



# first person

with **Bethany Hamilton**

*by Kaite Harrington  
photo by Mike Coots*

**First Person** is a monthly Q&A that features compelling people who excel in their chosen endeavors. Ideas for future Q&As? Email [edit@thriveswla.com](mailto:edit@thriveswla.com).

**F**or Bethany Hamilton, being born into a family of surfers in Hawaii meant she'd be riding the waves from a young age. By eight years old she'd entered her first surf competition the Rell Sun Menehune event in Oahu. She walked away victorious in both the short and long board divisions, sparking a love for surf competition.

On October 31, 2003, at only 13, Bethany's life changed forever after being attacked by a 14-foot tiger shark, leaving her left arm severed and the loss of 60 percent of her blood. After fighting through

an infection and several surgeries, her positive spirit and quiet faith helped her through the traumatic event.

Just one month after the attack, Bethany found herself back on her board and in pursuit of her dream of becoming a professional surfer. In 2007 her dream came true when she turned pro. Bethany shared her story in an autobiography titled **Soul Surfer** which would later become a major motion picture.

Bethany now travels the world sharing her inspirational story. She recently spoke with **Thrive** about her journey.

### What drew you to the water in the first place? Why surfing?

I was born into a family of surfers, so the beach, ocean and surfing was a big part of my life from the beginning. My parents took my brothers and I to the beach nearly every day and since they loved surfing, they had us in the water basically since birth. I love how it's always changing and every time I surf it's different than the time before. No one wave is like another. It's both challenging, refreshing and a lot of fun! Now, for me it's like art - seeing what I can create on each wave!

I fell in love with surfing at around age seven and started surfing with a girlfriend, Alana Blanchard, plus a lot of other local surfer girls. We had a posse! We pushed each other and started competing in the local kids' events. I was homeschooled so I could spend more time catching waves. At the age of eight I entered my first outer island surf competition and I was hooked from there.

### You were barely a teenager when you lost your arm during a shark attack. The teenage years are challenging for everyone, how did you adjust to the extra challenges you faced?

There are definitely a lot of new challenges you face as a teen, from the physical changes to the new emotions, thoughts and peer pressures. I was 13 when I lost my arm and it definitely added a unique element to that phase of my life. The grounding foundation I had established in my relationship with God definitely helped comfort and guide me; no matter what happened I had hope in the life I had in Jesus Christ. Reading scripture like Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord, "Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, to give you a future and a hope," assured me that God was with me and that he still had purpose for my life. Knowing God loved me, loving Him back, and having the support of my family and friends gave me the confidence I needed to "survive" the teenage years!

Choice of friends is also so important. I'm so glad I had friends who love God, love to be healthy, active, and encourage me in the tough areas. After a few weeks they seemed to not even notice that I had lost an arm. Thankfully, it was never an issue. I was just Bethany and they treated me the same as they always had.

I do admit I went through a time of being really selfish, especially with my family. Feeling entitled to be treated a certain way and given my way. I didn't even realize I was acting like that. One day my family sat me down and confronted the issue. They pointed out that I was being really selfish, and while it hurt to hear that, it opened my eyes to the truth. I was thankful they brought it to my attention because it caused me to turn to God, seek forgiveness, and ask Him to help me change. And He did! Not like I'm never selfish now, but it is not overpowering my life any longer. I'm so thankful.

### What sustained you after the attack as you worked to get back on your board?

God. Simple as that. And the support of my family and friends. God's love and gentle guidance got me through a lot of the emotional stuff. I know my mom was praying for me daily and my youth leader / friend Sarah Hill was there to pray for/with me and give me good biblical counsel. In the area of surfing, my parents were both supportive of me wanting to try surfing again. They were willing to sacrifice a lot so I could possibly pursue snowboarding or whatever I wanted to do; but since they love the ocean and understood how it can help bring healing, they were thankful that I wanted to continue life near the beach. Of course they had their fears and worries, but they were so sensitive and encouraging, and it allowed me to be confident in getting back out there. My brothers and dad helped me choose the best boards to ride, and modified my surfboards so that I was able to eventually progress to a performance shortboard.

### What message do you hope to spread?

We all face various obstacles and unexpected challenges in life, including the big factor of peer and society pressures. I hope to encourage youth, and all people, to choose what's right and not give in or get lost in the junk of this world. I talk about thankfulness, choosing to find the good in each situation, and being uniquely you; or as I like to say, "be your beautiful self."

I hope people can see from my life, and other's closer to them, how incredible God is and how much He loves us and the salvation we can have through Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection.

### What do you see yourself doing 10 years from now?

Now that I'm married, Adam and I hope to have started a family by then and be teaching the keiki (child) to surf! I plan to still be surfing and between now and then—pushing myself to be better at the sport. Nutrition and fitness have become such a passion, I may like to be working with people to live healthy lifestyles. And I think I'll probably be doing some speaking appearances then too. We'll see! I'm really open to whatever God wants me to do. Right now, I'm taking things day by day.