

Former bank robber heads Angel Tree ministry

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KILLEEN—The founder of Prison Fellowship's [Angel Tree ministry](#), which provides Christmas gifts for inmates' children, always considered herself an overachiever.

"I overachieved all the way to the FBI's most wanted list," Kay Beard said.



Kay Beard, founder of Prison Fellowship's Angel



Tree ministry.

Kay Beard, bank robber on FBI's Most Wanted list. Her early years showed no indication of her criminal future. She grew up on an Alabama farm, the middle child of nine, and said her mother, Grace, was the most godly woman she's known.

"I can't remember a time when Sunday wasn't spent in that little country church. There were some seeds planted deep in my life that never disappeared. When the Lord plants a seed, it stays planted," she said during a recent service at Pershing Park Baptist Church in Killeen.

She graduated from high school at 15 and became a licensed nurse before she turned 18, but she still found life lacking.

She was even teaching children's Sunday school, but she remained an angry young woman. She decided the pastor was the problem, and she could worship just as well at home.

"I had a lot of stuff, but I hadn't found that love, joy and peace."

She began to read about all sorts of religion and philosophy, "but I quit reading the Bible," Beard admitted.

After a while, a coworker asked her to go on a blind date with a friend, and Beard married the man nine days later. Because of their brief courtship, she didn't discover some important things about him—for instance, his identity as a professional gambler and safecracker—until later

He taught her safecracking techniques, and she began her life of crime. Soon, they accumulated great wealth through bank robberies and other criminal activities.

“The only time I had a problem with that was when I went home to see Mama,” Beard said. “In Mama’s house, if you slept under her roof, you went to church on Sunday. Sitting in that little country church, I remembered what I really wanted in life. I had a lot of stuff, but I hadn’t found that love, joy and peace.”

Her husband abandoned her after five years while she was hospitalized for cancer surgery. Her criminal career ended in June 1972 at age 27, when the FBI arrested her.

“The only emotion I had left was relief,” she recalled. Law enforcement in four states issued warrants for her arrest, and she faced 11 federal indictments against her—35 charges in all, ranging from grand larceny to armed robbery.

While she was in jail awaiting trial, God began working in her life again. Christians from several churches visited the jail each week, and the love and compassion she saw in them caused her to look to the Bible again.

She was sentenced to 21 years in the Alabama State Prison for Women, with no possibility of parole until she served at least seven years. She served only five.

“They’re still not real sure how that happened, and I didn’t ask for an investigation,” she said.

In prison, she noticed church groups brought the inmates gifts of toothpaste and soap. She watched as her fellow prisoners wrapped up the small gifts and gave them to their children during Christmas visits.

“Most children wouldn’t think much of such small gifts, but in prison there was such joy on their faces,” Beard said. “It didn’t really matter to them what they got. It was from Mama.”

After becoming Prison Fellowship’s state director in Alabama in 1982, one of her assignments was to create a Christmas program for inmates. But during a speaking engagement, the focus changed when someone asked about the inmates’ children.

She recalled those wrapped-up toiletries, and Angel Tree Ministries began to take shape.

In the 30 years since the program began, more than 9 million children in the United States have received a gift on behalf of an incarcerated parent. The ministry has spread to all 50 states, and churches provide much of its support.