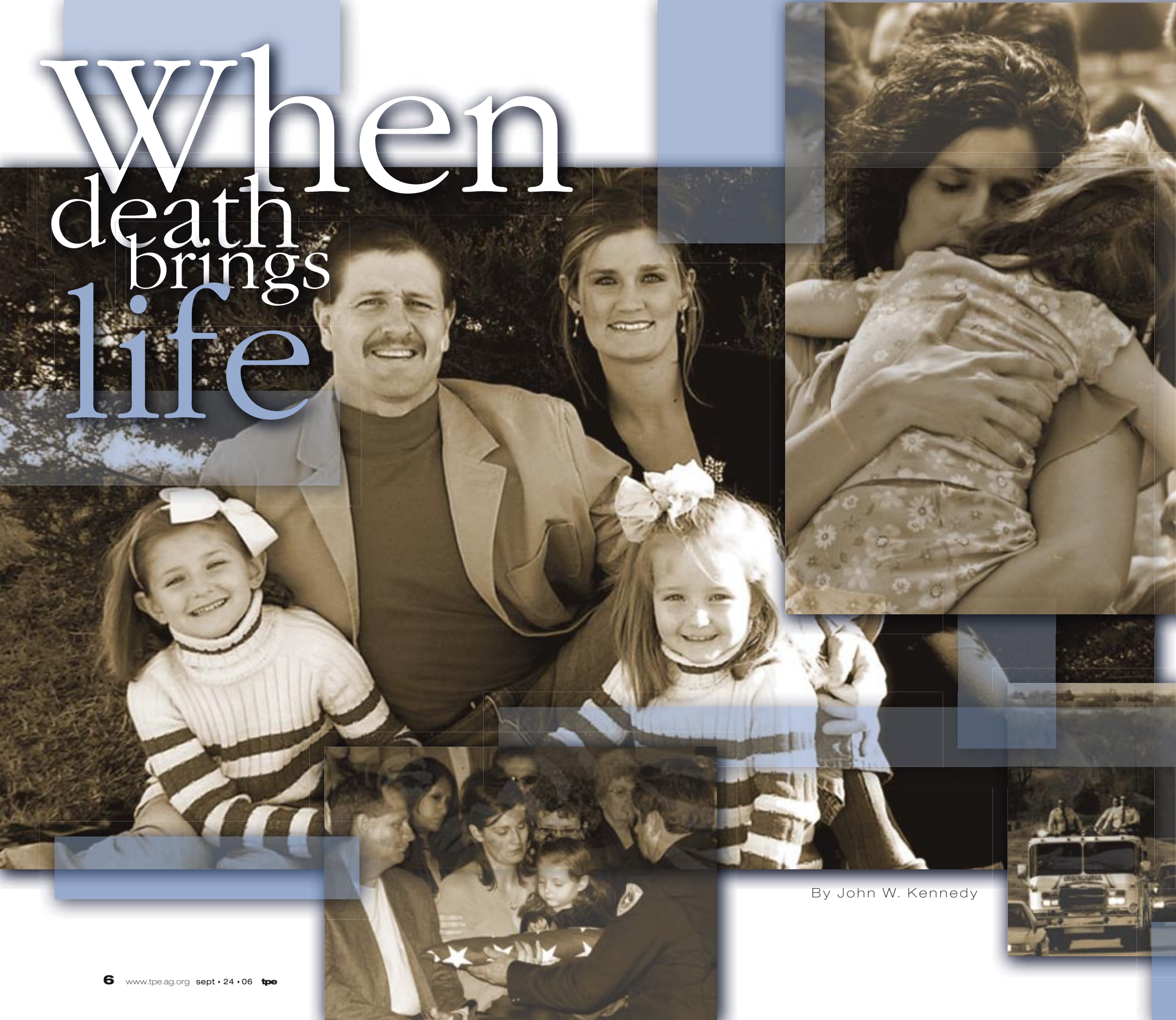


When death brings life



During his boyhood near Rush Springs, Okla., John Destry Horton lived across the pasture from Brandy Pittman. In between his periodic teasing and tormenting his neighbor, the 10-year-old Destry turned serious. He told Brandy, then 6, that someday he would marry her.

But that idealistic childhood vow sustained a bump or two along the road to adult reality. At 21, Destry embarked on a new venture: cooking up methamphetamine and dealing illegal drugs.

One day, after he shot up a lethal mixture of crank and heroin, a dazed Destry realized he had pushed too far. In a plea to God to spare his life, Destry promised to serve Him the rest of his life if he survived.

God spared Destry that day in 1996 and the young man made good on his promise, doing everything with evangelistic gusto. From that point on, Destry — who never endured withdrawal symptoms or went through drug rehabilitation — told everyone he met how God intervened to disrupt his descent into death,

By John W. Kennedy



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and how Jesus Christ powerfully transformed him and gave him newfound life.

Unlike Destry, Brandy grew up attending church three times a week. But in her late teens she rebelled.

Destry got her interested in the Lord again. After declining repeatedly, Brandy finally accepted Destry's invitation to a revival meeting, where she renewed her commitment to the Lord. Destry and Brandy's friendship blossomed into romance, and the couple wed in 1998.

For a couple of years, Destry and Brandy served as part-time youth pastors in Rush Springs. But Destry yearned to be a full-time firefighter. The day before the birth of their first daughter, Kiley, Destry began working for the fire department in Chickasha, a farming and college community of 18,000. He continued his education and advanced to ambulance paramedic.

The Hortons kept growing spiritually and they began attending Grand Assembly of God in Chickasha in 2003. Destry became the praise and worship leader, and the couple served as youth sponsors.

Destry had a vivacious personality and a contagious laugh. People liked to be around him. With Destry nearby, even the grumpiest person found it difficult to stay in a bad mood.

By early this year, Destry had worked his 5-foot-11-inch, 180-pound broad-shouldered frame into its best shape ever. He lifted weights, jogged miles, and did

hundreds of push-ups and sit-ups every day. Seemingly, Destry mastered any physically demanding activity he tried, including snow skiing, water skiing, baseball and basketball.

PERFECT LIFE INTERRUPTED

As 2006 began, Destry anticipated his promotion to engineer (the firefighter who drives the truck), starting March 2.

The Hortons looked as if they had the perfect marriage and the perfect family, which now

Crabb saw Destry, despite his pain, kneeling by a tree with his hands raised in worship to the Lord.

included 6-year-old Kiley and 3-year-old McKenzie. Life couldn't have been better. But the perfect life on earth is never permanent.

On, Wednesday, March 1 — Destry's day off — a series of wildfires swept across drought-stricken southwestern Oklahoma. Destry volunteered to drive a truck for the Acme fire department south of Chickasha.

With that area's fires extinguished, Destry planned to get in a quick game of golf before the

evening service at Grand Assembly. But just as he left the station, Destry received a page that another fire had broken out near Duncan, south of Acme.

"Destry always gave of himself," recalls Grand Assembly of God Pastor Larry Hatfield. "He didn't have to go fight the fire. It was his day off."

Shortly after 4 p.m., Destry phoned Brandy, assuring her that he would be home in time for supper.

Just after 5, the phone in the Horton living room rang. Brandy saw "Duncan Regional Hospital" on the caller identification. Instinctively she knew that Destry had been burned.

A doctor told Brandy he never had seen burns so severe. The physician told her that Destry wouldn't survive the night.

Brandy rode with a relative to Oklahoma City, 45 minutes north of Chickasha, as a medical helicopter transferred Destry to the Integris Baptist Medical Center in the state capital. At the burn unit, Brandy learned the details.

Destry had arrived upon a surreal scene, where high, dry grass quickly served as tinder spreading blazes from field to field. With winds shifting wildly in tornadic fashion, flames swiftly closed in on Destry and fellow firefighter Larry Crabb.

Inside the hot cab of the truck, Destry removed his helmet, gloves and jacket to drive. As he backed up in the thick smoke, a rear tire of the truck sank into a ditch, knocking Crabb off into a barbed-wire fence.

With visibility near zero, Destry jumped out of the truck to help Crabb. But Destry stepped into a swirling inferno that engulfed his face and upper torso. After the intense flames passed, Crabb saw Destry's shirt melted to his chest and his boots dissolved onto his feet.

Crabb, despite second- and third-degree burns on his own hands and face, ran for assistance. As he looked back from a hill to check on his comrade, Crabb saw Destry, despite his pain, kneeling by a tree with his hands raised in worship to the Lord.

On the ambulance ride to Duncan, Destry evangelized paramedics and firefighters with some of his final words. At the hospital

doctors performed a tracheotomy so that Destry wouldn't suffocate due to a closed windpipe.

At the burn center, Brandy didn't recognize her husband because of his enormously swollen, blistered face.

Brandy and Pastor Hatfield mobilized Christians around the country to pray for Destry's survival and recovery. Destry baffled doctors by surviving the night. And another. Then another.

On the fourth day, doctors removed the mummy-like bandages enveloping Destry from head to toe. They planned to scrape off dead skin and tissue. But Destry had little skin or tissue left. His face had fifth-degree burns, leaving virtually nothing but bone. He had sustained fourth-degree

burns everywhere else on his body except his legs.

The wedding vows Brandy had recited eight years earlier came to her mind. This had to be the "for worse" part.

Nevertheless, Brandy assured her husband that he looked handsome and she believed he would be healed. She asked for a sign that he understood. Destry blinked. Brandy implored Destry to wiggle his toes, and he complied. Her spirits soared in the knowledge that her husband hadn't suffered brain damage and in the expectation that Destry would be restored to health.

Six days into the ordeal, surgeons determined Destry needed both arms amputated at the elbow so that gangrene wouldn't spread.

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When death brings life

After the amputations, doctors told Brandy they could do no more. She consulted with burn specialists around the world in a grasp for a medical solution. None had seen any patient with such critical burns survive so long. They, too, had no cure.

Day after day, Brandy stayed beside her lingering mate, praying and reading her Bible. Over and over again Brandy told Destry she loved him and extolled him for being an awesome husband and

rose from that hospital bed, but he didn't," Brandy says.

Initially, Brandy felt anger at God about the length of Destry's suffering. Yet she is grateful that Destry is no longer in pain in his earthly body. Through the ordeal she grew closer to the Lord.

"God promised He won't put us through more than we can bear," she says. "God knows my limitations. Every day I tell God I can't make it without Him. Now God is my Comforter. He is the One I talk to in the middle of the night. He is the One I run to for help."

A TESTIMONY OF FAITH

Destry died at 32 and left a 28-year-old widow. Nearly 3,000 people attended a memorial service on March 30, including Gov. Brad Henry. About 1,000 packed into Grand Assembly while the rest watched video hook-ups at four other local churches. Dozens of firefighters, some from New York City, attended the service.

The crowd listened to an earlier church service recording of Destry singing praise and worship. Brandy spoke boldly at the funeral, leaving no doubt about Destry's final destination. She exhorted those in the audience to get their hearts right with God. Six relatives subsequently made decisions to accept Jesus as their Savior.

People paying their respects lined the 18-mile funeral procession from the church to the Rush Springs burial site.

For weeks afterwards, Brandy

received letters from people who attended the funeral describing how a loved one made a salvation decision. The final weeks and death of Destry Horton impacted hundreds of friends, relatives, firefighters, medical personnel, friends and others.

Still, those who haven't had a spouse die don't fully understand Brandy's loss. The oneness of two people joined together becomes most apparent when one is suddenly removed.

The young daughters Destry left behind also have their difficult days, grieving at length. In June, Kiley wrote a love letter to her daddy and sent it up into the sky with balloons. She figured he could see it from heaven.

Meanwhile, Brandy is working as a teacher's aide in Rush Springs, with aspirations of becoming a schoolteacher. Area residents sponsored fundraisers to help pay for Destry's medical expenses. News of the tragedy led strangers from around the world to send donations to Brandy.

"I miss Destry every day," Brandy says. "But I have the peace of knowing that I will see him again."

For Pastor Hatfield, Destry's miraculous survival for more than three weeks followed by death has been an enigma.

"It's been difficult for many people who were praying to understand why he had to die," Hatfield says. "But we have to trust God. People have been evangelized that wouldn't have been touched in any other way. There will be more people in heaven because of how this happened." **tpe**

JOHN W. KENNEDY is news editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.



Around 1,000 mourners pack Grand Assembly of God for the funeral.

father. She encouraged Destry to thank God for binding up his wounds. She saw what remained of his lips moving. As the days progressed, physicians and nurses continued to be dumbfounded.

Visitors packed the third floor of Baptist Hospital for three weeks, openly praying and talking freely about God.

The end came on March 24 as Destry's weakened heart finally gave out with Brandy standing by his side. He had survived massive injuries for 23 days.

"I would love to tell you he

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