

Telling Carola's Story

by

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CAROLA'S STORY

By Lillie Ammann

I stared at the television screen. The announcer had introduced the guest as Carola Spencer, but the wounded creature sitting before the microphone didn't look like my friend Carola. A road map of stitches covered her partially bald head, a bandage hid her right eye, and her face appeared several shades paler than normal. Her voice, however, sounded only slightly weaker than usual as she described her horrifying experience of less than two weeks before.

"I was working in my office at the answering service I own. I heard a noise from the back office and went to investigate. I saw a man who used to work for me walking down the hall toward me. He was carrying a rifle."

I leaned forward to hear the rest of the story. I had watched television coverage of the incident, but this was the first time I'd heard Carola tell her story.

Although Carola didn't remember the gun being fired in the hall, a bullet was later found in the floor. With no time to think clearly, she ran into a tiny restroom. She subconsciously chose to be trapped in the restroom rather than to be shot in the back as she ran away.

The gunman shot through the door just as she slammed it. The bullet went through the door, through the bathroom wall, and into the adjoining business, barely missing Carola. She crouched in the corner and held her hands up to her face. She screamed as the shooter crashed through the door. Silently she prayed that she would be with her dear Lord when the end came.

The next bullet hit Carola in the skull. At first, it didn't hurt any more than a slight bruise. Then she felt as if her eye had popped out of her head, and her face seemed to be melting in her hand. She continued to hold her hand up to her face to try to hold it together.

Brenda Santos, a seventeen-year-old employee who had escaped out the back door when the shooting started, came back inside to try to help those who hadn't escaped. She walked past the gunman who sat on a chair in the back office staring straight ahead, the rifle across his lap. Ignoring the danger to herself, Brenda frantically searched for her aunt Juanita Villalon, who also worked in the office. She didn't find her aunt, but she did find Carola.

Brenda wrapped Carola's face in a sweater, holding it together so that her face could later be reconstructed. Brenda then left again to try to find help. When the police arrived, they knew the gunman was still in the office, so they didn't risk storming the building with Carola inside.

After several minutes, Carola walked out on her own and was rushed to the hospital by helicopter. The police found the body of the gunman, eyes open, sitting upright in the chair where he had killed himself.

Six days and two long and delicate surgeries later, Carola was released from the hospital with an implant in place of the eye she had lost. The news that two of her six employees had been killed in the shooting added to her emotional trauma. Her eye leaked blood and other fluids; her wounds had to be gently cleaned several times a day. Even such a simple task as brushing her teeth was painful, and extreme fatigue overwhelmed her.

Yet, here she was, just days out of the hospital, being interviewed on a television news show.

"How did you survive?" the reporter asked.

"I know that God saved me," Carola answered. "I don't know what He has planned for my life, but I know He saved me for a reason. I just have to figure out what it is that He wants me to do and do it."

I wasn't surprised to hear that she had maintained the deep faith and positive attitude that I admired so much. Although she had a long way to go to regain her physical health, her faith had helped her maintain her emotional balance.

Carola is a deeply spiritual person, and prayer has always been an immense source of strength. She listens to prayer tapes and believes that the Holy Spirit ties us all together. She knows that we're in this mortal life only for a moment, and the life that comes after this one is what really matters. This tragic incident will affect Carola only for the rest of her days on earth. In the end, it won't matter. Something infinitely better than this will come after her mortal life.

I knew that Carola had spent many hours, one hour at a time, in the chapel at her church in Perpetual Adoration. This time of reflection and private communion with Jesus had been a source of strength to her. She had the faith and courage to face death and, perhaps more difficult, survival and rehabilitation.

Carola's faith would naturally lead her to find meaning and purpose in the tragedy and try to turn it into something good. As the Bible says in Romans

8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose."

Carola has the reputation among her friends of always being positive, upbeat, and caring. Many people would feel a strong hatred toward the man who caused them pain and grief. In spite of what Carola's attacker did to her, however, she feels no hate for her former employee turned killer. She strongly believes in Jesus Christ's second commandment: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." (Matthew 22:39).

Carola comes from a Christian family. Her parents instilled their faith and love in her from an early age. After the shooting, her parents and sister spent hours in prayer for Carola. When Carola was released from the hospital, her mother became the caregiver. With no medical knowledge or nursing experience, she bravely tackled the many tasks needed for her daughter's recovery. Three times a day, as she administered treatments to Carola's eye, she repeated the words "In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Carola's boyfriend Jack Broaddus was another source of strength for her. In the hospital, he had told her, "That man shot at you three times. How the other two bullets missed, I don't know. The bullet that went through you missed your brain by a fraction of a hair. It missed your larynx box by a fraction of a hair. If he had used a hollow point bullet, your face would have exploded. Carola, you have no idea how lucky you are. God really loves you. He really took care of you." Those words inspired her and helped her maintain her own strong faith.

The ages, races, genders, educational and social backgrounds, and work experiences of Carola's employees are widely diverse. In spite of surface differences, however, they all share a strong faith in God, and they live what they believe.

Although they had almost touched death, they all returned to work the next day. They knew that customers would be sympathetic about the tragedy, but they probably wouldn't risk their own businesses by continuing with an answering service if the phones weren't being answered. The staff arrived at the office, which had been already cleaned and repainted, each wondering if she had the courage to do her job. Linda Cathey, one of the workers who had escaped out the back door during the violence, led the group to the spot where the bodies of their co-workers had fallen. They knelt in prayer that morning and every morning after that. They shared Bible verses and their spiritual experiences.

Their faith and courage is even more remarkable to contemplate knowing that Brenda had lost her beloved aunt, and they all had lost two special friends.

Some of the employees had been witnessing their Christian faith to the killer, and he had even attended the church to which several employees belonged. Linda's husband is a minister who assisted with the funeral of the man who caused them so much sorrow. As difficult as it was for him and his family, he felt called as a man of God to perform this duty. Another employee was the assailant's cousin. The coworkers had tried to help Pam Henry, the killer's girlfriend and his first victim, escape from an unhealthy relationship. They had also tried to help the troubled man who responded to their help with violence. The employees dealt not only with grief and stress, but also with concern that others might think badly of them for being friends or relatives of a person who committed such a horrific crime.

They knew that Carola had already lost her eye and two employees who were also her friends. They sensed that losing her business during her long recuperation would be another devastating blow. Like Carola, they made a choice--the choice to triumph over tragedy, to become victors rather than victims. They looked past fear, pain, and grief into the future and beyond tomorrow.

For years, Carola had been a giver. She had helped individuals in need. She had worked tirelessly for charities and civic organizations. However, she hadn't treated herself as well as she'd treated others. She had no medical insurance to cover her astronomical expenses.

The person who had always been so strong was now weak, physically, emotionally, and financially. She couldn't manage her business; she couldn't pay her medical expenses; she couldn't even care for herself. Now Carola herself had to learn to accept help.

Her family and boyfriend Jack cared for her physical needs - preparing her meals, cleaning and medicating her wounds, washing her hair, driving her to doctors' appointments. Her employees and Jack took care of her business. Her friends raised money for her medical expenses.

Carola had nightmares, not of the shooting, but of monsters and vague, shadowy dangers. She dreaded going back to the office; she feared that the scene of the violence would trigger an emotional reaction she wasn't ready to face. Equally important, she was so used to being the leader, the strong one, she didn't want to appear weak to her employees.

Jack told her, "You shouldn't feel that way. You'd be so proud of them. They're working with such a good attitude." He suggested that Carola go to the office with him just to walk through to see how she felt. Late one afternoon a few weeks after the gruesome event, he took her to the office.

All of the employees were so excited to see her that she immediately decided, "I need to come back to work, if only to see how things are going." Enough time had passed that she wasn't as uneasy about being in the office as she'd expected. She already knew she needed to be doing something, and her business had always been extremely important to her.

Carola says of her employees, "They're all heroes." Their example of returning to work the next day and their support of her have been an inspiration to Carola. "They were all amazingly strong. I didn't want to let them down."

A month after being shot, Carola turned her attention to her business again. In a brief moment of weakness in the hospital, she had told her mother, "He ruined my whole life!" A few weeks later, though, her true spirit prevailed. She would not allow one criminal or one tragic incident to control her life.

She would give power over her life to no one or nothing except the Lord. She had a mission--to find God's purpose for her life. She couldn't do that by hiding out in her parents' home, avoiding risk, avoiding life.

Several years have passed since Carola heard a strange noise in the back office. As she stepped out of her office to investigate, she couldn't have imagined how her life would change in the fifteen minutes that followed.

On that day in the fall of 1997, she couldn't run or hide from the danger. She couldn't stop the violence. She couldn't save the lives of her two friends.

After she awoke in the hospital, though, she had a decision to make. She could have chosen self-pity. She could have cried out, "Why me, O Lord?" She could have become bitter and filled with hate at the evil that had been done to her and her friends.

Instead, she chose faith. She chose to believe that "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose."

She chose to look for God's purpose in her life. Her story inspires everyone who hears it. She has told the story herself in speaking engagements at civic organizations, churches, and other groups. Her friends have shared her story, through private conversations, public speeches, and in a book, **LOOK BEYOND TOMORROW: THE CAROLA SPENCER STORY**.

Carola's hair has grown back and hides the physical scars. The prosthesis replacing her right eye doesn't see or move, but it looks like an eye. She has

regained her strength and her incredible energy. Even though she has five titanium plates in her face, the surgeons worked their magic without marring her beauty. Her gorgeous face remains unflawed, but it is her inner beauty, faith, spirit, and determination that shine the brightest.

Carola has found her purpose—to reflect God's grace and love to a hurting world. She inspires us to give no power in our lives to circumstances, no matter horrific, or to people, no matter how evil, but to give power only to God.

Look Beyond Tomorrow: The Carola Spencer Story is available at <http://www.lillieammann.com>. Carola's medical expenses have all been paid, and the proceeds of book sales are now being donated to a literacy organization in San Antonio, Texas.

Mission Possible, with God's Help

By Lillie Ammann

I sat at the computer, staring at the screen. Would this project fail because my computer ate the file? I'd truly felt led by God to write this book. Now, just five hours before the deadline to deliver the manuscript to the printer, the book was locked inside a computer that refused to release it. The mission I thought I'd been given now seemed impossible.



I found myself speaking aloud in the empty room, pouring out my heart in a disjointed prayer. "I thought this was Your plan, Lord. What's going on here? Did I completely misread this whole situation? The story will glorify You. You seemed to open every door to make this happen."

Sighing, I thought back to all those open doors. My friend, Carola Spencer, had been shot and critically injured. A gunman had come into Carola's business early one morning to confront his estranged girlfriend. He shot and killed both the girlfriend and a coworker as other employees escaped out a back door. When Carola came out of her office to investigate, he shot her in the head, then turned the gun on himself.

I learned of the shooting when a mutual friend called me, saying, "Turn on your TV quick. Carola's been shot!"

I watched in horror as the SWAT team swarmed Carola's office. I prayed for my friend and her associates.

The media reported that Carola had been airlifted to a trauma center, but hours passed before her friends learned of her condition. She lost an eye and her sinuses and the bones inside her face were shattered. Hours of intricate surgery and five titanium plates saved her life and her face.

The only help I anticipated offering Carola was my prayers and the prayers of others. As soon as I learned of the tragedy, I went to the LoveKnot, an Internet email loop of Christian women writers, to ask for their prayers.

All of them agreed to pray, and one of them said, "Why don't you write Carola's story?"

"Thanks for the suggestion. I'll think about it." It was too soon for me to think about anything but Carola's recovery.

Just a few days after the shooting, Carola agreed to a number of television interviews. She faced the camera, with a road map of stitches covering her head and pale face.

"How did you survive?" a reporter asked.

"I know that God saved me," Carola answered. "I don't know what He has planned for my life, but I know He saved me for a reason. I just have to figure out what it is that He wants me to do and do it."

Carola's friends weren't surprised to hear that she maintained the deep faith and positive attitude that we all admired so much. Although she had a long way to go to recover her physical health, her faith helped her maintain her emotional balance.

Carola had always participated in numerous charitable and civic activities and helped people in need. However, she hadn't treated herself as well as she'd treated others. She had no medical insurance to cover her astronomical expenses.

A group of friends formed an organization, Friends of Carola. As we discussed possible ways to raise money for her medical expenses, someone said, "Lillie, you're a writer. Could you write a magazine article about this and donate the money?"

This was the second time someone had suggested I write Carola's story. Could this be a message from God? I shook my head and started explaining why a magazine article wasn't a good idea.

"A magazine wouldn't pay enough to make a dent in the medical expenses."

Another friend asked, "Couldn't we use the article as a plea for donations?"

"I don't know if we could get a magazine to accept such an article. Even if we could, it would take months," I answered.

Another person spoke. "This story needs to be told. Look at how Carola and her employees live their faith. Surely other people going through terrible tragedies could be helped by learning how they coped."

Not knowing what to do, I turned the discussion to other avenues of fundraising. We ended the meeting with no firm plans.

A small voice in my head urged me to write a book, but I wondered if the voice came from my own ego or from the Lord.

I could think of a million reasons to ignore the voice. Carola and her employees and family might not want their story told. People might think I was taking advantage of this tragedy to publish a book, when I hadn't been able to sell any of the manuscripts I'd completed. We probably couldn't afford to publish the book ourselves, and selling the book to a publisher would take too long. Maybe I didn't have the talent to tell the story effectively. The project would take too much time away from my life.

Most importantly, I worried about my own emotional reactions. I identified strongly with Carola for several reasons. I had been a crime victim, robbed and molested in my retail store years ago. I had struggled through months of medical treatment and therapy following a debilitating stroke five years earlier. I had seen my business suffer when I couldn't work for months. Although Carola's experiences and mine weren't exactly the same, there were too many similarities for me not to relive many of the strong emotions I had experienced.

Yet the idea wouldn't go away. A few days later, I went to a meeting of the San Antonio Writers Guild. The speaker was a printer/publisher who specializes in self-publishing for authors. After the program, I asked him if he thought we could raise a significant amount of money for Carola's medical expenses if we published her story. Not only did he assure me the project was viable, but he offered to do the printing at a reduced price if we delivered a camera-ready manuscript in time for him to print it during a brief lull between major jobs.

I reported this to Friends of Carola and suddenly doors opened everywhere I turned. People volunteered to proofread the manuscript. Carola's friend who owned an advertising business offered to donate the book cover design. Carola received numerous invitations to speak at local organizations, and she could sell books at each meeting. A publisher friend gave me free advice. God's voice seemed loud and clear.

As I prayed for guidance, I felt called to the mission of writing this book, both to raise money for Carola and to inspire others. Carola, her family, and her employees were overcoming this tragedy through courage, hope, faith, and love. Their positive reactions to a horrific experience could inspire countless people who face tragedies every day.

I interviewed Carola less than six weeks after the shooting. During the next eight weeks, I spent over one hundred hours interviewing the victims and writing the story.

Despite my earlier fears, the people I interviewed were enthusiastic and eager to have their story told. The experience of sharing their experience seemed cathartic for many of them, and they wanted to share how their strong religious faith helped them cope with the catastrophe. Since each person had a different perspective on the incident, tying all the stories together into a coherent narrative proved to be a difficult challenge.

Besides the interviewing and writing, I spent many more hours coordinating the logistics needed to prepare and publish the manuscript. Except for designing the cover art and taking and scanning the photographs, I did everything necessary to prepare a camera-ready manuscript.

The experience was intense, exhausting, emotionally draining, and exhilarating. The remarkable courage, the incredible hope, the abiding deep faith, and the forgiving love shown by all the participants inspired me. I knew the story could inspire many others as well. I felt blessed to have a part in spreading God's love through this story.

The pressure increased as the deadline approached. The day before the manuscript was due to the publisher, I met with several proofreaders throughout the day, reviewing their comments and questions. Carola delivered the photographs around eight o'clock that evening. I expected to work late into the night to complete the manuscript.

I'd made a back-up copy of the computer file earlier in the afternoon. After Carola left, I made the corrections pointed out by the last proofreader and added the photographs. I planned to save the document as soon as I finished. By one-thirty in the morning, after hours of tedious work, everything looked perfect.

As I tried to save my document, the file disappeared! My computer refused to find the file, and nothing I did made any difference. The manuscript remained locked in a computer I couldn't access.

Now I sat in my office, alone with God. "I really thought You wanted the story told, and I thought You wanted me to tell it. You have to help me here. If you don't want this done, let me know. If this is just a trial I have to overcome, I need to know."

I must have sat at that desk for almost an hour, questioning God and full of doubt. I didn't hear a voice. I didn't see a sign. Nothing happened. But gradually a peace came over me. I didn't make a conscious decision. I just took my last back-up disk into the other room to my husband's laptop computer. I didn't know how the book would get finished; I just knew in my heart that it would. I opened the file and re-entered all the corrections I'd made from the day's proofreading. Since the laptop couldn't handle the photographs, I went to bed.

When I woke about three hours later, I called Carola's friend, Jack Broaddus, to ask him if I could use his computer. When he said I could, I called the publisher to ask for an extension of the deadline. He said I could deliver the manuscript at the end of the day.

I spent a long, frustrating day on a strange computer that wouldn't cooperate. I had to re-enter the photographs three different times, losing them twice. Finally, at the very end of the day, the manuscript was perfect on the screen but wouldn't print on paper.

I called the publisher to explain the problem.

"Put the file on a CD and bring me the CD," he said. "Just get it here before we close at 5:30."

I arrived at the office with the CD barely in time. However, because of differences in computers, what appeared on the publisher's computer screen looked nothing like what I had so carefully designed.

"It's Friday afternoon," I said. "You can't start on this until Monday morning. Why don't I work on it over the weekend? I'll print it out some way and get it to you first thing Monday."

He agreed, and I hurried home to call a computer guru. Over the weekend, the computer expert managed to fix my computer so that it functioned just enough for me to print the document, one page at a time. Monday morning when the printer opened for business, I delivered a camera-ready manuscript.

Although I hadn't known when or how, I had known from the wee hours of the morning on Friday that God's plan would be fulfilled.

Look Beyond Tomorrow: The Carola Spencer Story was released less than four months after the tragic incident. Carola has spoken at many organizations, and her story has inspired everyone who has heard it. Friends

of Carola have sold books in their businesses and at organizations to which they belong. Now the book is available on the Internet for wider distribution. We'll never know who is inspired by Carola's story, but we know that the message of God's love and the power of faith is being shared. I thank God that the mission that seemed impossible became possible with His help.



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