



BELIEVES

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God's Plan B: Better than Our Plan A

Shay Eskew's story is one that once you hear it you won't soon forget. But as Eskew up front that what he shares may be the story from his life, it's really God's story.



"Please understand my story is to share, not to compare ... it's to share that God can use our greatest disappointments to bring the greatest blessings," Eskew

Eskew, VP Client Services at EnableComp, Burn Survivor, and Kona Ironman Triathlon Finisher, traveled from Nashville, TN, to share his story and lead a discussion entitled "God's Plan B: Better than Our Plan A" at BELIEVES.

A little more than 4 years ago, Eskew and his family moved to Nashville, but prior to that Atlanta was home. Eskew attended McEachern High School.

"We lived in Grant Park in the Octagon House for 11 years, and had 3 of our kids while in that house," Eskew said. "We attended mass on Sundays at Cathedral of Christ the King."

"The greatest part of our life is the journey, Eskew says.

"People rarely understand the journey we have been on to get from childhood to where we are as adults. For me, people look at my scars now and have no comprehension of the 35+ surgeries and 1000s of hours of physical therapy I endured over the last 33 years. When they hear of me competing in Ironman triathlons, they just assume exercising has always come easy."

"I am a big believer that it is the journey we should celebrate," Eskew said. "With what happened to me at age 8 and being told I'd never play sports again, it's hard to believe that one day I'd be competing in the World's hardest one day endurance event. I never thought a lot of things were possible but then I realized God had a special plan for me."

In Eskew's words, his life started as a normal kid.

"Well actually, I was a perfect child because grandma told me so," Eskew joked to a lot of laughter. "I was raised by the most conservative Christian parents possible."

Then, on a summer day in 1982, Eskew, an energetic 8 year old boy, and his friend, were asked by their fifteen-year-old neighbor to help get rid of a yellow jacket nest. She doused the nest with gasoline, splashing Eskew and his friend in the process. What happened next was unimaginable. Within seconds Eskew and his friends were engulfed in flames when the girl threw a match on the gasoline covered yellow jacket nest.

"I thankfully had the presence of mind to stop, drop, and roll, and then I grabbed a hose and alternated between me and my friend," Eskew recalled.

The girl, who had to be terrified and in shock, hid in the bushes.

“People have often asked what it feels like to be engulfed in flames,” said Eskew. “I tell them it’s like burning your hand on something hot – but then imagine it being 100 times more painful and that pain is experienced throughout your entire body. And that’s what it’s like.”

While it may seem getting burned is the worst part of what happened, Eskew said it wasn’t. It was the emotional pain of bearing those scars as a child. Everywhere he went kids would make fun of him and comment “eww gross mommy, look at him” or “look mom, it’s Freddy Krueger.”

His parents had no insurance and a \$2 million hospital bill. People contributed as much as they could to help his parents out. Fortunately, however, the Shriners Hospital for Children also heard of Eskew’s story and made it possible for him and his mother to relocate from their home in Atlanta to Cincinnati for three months where he received over \$2 million of care courtesy of the Shriners’ organization. Eskew’s friend, who was burned along with him, also went to Cincinnati for care at Shriners Hospital for Children. The Shriners continued treating Eskew until he reached 21.

As time progressed, Eskew’s burn scars actually got worse due to keloiding – causing the scars to thicken to one inch.

“I had to wear a full body compression suit, basically like a woman’s girdle, 22 hours a day for three years – so ladies we can relate,” Eskew said with seriousness but also with a touch of levity.

So at the age of 8, Eskew was told he would never play sports, unable to lift his arm over his head (which he did do after three years) and hold his head up straight. Eskew started playing baseball 2 months out of the hospital and football just 6 months later.

Now it’s 30+ years later. He’s currently an All-American triathlete and on Team USA (ranked #9 by Ironman in the US, #21 in the World in Sprint Distance), former 3x boxing champion in college and was an All-American wrestler in high school.



“When I entered the hospital, over 33% of my body was burned. By now though, I have over 66% of my body scarred by burns and burn related procedures (over 30% of my skin was harvested for skin grafts).”

Though his situation was bad, Eskew told everyone that God says to make the most of any situation.

“We have the ability to shape our perception,” he stated firmly. “I have spent the last 33 years focusing on the positive versus the negative and drawing from that repository. As Christians, we often are waiting for God to reveal His plan for us, but in reality He’s revealed it but we weren’t ready for it.”

Eskew then pulled out a key, and told the packed house the reason he shows this when he speaks.

“What is this key? It doesn’t come with any instructions. So in short, if I’m looking for the silver lining, I’m going to find it.”

Eskew also shared with the attendees a bit of the story of Ernest Shackleton, Colonel Sanders, and his love of the movie Cinderella Man – which he’s watched countless times.

“Look at this ad posted by Ernest Shackleton,” Eskew stated. “1500 applied, 26 signed up, and those that did became some of the greatest adventurers of all time.”



Eskew said these are stories he reads and watches – stories where we are most vulnerable and open for God.

“Just like Colonel Sanders who experienced 1,008 ‘No’s’ before he got a ‘Yes,’ my life is one of 1,008 ‘No’s’ and 1 ‘Yes’, but then that makes the 1 ‘Yes’ more worth it,” said Eskew.

By 2009, in tribute to losing his good friend Henry Forest to pancreatic cancer, Eskew had gotten into triathlons and was competing in the 2011 ITU World Championships where he had to be vulnerable and open for God.

“When I began the competition and learned they cancelled the swim, my least competitive leg, I truly felt this was my race and one that I could very well place top 20 in the World. As I was hammering away on the bike, I suddenly got a flat tire at mile 10 of the 75 mile bike portion - something that’s never happened in over 50 races. Luckily I didn’t panic and was able to change the tire out in 2 minutes and soon reeling in those that had passed me,” said Eskew.

Ten miles later at mile 20, Eskew got a flat again so he pumped it up with CO2. Amazingly, only five miles later at mile 25 he had another flat. This time a friend threw him another CO2.

“You’ve got to understand, I had told my daughter before the race, ‘daddy’s going to get you a medal’ and I felt confident about this because I had never not finished a race,” Eskew retold.

Eskew was able to ride on the half-flat tube for 25 miles, but then at mile 50 it went completely flat and he wrecked, slamming into the pavement and cracking his helmet, scraping his forearm and right hip.

“First I screamed, then I laughed,” said Eskew. “I had always told myself that I wanted to do an ultramarathon, I just wasn’t planning on it being today and definitely didn’t plan on doing it barefoot. At that point I just took my shoes off, because you can’t run in bike shoes, then put them on the bike and started running barefoot.”

The only thing was, Eskew still had about 26 miles to go on the bike, and then had a 18.5 mile run to follow after that on the World’s hardest triathlon run course.

Keep in mind that in this and all the other races Eskew has competed in, Eskew faces unique challenges as a result of his burn scars.

“Because of the burn scars, I can’t sweat over 1/3 of my body, which means on the other 2/3 of my body I sweat like crazy. I calculate my sweat rate (5 pounds per hour) to know how much water to consume.” My body doesn’t have the ability to thermoregulate in hot races, causing me to continue sweating and usually to the point of severe dehydration.

So with all this to consider, Eskew continued to run with his bike for 5-6 miles, until of all things he saw a guy whose tire was ripped in half.

“I have never seen this,” Eskew said. “Then the guy sees me, turns and asks if I want his tire, so I tell him sure. Now I have a tire. Then in a few more miles, a lady from England rides by, sees me, stops and tosses me a CO2. Now I have wheels again so I finish the bike, and then the run.”

That’s not the end of the story. When Eskew finished after the lengthy ordeal, it turns out that at the finish there were no medals.

“How do you not have medals at the World Championship?” asked Eskew.

It turns out, the medals hadn’t been ordered. When Eskew got home, he prayed and asked God what He wanted Eskew to learn from this.

“A few months later a complete stranger was talking trash to me via Facebook and I had to call his bluff,” recalled Eskew. “I issued a challenge to him and made sure all of our mutual friends knew the gauntlet had been laid down. Come to find out, he was on the Board of Directors for USA Triathlon, the governing body for all the races I compete in. He was unable to take me up on my challenge, with a legitimate excuse mind you, and we actually became friends shortly thereafter. He learned of my experience at the ITU Worlds and made the CEO of USA Triathlon, Rob Urbach, aware of my trials and tribulations at Worlds. Within two days, Rob calls to apologize for the lack of oversight by ITU on ordering the medals and then asks if I’d be ok being a feature story of their Olympic preview magazine that goes to over 100,000 of their members.”

“My life is not for everyone, but I made a decision many years ago after suffering the burns that I was going to let people see me as an athlete, so in school I wrestled, boxed, and more. Since then, I’ve bungee jumped, sky-dived, spent six months trapping bears. What have I missed out on?” he asked.

Eskew says that he is always evaluating what he’s gained versus what he’s lost. Instead of asking “why me?” he prefers to ask “why not me?”

“I have five beautiful kids now. Did I suffer in the past? Heck Yeah. Do I have a greater appreciation for everything? You bet. I had to work 10 times harder but as a result I appreciate everything 10 times more.”

With this perspective, Eskew says it is hard for him to have sympathy when people tell him that they’re too old, too busy etc...

“My friend Raj is a triple amputee. His swim time is faster than mine,” he shared. “We are never too old to pursue our dreams. Pursue dreams daily.”



Now if you think all of Eskew's stories deal with perseverance, they don't. There's a very light side to Eskew's journey as well.

"So to many folks, I'm affectionately known as Mr. Potato Head because I didn't have an ear for my entire life until 4 ½ years ago," he joked. "In addition, if anyone knows me, they know I love dancing and it is my duty to share this talent with everyone."

He then recalled that one time in the last 4 ½ years after he got his prosthetic ear, he was on the dance floor putting on his best moves, but when he finished there was no applause. He wondered why.

"Finally, someone comes up and says, 'Hey, you left your ear on the dance floor.'"

The audience at BELIEVES erupted in laughter.

Eskew went on to share the story of how he qualified for the Kona Ironman through the [Kona Inspired video contest](#) and the myriad of providential encounters with people who made it possible along the way.

"As a result, of God's plan, I was able to share the story of what God had done in my life through suffering the burns. If I had qualified as regular athlete, the story wouldn't have ever been told. Was all of this coincidence? I don't think so," said Eskew. "Coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous."

Eskew made sure to let everyone know that his is not the only story of inspiration they'd hear at BELIEVES when he shared the [story of Dick Hoyt](#), whose son, Rick, has cerebral palsy (www.teamhoyt.com).

"Dick's marathon time is faster pushing his son than Lance Armstrong's without. Ten years ago, Dick had a heart attack but he didn't even know it because his heart was so strong. If you asked Dick forty years ago what he thought life would be like, what being a dad would be like, this isn't what he'd have imagined, but he wouldn't trade it for anything. He's impacted millions and done 1000s of races. Dick wasn't originally a runner. He did all this because his son, Rick, saw a kid get paralyzed in a 5K, and said, 'Dad, I want to do this' and that's how it started."

When it was time for questions at the end of Eskew's message at BELIEVES, some attendees realized the session had gone well beyond when BELIEVES typically wraps up, but it didn't matter – almost everyone stayed extra.

John Monroe, CFO at TradeRocket asked Eskew, "You work, have 5 kids, and you train. How do you do it?"

Eskew responded, "First, I don't watch TV. Second, I train at 4 AM everyday. Third, my wife gets two day of breakfast in bed every week. There are always excuses. I have workout gear in my car always."

When asked by someone else how he instills toughness in his kids in this day and age of ‘helicopter parents,’ Eskew responded, “I believe in doing as little as possible for them. Crying and yelling gets no response. Blood gets attention. Biggest disservice we’re doing is making it easy for our kids. We tell our kids that anything we do, we do 100%. You can be last, but you don’t quit. Our question to our kids after anything is always, ‘Did you have fun? Did you do your best?’”

Another BELIEVES attendee then commented, “What an incredible story. What happened to the other young man that was burned?”

“In life you have two choices,” said Eskew. “You can sit at home and feel sorry for yourself, play the victim card. Or you can make the most of a bad situation and tell yourself that you’re not going to let this define who you are.”

Then Yovany Jerez, a regular BELIEVES attendee and Corporate Training Manager at AT&T asked, “How do you do faith?”

“We’re Catholic,” stated Eskew. “I do a lot of praying when I run. I don’t wear headphones, so there’s lots of time talking with God – just recognizing God’s gifts and who it is all from. I truly believe if I don’t use the gifts He’s given me to the fullest, I will lose them. After lying in the hospital bed for all those months and learning how to walk again, you realize just how lucky you are to be able to do the daily things that we all take for granted.”

Gregg Ficery, Founder and President of Integra Advisory Services, then shared that he had been a competitive tennis player in college, and was curious how Eskew balanced serving versus achieving?

“It’s not about winning,” replied Eskew. “I love to win, but what really matters is did I make the most of the gifts I’ve been given. I can always win knowing I gave it all I got. Money and other things are just indicators, metrics. What I look for is waiting to see who God brings in my life and I serve there.”

CTK parishoner Sharon Zukauckas, closed out the session with a final comment when she said, “I just wanted to say you are the best speaker we’ve had, and especially with Father’s Day coming up.”

For more information on Eskew’s life journey, you can also check out the following USA Triathlon article about Eskew from 2012: [Forged by Fire](#).