

AGAINST THE FLOW

by Shawn Strannigan

Sam and Maranda, a young couple from a small Alaskan village on the Yukon River, have experienced more than their share of heartache and trouble. But by the grace of God—and the loving example of InterAct missionaries Jim and Sue Manzella—they have chosen to follow Jesus. And they intend to bring their family and friends along with them!

Sam was raised in Grayling by alcoholic parents. During his teen years, Sam followed in his peer's footsteps and succumbed to heavy drinking and drug use.

Sam had never been introduced to the concept of having a personal relationship with Jesus; but when Jim and Sue Manzella moved to Grayling in 2003, their walk with the Lord caught his attention. Recovering alcoholics themselves, Jim



Sam and Maranda participate as a family at the Grayling church.

and Sue¹ modeled such an attractive combination of grace and truth that Sam felt irresistibly drawn to them.

As his life grew more tumultuous, the love of Christ continually beckoned Sam back to the missionaries' house.

Maranda spent her early years in Grayling, but moved with her alcoholic mother to nearby Shageluk in 1990, when her father went to prison. Her first exposure to the gospel was through her grandmother, who took her to the small church led by InterAct missionaries Bruce and Flo Walters.

The sermons never captured Maranda's attention, but the music soothed her young heart. She'd sit quietly and listen as hymns were sung, drawing comfort from the lyrics. Her grandmother's favorite, "I've got a mansion just over the hilltop," soon became the song Maranda loved best.



Everyone felt the joy when Jim Manzella baptized Maranda.

¹ Read Jim & Sue's story, *An Unlikely Second Career*, at www.interactministries.org.

Maranda moved back to Grayling as a young teen and became ensnared in the deadly cycle of drug and alcohol abuse. She started seeing Sam and gave birth to their first child at age 17.

Sam and Maranda married a year later. Their relationship was rocky from the start, and bad choices threatened to destroy their young family.

One fight in particular nearly ended the marriage – and Maranda’s life. In desperation after his wife’s suicide attempt, Sam reached out to the Manzellas for help. They responded with wisdom and grace, and invited the young couple to church.

Although she hadn’t been to church since her grandmother died, Maranda reluctantly agreed. The following Sunday, it wasn’t the sermon that touched her heart—it was the music! The first hymn just happened to be “I’ve got a mansion,” and Maranda’s soul was bathed in God’s comfort and peace as she sang the familiar lyrics.

At the end of the service, she surrendered her life to Jesus. And so did Sam.



Sam uses his music ability at the Grayling church to make a difference in the kids’ lives.

Together, they made a commitment to follow Him, no matter the cost. They gave up drinking, drugs and cigarettes cold turkey, and these substances no longer have any appeal. Their marriage is growing stronger in the Lord. They have been faithfully working alongside the Manzellas, serving in any way they can.

While many Native believers feel it is too difficult to stay and minister in their own villages (there is a great pull from old friends and family to go back to the old ways), Sam and Maranda believe the Lord has called them to stay in Grayling.

“I want the kids here to know that drinking and doing drugs are not normal activities,” says Sam. “I want to give them hope and help them go against the flow.”

One of the ways Sam hopes to accomplish this goal is to resurrect the nearby Rapids Bible Camp as an avenue of outreach to the village youth.

Please pray for Sam and Maranda and their three daughters. Pray that the Lord would heal the wounds of the past, give them strength and wisdom for the future and the grace to follow Jesus every day. Pray that they will be a beacon of hope for the youth of Grayling..