Canadian Missionary Missing in Belize

Seventh-day Adventists throughout North and Central America are praying for a missionary that has disappeared. Brian Townsend, a missionary living in the Valley of Peace area of Belize, has been missing since late December 24th.

On Christmas Eve, Townsend's cook and neighbor saw his truck drive by with a mattress and rolled-up rug, heading out of town. The following morning when she arrived at the house for work, she discovered Townsend's truck was missing. Upon entering his single room house she discovered the place had been ransacked. Outside, approximately fifty feet from the house, "there was blood, there were two machetes in the place where they struggled" says Juan Arias, Vice Chairman of Valley of Peace who was on the scene soon after Townsend was noticed missing. Arias also stated "In his room it's like they hailed him to open the door and he did it. Because there was no forcing." Neighbors believe that it may have been someone he knew. Police where called to the scene shortly thereafter. "We are treating this very, very seriously and appealing for assistance. That is all we can do for now" said Police Inspector Sinquest Martinez. He added that the police have been distributing flyers asking people to call if they see Townsend's silver Chevy truck. Martinez would not give specifics about the case because it is an open investigation, but did say "We are looking for some person that could assist us".

Police have also been working with the Canadian consulate and Kory Townsend, Townsend's adult son, who has traveled from his home in Western Canada to help search for his father. Acknowledging that Townsend seemed to make it a point to know everyone, Martinez uttered a personal note, "It is a shock, it is a shock, I knew him"

Townsend moved to Belize from Canada nine years ago to build the Valley of Peace Seventh-day Adventist High school and ended up staying after it was finished. "He was doing a lot of things, he had a couple projects. He built a school, towards his later years he was doing a vocational school, things like gardening and a wood shop," says Kory Townsend. "There are few people who can live a dream or live a goal, and embrace it with the passion he had." Kory also acknowledged his father's commitment to his Seventh-day Adventist faith and community. "This was a life style for him, it was not just a project or a mission, he lived here".

According to Pastor Dennis Slusher, President of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Belize, "Townsend came to work in the Valley of Peace Community, helping build a school and church which now has about 50 members. He stayed on after the construction was finished, continuing to work for the betterment of the local community". Slusher says that the Belize Seventh-day Adventist Church administration and staff held a session of prayer for Townsend on Monday and
are hoping that he will be found soon.

In the few days since the incident, the village has been searching for Townsend. "We can not stop until we have a result" says Arias, who spent Sunday searching the area along with thirteen of Townsend's friends from the community. "He was a nice person and always there to give me advice" adds volunteer Emil Montgeo from the back of a pickup truck heading into the bush. "The whole entire community is going out and looking, and separating to different streets and corners of each valley."

However finding Townsend has been compared to finding a needle in a haystack given the thick bush surrounding the village. Currently efforts are focused on finding his truck, or for signs of his body. "Right now we are looking in the sky, looking for vultures. If the body is dead the vultures are going to guide us" says Arias. This grim tactic has not prevented Pathfinders from the Orange Walk Seventh-day Adventist Church from helping with the effort. "Today we came on a rescue mission….We are a family and we must go forward looking for each other because we are a community" says their leader, Pastor Gelder Gamboa.

Monday, Kory Townsend, accompanied by Patricia St. Jean and the Belize Disaster and Rescue Response Team visited Townsend's house and joined the rescue efforts. "We tried to do a local search around the area and so far we have come up empty handed. We are going to try to expand, we are going to try to get other resources" says Loyda Martinez, Executive Director for the team. While at the house, neighbors and church members kept dropping by and sharing what Townsend meant to them. "Brian has been a role model for me, he has shown me a lot about mission work" said Miguel Ico, a local church elder. "Through his efforts the Peace of the Valley Seventh-day Adventist high school has been built".

Enrique Depaz was also a beneficiary of Townsend's kindness. He lived in Townsend's single-room house, but was out of town when Brian went missing. Enrique describes him as a "very positive man, very intelligent, he was always telling people how to live that Christian lifestyle." He remembers Townsend as a strong man who trusted in his faith completely "He never showed that had fear of anything, because he always believed in God". Others told similar stories. Kory Townsend shared the story of a neighbor who told him that they had just named their newborn child in Townsend's memory. Patricia, a long time friend, praised the work he was doing for the church and community, "I don't want his work to be finished here, it needs a strong Adventist presence".

For now the search continues. The family has arranged for a helicopter search on Thursday. "We are going to keep searching and remain hopeful" says Kory. His optimism is echoed by Brian's cook, "I believe he is alive." For now this is the belief propelling the searchers forward.

-- Written by Tim Wolfer, a freelance videographer, based in Grand Rapids, Michigan.