

PURE RELIGION

For This My Son Was Dead, and Is Alive Again

The first thought that entered the bishop's mind was, "This man is going to die in my office." The man was too thin, emaciated. Red boils disfigured his face and neck. Half of his front teeth were missing.

"Can somebody help me?" he asked. Tears flooded his eyes and fell freely to the floor.

The man looked dirty and diseased, and Bishop Zabriskie of the Salt Lake 4th Ward did not want to touch him. Repressing his instincts to recoil, he placed an arm around the man's shoulder and asked if he wanted to talk. He did not know that fall evening in 1996 that this man would eventually not only touch his life, but the lives of many in the ward.

"My name is Van Bailey, and I've destroyed my life," the man said between sobs.

Never had the bishop seen anyone weep so freely and genuinely. As he spoke, the story of addiction to drugs, tobacco, and pornography unfolded. The man had grown up in Utah, married, and later had two children before his addictions ultimately unraveled the fabric of his life. Now, he lived between homeless shelters and squalid apartments. He was sick, possibly dying. As the interview drew to a close, the bishop suggested they pray. Van dropped immediately to his knees and poured out his soul to the Lord.

During the ward welfare committee meeting, Bishop Zabriskie assigned leadership missionaries John and Ruth Whiteley to work

one-on-one with Brother Bailey. Brother Whiteley told Van that he would help him on one condition: that Van promise to call him every day and report on his progress no matter how he had done during the day. Van agreed.



After receiving a priesthood blessing, Van noticed the sores on his skin began to disappear. Receiving food orders from the storehouse improved his diet. One family offered a suit so Van would not feel out of place at church. Through the Lord's storehouse, a dentist was found who volunteered to pull Van's remaining teeth. Another donated his time in making a denture. The denture helped Van to come out of his shell. His smile became infectious, and he began attending sacrament meetings and Church activities regularly.

And every day, Van faithfully called Brother Whiteley or left a message on his answering machine. "I love you, Sister Ruth and Brother John," he always said.

Van loved Sundays and looked forward to attending church meetings. Slowly, he began to overcome his addictions. He began to work regularly as a roofer, and with the help of Brother Whiteley, he set up a budget and expense sheet. Soon, he was paying tithing, holding family home evening with his roommate, going home teaching, and blessing the sacrament in church. He looked forward to one day entering the temple.

In response to a challenge by Bishop Zabriskie that every member read the Book of Mormon during the year, Van carried his book in his backpack and read it on breaks and in the evening. He reached his goal and finished reading the Book of Mormon long before the year was out. To help keep his thoughts pure, he began carrying photocopied pages of hymns and sang to himself as he worked.

When Van expressed concern that he wasn't worthy of the help and compassion he had received from the Church, Brother Whiteley explained the principle of fast offerings and how these funds were set aside to aid those in need. After that, Van began paying fast offerings. He wanted to help those less fortunate than himself.

On September 19, 1997, Brother Bailey left a message on the Whiteley's answering machine. He was sorry it was raining because he had hoped to work on the Whiteley's roof that evening. "I love you, Sister Ruth and Brother John," he left his customary message. "I appreciate all you do!"

Two days later, the Whiteley's received the news that Brother Van Bailey—his body tired and spent—had died.

When the bishop returned to the small apartment to help collect Van's things, he noticed the pornographic pictures had been replaced with strips of paper with words such as *obedience*, *prayer*, and *repentance* written on them. Pictures of the Savior and from covers of the *Ensign* magazine decorated the walls. An old Scout shirt hung reverently on a hanger near the fireplace.

"When I look up, I want to remind myself of worthwhile things," Van had said.

A couple of days later, Bishop Zabriskie received an envelope in the mail. It was a tithing envelope from Brother Bailey, one he had mailed the day he died.

It had been one year since he had first walked into Bishop Zabriskie's office and asked for help. During that year, thanks to compassionate and understanding brothers and sisters in the gospel, and thanks to an effective and functioning ward welfare committee, Van Bailey discovered peace and happiness as he sought to live the commandments of God.