

Freed From Dark Skies

“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”—Psalm 34:18

Kim Natalie Renga, First New Year's Baby Winner

BY NINA TYLER
Arriving on New Year's Day at 11:29 a.m. in St. Vincent's Hospital, Monday, made newcomer, Kim Natalie Renga winner in the 18th annual First Baby Contest. The "dapper baby" is sponsored by local merchants and The Independent Press.
Kim Natalie weighed 8 pounds, 15 ounces. She is the first child born to Mr. and Mrs. Vincent Renga of 182 Ashland avenue, Bloomfield.
Mrs. Renga explained that Kim Natalie's birth was normal, the easiest St. Vincent's Hos-



pital, Monday, New Year's Eve at 10:48 a.m. Her husband stayed at the hospital until 1 a.m., and spent the rest of the morning at the home of his parents. "I never expected to spend my New Year's Eve in a hospital," the infant's father stated.

Mrs. Renga admitted she read the contest particulars in the Press during the holidays. "I regretted that we would be the winners. I thought I'd be 3 weeks late in giving birth. However, Kim Natalie did arrive on the exact date our physician, Dr. (Continued on Page 17)

I was born on January 1, 1969 in a small town of the state of New Jersey here in the U.S. My grandfather had entered my parents into a New Year's Day baby contest without their knowledge. To their surprise, I was the first baby born in the town of Bloomfield making our family the proud recipients of many gifts and services from the local merchants. Wow, what a great start in life, right? I was a winner so-to-speak but my life would be far from conventional.

Growing up in a generational, alcoholic family, I learned the family history that included a great-grandfather who spent his final days on a park bench. On March 2, 1981, at the age of 12, my grandmother also died and the knocking finally ceased from her liquor bottles. Scotch, with a little water was her favorite. "Kim," she used to say, "Can you pour me a drink? You know where the ice cubes are." Yes, by the age of 7, I was my grandmother's personal

bartender during my summer visits. I loved her, but honestly, I hated her too. She was controlling as well as verbally and emotionally abusive because of her own issues and the effects of the alcoholism.

I used to think, what was it specifically in her life that caused so much pain that she had to drown herself in a bottle of alcohol? To this day I don't know for sure but I have my suspicions. It wasn't until many years later that my inclinations about my grandmother triggered my own suppression of molestation at the age of 4 by a male neighbor, at age 13 by a male relative and the trauma of acquaintance rape at the age of 22 by a former employer. It seemed like there were so many secrets in my heart and mind with so little answers.

A few months before she died, my grandmother paid her last visit to us. By then, the jaundice had flooded her body with shades of toxic yellow throughout her skin and eyes. I knew her days were numbered and I could do nothing to save her. "Was it my fault?" I contemplated because I believed I enabled her to drink and couldn't make any attempts to stop her. As I matured, the generational bondages of addiction and compulsion ravaged my thoughts in the forms of obsessive cleanliness, undereating, overeating, and abnormal preoccupations with sex. Not to mention, I possessed volatile mood swings of elation to the depths of suicide.

My mind raced from one thought to another. An hour felt like a day. A month felt like a year. Time just stood still. The mental exhaustion depleted my soul, stripping it of any joy, compassion or life. I dreaded getting up each morning as panic showered my body. Shame covered my countenance and rage filled my heart. I knew I had finally entered captivity where darkness and loneliness became my closest friends. If hell did exist, this must be what it's like—the place I called dark skies.

Invisible shackles imprisoned my heart and mind. I couldn't speak, scream or even cry. The only thing I knew how to do was withdraw from the world. During my teen years, I lived an 'acceptable' double life and never exhibited any of the stereotypical symptoms of psychosis. However, the

quest to find my self-identity became a total obsession. I constantly felt torn and fragmented. With a deep interest in spiritual and paranormal phenomena, New Age philosophies (repackaged Hinduism and Buddhism intended to appeal to the Western cultural mindset) became a natural breeding ground in my search for freedom and enlightenment. I really believed I found the answers I was looking for since the traditional church setting I was raised around offered nothing except mundane ritual and a guilt-ridden conscience.

In 1983, at the age of 14, I was introduced to astrology. This would be the open door that would be used to draw me into the world of 'enlightened,' deceptive spiritual knowledge to set the plan of destruction in motion for my life. I was in so much emotional pain from the shame of being violated and abused, I needed something to fill the deep emptiness in my heart and give me a sense of real self-worth. Through astrology, I learned about the dynamics of human personality as well as human potential. My mother was an astrologer and studied with the foremost astrology instructor in the U.S at the time. I devoured my mother's books every chance I had and viewed programs that promoted or focused on the supernatural and paranormal. In addition, the underlying principles of Western cultural adaptations of Buddhism and Hinduism that centered on self-realization particularly appealed to me because of the overwhelming obsession to 'find myself.'

As the years went by, I adopted the beliefs of reincarnation, explored past-life regression, tapped into aspects of transcendental meditation and other mind techniques to relieve my pain and denial. Looking back, at the beginning of this process, I had a great sense of euphoria, excitement and even superiority of obtaining a secret knowledge I believed no one else possessed. I also had a false sense of peace. Eventually, these feelings wore off and the only things remaining were the magnified realities of grief and hopelessness.



I had no idea at the time that due to my lack of true knowledge and revelation from the Holy Spirit, I was dwelling in total deception and yielded myself to the powers of darkness. They now claimed rights to my soul and they freely wreaked havoc in my life laying the foundation for my destruction. On the outside, I was a model student, a talented athlete, a skilled musician and well-liked by my peers. But on the inside, I existed in a black fortress surrounded by a moat of depression waiting to swallow me in the depths of despair. This was my real world—a world that others dared not enter.

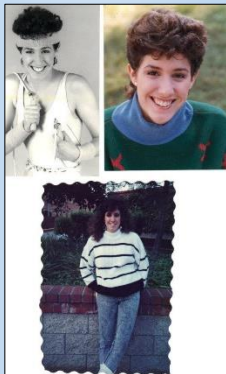
Year after year the intensity of my isolation grew until the pain gripped the core of my soul. I knew I had to put an end to the misery. In March of 1991, ten years after my grandmother's death and the exact day of my sister's 17th birthday, I decided to end my life. I saw this as the ultimate remedy to my existence of spiritual and emotional torture. After downing a handful of an old bottle of antidepressants prescribed by a doctor I temporarily went to for treatment, I got in my truck and drove it over the embankment of a local canyon dropping about 50 feet into a tree causing irreparable damage to my vehicle.

It's interesting to note, my sister and her boyfriend happened to spot me driving on the canyon road that afternoon. Deeply concerned and suspicious, they followed me to see where I was going when they eventually witnessed my plunge off the embankment of the canyon. The paramedics were called immediately.

The attempt to end my life was unsuccessful. Looking back, I see how God had other plans for me and it wasn't time for me to die yet. However, the next eight years proved challenging and difficult. I believed the lie, *"you're going to hell anyway so you might as well live it up before making the trip."* So, I finally pursued what I secretly mediated on for years seeking comfort in the night life and in various emotional and sexual affairs.

From the ages of 22 to 25, the psychiatric hospital became a familiar refuge as I struggled to weed through the constant cycle of mood swings and obsessive thought patterns. I felt like a specimen to the doctors as they attempted to 'diagnose' my condition and use me as a goblet for their cocktail of prescription drugs. *"Don't these people get it? They're wasting their time,"* I said to myself, *"I just want to die."* During this season of my life, I hardly worked and could only hold a part-time job here and there if I was lucky and lived on disability benefits for some time as well. I am so grateful to my parents for taking me back into their home. I thank the Lord every day for them.

The fall of 1998 finally set the stage for the beginning of lasting transformation and the road to healing. I planned a second and final attempt on my life with my father's 22-marksman rifle. I got up one morning during my parents' week-long trip to Arizona that October with the purpose of buying new bullets to carry out the mission to end my years of torment.



When I arrived at the gun shop, I found the proper bullets and slowly walked toward the cashier. My hands sweat and trembled. I thought, *"Do I really want to do this? What if somebody finds out why I am buying the bullets? Somebody might call the police."* Paranoia settled over me and the nagging feeling not to go through with the plan followed me all the way home. Wow, I decided not to pull the trigger, but why? What kept me from total self-destruction? That night, I still chose to drown my conscience in some beers and a bottle of white zinfandel. That didn't work. The pounding hangover the next morning taught me a valuable lesson—stay clear of the booze.

The next few months I clung to life wondering if I would get just one more opportunity to end it once and for all. Little did I know that true love and peace would finally break through the face of dark skies. In the winter of 1999, my financial status plummeted when I received several collections notices from my credit card company with the right to sue for account delinquency. Up to that point, I managed to stay afloat but I knew I hit rock bottom and the ultimate decision for life or death had to be made. Again, all alone in silence at my parents' house during one of their weekend trips, I anxiously sat at the edge of the bed in the guestroom rehearsing my dilemma to live or die.

Suddenly, I started to recall every word and every prayer of love and encouragement that I received over the years from friends, books I read, movies I saw and music I heard. I bowed my head in complete shame and desperation as I poured out my heart in all honesty for the first time to God. I said to Him, *"I don't deserve to ask you anything. I've lived my life totally for myself without any regard for you or anyone else. But I'm asking you, will you help me? I really do need your help because if you don't help me, I know I won't be here much longer. I'm afraid. Please help me."*

At that moment, a weight the size of a boulder lifted from me as I laid on the bed and cried from the depths of my soul. Years of torment ended with a simple confession from a broken heart.

Looking back, I see how God was there all along and never abandoned me. He even sent His angels for my protection against the cohorts of evil to break my covenant with death.

I was so grateful to witness how God brought the people in my life who unconditionally loved me and prayed for my restoration from the spiritual and emotional abuse I endured. I still wondered why God created me at all and what I was going to do with my life. I didn't know but I felt a strange duality of fear and excitement as I sought to find out.

After the breakthrough from the contemplation of taking my life the second time in that winter of 1999, I took a brisk, 5-mile walk introducing a new beginning in my life. I went back to college for the first time in almost ten years and I knew my life would never be the same. I had \$25.00 to my name—not enough to pay for practically anything, not even one course at the local community college.

I arrived at the campus and when I found the financial aid office, I immediately inquired about how to apply for assistance. In the summer of 1999, I received \$400.00 to take my first course. For the next 7 years, I persevered despite spiritual and emotional challenges and received total financial support with no outstanding debt. When I finally completed my dual bachelor's degree in 2006, I possessed a solid academic history with two valedictorian nominations at two separate community colleges, departmental honors at one of those colleges, graduation honors at the university and several nominations and awards for my work.



It still amazes me that only eight years prior, it was a chore just to get out of bed. During my college years, I received counseling for the ongoing emotional struggles—particularly, the anger. At first, I resisted but eventually I also accepted the need to seek medical (psychiatric) treatment along with the counseling. My moods stabilized, my thoughts stopped racing and my focus turned to purpose. I honestly sensed for the first time in my life that I did have purpose and that my birth was no accident.

I've learned and continue to learn the value of compassion, especially for those with broken spirits and scars on their souls. How incredible it is to witness how God works and what He uses to repeatedly confirm His love, healing and comfort after all this time. While watching the conclusion of an episode of the crime drama, *Criminal Minds*, character David Rossi (played by actor Joe Mantegna) said, "*scars remind us where we've been, but they don't have to dictate where we're going.*" Oh, how true this is.

Today, I have the continual privilege to help prepare others and encourage them to pursue God's will and call for their lives. I never imagined that one day I would be part of several international organizations as well as building an internet business. When you're depressed, have you ever wondered why the lives of others seem so much more stable, fulfilled and successful? Well, theirs seem to look better because the only thing we can see is a distorted view of ourselves and the world around us. It's the cruelest form of self-absorption and deception because it dulls the heart from hearing the truth and perceiving reality. Without question, I never found what I was looking for in the world and New Age philosophy. It only kept me in denial of my true condition. The only true peace and purpose is found in Jesus alone.

There's no doubt that what we see from others may just be a mask or some sort of façade to hide their own inner struggles along with the methods they're using to deal with those struggles. No one is really transparent for integrity and sincerity are born out of a heart of humility, brokenness and a process of deep inner healing that strips away the residue of false mindsets and perceptions of God, self, others and the world. Only when these obstacles are removed can we live an authentic, abundant life. False philosophies and religious doctrines teach us that we can build up our egos, heal and save ourselves but this is the furthest thing from the truth.



Authentic connection and relationship is the basic need of our existence. Without it, we're destined to wither off the vine and suffer dehydration of spirit. Out from the overflow of our genuine fellowship with Jesus, we develop our sense of security, acceptance and the realization of our true identity and purpose in Him.

When we honestly consider it, who we are and what we do only find their place in the context of real relationship. It's through relational restoration where the love and fullness of God is expressed. For so many years, I drove myself to find peace and wholeness in all the wrong places when living by the illusions and empty promises of the world.

Jesus loved me enough to save me and to continually save me from myself. I'm not perfect just a grateful work in progress. His love and mercy heal the broken heart. Life through Him breaks the shackles of deception to see things as they really are which enables us to understand our cultural climate and become His vessels of transformation in the times we live in.