

By John W. Kennedy in Goodyear, Ariz.

**NAOMI KNOLES** embarked on a childhood and youth of deep faith when she made Jesus her Savior at an Assemblies of God church at age 5. As the older child of John and Doris Knoles — missionaries to Native Americans for the past quarter-century — Naomi became passionately involved in her church youth group, went through a *FIRE Institute* discipleship program and graduated valedictorian of her high school class.

But Naomi moved away from home the final year of attending a Christian university in Phoenix. She started hanging out with non-Christians, who convinced her that she had been missing out on excitement all her life. Naomi started smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol.

Nevertheless, Naomi graduated summa cum laude with a degree in international business. Soon she became an assistant vice president working in a branch of a national bank chain, specializing in mortgage sales. As she gained material possessions, Naomi let the faith of her youth dissipate. She no longer sensed God's love. Instead, she frequented singles bars.

In 2002, Naomi became pregnant and began cohabiting with the baby's father. After a few months, however, he became abusive, and Naomi obtained an order of protection. The companion moved out, never to be involved in her life again.

During her pregnancy, Naomi never considered abortion. She selected a family for adoption, believing her child would have a better upbringing with both a mother and a father. But as the baby grew inside her womb, she could not bring herself to relinquish the child.

After the initial shock and disappointment, John and Doris Knoles continued to love Naomi rather than try to make her feel guilty about quitting church and becoming pregnant out of wedlock.

"Naomi knew she was wrong," says John, who became a Christian 38 years ago at age 21 through Teen Challenge, where he was instantly delivered of his drug habit. "We didn't need to condemn her."

Anna Marie came into the world in December 2002. Two months later, Naomi returned to work. But slowly her world be-

gan to crumble. The following months, her troubled thoughts went beyond the baby blues that afflict millions of women after giving birth.

By June 2003, Naomi suffered from severe postpartum depression, which eventually devolved into psychosis. Even though her bosses valued her work, she grew paranoid about being fired. She thought co-workers whispered about her behind her back. Naomi also became plagued by the notion that she didn't measure up as a mother, even though she gave Anna Marie lots of attention and care in an immaculate home. However, she kept these thoughts to herself.

Even though her parents saw her several times a week, they attributed Naomi's doleful and weary behavior to financial struggles, work-related stress and lack of sleep. They believed the best because Naomi always talked of her love and dedication for Anna Marie.

Naomi and Anna Marie came home to an empty house in the evenings. In August 2003, Naomi began unplugging the phone and withdrawing into an irrational, internalized world. Many times she felt drawn into the TV commercials she watched. She believed they implied that she never could make a good life for Anna Marie.

#### DESPAIR REIGNS

Everything changed just after midnight on Sept. 3, 2003.

"I became so hopeless I didn't want to live anymore," Naomi remembers.

She wrote a suicide note and took a combination of nearly 100 sleeping pills and pain relief tablets. She assumed she would be dead by morning. She thought if she didn't show up for work that someone would come looking for her and Anna.

But a groggy Naomi woke up around 8 in the morning more delusional than ever. She believed the devil told her Anna Marie would be better off dead. Naomi couldn't get the thought out of her mind: *I must prevent Anna from experiencing all the misery I've been going through.*

"I went to her crib and put a pillow over her face until she stopped breathing," Naomi recalls, crying. "When I picked her

# BACK FROM THE BRINK

A wayward daughter embraces God's grace in her darkest hour

Anna Marie



# BACK FROM THE BRINK

up, her body was limp.”

Suddenly aware of the reality of the situation, Naomi called 911, explaining that her baby had stopped breathing. A dispatcher guided her through cardiopulmonary resuscitation techniques until paramedics arrived.

At Phoenix Children’s Hospital, Naomi drifted in and out of lucidity, admitting responsibility for her actions yet not recollecting the details. Police detectives read Naomi her rights.

When Naomi called her par-

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ents en route to the hospital in an ambulance, John and Doris presumed Anna Marie had a medical emergency. When they finally saw their daughter — handcuffed to a hospital bed — they realized something extraordinarily tragic had occurred.

The hurting grandparents immediately received help from Phoenix First Assembly of God, their home church for 20 years. Marriage Pastor Leo Godzich spent the entire day with them. Senior Pastor Tommy Barnett came to the family home after the Wednesday evening

service. He canceled a flight to Los Angeles in order to pray with the Knoleses and to give encouragement. John believes he and his wife were able to cope because Barnett had repeatedly taught about rising above circumstances.

During Naomi’s three-day hospitalization to flush her system of her drug overdose, a grand jury indicted her for child abuse and first-degree murder. The latter charge could have resulted in the death penalty. After being arrested on the third day, she spent six hours in a suicide prevention chair. Later that night, handcuffed to the bed by her ankles and wrists, she realized she had lost Anna, her job and everything.

“This was my Damascus experience, lying in bed crying out to the Lord and asking forgiveness,” Naomi explains, beginning to sob. “I saw a figure of a Man holding a little girl’s hand. I knew it was Jesus and Anna. That was His way of letting me know she was OK in heaven. I knew from that point on I could make it, even though I didn’t deserve it.”

Naomi spent the next six weeks in the jail’s psychiatric ward. In a plea-bargaining agreement almost a year later, prosecutors dropped the original charges in exchange for a second-degree murder conviction, which carries a mandatory 10- to 22-year prison term. More than two dozen people from First AG attended her sentencing, with several ministers testifying on her behalf. Naomi received the 10-year minimum sentence, and now has a little more than four years remaining to serve.

“I don’t begrudge my time at all,” Naomi says. “It’s the grace of God that I received the sentence I did.”

#### WEEKLY VISITATION

Naomi’s parents, who have been married 35 years, drive 40 minutes from their Phoenix home every Saturday to visit Naomi at

the Arizona State Prison Complex in Goodyear, a western suburb of Phoenix.

On a recent Saturday, Naomi warmly hugs her parents and greets them with a broad smile in the large visiting room. The tall, slender woman with auburn hair in a ponytail wears the standard prison-issue orange T-shirt and pants.

Naomi rededicated her life to Christ while still handcuffed under suicide watch. She is no longer the confused woman who committed a crime six years ago. While she’ll always feel the enormity of smothering her child, Naomi’s life has been redeemed. While in the county jail awaiting sentencing, she led three inmates to commit their lives to Jesus. Several of those incarcerated in Goodyear come to her regularly for Scripture-based advice. Now 31, Naomi spends time each day reading the Bible.

In 2006, Naomi — making 50 cents an hour — donated \$104 to become a Key Bearer, the Light for the Lost program that provides *Today’s Pentecostal Evangel* to inmates.

Her priority after being released will be to minister to women in severe postpartum depression or psychosis.

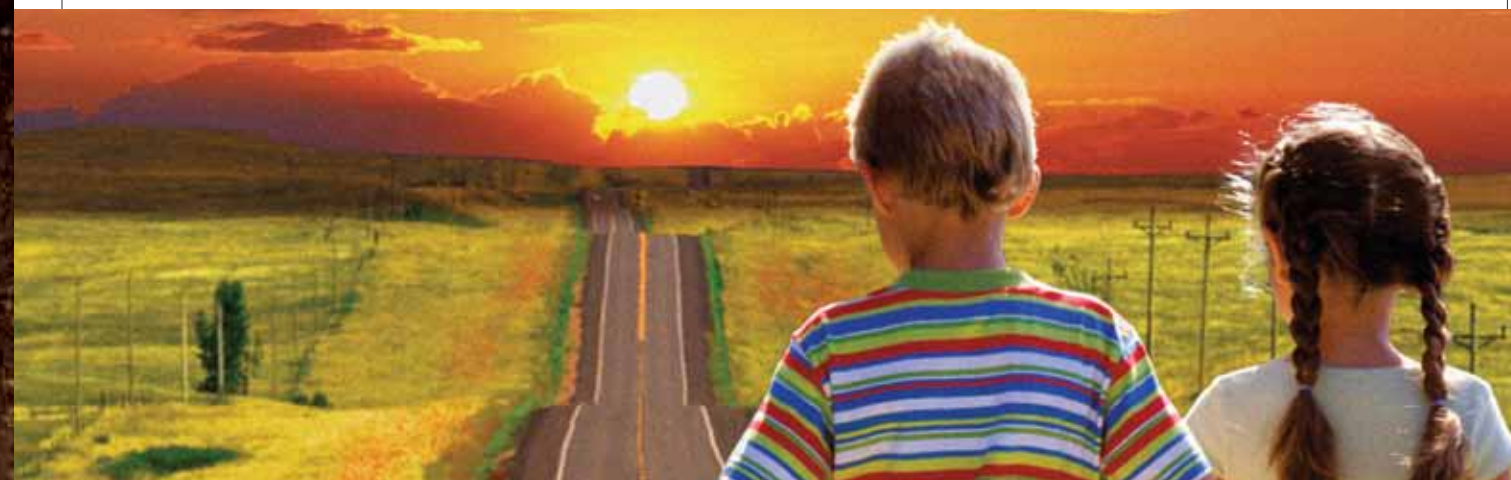
“Anna’s brief life and tragic death can help save the lives of mothers and children in the future,” says Naomi, who is on medication to regulate what is believed to be a chemical imbalance. “This can happen to any new mother.”

In the book *Infanticide: Psycho-social and Legal Perspectives on Mothers Who Kill*, Dr. Katherine L. Wisner and Dr. James L. Perel note that women are most vulnerable to depression and psychotic illness in the post-birth period, with first-time mothers 35 times more likely to develop psychosis. Symptoms include delusional thoughts, diminished interest in activities, insomnia, inappropriate guilt and feelings of worthlessness.

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# BACK FROM THE BRINK



The Knoles family: John, Naomi and Doris.

These aren't women who habitually abuse their children, but rather mothers who snap.

Naomi has joined an international postpartum support network. The network emphasizes

that severe postpartum depression can be avoided with proper education.

"I want to let women, especially single mothers, know they are not alone," says Naomi, who knows logically she should have died from her drug overdose. "It is a lie from the enemy who wants to isolate us."

Anna Marie actually had been revived from the smothering, but had no brain function left. The day after the incident, John and Doris made the decision to take their granddaughter off life support.

"When a baby dies in your arms you will never be the same," John says. "The Holy Spirit comforted us in that dark moment in a way that we never imagined possible."

On the road to recovery, Naomi realizes her social friends abandoned her, but her Christian friends remained faithful. One of

those, Holly Bodine, has visited her monthly the past four years. Holly never forgot Naomi invited her to join the church youth group in seventh grade.

"Naomi changed my life in amazing ways," says Holly, tears filling her eyes. "This is my time to be with her."

As they minister, the Knoleses say God has given them the grace to triumph in tragedy, relying on 2 Corinthians 1:4: "He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us" (New Living Translation). **tpe**

JOHN W. KENNEDY is news editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel* and blogs at Midlife Musings (jkennedy.agblogger.org).

E-mail your comments to [tpe@ag.org](mailto:tpe@ag.org).

## ABCs OF SALVATION

To know God and be ready for heaven, follow these steps:

### A. Admit you are a sinner.

"There is no one righteous, not even one ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 3:10,23 (See Romans 5:8; 6:23.)

### Ask God's forgiveness and repent of your sins.

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Romans 10:13 (See Acts 3:19.)

### B. Believe in Jesus (put your trust in Him) as your only hope of salvation.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16 (See John 14:6.)

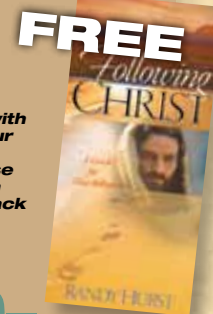
### Become a child of God by receiving Christ.

"To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." John 1:12 (See Revelation 3:20.)

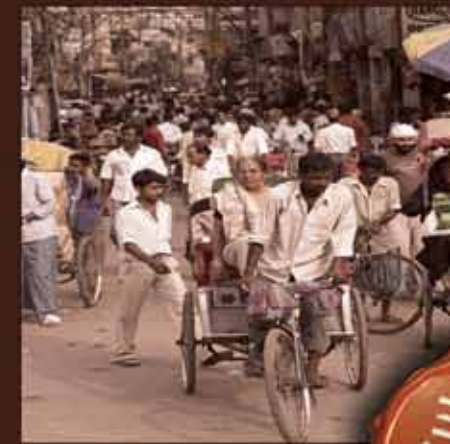
### C. Confess that Jesus is your Lord.

"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9 (See verse 10.)

For further help, contact the Assemblies of God church near you.



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