

Baffling killings lead to newfound faith

Patrick O'Neill 12:28 a.m. EDT August 4, 2014



(Photo: Jessica Phelps, Jessica Phelps/The Advocate)

FRESNO – There's a video that Pastor Chris Cutshall likes to play to familiarize parishioners with his deceased daughter, Lindsay Cutshall, and her fiancé, Jason Allen.

The brief film begins with a 6- or 7-year-old Jason flashing a smile at the camera while wading through family at a holiday party in Michigan. As the years pass by on screen — showing Jason fishing, hunting, biking, sailing — what began as solitary activities shift to incorporate Lindsay. The couple met in Bible college in 2002.

Standing beside his wife, Kathy, in his office at the Fresno Bible Church, Chris points to a still frame near the end of the movie: Jason, 26, and Lindsey, 22, are each guiding a raft full of children down a span of white water. Lindsay is paddling hard, eyes fixed on the water ahead. Jason is shouting, paddle extended overhead in a one-handed celebratory pose.

"That pretty much describes it right there," Chris said.

"He was a character," Kathy added. "He said he wasn't sure he'd meet someone who wanted to live the sort of on-the-go adventurous life he did. Then he met Lindsay."

Energetic, spontaneous and deeply spiritual, Lindsay and Jason had just begun living their dream as hiking, climbing, and rafting guides for a Christian youth camp, Rock-N-Water, in northern California. Every Sunday, Lindsay would use a run-down pay phone to call her parents back home in Fresno to relay her most recent adventures. Then, on Aug. 15, 2004, the call didn't come.

It's been 10 years since Lindsay and Jason were found slain along a secluded beach in Jenner, California, less than a month before they were to be married. The Cutshalls still experience pangs of grief, although they come far less frequently than during the first few years following their daughter's death.

"There were times I'd fall out of my chair in these uncontrollable waves of grief," Chris said. "Birthdays, holidays, everything seems to bring back memories. But she's worthy of that sorrow."

The killings

It was the weekend before Lindsay and Jason's final week at Rock-N-Water. The couple decided to make an impromptu trip to the coast, about a three-hour drive from the camp. Hitting the road in Lindsay's 1992 red Ford Tempo, they made several stops on their way to Jenner, including San Francisco, where a picture of the two reclined on a wharf was later found on Lindsay's camera.

From there, the duo traveled north toward Jenner, a coastal town of just more than 100 people. As Saturday, Aug. 14, 2004, came to a close, both added their sentiments to a visitors' journal that was left in a wooden hutch along the beach. Lindsay wrote that the sun was going down, "shining on the cliff face," and that she knew "God is awesome" by the "creation all around" her.

"As I stir this Mac and Cheese I think to myself: what a wonderful life," Jason wrote less than 12 hours before he was killed. "I've just spent two awesome days with my fiance Lindsay. Can life ever be so perfect? Only with a person who is so great. God gives me this privilege in life and he has given me a wonderful woman to enjoy it."

Lindsay and Jason slept among the driftwood of Fish Head Beach, a short distance from the crashing surf. At some point in the night, both were shot in the head at close range with a Marlin .45-caliber rifle, the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office later determined.

When the couple didn't show up for Sunday orientation at Rock-N-Water, the camp counselors contacted the Allens and Cutshalls. Despite attempts by law enforcement officials and camp counselors to downplay the disappearance, Kathy said she "knew right away that something wasn't right."

The Cutshalls flew out Tuesday; the Allens arrived Wednesday. The families stayed at the home of camp owner Craig Lomax, spending the majority of their time calling TV stations and newspapers and doing anything they could do to get the word out about their missing children.

At 6:30 a.m. Thursday, Aug. 19, Lomax and a group of law enforcement officials drove back to the camp to deliver the news: Lindsay and Jason had been found at Fish Head Beach the day before.

"I was praying, 'Let us know where they are,'" Kathy said. "It was agonizing, not knowing if they'd been captured, tortured. It was comforting in a way. They fell asleep on this beautiful beach and woke up in heaven."

The Midwestern couple had been found lying in separate sleeping bags, fully clothed. Nothing appeared to have been stolen, no signs of sexual assault were present, and the position the bodies were found in led detectives to believe Lindsay and Jason had been asleep when they were shot, said Sonoma County Sheriff Steve Freitas, who supervised the investigation.

"It was very odd," Freitas said. "It's been a difficult investigation from the start. Once we found them, it took us a day just to locate who they were. The geographical location made it a tough crime scene to work. The water comes in, the wind picks up. All the footprints were gone."

The sheriff's office dedicated 25 detectives to the case in the first year. Detectives discussed various motives, including a drifter who'd been stalking the couple, or the possibility they'd accidentally interfered with a drug deal or poaching ring. More than 1,000 tips poured in, people of interest were named, and detectives followed up on each lead. A pond where the gun was reportedly ditched was drained and searched.

Ten years later, tips still are called in to the sheriff's office. Shannon McAlvaine, detective sergeant for violent crimes, said that, although it's considered a cold case, it's very much active.

"It's a huge deal for us here in Sonoma County," McAlvaine said. "Our homicides get solved here. Some take longer than others, but we're holding out hope. Evidence is preserved, and we have new forensic techniques that we're working on and waiting for."

'A great comfort'

The families developed an unwavering trust for the detectives handling the case, and a mutual respect between the families and law enforcement officials was forged. Freitas felt himself being personally affected by the case and was moved by the faith the Cutshalls and Allens harbored during such a painful loss.

In the years that followed, Freitas and his wife made trips to Ohio to stay with the Cutshalls, and the Fresno family reciprocated.

"Their faith was very strong in the face of everything they were dealing with. I hadn't encountered that before," Freitas said. "Over the months and after lots of talking, my faith and my family's faith was transformed. ... It's all because of God. There's no doubt in my mind that God brought us together."

Freitas wasn't the only person whose faith was bolstered in the wake of the killing. Delores Allen, Jason's mother, said letters have poured in from people all around the world who've been affected by the sincerity of Jason and Lindsay's faith. The possibility that something positive was born out of such a deep pain has provided solace to her.

"You're never quite the same once you've lost a child," Delores said. "We knew it could destroy us, but we decided early on we were not going to be angry and bitter. There can be positives. The comments from other people were that they knew their faith was sincere. When they died, people's lives were changed by Jason and Lindsay. That's always been a great comfort."

Four months before his trip to California, Jason embarked on a trip to Puerto Rico, where he and his friends planned to buy a sailboat and spread God's word on nearby islands, Delores said. Although it never came to fruition — they were considerably short on cash — his attitude regarding the trip was indicative of the way the 26-year-old Michigan native lived his life: hopeful and adventuresome.

While guiding at Rock-N-Water, Lindsay asked her mother to pick up her wedding dress back in Ohio. When Kathy showed up to pay for the gown, the woman at the counter told her it had already been paid for. As her mother would later discover, Lindsay had worked as a janitor in a nearby store to save up money for the dress. The can-do attitude reminded the Cutshalls of years before, when Lindsay had raised her own money to travel to a rural African village to do mission work.

"That's just the sort of girl she was," Kathy said. "It never changed."

A 10-year memorial service will be held in Jenner at Goat Rock Beach, a far more accessible stretch of waterfront than Fish Head Beach. After the service, the Cutshalls will descend the hillside onto the same spot their daughter died 10 years ago. It's a place Kathy has always regretted avoiding, and "exactly where I want to be on the anniversary."

The Allens will be in Michigan for the anniversary, surrounded by family.

Things that were once nearly unbearable for the families — going into their children's rooms, picking up rice at the store (Jason's diet consisted nearly entirely of rice and beans) — have become less difficult. Still, Delores said, "that sense of loss never leaves you."

"Through time and God's grace, the deep deep grieving and pain eases up," she said. "This is a time to remember them, and it brings back some sad memories, but healing has taken place. We go on. We know where they are, and we know we'll be with them again."

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