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# VISITOR

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Hallelujah!



21 Ways God Worked in the Columbia Union This Year

## Conversion Story

KARA WATKINS

FROM

PUNK

TO

PASTOR

### A FELON FINDS FORGIVENESS AND FAVOR FROM GOD

his parents, Roger and Gayle Voigt, members of Chesapeake Conference's Baltimore-White Marsh church.

#### HEADED FOR TROUBLE

As a smart and generally well-behaved kid, Voigt had liked church and Pathfinders. When he arrived in junior high school, innocent experimentation progressed to drug dealing, alcoholism, and gang violence. Through it all, he maintained a facade of integrity, but, as he dove deeper into his double life, an uneasy tension developed between Voigt and his parents.

Though unaware of the dangerous extent of their son's activities, the Voigts sensed they had lost him. Research into solutions led them to MMS, known for its success with troubled children and teens. In October of Voigt's junior year, they were still weighing options when Gayle dreamt her son would kill her unless she sent him to MMS. The next day, they drove Voigt to West Virginia. It was the right decision; he *had* planned to kill his mother *that afternoon!* "She was my conscience," he explains.

During the first month at MMS, Voigt was on his best behavior; he wanted to go home for Christmas. However, when the holidays arrived, the staff decided Voigt was not ready to leave. Anger and bitterness fueled his flight from campus and into that life-altering Philadelphia night.

A week later and back from Philadelphia, Voigt and his two classmates faced felony criminal charges and decades in prison. Instead of turning them over to the authorities, MMS staff negotiated a deal with law enforcement that allowed the teens to return to school uncharged. In exchange, they had to obey all rules and perform manual labor to pay back stolen money. They were also placed in solitary confinement for several months, with only a thin mattress and a Bible to comfort them.

Voigt read the Bible from cover to cover, and within its pages rediscovered the Adventist doctrines *and* a relationship with Jesus Christ.

#### GOD'S PLAN

Voigt is convinced that hitting rock bottom was part of God's plan. The experience allowed him to face his demons, leave his past behind, and look to a hopeful, God-led future. Just as the apostle Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, Voigt claimed God's forgiveness and became a "new creature" in Christ.

"Josh had chosen a destructive way of relating to the damaging experiences in his life," explains Gayle Clark, who founded MMS with her husband, Bill. "He had the potential to make positive choices, but it took some time to bring that out. When he got it, he ran with it."

Voigt finished 18 months at MMS, grew stronger in Christ, and developed the tools he needed to work through his problems and build healthy relationships with his family. Others noticed the change too. "Josh became a leader on campus and began exerting a positive influence on his peers," remembers Aaron Weber, a new staff member at the time and now the school's director.

After a summer of working as a literature evangelist, Voigt enrolled as a theology major at Southern Adventist University (Tenn.). There he met and married his wife, Celeste. With a degree in hand, he was soon hired by the Chesapeake Conference and sent to seminary at Andrews University (Mich.). Today he helps pastor two congregations—the Reisterstown (Md.) church and the South Carroll company in Sykesville (Md.)—and mentors students at the Crest Lane School in Westminster, Md.

With God now in control of his life, Voigt looks ever forward. "I want to be an example, to help prevent kids from doing what I did. Although I've been there," notes the 26-year-old, "I can't identify with that life anymore. I'm not even the same person! I am *truly* a new creature in Christ."

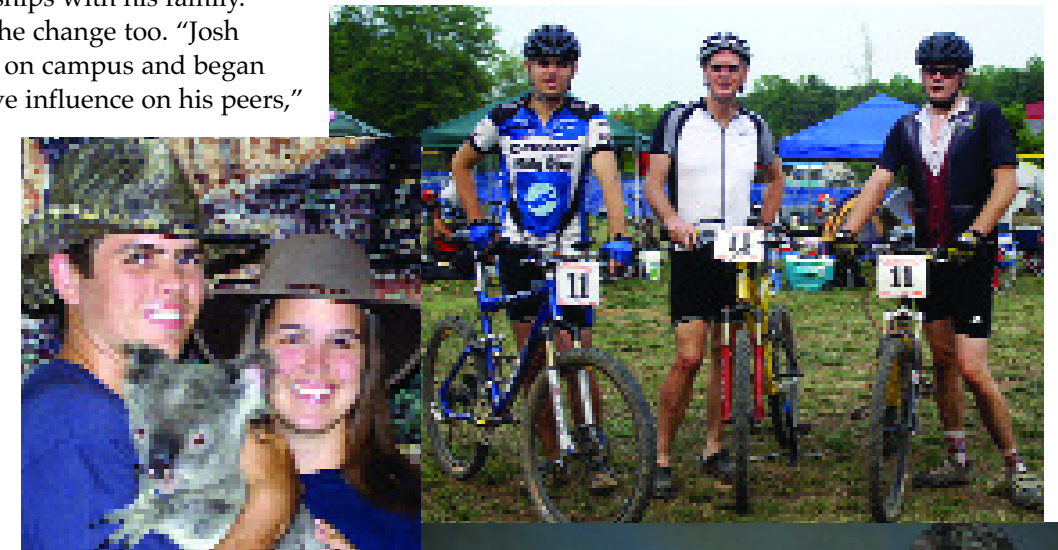
Kara Watkins writes from Columbia, Md.

"DAD? IT'S ME, JOSH. I NEED YOUR HELP."

**H**ours before making this call, a scared and shivering 16-year-old Josh Voigt huddled in a drafty corner of a dilapidated crack house in one of Philadelphia's most unsavory neighborhoods. A week earlier Voigt and two classmates had fled from Miracle Meadows School (MMS), an alternative Seventh-day Adventist institution in Salem, W.Va., in a stolen car, embarking on a crime spree that would stretch across the Eastern seaboard. Now, on a snowy Christmas Eve, the teens found themselves fugitives hunted by police and the FBI.

As police helicopters hovered overhead, their searchlights streamed through hole-ridden walls, revealing discarded syringes, rotting trash, and buckets of human waste. *What am I doing here?* Voigt wondered, remembering another Christmas Eve not so long ago. As a boy nestled in his mother's lap, he had listened intently as she read the story of Jesus' birth in *My Bible Friends*.

Spurred by the childhood memory, Voigt offered a simple prayer: "Lord, I've messed up; I'm ready to follow where You lead." Filled with a sense of peace, he found a pay phone and called



Josh Voigt and his wife, Celeste—a farm girl from upstate New York—cuddle a koala during a trip to Australia.

With a shared love of cycling, Roger Voigt celebrates finishing a 12-hour road race with his sons, Josh (left), and Sam.

Meet the Voigts: (back row) brother-in-law Brent Hamstra; Voigt and wife, Celeste; younger brothers Sam and Alex; (front row) sister Emily Hamstra; mother, Gayle; and father, Roger.