly had contracted the deadly Ebola virus while trying to save lives in Liberia. I didn't know him except through various quotes in stories written by my communications team. In that moment, however, I became intensely aware of our bond through Christ. He was my brother, and he was fighting against a scourge straight from the pit of hell. Every one of us knew the disease's horrific and fatal path—the flaming rash, the fierce vomiting, and the bleeding through eyes, ears, and skin as the virus turned organs to mush. As editorial director, my job was to get ahead of what we all knew would be one of the biggest stories in the world. As soon as the word got out, the media frenzy began. I was breathless as I tried

to keep up with the demands of a febrile press corps. I had been in this same room with this same group of people countless times through the years responding to major international disasters, but we all knew this one was different. I wasn't sure if anyone else felt the crushing weight of catastrophic anxiety that I did, but we avoided looking each other in the eye. A few hours had passed when our country director in Liberia informed us that another member of the team, Nancy Writebol, was also infected. "Dear Jesus, help us" was my whispered prayer. Two days later, I was sitting with Samaritan's Purse President Franklin Graham and other senior leadership when I was told to leave immediately for Texas, where Kent's wife Amber and their two children were holed up at a friend's pool house because they had been chased out of her parents' home by aggressive media and terrified neighbors. Before boarding the plane, however, I had to write a press release to have on hand if Kent or Nancy died. We all told each other it was "just in case." I hadn't slept in days, but I tried my best to put on an air of bright-eyed professionalism as I met Amber and the rest of the family. I presented the public communication options and told them I was there to help. Amber's father led us in asking God for courage and wisdom. I staggered into my hotel room that night, intoxicated by a fog of exhaustion and fear. And then the afternoon of that vile phone call, and suddenly I was watching a woman that I had quickly come to love and admire as she heard the words she dreaded most: "Your husband will die." I was holding her hand as she dropped to the floor. Her mother was pleading, "What is it?" "Just pray, Mama!" Amber replied. Soon the entire family was on bended knee begging God to spare Kent's life. The only exception was Kent's mother, Jan, who stretched herself across the bed at the side of room. As her body convulsed in sobs, she prayed, "Lord, I'm so sorry. Now I know what it feels like to see your son die. And You did that for me. And I'm so sorry." Several muted hours followed. Pacing with silent steps. Grieving with hushed tears. And then the piercing ring of Amber's phone and the elation in her voice as she said, "It's Kent!" A few days later, I boarded a small plane with Amber and a few family members to begin the journey to Emory Hospital in Atlanta where both Kent and Nancy would be safely delivered home.