



# A Woman on a Mission

## Kim Roeske's Story

Kim with Mrs. Chaquito Angonia and Edith Nalzaro

By Beth Foreman, Features Editor

Courage and change are not strangers to this woman on a mission.

"I'm not usually a fearful person, but there have been times when I've been really afraid, when my heart rate changes, when life gets . . . kind of ... AHH!"

And it's sometimes in those heart-pounding "AHH" moments (think quiet scream, not melting relaxation), that Kim Roeske has learned what it means to find real courage in her faith, to be with Jesus.

*Magad ya Tyumanem kamayu.*

"It's interesting to connect fear and being with Jesus," she said. "It fits perfectly for me. Being with Jesus. Honestly, it's my continual struggle, staying in prayer, staying daily in God's Word. I'm not sure that it gets any easier. Satan is always pulling me away with distractions."

As if on cue, Kim is suddenly distracted from our

long-distance phone interview by her crying 2-year old. She whispers to someone nearby, "Get me her blankie," before she returns to our conversation.

"I'm always reminding myself that God sees the big picture. He's much bigger than any fears I have. He's the one doing it. Not me."

Sitting inside her rural Alaska home in the middle of the Copper River Valley, where the morning's low was about 40 degrees below zero, she reflects. "It's a little warmer now that it's afternoon. Ten below." And then she shares some of the experiences, joys, sadness, and fears she has discovered in serving the Lord alongside her husband, Rev. Todd Roeske.

"I learn again and again that our heavenly Father is in control. He sees the bigger picture. Our motto in the Philippines was 'All plans change.' No matter what we planned, we learned to live with the uncertainty of our plans. God's plans are much better than mine!"

Magazine cover photos: (top) Kim in front of the rice fields in Katyan, Malungon, Sarangani Province. (bottom) Lutheran women from outlying churches walked to Kiabol to attend a women's seminar led by Kim, former LCMS nurse volunteer Debbie Hauser, and TLCCP liaison Jeralyn Dumalat.

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*Kim teaching at a women's seminar in 2009*

The greatest joy for Kim has always been to see new believers, but she never dreamed that these new believers would be found in very remote corners of the world from the Philippines, where she and her daughters would hike for thirty minutes just to get to their local church, to Alaska, where the nearest Walmart is about 200 miles from home.

It's surprising to hear that Kim didn't think much about mission work as a child growing up in a traditional Lutheran setting outside of Fort Wayne, Indiana.

"I don't really remember hearing about missionaries at my church or thinking much about missions," she said. However, her childhood home was filled with subtle mission messages because her mother (Elise Koenemann, former Indiana LWML District President) was active in the LWML.

"I do remember my mom being involved in missions with her LWML work," she shared, "and I always wanted to travel. I knew that I wouldn't stay in the Fort Wayne area, but this has been beyond my wildest dreams."

Kim received her Bachelor of Arts degree in elementary education from Concordia, Ann Arbor, Michigan. "When I was in college, I envisioned my ministry in the classroom, teaching. I was planning to be an elementary school teacher."

Marrying Todd in 1986, Kim's plans started to change.

"Todd and I dated through college, and when he graduated, he went to Taiwan with the LCMS

Volunteer Youth Ministry Program." Kim finished her student teaching, graduated, and then began her teaching at Bethany American School in Taipei, Taiwan.

Although she has continued to teach since her Concordia Ann Arbor days, her lessons have not always been inside a traditional classroom. "I've been in a support role to Todd's ministries," she said. "And I've been busy home schooling my girls, adding wood to the wood-burning stove, all that goes with maintaining a home, holding down the fort. Mission work becomes a lifestyle for the whole family. It's not a nine-to-five job," she added.

For twelve years, the Roeskes' missionary work was on the island of Mindanao, the second largest island in the Philippines, with the Tagakaulo people. The tropical island, covered with rugged mountains, volcanoes, and fertile land where mangoes, bananas, pineapples, and coconuts flourish, was a world apart from northeastern Indiana.

Kim offered background information about the people with whom they lived and worked. "The Tagakaulo people were mostly a hunting and gathering people group that lived in mountainous rain forest until the 1960s. Since then most of the rain forest trees have been harvested or cut down to make room for the growing population. The current generation is the first to rely solely on farming in this area. They plant and harvest corn two-to-three times each year on slopes that are too steep to use machinery. The Tagakaulo people are a people





*Tagakaulo women in traditional dress prepare to celebrate the graduation of the first 12 Tagakaulo pastors from the pastoral training program in San Roque, Malungon, Sarangani Province in March 2005.*

in transition — more and more children are being educated and learning the lowland languages.”

She explained that the LCMS missionaries working with the Tagakaulo people focused on the remote villages because the villages with roads had been well-evangelized already. The goal of their work was to grow independent Lutheran congregations, with their own people leading worship in their own native language, she explained.

“The church locations to which Todd and his fellow missionaries, Rev. Don Treglown and Rev. Bruce Lesemann, traveled were accessible only by mountain trails, and it was ten hours of hiking from the northernmost church to the southernmost church location.”

The remote lifestyle came with some adjustments. “Initially there were just two missionary families, and we lived a mountain ridge apart,” she said. “We had no radio communication. If we had a message to deliver, somebody rode a horse over the ridge to the other missionary.”

Kim’s husband spent a lot of time traveling between the remote locations, training, teach-

ing, and mentoring pastors. Kim and her daughters didn’t usually travel with Todd. “These locations were so remote, a two- or three-hour hike, and we’d slow Todd down so much! The kids and I spent our time with the congregation closest to our home, about a thirty-minute horse ride or hike.”

Along with the challenges of living remotely, Kim tackled the language and cultural differences. “Todd picks up languages very quickly, and he enjoys it. When we go to a new place, he has a great time meeting all the people and learning the language, and I’m happy just to get my survival level!”

Kim worked closely with a Tagakaulo language helper, Carmela, during her years in the Philippines. The two women became close friends as they read God’s Word, talked about the words and the meanings. “But she was not a Christian. At one point, her husband and kids worshipped with us, and then she drew them away. Carmela didn’t believe, and it’s been a heart-breaking thing for me. I continue to pray for her.”

Kim found some surprising hurdles as she worked with the people and especially the older women in the tribal villages. “The women were some of the hardest people to communicate with because they didn’t have any education or exposure to schooling at all. They had never been in a classroom where they had to sit and listen. It was difficult for them to even sit in a worship service,” she said.

“Also, group singing was something this culture had never done. But as the church grew and the people’s faith grew, the older men who would do the traditional solo singing — a kind of a chanting — would incorporate Christian themes into their chanting.”

The Roeskes’ life in the remote mountain area was peaceful until May 2001, when the Abu Sayyaf, an Islamic militant organization based in the southern Philippines and linked with al-Qaeda terrorists, kidnapped twenty people, including three Americans. One of the Americans was beheaded and the other two, a Christian missionary couple, Martin and Gracia Burnham, were taken hostage.

As Kim shared this story, some frightening memories returned. She explained that the next month, in June, the Abu Sayyaf attempted another kidnapping only sixty miles north of where the Roeskes lived and worked. “The secu-

rity guards were able to hold them off, and so it was unsuccessful. However, as the militants escaped, their boat was disabled just across the Tagakaulo Mountains from us.”

She paused and took a deep breath.

*Magad ya Tyumanem kamayu.*

“So when their boat was disabled, they came inland to return to their home base. They were being led across the mountains by a local Tagakaulo man who had links to our area. This man’s wife had been from our village congregation.” To illustrate this man’s violent history, she added, “The Tagakaulo man had killed his wife in front of their children.”

She continued. “And he was well aware of where the missionaries lived, where we lived . . .” Kim paused and took a deep breath.

“Those were the times I’d wake up in the middle of night, heart pounding, and wonder: Did I hear a noise?”

Kim paused as she remembered her fear for her family’s safety.

“That was really when Bible verses would come back to me. I would go back to one of my favorites, Jeremiah 29, remembering God’s promises and God’s care. I recited all those Bible verses I had learned in Lutheran school. That experience has really made me a great advocate of memorizing Scripture.”

The next week, missionaries were evacuated because of the rising tensions, and the Roeskes left their home to return to the United States for several months. And then it was September 11, 2001, and the plans for the Tagakaulo work were changed.

“Our family was reassigned to the U.S., and we didn’t know when things were going to calm down, or when they were going to let us return.”

Kim explained that, meanwhile, the American missionary couple was held hostage for over a year before Gracia was rescued. Her husband, Martin, was killed in a crossfire during the commando rescue. “During their captivity, the Burnhams didn’t have a Bible. They relied on each other and some of the other prisoners to recall verses. Any verse that anyone could remember, all would memorize.”

Kim added, “There might come a time when we don’t have a Bible right with us to open up and find a verse. Memorizing Scripture is good.”



*Tagakaulo women gather in Davao City at a Lutheran Church in the Philippines partner church for a prayer seminar with missionaries Ann Wade and Kim.*

Finally, the Roeskes were able to return to the Philippines in 2002 to serve for three more years. Although they were not allowed to live in the rural mountain village that had been their home, they moved to Davao City where it was safer.

“We were ready to go back at that point,” Kim said. She said that the city was controlled by what she described as a “very heavy-handed mayor” who protected the foreigners and the Americans in his city. “We knew it would be a safe place.”

Todd continued his work with the Tagakaulo churches as they became more and more independent. In March 2005, the first twelve Tagakaulo pastors graduated from the pastoral training program in San Roque, Malungon, Sarangani Province.

Seeing God’s hand at work in these tribal areas was a joy for Kim and her family. “It was exciting to see the churches multiply in God’s time and in God’s way. Much more than we had ever anticipated! When the mission team was initially planning, we had thought about planting six congregations. God turned it into twenty!”

In June 2005, the Roeskes packed their bags and left behind their tropical home where Kim was accustomed to holding a blue plaid umbrella as shade from the hot sun. Their new home? The state known as “The Last Frontier,” where school is not cancelled until the temperature is 50 degrees below zero.

“This is Alaska! If it gets really cold, 20 degrees below zero, then we have to plug in the truck so it’s warm enough to start.”





*Kim hiking with Karis on her back in the Philippines*

The transition for the family to the cold Alaska winters was fairly smooth. “We all enjoyed winters on our home service times in the States, and the kids thought snow was really special. And we moved here in January, so our first Alaska winter was really only half of a winter.”

Kim was prepared for more remote living. “Ah, everything is very rural in this state,” Kim said. “And remoteness is all relative. When we lived in the mountains of the Philippines, we’d go to town once a month to get cash from the bank, mail from the post office, and groceries. When we moved to Alaska, I found out I could have fuel delivered right to my door!”

Kim’s extended family enjoys having them state-side. “My parents think we live close now that we’re in the United States and they don’t need their passports to come visit,” Kim laughed.

The Roeskes still only drive to town about once a month to get groceries and incidentals. “The hardest thing is fresh fruits and vegetables because they are expensive and they don’t last very long when we shop like that.”

Food is abundant, however, as they have a big garden all summer to add to the freezer for the long winter months. No fresh coconuts or bananas in this garden, but Kim plants cabbage, cauliflower, carrots, potatoes, and rows of lettuce.

And meat is plentiful. “Todd hunts, so between people at church sharing their meat and what he

hunts, we usually have the freezer full of moose, caribou, and salmon. Our heavenly Father has provided those things for us wonderfully.”

*Magad ya Tyumanem kamayu.*

The weather, the setting, and the foods may have changed dramatically since her days in the Philippines, but one thing has not changed. “I always try to get up early enough to have some quiet time, prayer time, devotion time in the morning. If that doesn’t happen then my whole day goes from there. It’s been trickier with our 2-year-old foster daughter because she hears any movement in the house, and she tends to get up early. But we’re working on it.”

During the winter months, much of Kim’s day is spent home schooling the girls until lunch. In between taking out the compost, bringing in the wood, and plugging in the truck, Kim finds time to organize the music for her church. “I play the guitar. We don’t have anybody who plays the keyboard right now. I look at what’s in the service for Sunday and make sure it’s all ready, all the copyrights and the Power Point®.”

“I don’t have time for any hobbies other than gardening in the summer. We can’t plant until after Memorial Day. We can get frost any month of year. Since I’ve lived here, we’ve had frost in June, July and August. So you can lose it all at any time!”

As we talk, it’s the middle of winter and probably hard for Kim to imagine her garden as she looks outside her window at three feet of snow. “From our house I just see trees and snow everywhere. We live just off the Richardson Highway, where we can see across a lake up to 12,000 foot-high snow-covered peaks. The peaks, part of the Wrangell Mountains, are snow-covered all year long,” she said. “I think this is the most beautiful part of Alaska, but I’m partial.”

Todd’s work with Alaska Mission for Christ (AMC) is similar to his work in the Philippines, as it includes ministry to remote areas accessible on the limited road system, visioning, planning, and training lay ministers to serve in communities that are too small to support their own pastors. Men are trained through Leadership Advancement Process at Concordia Portland, EIIT (Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology) at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, or through Alaska Mission for Christ mentors. AMC’s goal is to have a bold proclamation for Christ in all communities in Alaska. Last year over 1000 volunteers came to Alaska to serve with AMC

doing Vacation Bible School, sports camps, Hammer and Nail Projects, and more.

Kim explained that Todd's work also includes serving as pastor at Mt. Drum Lutheran Church, the newest LCMS congregation in the state. Kim teaches Sunday School and leads women's Bible studies, along with her music ministry in the rural church.

"Alaska is filled with secularism, people who just want to get away from everything and that's why they come to here," Kim said. She explained that they also find many Alaskans, especially native people, whose lives have been disrupted by culture shifts. "Alaska has only been a state for fifty years, and the native people have had so much culture change in the last couple of generations. It's very difficult when your whole culture system gets totally changed," she said.

Kim and her family have found many opportunities to learn about the Native American culture and to love the people. "Two years ago, we baptized two Native American girls in our church, and their families would come sometimes."

Kim paused and began again slowly. "In June of that year, one of the girls was killed in a fire. She was nine years old."

*Magad ya Tyumanem kamayu.*

"Because we were her godparents, the family considered us family, and Todd was very involved with the funeral and with the family. We continue to be with them through the grieving process. God has brought a lot of good things out of this horrible situation. It has drawn us closer in to the native community. The other girl who was baptized is now one of our foster daughters."

Kim shared one of her favorite Bible verses: *'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart'* (Jeremiah 29:11–13).

"We really do live under the theme of 'All plans change,' so I'm comforted just knowing that God has a plan. I go back to that again and again," she said.

This was especially true as Kim was preparing to return to the Philippines — without Todd — to conduct training for the Tagakaulo women.

"This was the first time I traveled to the Philippines without my family, without my kids, with-

out my husband. I'm used to relying on Todd for language things, and on that trip, well, I was supposed to be the one in charge. I was supposed to lead that trip and encourage the women in these churches. I speak the tribal dialect fairly fluently, but my husband is more fluent. I admit that I felt inadequate, but the Holy Spirit used me anyway." Kim explained. "I had a lot of fears, but I asked a lot of people to pray. And God is faithful."

*Magad ya Tyumanem kamayu.*

Training women to be leaders was one of the goals of her solo trip to the Philippines, and it's



*Roeske Family picture taken in Copper Center, Alaska*

also one of her goals with her own daughters. "This is not always an easy place for our kids. We're not in a place where our girls can have Lutheran schools or Lutheran friends. Many of our kids' friends come from the families we know through our ministry connections."

She said that these are often families with addictions and sexual abuse so prevalent in rural Alaskan communities. "So I continually pray for the Holy Spirit to raise my kids up above all of this and to make them strong, to make them leaders and not followers."

*Magad ya Tyumanem kamayu.* It's Kim's favorite way to close a letter or to say farewell, sharing this Tagakaulo phrase. Translated, it means: *God goes with you.*

For Kim Roeske, the path through the fear and the worry and the challenges of life is clear. "The only one who can overcome fear is the God who is bigger than fear!"

*God goes with you.*