

Sometimes, Angels Ride on Mules

By Kevan Mathis

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*Below is Lytle James sitting with Haley while she munches on a cookie
& William Jeff Villines taking out Haley on the three mile ride back to the nearest road*

*Who
Said
There is
No
Such Thing
as a
Miracle,
and That
Heroes
are Hard
to Find?*



Anyone who says there's no such thing as miracles isn't looking in the right direction. One need only look closely at the case involving the six-year-old girl who was recently lost in the forest for 53 hours before she was found wandering in the wilderness in Newton County, Arkansas. Haley Jennifer Zega, a kindergarten student from Fayetteville, Arkansas, wandered off from her grandparents while hiking in the Ozark National Forest near Boxley, Arkansas, Sunday, April 29th.

Hundreds of volunteers, police officers, fire department personnel, Red Cross, park and forestry officials, K-9 units, and at least three helicopters with infrared heat-seeking cameras could not accomplish what two country boys on the back of two sweaty mules could do, who are quick to point out they were guided by their own prayers and the good Lord above.

Now, I don't want to take anything away from all the aforementioned agencies and volunteers. They worked tirelessly to achieve what everyone involved wanted to see, the girl returned unharmed to her parents. Most of the people searching did so without pay and compensation, and they all need a pat on the back.

Before I get shot out of the saddle, let me explain why I think I can speak with at least some validity. I went to the location myself three different times and spent many hours searching for the girl myself, and I think I've earned the right to at least give my side of the story.

I think everything happens for a reason. I read, looked, watched, listened, and interviewed almost every person who lived out this real-life drama, and every single person I've talked to can not explain how that little girl safely got down that mountain, hundreds of feet straight down in some of the roughest terrain that you're ever gonna find in the state of

Arkansas.

"I can not tell you how rough that wilderness, is and I can't explain it to someone who hasn't seen it with their own eyes," said one of the Mount Sherman residents who found the girl - Lytle James. The other man who was with him was William Jeff Villines.

Mr. James was quick to point out in an interview with me that he has no doubt that he was led to the girl by the man upstairs. "I can't tell you how or why I knew, but I just knew that we were going to find that girl that day, and all we had to do was let the Lord lead our mules," he said humbly.

There is a sweet, pure, child-like faith in that statement that is probably much more profound than Mr. James could ever dream. When I told Mr. James that he and Villines were heroes, he brushed it all aside and said they were not heroes. "That little girl is the hero," he told me. But don't all true heroes deny that distinction? It's characteristic of their valor and courage.

I tried to interview Mr. Villines also, but by the time I had tried to contact him, he was sick and tired of dealing with the rude and calloused TV crews. And I don't blame him for not wanting to talk to me. Most, but not all, of the media groups are like a bunch of meat-hungry pack of wolves.

I was told by a neighbor on the condition of anonymity that TV crews swarmed outside the home of Villines and would not leave when asked in an effort to interview him about finding the girl.

I don't know if any of you have ever hiked to Whitaker's Point off of Cave Mountain Road near state Highway 21, but if you ever get the chance, be prepared. I hadn't, and I wasn't. It's relatively easy going down to the Whitaker's Point, but I had forgotten that I had to walk back up hill going out.

On my way back out, I thought I was going to have to try to flag down a helicopter overhead and pull me out of there. I guarantee you no longer than I had been in the forest, that little girl had fewer scratches, cuts, bruises, tired leg muscles, and tick bites than I had. The only smart thing I did was take a bottle of water with me.

I photographed the spot where Haley and her walking stick was last seen deep within the forest. She was found almost three days later hundreds of feet lower and more than two miles away along the Buffalo River. She only had a few small scratches on her arms and legs.

I can't describe to anyone who hasn't been there how far that little girl had traveled alone down a 'Grand Canyon'-like mountain valley. Haley later told her parents she befriended a caterpillar and a butterfly while on her journey, and they were her only friends. Do you not think it possible for God to send an angel in the form of a butterfly to lead a child to safety? I know I do.

I believe that little girl was led down that mountain by an angel in some form or another, and everyone else I've talked to who saw where Haley ended up can offer no better solution. Don't believe me? Take a hike down there sometime and see for yourself. She was discovered so far down below that overlook that it was like she herself was turned into a butterfly and fluttered down to safety.

To give you an idea how alone that little girl was, after the two men found her, it took them more than three hours by mule to get her out to Cave Mountain Road (where volunteers taking more food to the more than 200 searchers) where they loaded Haley into their vehicle to re-join her family for the happiest reunion of their life on earth.

Mr. James told me that he and Mr. Villines discovered a footprint belonging to Haley so deep in the valley

that it was like finding a needle in a haystack.

Luck? I don't think so. Mr. James said they couldn't tell which way Haley had traveled after they found the track. However, he said, "God seemed to close the doors in all directions except one, so we knew she had to go in that direction. All we had to do was follow."

I know there were mistakes made by some of the officials in charge of

the search, but I don't want to point any fingers at anyone because I believe they were doing the best job they could to find that girl.

I think it's important to study this case because I believe we humans are constantly searching the horizons for the impossible dreams while missing the miracles, which are occurring right under our noses. I'm glad I got to see the miracle of life unfold right before my very eyes.

With all of today's latest human technological gadgetry in the world, two men on the back of two lowly mules who were willing to let God lead them through a dark lost world were used to save the life of one lost soul and reunite her with her family. Who said there is no such thing as a miracle and that heroes are hard to find?

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