

Bethany Hamilton

Teen surfer ministers to others after losing arm in shark attack.

Story by Tom Price
Photos by Noah Hamilton

It was the last morning of October on the northern Hawaiian island of Kauai. Thirteen-year-old Bethany Hamilton had gone surfing on the North Shore where she lived with her parents and two older brothers. Tom Hamilton, Bethany's father, was at the local hospital, getting prepped to have an operation on his knee. Opting for local anesthesia, the doctor was just beginning the procedure when a nurse burst in. She announced that a shark had attacked a thirteen-year-old girl and that this operating room would be needed—the victim was en route—her life in danger with the loss of blood. Tom began to pray. The girl's description fit his daughter.

Meanwhile at CC North Shore, Pastor Steve Rex was finishing a men's prayer meeting. He received a phone call that a shark had attacked Bethany Hamilton. She had been a regular at the church's Rad Night, a youth outreach they shared with North Shore Christian Fellowship. Bethany was a big part of the close-knit group of young Christian teens as well as one of the best young female surfers in Kauai and a fierce competitor. Steve hurried to the hospital as he prayed for the young teen.

Friends and family huddled together to pray in the waiting room. After the operation Bethany's parents were allowed to see their daughter. They emerged, still shaken but grateful—telling everyone gathered there that Bethany was going to be all right. They relayed a message from Bethany to all her friends.

"Bethany is going to be OK," shared Bethany's mom, Cheri, and her dad, Tom. "She said she thanks God that this happened to her so she can tell everyone about Jesus," they said, choking back the tears. Friends hugged as they listened. Cheri shared how she and her daughter had been praying seriously for several weeks that the Lord would make Bethany's life count for Christ in a big way.

After a week in the hospital and three additional weeks of recuperation, the surf began to beckon Bethany again. She stayed close to shore to practice on the smaller waves. After several tries—pushing herself up on the board with one arm—she stood and rode the churning whitewater into shore. Tears of joy streamed down her face and mixed with salty water.

"I'm so stoked that God would let me be a part of His plan."

Bethany Hamilton

She remembered the last time she was in the water, a month earlier. Surfing with her best friend, Alana, and Alana's father and brother, Bethany had been lying on her board between sets of waves. Adorned with a shiny watch, her wrist hung lazily in the water. Suddenly a large gray blur appeared out of the water from her left side. She felt a hard tug and pressure, and immediately the water was filled with blood. She looked down and saw that her left arm was missing all the way to her shoulder. Not feeling pain yet, she called out to Alana that a shark had attacked her.

Realizing that the shark could attack again, Bethany knew her life depended on getting ashore a quarter of a mile away. Alana's father made a tourniquet to stop the loss of blood by using his rash guard, a protective surfing shirt. He pushed her as she paddled with her right arm. Bethany prayed for the Lord to help her get to the beach. She remembers the Lord's calm voice assuring her that she was in His hands. After reaching shore, they began the torturous 45-minute ride to the hospital. A Kauai paramedic whispered in her ear, "God will never leave you or forsake you."



Bethany has used her ordeal to tell others about her faith in Jesus Christ.

Bethany came through the ordeal several operations later, strengthened by the constant prayers of the tight-knit North Shore Christian community. Her hospital room needed security guards to limit the visitation of all her teenage friends as well as keeping the paparazzi away. Both older brothers Noah and Timmy showered her with attention. Noah, a surf photographer, and Timmy, a videographer, documented her recovery and return to the ocean on video and provided stills that showed Bethany surfing Hawaii's giant waves. Not only did she surf again, but she also began competing nationally. That same year, she placed fifth in the National Surfing Championships and earned a spot on the U.S. National Surfing Team. She continues to win surfing contests. A strap rigged across the front of the surfboard enables her to "duck dive" her board through the waves with one hand, pushing the board down under and through the wave.

Bethany was invited onto syndicated national talk shows. Celebrity journalists joined camera crews from around the world—everyone wanted to hear from the young girl who had lost her arm but not her courage as she battled back onto the competitive surf scene. An international franchise now features a "Bethany Hamilton" line of jewelry; her biography—which clearly depicts her faith in Christ—made the L.A. Times best-seller list. Although uncomfortable in the media's spotlight, she has nonetheless used the platform to share that God has a plan for everyone's life. In 2005, she traveled to Germany to encourage U.S. troops who lost limbs in battle. First, she explains, we must accept the invitation of salvation offered through the death and resurrection of God's Son, Jesus Christ.

Pastor Steve Rex, CC North Shore Kauai, shared about Bethany's impact. "Many teenage girls have come to church and said that it was Bethany's testimony that brought them



Bethany Hamilton rides a wave in Indonesia. Since losing her arm, she has won surfing contests and will now compete professionally.

to God," said Steve. "They heard her share about her attack. It was her powerful faith in Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior that made them want what she had. Bethany seemed to emerge from this experience stronger in her faith." Both Bethany's parents, Tom and Cheri, have been walking with Christ since 1980, growing through Pastor Chuck Smith's teaching tapes and radio broadcasts. Their children were brought up in a Christian home.

Steve said, "She is the epitome of the verse that says, 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me'" (Philippians 4:13).

Bethany said later, "Knowing that God loves me and that He has a plan for my life that no shark can take away is like having a solid rock underneath me. I have a relationship with Christ that keeps me strong and helps me see how good can come out of a bad situation. I think that the reason I have been able to tell my story on TV and in magazines is because God wanted other people to know that He is the Rock that you can build your life on."

"Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock."

Matthew 7:24-25

Bethany continued, "I have a lot to be thankful for ... I could have died, or been hurt so badly I would not have been able to surf again. People should not look to me for inspiration—I just want to be a sign along the way that points them to heaven." Now, four years later, Bethany grasps how the Lord answered her prayer to make her life count for Jesus Christ.

"God has definitely answered my prayer to use me. He speaks to people when they hear my story—whether they read one of my books, watched my documentary or saw me in person, on TV, in a magazine, or a news-

paper. People tell me that they have drawn closer to God, started to believe in God, found hope for their lives, or were inspired to overcome a difficult circumstance. I just praise God when I hear those things because it's not me doing anything for them—God is the One Who is helping them. I'm so stoked that God would let me be a part of His plan.

"These days I'm taking my surfing to the next level by starting to compete professionally. My documentary is being seen around the world, and we're starting on a feature-length theatrical film. My focus this year is to take life one day at a time while getting to know God better!"

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For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Jeremiah 29:11