

White Butterfly

Plano Senior High School English teacher Vanda Terrell writes memoir about missing daughter.

Elbows propped on a student's desk, hands clasped, Vanda Terrell gazes across her classroom as tears well up in her hazel eyes. Recalling the time her 15-year-old daughter was lured away by a 45-year-old man never gets easier.

Vanda and her husband Mike were serving as missionaries in Bacalar, Mexico, just north of Belize, when Brittany disappeared on January 6, 2001. Their mission was to open a school and clinic for abandoned children. Mike was going to oversee the construction of the clinic; Vanda was going to be the principal of the school; and Brittany would serve as secretary of the clinic.

Brittany, 5'8", with thick chestnut hair that fell down to the middle of her back, had a "smile that would light up a room," says Vanda. In stark contrast, Aldo possessed dark hair, shadowy, almond-shaped eyes, and a silver tongue that would convince Brittany he could make her a famous model. What was supposed to be a day trip, 30 miles outside of their *pueblito*, turned into weeks, and then months . . .

"Day after day after day I would wait for the phone to ring. I just finally got to a place where I believed in my spirit I couldn't do it," says Vanda. "I wasn't eating; I wasn't sleeping; and there were so many days I was by myself."

Someone had to stay in Bacalar in case Brittany returned. Sometimes Mike would be gone for days searching for her. "We were so far from town; I had no friends, no television; I had no one to talk to really, and I thought I just can't do this one more moment."

In her desperation, Vanda climbed the roof of her home. Peeking over the edge, she was thinking of doing the unthinkable. "I went up to the roof and I called out, 'God if you are there, if you have something for me, give me a sign.'" See *Excerpt*.

The sign would become the title of her book, *White Butterfly*, as the graceful mascot of metamorphosis began flying around her. "It was miraculous. Within moments, there were over a dozen of them fluttering around, and I just fell to my knees. I was shaking all over, broken, on this concrete roof, just bawling."

To Vanda, the white butterflies represented hope. She knew then that God was near, and today, she credits Him for her book's title. "God gave me the title," she says matter-of-factly. "The whole thing has been a God experience; I wouldn't be here today if God didn't show me his love."

Retrieving a family photo, Vanda points to her son Chris and credits him as well for his strength and support. "He put his life on hold to come down there. He ended up staying almost three months, so he almost lost his job and his apartment."

Vanda's eyes are now swimming in tears, and she continues, "We didn't have any money; our financial support was dwindling because family and friends supporting us to live down there began supporting the effort to find Brittany."

Another "strong tower" that Vanda turned to was her mother. In *White Butterfly*, the author describes a Southern belle whose "accent dripped like peaches in heavy syrup." "My mother was and is my steel magnolia," says Vanda, and adds,

"She was a teacher and I just knew that's what I was supposed to do."

Vanda is an AP English teacher at Plano Senior High School (PSHS). She comes from a long line of educators, including a grandfather who was a professor at the

University of Georgia and a grandmother who taught elementary school for 50 years.

Growing up as a child in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Vanda enjoyed playing school, even when there were no students to play with. "I used to teach all the neighborhood kids, and then

when they would get bored, I would put my stuffed animals in the desks and teach them. Teaching is in my blood."

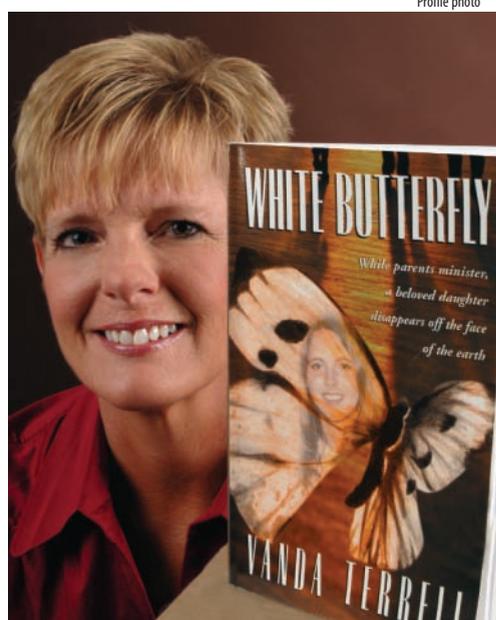
This will be Vanda's 15th year teaching at her alma mater. She was part of the 1976 PSHS graduating class, the first class to graduate from the school.

"I moved to Plano when I was a junior in high school. I was like, 'Mother where in the world are you bringing us?'"

"Plano, Texas. That's right, it's plain," she says, imitating her mother.

"We lived in Country Place, and there wasn't anything here, not one restaurant, or gas station. Haggard Farm was huge."

Vanda's dad was working for Singer Sewing Machines in the '70s when his job relocated the family to the Dallas area.



Author Vanda Terrell has taught for 15 years in Plano.

Today though, her parents reside in North Carolina.

Vanda and Mike live in McKinney. They met on a blind date while attending PSHS and will have been married 32 years this December. "It's been a roller coaster ride," says Vanda, "but you learn to live the life you have. No one's life is perfect. Mike and I have to move forward."

The author is doing just that. Her tears have expired now, and it's as if she has transformed from student to teacher as she talks about a ministry she began to encourage parents going through stressful situations at home. In fact, Vanda will be speaking at First Baptist Church in Garland on October 9 and will have copies of *White Butterfly*.

"I think that the lesson from this book that the Lord has really put on my heart is one of forgiveness," she concludes. "Everybody who hears my story asks, 'How could you forgive Aldo?' You just make a conscious choice. Bad things happen to everyone. I think it's up to us as individuals to figure out how we're going to deal with each situation. What doesn't make us bitter, makes us better."

Do Mike and Vanda ever find Brittany? *White Butterfly* is available at www.hannibalbooks.com and at www.Amazon.com.

Excerpt from White Butterfly pgs. 126 - 127

With my eyes filled with tears, I looked over the edge and readied myself to jump. I was too broken to help anyone at this point, least of all, myself. This was the only option left for me. My mind was so warped from no sleep or nourishment that I believed I was actually thinking rationally.

With one last breath, I prayed. "God, if you are here, and if you love me, send me a sign. If you have something more for me, send me a sign." I stood waiting and looking over the edge of the high, white wall. ...

In an instant, a white butterfly appeared ... then two ... then three ... and four.

... Trembling and in a state of bewilderment, I lifted my hand toward one of the beautiful white butterflies swirling around me. The white symbol of hope fluttered close to my palm and flew just out of my grasp. My heart fluttered in synchronicity with its wings. These exquisite insects did not fly too far from my reach until they sensed I was certain they were from God.

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