

# 'I'll Stand and Preach Gospel'

WASHINGTON D.C.

**F**riends and missionary companions kept pleading with Elder Randall Ellsworth for about six hours to "hang on just one more minute."

The minutes dragged into hours that he thought would never end but Elder Ellsworth did hang on until he was freed from the 60-foot concrete steel-reinforced beam that pinned him to the floor of the cultural hall stage in the Patzicia meetinghouse. He was experiencing the nightmare of the Guatemala earthquake on Feb. 4. (Church News, Feb. 14)

And he's still hanging on, this time to his faith, as he pursues recovery in George Washington University Hospital in Washington D.C. near his hometown of Rockville, Md.

"I've never wondered why it was me who got hurt," he said.

"I look at it like a test. The Lord doesn't want me to suffer but I will learn from this experience."

The experience, kept vivid in his mind through bad dreams during the early part of his hospitalization, was recalled by the young missionary in soft tones that matched the night's stillness of the hospital corridors.

"I had been participating in a language training program to learn the Cakchiquel dialect," he began. "It had been a long day, and though it wasn't physically exhausting, I was tired."

He slept soundly on the mattress he had placed on the cultural hall stage to be near his companion, Elder Dennis Atkin, who was ill.

The earthquake, for a few short moments, amounted to nothing more than a dream for the sleeping Elder Ellsworth. "When I woke up, the whole place was roaring," he said. "I wasn't scared. I had been in an earthquake before and nothing bad happened."

Lying on his stomach, he started to prop himself upon his elbows. That's when he realized something bad was happening in this earthquake.

"Pain shot through my body so bad it sort of knocked the wind out of me," he said. "There were pounding noises . . . echoes . . . vibrations. The pain just kept shooting all through my body."

The force of the earthquake vibrated and shook the stage so much that, before the beam from the ceiling fell in, the two missionaries were shifted about three feet off their pillows toward the foot of their mattresses.

The giant beam, weighing several tons, crashed down and pinned Elder Ellsworth's legs. It missed Elder Atkin by inches. Another part of the beam fell on their pillows, a blow that surely would have killed them.

Elder Atkin, uninjured, checked to see if his companion was all right.

"Get me out," Elder Ellsworth pleaded.

"He told me to wait a few minutes, that he was going for help," Elder Ellsworth said. "I couldn't understand that he wasn't able to get me out by himself."

Left alone, he looked where the back wall had been. "I could see the stars shining through the hole," he said. "I was half screaming. Then I thought, 'Am I going to die?'"

"I remembered my patriarchal blessing. I had been promised that I'd live a

long life and would support my family. The thought of dying completely went out of my mind."

But panic and terror remained. Confusion had swept through the country with the earthquake and help seemed a long time coming.

He saw a flashlight moving in his direction. Then he heard someone say, "Oh, no!"

"Elder (Fred) Bernhardt ran in and hugged me and cried," Elder Ellsworth said. "He started talking to me. He told me about his girlfriend back home and just rambled on about a lot of things. For a while, it worked. I felt comforted. Then he had to go. I felt desperate. The pain . . . the shaking of the building. The beam bore down on me more. I thought I would crack into pieces."

Other missionaries, who had been sleeping in a nearby building during the language training program, ventured into the building.

Elders Taz Evans and Julio Salazar began cutting at the stage with a hammer and chisel. Elder Ellsworth watched them dig splinters from the floor and thought it was an impossible task.

"I had been given a blessing by the elders," he said. "Then someone said, 'Let's bless the walls so we can work without fear they will fall in on us.'"

"When the walls shook after that, they just kept on working. They didn't even flinch."

Elder Bleak Powell, an agricultural missionary, arrived with a chain saw, but there was no gas. There was nothing with which to siphon gas so Elder Steven Schmollinger sucked the gas from the truck with his mouth. The saw was defective and it was difficult to keep it running but slow progress was made.

Elder Ellsworth described another of his comforters. "An old Indian, with tattered clothes and no shoes, came to me. He grasped me by the head and cried.

"Then he got up, grabbed an ax and started cutting at the floor as hard as he could. He chopped until he became exhausted and had to quit.

"It's no use," he said. He hugged me again and cried some more. Then he got up and cut with the ax again. When he got tired, he came back to me and said, 'It's no use, brother.' But he kept on cutting."

Meanwhile, the other missionaries and some members were working to free the trapped elder, saying all along, "Hang on, Buddy. Just a little more time. Just hang on."

"They coaxed me to keep hanging on, and I just kept saying, 'Please, get me out,'" he said.

They gave him water, but he couldn't keep it down. Blood came when he regurgitated the water. He felt numb and thought everything below his waist was smashed.

Finally a hole was cut large enough to lower Elder Ellsworth at an angle beneath the stage. The hole through which he had seen the stars six hours earlier now revealed to him daylight.

He was given another blessing and was placed, still on his mattress, in the back of Elder Powell's truck to be taken to a hospital.

BY  
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Elder Randall  
Ellsworth,  
injured in  
earthquake,  
desires to  
return to  
Guatemala.



Elder Gary Larson and Elder Schmollinger, who had worked along with the others to rescue him, rode in the back of the truck, massaging his legs, comforting him during the ride in which every bump was agony.

They passed through Chimaltenango, Elder Ellsworth's favorite town where he had labored for four months. It looked as if the whole city had sunk.

A long line had formed at the clinic. A doctor gave him some pills for pain and told him he'd have to wait a couple of hours.

His companions took a chance on transporting him to a hospital in Guatemala City. Land slides, rocks and debris blocked the road in some places but the largest traffic jam, caused by an overturned bus caught in a slide, was encountered near Guatemala City.

Their truck was stalled in the traffic for about 45 minutes. It would take about three hours, they were told, to clear the road.

Elder Kirt Dell Harmon, the zone leader, and Elder Steven Hansen happened to be walking along the road from the opposite direction. Recognizing Elder Powell's truck, they went over to it. Assessing Elder Ellsworth's injuries, Elder Harmon realized he had to do something to get the truck through.

He asked an armed policeman to help him get the truck through. He said it would be impossible.

He talked the driver of a bulldozer, working to clear the area, into helping him. He then found a truck with a plow on the front.

Directing the two vehicles in front of Elder Powell's truck, he gave the signal for them to move forward. The other drivers caught in the jam simply moved their vehicles to clear a path for them.

"The people were quite cooperative when they learned we were bringing some injured people through," said Elder Harmon.

The policeman, uncooperative at first because of the danger of the slide, agreed to help the missionaries. He

escorted the truck, and three other rescue units that fell in with the bulldozer-truck procession, to Guatemala City.

"They took me to the mission home," said Elder Ellsworth. "President (Robert B.) Arnold came out and took charge of things. He put his hand on my head and said, 'Well, elder.'"

"At that time, the fear drained out of me. I knew I'd be all right."

Elder Ellsworth doesn't remember many of the incidents at the hospital in Guatemala City, and his evacuation to the Panama Canal Zone and, eventually, to Washington, are more of a blur than a clear memory.

Paralyzed from the waist down because of damage to the nerves at the base of the spinal cord, he is now spending about five hours a day in therapy and seems to be ahead of schedule in his progress.

He first began trying to walk, using parallel bars for support. He has since used a walker and, presently, uses crutches and braces under careful supervision.

He was able to leave the hospital long enough to attend church in his home ward, Rock Creek Ward, on Easter Sunday.

"It gives me enthusiasm to work harder in physical therapy when I know that so many people are pulling for me," he said.

There was little emotion displayed as Elder Ellsworth described his ordeal. However, sobs wracked his pain-ridden body when he spoke of his love of the Indian people of Guatemala.

"I talk about when I'll be better and will be able to walk again," he said. "I was promised that I'll stand and preach the gospel again. One of the things I want most is to be able to go back and finish my mission."

"The people there are just so special," he said weeping openly.

"I love them so much. There are two reasons I want to go back. I want to be with the people and I was called on a mission by a prophet of the Lord for two years. I want to finish that mission."