

EDITORIAL: A bright light of humanity snuffed out by Islamic State



In this May 30, 2013, photo, Kayla Mueller is shown after speaking to a group in Prescott, Ariz.

MATT HINSHAW — Associated Press

A person's 20s can be an age of idealism. Kayla Mueller had decided to become an aid worker in Aleppo, Syria, a decidedly unidealistic place. Riven by civil war and run by a corrupt dictator, Syria is a free-fire zone for fascists, zealots and corruption.

Mueller, who was from Prescott, Arizona, would have none of that. Her life was dedicated to service. When she got there, she said in an interview that "for as long as I live, I will not let this suffering be normal."

Now, normal 20-somethings are going to college, starting families and preparing for the long journey ahead of them. Some volunteer; others do not. But for Mueller helping others was who she was.

She volunteered to help victims of HIV/AIDS and domestic abuse, and assisted the poor in India. She volunteered with AmeriCorps, Big Brothers Big Sisters, America's Promise, Youth Count and Open Inn. She was learning French so that she could go volunteer in Africa.

Mueller then decided that those stunningly selfless efforts weren't enough and traveled into the heart of human darkness in 2012. She volunteered for the human rights groups, the Danish Refugee Council and Support to Life.

And that human darkness, the darkest of the dark, was Syria, where Islamic State operates. The terrorist group's depravity is difficult to convey in words. Last week, the organization put a Jordanian pilot in a cage and immolated him, then released a 26-minute video showing the horror. They have sawed off the heads of journalists. We'd say they kill as casually as jackals, except that jackals kill to eat, not for some sick nihilistic pleasure.

In August 2013, Islamic State terrorists abducted Mueller outside a Doctors Without Borders hospital, where she was helping a friend. They demanded \$7 million in ransom. Her parents and the U.S. government kept her identity a secret during the negotiations.

At the idealistic age of 26, Mueller was killed by the terrorists. She may have died when Jordan, in retaliation for the killing of the the pilot, bombed a building in which she was held. It doesn't really matter precisely how she died, though. Islamic State killed her.

Even in captivity, she didn't complain. She said she was being treated well, and had put on weight. She wrote this in 2014: "If you could say I've 'suffered' throughout this whole experience it is only knowing the suffering I have put you all through."

Don't worry, Mom and Dad. I'll be fine.

Now, there is selflessness in the world. There is altruism in the world. There are loving daughters in the world. But it is impossible to fathom the depth of character that Mueller demonstrated in the clutches of her feral jailers.

Mueller also wrote this in the same 2014 note: "I have come to see there is good in every situation, you just have to look for it."

This passage is eerily reminiscent of a diary entry that Anne Frank wrote: "It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart."

Most people are.

But in the fanatical world of the Islamic State, where normal is setting a kid on fire and idealism is severing human heads on video and posting them on YouTube, sick delirium threatens the good at heart.

Mueller was good at heart. She never dropped her ideals, either, and they were not absurd or impossible to carry out. The absurdity is in others' continuing deafness to her words and work.

She also wrote this: "I will not give in no matter how long it takes."

Read that, Islamic State.

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