

In 1966, at the age of 10, I attended Bible School in Guntersville, Alabama. The Vietnam War was raging and our church decided that the 150 children who were enrolled would paint checkerboards, write letters, and send pictures of themselves to the servicemen.

I was a very hyper child but back then no one had ever heard of Attention Deficit Disorder - with which I was later diagnosed. So it was excruciating for me to paint a checkerboard, block-by-block. And on the last day of Bible School, I was told that I would not be dismissed until I had completed it. Finally out of frustration, I simply painted the last three rows all black. My teacher was furious and said that mine was the worst checkerboard of the 150 children. She added that she was going to send it anyway, just to show a serviceman how he was risking his life for an ungrateful, selfish child.

Six weeks later a package arrived for me from Vietnam. It was from Yeoman Philip J. Palmer, who was a Swift Boat sailor. Inside the package were a thank you note, a picture of a Swift Boat, and a beautiful Vietnamese doll. He told me how much he enjoyed my checkerboard, and said that every day he and his buddy played checkers on it during their lunch break. He thanked me by sending the doll. As the weeks went on, it became apparent that I was the only who had received a reply - let alone such a gift.

I named my doll Saigon Suzy, and as I grew more fond of her, I made a decision and a promise to God to work with children when I grew up, and to be as kind to them as this man had been to me. I wrote a letter back to Phillip thanking him for the beautiful doll; but the letter was returned by the military as undeliverable. My mother told me he had probably been killed. But in my mind, I refused to accept this. I asked

the Lord, and this became a prayer that I prayed hundreds of times in the coming years, to let me meet this special person. I knew in my heart that one day this would happen.

My father wrote several letters to the Department of Navy on my behalf but had no success. After a while he told me I needed to just let it go.

As the years passed, I remained true to my promise to the Lord of the decision that I made as a child. I trained to be a musician and a teacher. For over 30 years I worked with children - most particularly in the field of music. I taught many classes, gave many piano lessons, directed many performance. I taught music in the public schools; I've worked in over a dozen churches, almost always with children in some capacity, and I loved them dearly. Throughout all of those years, I shared with those children - in every church, in every school, in every class - the story of the kindness of a soldier who took time out in the midst of war to acknowledge an impressionable little girl all those years ago; and it never failed to move and inspire the children.

Eleven years ago I met Mike whom I later married. He was an Army Colonel, and one day I shared with him the story of Phillip Palmer. He was amazed when I showed him the doll and that the package that it came in was still in perfect condition. I remember him getting so excited that the man's serial number was on the return address. I never knew what that number was and had never included it in any of my searches. So Mike began his own search for Phillip. However, the privacy laws had been enacted, and because of that the Navy was still unable to give me any information. I was discouraged when I realized that I had had the information needed right before my eyes back in

1966. Like my father, Mike told me that it would be best to let it go. But I would not. I had faith that God was going to let me meet this special person. I didn't know it at that moment, but in His perfect plan, God knew that it was not yet the right time.

In January of the year 2010, in Wetumpka, Alabama, as I was putting dishes in the dishwasher I heard God's voice. I can't describe the feeling but I knew He was telling me to find Phillip Palmer. And for some reason I knew, I JUST KNEW that I needed to get it done as quickly as possible. I don't have the time right now to tell you all that went into this frantic search for him but one interesting thing that happened was that the producer of the Oprah Winfrey Show contacted me about my efforts in locating him.

Mike and I were searching the internet daily, and I had Vietnam veterans whom I had never met, looking for him as well. During all of this time I had a sense of excitement because I felt like my prayers were, at long last, going to be answered.

A good friend of mine, Edwin Campbell, joined in the search. He got Philip's name and serial number, and began calling every Philip Palmer in the United States. He called and talked to 237 people. On April 13, 2010 Edwin called and said, "You need to sit down. I found him."

He gave me the phone number and with trembling hands I called Grafton, North Dakota. After 44 years of searching, I finally got to speak with Philip Palmer. He just couldn't believe that a simple doll had made such an impression on a little girl all those years ago. I could tell by his voice that he was excited, but he also sounded very weak.

I then spoke with his wife, Janet, and she shared some devastating news. She said that Philip had cancer and was not doing well. She said he didn't want any more treatments and was refusing a surgery that would save his life. Mike and I immediately began making plans to travel to North Dakota to meet this wonderful man. Janet told Philip that we were coming, and she was so relieved that Philip agreed to have the surgery so that he could meet me. The whole family could not believe the timing - that this event had occurred so unexpectedly, at just the right time of their critical moment. His daughter said that it was as if the heavens had opened up and an angel had dropped down before them. Me... An angel!

A few days later, Mike and I arrived in North Dakota. We went to the hospital, doll and all, where Philip was recovering from his surgery. And after 44 years of praying, searching, and waiting, I was privileged and ecstatic to finally meet and hug one of the most influential people of my life.

As we visited for those few days with Philip's family, I was touched and impressed - although I can't say surprised - when I came to learn more about Philip and his life, and to understand how this type of giving and unselfish kindness were so commonplace and characteristic of this gentle soul throughout his entire life. Story after story of similar loving acts of kindness by Phillip was related to me by those who knew him best.

Janet called me a few weeks after we returned to Alabama. Philip had kept his things from Vietnam stored in a chest out in the garage. He never wanted to open it nor share stories of what had happened during the war. The family was asked to respect his privacy so the trunk

remained a mystery to his wife and children as to what it contained. After Mike and I left, Janet and Philip opened the trunk, and although I don't know what they talked about, I think he was able to come to some sense of closure concerning the war. Among the things that they found buried in the chest were the checkerboard that I made, my picture as a 10 year old, and my letter that I sent to him in 1966.

Since 2010, Janice, Philip and I have talked on the phone often. I am sad to say that recently, Philip finally lost his battle with cancer. He passed to the Lord's loving care on Friday, August 16, 2013 - and this world lost a wonderful human being. I consider it a rare privilege to have known and loved Philip Palmer, and an honor to call him my friend. But in the hearts and minds of hundreds of children who have literally grown up with his memory over the past 30 years, he will live on. I thank the Lord for giving me the faith to believe that one day He would allow me to meet this special human being. And the wonder of God's perfect work continues.