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Cheryl D. Doss

Andrews University, doss@andrews.edu

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"I'll Be Back Someday"

BY CHERYL DOSS

Ruimar, Margareth, Larisson, and Melissa DePaiva were excited about becoming missionaries. Originally from Brazil, they had spent nearly five years living and studying at Andrews University. Now they were headed for the island nation of Palau, where Ruimar would pastor a church and their years of study could be put to good use.

From August 2002 to December 2003 Ruimar pastored the Koror Church and Margareth taught church school in Palau. The family earned the love of the church members and was befriended by the queen of Palau and many others in the wider community.

On the night of December 22, 2003, an intruder broke into their home intent on theft. One by one, as the family was aroused from sleep, the robber attacked them until all were dead except ten-year-old Melissa. Abducted by the attacker, Melissa was released after a harrowing twenty hours and told the story to the police. Within a few hours, the perpetrator was in custody.

The government of Palau ordered the country's flags lowered to half-

mast and a state funeral to be held on Monday, December 29. The entire nation of Palau was shaken by this horrendous tragedy. The General Conference sent Ann Hamel, former missionary and licensed psychologist from Berrien Springs, Michigan, to provide support to the grieving.

But, the real story of the funeral is best told by one who was there—



The DePaiva family: (front) Larisson and Melissa, (back) Margareth and Ruimar.

John Rutledge, an attorney with the State Government of Koror. Following are excerpts from his e-mailed report.

The memorial service was held yesterday at 4:00 p.m. The ceremony was long but remarkable. Just as I was about to stand and yell "Enough already!" (the thing ran 4 hours!), Ruimar's mom did something so intensely selfless that I simply broke down and wept.

She took the microphone without warning or announcement and showed us a level of forgiveness we'd all do well to strive for. In the week she was here in Palau, she met with Justin Hirosi, the man who murdered her son, daughter-in-law, and only grandson. She prayed with him. And she let him know that she'd already forgiven him.

Then, having just learned

that Justin's mother was at the service, she asked Ms. Hirosi to join her. Ms. Hirosi, unable to walk on her own, was aided to the stage by her brother and several neighbors. Ruimar's mom hugged her so warmly that the casual observer might have believed the two were long-lost friends. Together, they stepped to the microphone and Ms. DePaiva announced that they were "both mothers grieving for lost sons." You could have heard a pin drop.

Ms. DePaiva went on. She implored the Palauan community to remove any shroud of blame that might otherwise cover Justin's family. She declared that the DePaivas do not blame Justin's family for the tragedy (and that no one else should either). "We raise our children; we educate them," Ms. DePaiva said. "We teach them right from wrong. That is all we, as mothers, can do. They have their own minds."

The high chief of the island where the tragedy occurred came to the microphone. He expressed shame, regret, and sorrow on behalf of Justin's family, his clan, and his entire tribe. The high chief explained that Justin's family and clan, though of meager means, had sold many of their belongings and now desired to deliver \$10,000 in cash to Melissa for her college education.

Melissa has been so extraordinarily strong throughout this process that it's left us all in awe. When asked where she'd like to go to live, Melissa said: "I'd like to stay here in Palau." Imagine everyone's surprise. Her grandmother then explained that staying here wasn't possible. "Okay," Melissa said. "But I'll be back someday; I'll come back as a missionary."

Cheryl Doss is associate director of the Institute of World Mission at Andrews University.



Larisson, Margareth, and Ruimar DePaiva were tragically murdered on December 22, 2003, in Palau where they were serving as missionaries.