Missionary tells story of being kidnapped, held hostage

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Missionary [Gracia Burnham](http://www.graciaburnham.org/index.asp?sec=1_1) shared her compelling story of captivity, loss and forgiveness at Liberty University’s convocation on Wednesday.

Her visit was part of [Missions Emphasis Week](http://www.liberty.edu/news/index.cfm?PID=18495&MID=37362), which is held every semester at Liberty. This fall, the theme is “How Will They Hear?” Many missionaries came from all over the world to network, educate and recruit students.

For 17 years Burnham served in the Philippines alongside her husband, Martin, a jungle pilot, with New Tribes Missions. The Burnhams’ three children were born and raised in the Philippines.

Abu Sayyaf Group, a militant group, kidnapped the Burnhams on May 21, 2001 while they were celebrating their 18th wedding anniversary at Dos Palmas Resort off Palawan Island. They were held hostage for 376 days, enduring starvation, many gun battles and even cold-hearted murder. Martin was killed June 7, 2002 in a firefight between the Philippine military and the Abu Sayyaf Group. Gracia was injured, but was able to escape and return to the U.S.

On Wednesday, Gracia was transparent about her testimony and her authenticity about her life story impacting students. She shared how she was bitter toward the hostages, the government, and God for the situation when she was in captivity, where she

“In the beginning of my hostage days I thought I was the good one and they were the bad ones … then the real me started to surface and it was shocking,” she said.

Gracia explained how Martin helped her to see her sin and showed her how to love her enemies.

“My hatred was replaced with concern and even love for them,” she said. “Contentment began to grow in my heart as I learned to keep putting the situation I was in back into God’s hands because it was too great a situation for me to fix.”

Upon returning to the U.S., Gracia was in the national spotlight and has been interviewed by The New York Times, BBC News and Fox News, and has become a popular speaker for churches, conferences and schools. She has written two books, In The Presence Of My Enemies, and To Fly Again.

Gracia was at Liberty during Missions Emphasis Week last spring, talking in classes and helping recruit as a representative of New Tribes Mission. She had been invited to speak in the fall and said she was saving a recent development in her story for Wednesday’s convocation -- finding some of the men who held her and her husband hostage, now imprisoned in the Philippines.

She said that while most people would never want anything to do with them, these 23 men were like her family because she lived with them, starved with them, and hiked with them for a year. God has given her compassion and love for them, she said.

Gracia encouraged students when they’re enduring difficult circumstances to remember God’s sovereignty and grace in their own lives. She testified that three of the men have become Christians while in maximum security prison. One of the criminals had 20 acts of violence against him.

“Gracia gave us a good perspective of what it means to be a martyr of dying to self every day and living for Christ by putting every day into perspective,” said senior Emily Ladnier, who plans on serving in the mission field as a nurse after graduation.

Gracia and her family donated the plane that Martin flew in the Philippines to Liberty this past year. (View a local news story [here](http://www.wset.com/story/14038585/famous-author-donates-plane-to-lus-aviation-program?redirected=true).) Gracia said she couldn’t think of a more appropriate place for the plane to be than Liberty, where missionary pilots are trained. Gracia’s oldest son, Jeff, graduated from Liberty University with a degree in aviation. He is now a missionary pilot serving with Flying Mission Services in Botswana, Africa.