

## **Five Souls Stolen but Teach a Valuable Lesson** **By Bonniejean Alford**



February 14, 2008 - Five souls stolen from our world. Why? No one really knows. The shooter's intent may never be known. But five lives are simply gone, with family, friends, and even strangers left behind to pick up the pieces and find meaning in tragedy.

This is where I come in. I didn't know these people taken long before their time, but for some reason their deaths touched the very center of my being and I can imagine them watching the world from wherever they are smiling because they know they were not only loved, but also inspiring in their last moments, and all the moments that came before. They are remembered. The soldier who returned home from service, only to die during what was supposed to be a simple mundane day of learning. The boyfriend that gave his own life to save his girl, who was injured, but lived. The future therapist, whose advice will likely be missed. The young woman who took pride in learning her Polish heritage. The young Latina, living life always as if there was no tomorrow.

And sadly, for these five people, there will be no tomorrow.

But all are heroes in many minds, in my mind. Everyday heroes who go through life not even knowing that what happens to them might actually change the world, at least for some.

I know they did for me, though it took months for me to fully realize it.

I remember the day as if it were yesterday. I wasn't feeling very well, so I had cancelled my classes at the two Chicago area colleges I teach at, figuring that with it being Valentine's Day, my students wouldn't mind anyway. Then, I just relaxed. No TV, no radio, no Internet. I was basically doing nothing. I decided about 8 p.m. or so to check my e-mail, only to find a friend of mine had sent me a strange one (the same friend who turned me on to Breathe Again Magazine, actually), asking if I was still in DeKalb, at the college there. He had heard about the shooting and wanted to know if I was okay. He knew I once was there, but he couldn't remember for sure if I was still there or not. He had been traveling the world and was finally settling back in the US, and saw the news and thought of me, which made me feel good, but sad too.

Five people slain in the very room I once studied various subjects. Five people slain at the only place in this world that has ever been home. Five people slain.

Violence in schools was, is, nothing new. The previous year, Virginia Tech faced a similar tragedy. High schools for years have had to crack down on what kids bring to school with metal detectors and armed guards. Education is no longer the truly free thinking zone it once was. Teachers, students, parents, everyone, always on guard, making sure they don't say the wrong thing to the wrong person, for fear of what could happen rather than the simple joy of learning.

But all that seemed a world away for me, in Chicago, where tragedies such as that were seemingly only a part of the news. The shooting at NIU, on Valentine's Day, three days before my birthday, at a time when I was hitting rock bottom already, was too close to home for me, and I didn't even know those killed. I could only imagine what their families and friends were facing if I was completely devastated by this senseless act.

As a person, I was destroyed.

I had already been pretty much near destruction, on the verge of losing my house, my marriage, my sanity, my faith in God. This ripped it all further away, at one moment making all the rest seem minuscule, but yet so important. And at that moment, I remember saying, "If there is a God, where the hell is he? How could he let this happen?"

It was in that moment, that day, I decided there was no God. There couldn't be. Too much bad stuff in my life, in the world for there to be. And to make matters worse, not even two months later, a threat of violence at another University I work caused it to close for a week.

Little did I know, these five lives, would have the greatest impact on me and my career than anything else ever had, and likely ever will.

But, personally, I was falling apart; I had to be a teacher, a guide for my students as they faced this tragedy. I learned the following week that more than half of my students in one of my classes knew at least one person who died or was injured. One student's best friend was the one whose boyfriend had shielded her so she could live. I was impressed by my students that day, more than any students I had ever had before.

They came. Despite their fears. Despite their hurt. Despite their anger. They came.

They were prepared. They were engaged. One student said specifically, "They wouldn't want us to stop pursuing our dreams simply because theirs will never be realized." It was amazing.

It took every bit of control to stay focused. And that comment, nagged me for months. Deep inside I knew I wasn't following the dream I have had all my life. The dream that led me to allow advisors in a PhD program I felt creatively stifled in to push me out. The dream I never felt I could pursue because everyone else thought I would be better at this or that.

That dream is simply to write. Ideally, photojournalism, or so I thought.

Upon coaxing from a different friend, and the hundredth job rejecting telling me they think I am

great, but I don't have the right credentials, I decided I needed to make a good faith attempt at fulfilling my dream, as those five young souls cannot. I immediately went to NIU's website, finding a Masters in Communications with a focus in Journalism.

Perfect.

Actually, more perfect than I ever could have imagined. While I want to do journalism, I want to write whatever I can. I want to take photographs. And I want to run my communications firm. I wanted a degree that was versatile and specific, all at once. And here I found it in the only place I have ever really known as home.

So, I emailed the graduate advisor for information on assistantships and the like, knowing full well I had missed the deadline and would have to wait until the next year. I was shocked to receive the e-mail back that they still had a few positions available and I should apply for this fall. In a whirlwind of events, my husband and I found an apartment closer to DeKalb, I agreed to sign the house over to the friend I had bought it with just 2 and a half years earlier, and I applied for school at NIU. It was the only decision to make. I had to go home again. I needed to start over, seeking my dreams. Rebuild what was broken in me; fix where I went wrong along the path.

Rebuilding doesn't mean I give up teaching, or the knowledge I obtained in ten years of studying Sociology, but rather, reworking it all to have the creative life I crave and deserve. And somewhere in all this, my faith in God was restored by a young woman who stepped outside the world's comfort zone in the middle of an office to bless those present, individually and as a unit.

At every stage of this journey, I am reminded that life is a precious and true gift. No matter the hurdles we face, we must pursue our own destiny, and not the destiny others think is best for us. Five souls will never get that chance. I owe it to them to have the courage to step up and take the chance, even if I fail. At every turn from here on out, I will carry them with me, born to me on February 14, 2008.

### **About The Author**

*Bonniejean Alford has been pursuing writing and photographic endeavors since she was a child, only just now realizing her true professional dream is to enter the world of journalism and fiction writing, as it had always been a side endeavor. After deciding not to finish a PhD in Sociology with only her dissertation left to write, she taught for several years until finding the courage to return to graduate school in the field she truly wants to be a part of: Communication. The courage came from the tragic deaths of five people she didn't know at her alma mater, Northern Illinois University, when a man senselessly shot them. In that moment, Bonniejean realized that following her dream was a necessity that must take place in honor of those five people that will never be able to follow their dreams. While teaching will still be a component of her life, focus will now be placed on running her specialty communications firm, writing, and taking photographs that are meant to inspire. Bonniejean currently lives in Wheaton with her husband, Bill, and their dog, Angel.*