

The Augusta Chronicle

Hostage released by faith

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Ashley Robinson blends in.

She worships at a local church, works as a radiology technician and coaches a middle school girls basketball team.

Six years ago, when she was Ashley Smith, she was in the national spotlight. The country couldn't get enough of then-26-year-old Augusta native. Six years ago, she

was addicted to meth and had given up her 3-year-old daughter.

Six years ago, she was taken hostage by Brian Nichols.

Nichols was on the run in Atlanta. He was on trial for rape when he tore through a Fulton County courthouse on March 11, 2005, killing a judge, a court reporter, a deputy, a federal agent and brutally beating a guard, leaving her brain damaged.

Smith was attempting to get her life straight after rehab for meth addiction. So far, she had been unsuccessful.

She was returning to her Atlanta apartment when Nichols put a gun to her head and forced his way in her home.

"I remember seeing the news that he had killed people," she said in an interview Tuesday. "I thought, great, I'm next and I deserve it."

When Nichols asked for drugs, she pointed to her stash of meth and for the first time, she didn't join in.

"Out of all the times I would have been justified to do drugs, it probably would have been that night, but I chose not to for the first time in my life," Robinson said. "When I said no, it was like God set me free."

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Although she was raised in a Christian home, Smith had lost touch with God after witnessing the stabbing death of her husband and turned further toward drugs. But when she sat across from Nichols, she said she suddenly felt God's presence again.

She immediately grabbed for her copy of Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* and read from it. As the hours passed, she began to read to Nichols from the book and the two began to discuss their relationship with God.

"He had guns and he reminded me several times that he was still in control," Robinson said of their discussions.

Robinson said she stressed to Nichols that although they had both taken dark paths, they could be forgiven.

Seven hours after they met, Nichols let her go and surrendered to authorities.

In December 2008, Nichols was sentenced to life imprisonment with no chance for parole.

"One of the last things he said to me before I left was 'I wish I could have met you under different circumstances because I think we could have been friends,' " she said. "It helped me know that God helped him see, too, the things he had done wrong."

After that, Smith dropped her addiction, regained custody of her daughter and tried to put her life back on track while living in the spotlight.

"I was thinking, I've been clean for four days and they want me to go on *Oprah* and do the show, an interview and write a book? I just wanted things to slow down," she said.



It took time for Robinson to realize her larger purpose.

After writing a book, she took to the road and still, at five months pregnant, tours the country talking to youth, church and rehabilitation groups.

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"I just saw it as a platform for God," she said. "I didn't want it to be for my own fame or notoriety. It was about giving God complete glory and saying that nothing else happened in my apartment that night except God showed up."

She also serves on the advisory board for the Georgia Meth Project.

Robinson has never contacted Nichols but said she is working on a letter. Whether she will be able to bring herself to mail it, she's not sure.



She mainly wants to know what Nichols did with his second chance at life.

"There's no doubt I would be dead (if we never met)," she said. "I just could not break free from the bondage to the meth. If the drugs hadn't killed me, I would have been in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Four years ago, Robinson married a former boyfriend. The couple dated and partied together back in their meth days. Her husband reunited with God after spending time in a jail cell from a meth charge.

"My husband said, too, that God was the only thing that kept him away from that lifestyle," Robinson said. "We lived it for so long and it took so much away from us. It started off being fun but it slowly led into a life of despair and misery."

She is working with directors on a motion picture about her evening with Nichols. Filming is expected to begin in May or June.