



For my neighbour -  
you are not forgotten!

Yes, we missed Wimbledon, but here's a former champion's heart-warming story of forgiving her abusive father

# HOW PIERCE FOUND PEACE

## Grand Slam winner Mary Pierce tells how her tennis and life changed

**THE last French woman to win the French Open has opened up about the faith that helped her succeed – and forgive her abusive father.**

As well as that singles title at Roland Garros in 2000, Mary Pierce won the 1995 Australian Open and 16 other WTA singles titles.

The former world number three and two-time Grand Slam champion also represented France internationally in team competitions and the Olympics.

Born in Canada to an American father and a French mother in 1975, Mary held citizenship of all three countries.

But until she retired from the game in 2006, home was a hotel room and a tennis court. Her father, Jim, moved the family first to Florida and then, just before she turned pro at 14, to France in search of greater tennis opportunities. She competed most of her career for the country, the homeland of her mother, Yannick.

In the tennis world she was

known for her aggressive playing style and fast serve (her first serve was clocked at 139mph), but also for suffering badly from nerves.

This was hardly surprising, given the toxic relationship she suffered with her father, who was also her tennis coach.

**"I grew up scared every day"**

"Hell on earth" is how she describes life with her father during her teens. He was "so hard, mean and scary. I grew up scared every day."

There were public dressing downs after matches. It was reported that after one humiliation at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, Mary fled into the locker room crying.

There were also terrifying tirades at opponents and in 1993 the WTA banned her now-notorious father from attending events. Nevertheless, the incidents escalated.

By Andrew Halloway

At 18, Mary cut herself off from her father: "I was like, 'I'm out of here. I'm an adult and no-one can tell me what to do any more'."

Shortly after distancing herself from Jim, he instigated a fist fight with her newly-hired bodyguard in an Italian hotel corridor. The minder returned with a knife and stabbed him in the arm, which he claimed left "blood pumping everywhere" and resulted in a four-inch scar.

**Battling**

Other women might have buckled under the pressure and chosen a quieter life, let alone gone on to win championships. Mary continued on the tennis circuit, battling nerves and climbing the rankings.

Then, the year before the French Open win, Mary got to know fellow player Linda Wild. Mary felt there was "something special" about the American's personality, which she now knows was the joy that comes from "having Jesus in her heart".

After further conversations, Mary decided she wanted the same thing. In March 2000, at the age of 25, just three months before the French Open, she became a Christian, a change so great in her life that she describes it as being "born again" – the same term Jesus used to explain it.

"That is the moment my life completely changed," she says. "It was a period where I was looking for something more. Even if I had everything in my life, I felt an emptiness."

After asking Jesus into her life, "an extraordinary peace washed over me. I knew I had been saved. Everything made sense and I realised that this was God's plan for my life."

Mary told the Daily Express this year that she would not have won the French Open without the peace she found in Christ: "The two were related.

tennistame.com



In 2019, Mary Pierce was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame

Playing the French Open as a French player was always the hardest event of the year because there is so much pressure, so much expectation.

"It took all the pressure off and the stress. I felt it was going to be the year I would win Roland Garros after my first round. It was a little voice inside me."

Even the journalists saw the difference in her: "I got to Roland Garros and the media were saying, 'You look so different, you've changed, you are more peaceful and calm, you don't get so mad any more at important points. Have you done some mental training?'"

"I explained I hadn't: 'It is just that my life belongs to God now. It is in his hands and his control so I have nothing to worry about.' It totally changed my outlook."

She told the BBC: "I was looking for the truth, answers to my questions, something that was going to bring me peace and heal my heart."

Mary Pierce lifted the French trophy that summer, and no home player has won it since. (She was due to celebrate the 20th anniversary at Roland Garros in June, but the Covid-19 travel bans put paid to that.)

**Forgiveness**

In addition, her new-found peace helped Mary break free of her father's malign influence.

**"Our relationship was restored. It was a miracle"**

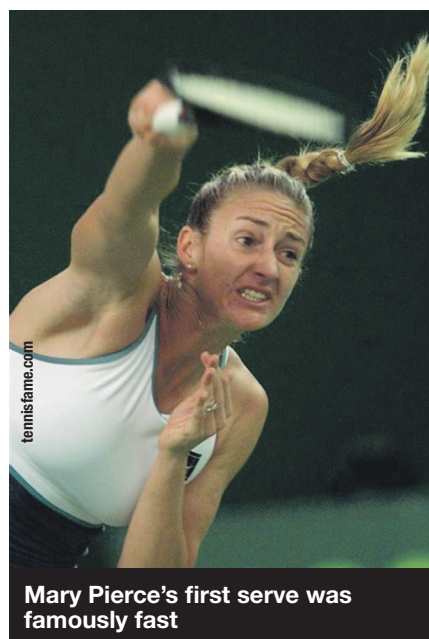
After becoming a Christian, "I was able to forgive and love my dad and our relationship was restored. It was a miracle when you think about everything that happened."

When her father had cancer, Mary took care of him. One day, while in hospital, her father started crying. "He said sorry for everything. He was just so grateful and thankful. And I

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Mary Pierce with the French Open trophy in 2000



Mary Pierce's first serve was famously fast





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## HOW PIERCE FOUND PEACE

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said: 'It is OK, Dad. I have forgiven you already.'

Jim died aged 81 in 2017, wonderfully reconciled to his daughter.

Having experienced God's love for her, Mary wanted to spend her life helping others. After a knee injury in 2006, she moved into missionary work and coaching.

Talking to the BNP Paribas Open website, Mary commented, "I had been to Mauritius in 2005 to visit a church there and I just fell in love with the people and the church and the island so in 2008, when I couldn't play any more and I was tired of rehabbing (trying to get match fit again), I decided I wanted to go there."



Mary at a tournament in 2014

In Mauritius, she fed children what "would sometimes be their only meal of the day" and taught English. She also cared for geriatric patients in a hospital in Zimbabwe, washing their hair and cutting their nails.

After settling in Mauritius, in 2010 she started coaching her neighbours' two Mauritian children, Emmanuel and Amaury de Beer, who were 11 and 14 at the time, after their coach left. No doubt Mary was determined to make their youthful coaching experience completely different from her own hellish years and she helped them for five years.

By 2019 she was still happily settled in Mauritius, telling the New York Times, "The two best things about Mauritius are the people and the clear turquoise water. The first time I went there, I felt like it was exactly what I was looking for, praying for. My heart felt at home."

In July 2019, Mary travelled to Australia to be inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame. At 45, the former champion radiated joy and peace.

Today, Mary continues to put her faith into action: "I want to touch people's hearts and change people's lives for the better."

# WRESTLING FOR JESUS

**"Pray, eat, wrestle, repeat" is the motto of the wrestling champ who survived sexual abuse and sleeping in a skip**

by Chris Eyte

**LIGHTS** beam onto the wrestling ring and the crowd roars as the contender waves his rippled arms and gets ready to grapple with his opponent.

Not many people would know that 'Gareth Angel', to use his ring name, had offered to pray for his opponent before the fight began.

Nor would they realise that for the professional wrestling champion, 33, the real grappling happened when he was younger - surviving sexual abuse and sleeping homeless in a rubbish skip.

### Struggle

Gareth Thompson has won over a dozen championships across six different companies. But he recalls that his childhood was only about struggling to survive.

**"I would find my mum in pubs to get the house keys"**

"My parents divorced when I was six and after this my mum hit the drink hard; she became abusive and unhinged.

"My dad wasn't to be seen at all. I would often have to take my two younger brothers to school, feed them and find my mum in pubs to get the house keys from her."

Gareth's only escape was staying with his Catholic grandmother on Friday nights, who prayed with him. His mother went out at weekends and the boy had different babysitters. She was

not to know that her son would be preyed upon by one of the babysitters, who violated Gareth sexually between the ages of seven and eight.

"This made me withdrawn, very meek and placid. I was confused, hurt and scared. I didn't know what to do, how to stop it. I finally plucked up the courage to tell my mum one night.

**"I spent eight weeks sleeping in a skip"**

"This was 11 November 1995. I remember clearly because of the poppies that everyone was wearing. That night I was taken to the hospital and examined, and my abuser was arrested. Shortly after, there was a trial and once it was all out in the open I thought things would improve.

"My mum took it really hard, though, and I was bullied at school."

At 15, Gareth was thrown out of home to fend for himself. He hadn't finished his GCSEs, so started working as a window cleaner.

"I lost my job quickly and spent the next eight weeks sleeping in a skip before finding myself at Bradford Foyer, a homeless hostel."

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Tony Knox

'Gareth Angel' has had to fight both inside and outside the ring



"I do my best to be a positive role model and ambassador for Christ," says Gareth



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## Crying

Gareth found a girlfriend there and they moved to his home town, Keighley, where they struggled with debt. One day, on the way to get Gareth's tongue pierced, the couple met friends who invited them to church.

## "I felt my heart ripped open"

"This church was different – no pews, no organ. A live band, comfy seating, open space to worship and dance – you could interact. During the worship time, I felt my heart ripped open.

## "I was absolutely blubbing"

"I caught myself crying and a real sense of home and love that I had never felt before came over me. I tried to act like a hard man, but I was absolutely blubbing. I had attended a Catholic school as a child, but this was completely different. This was personal and relational; it was about love, forgiveness and redemption."

After the service, a man came over and told him, "I know why you were crying. God has told me that you've just felt love for the first time in your life, and you didn't know how to deal with it."

That message made up Gareth's mind. "I decided to give this a shot; I gave my life to Christ and things moved pretty quickly."

## Grief

Although he started attending church regularly and did an Alpha course to learn more about Christianity, his relationship with God remained "surface level" outside church.

He got married in March 2011, but experienced grief when his grandmother died the same night. His wife also later left him for another man.

"I almost instantly retreated from God, feeling hurt and blaming

him for her death. I thought things were supposed to be better once you were a Christian, but I wasn't looking at my life the right way."

The same year, Gareth started training as a professional wrestler: "Wrestling had been a massive escape for me as a kid – I used to love characters with 'superhuman' capabilities." He progressed quickly through the training school and was soon doing shows part-time.

## "God, I'd love to be able to forgive my abuser"

A friend from church, Dave Kendall, noticed that Gareth was attending Sunday services less often and offered to mentor him one-to-one. He encouraged Gareth to pray and read his Bible daily and helped him get out of debt. This led Gareth to make peace with both his parents, as well as his ex-wife.

## Fear

However, the issue of his sexual abuser remained on his mind. In 2013, he prayed a simple prayer: "God, I'd love to be able to forgive my abuser, but I need you to help with that, because I'm stuck."

The very next day, he found himself in front of his former abuser. The man, released from prison for his deeds, turned up at the computer exchange store where Gareth was working as a supervisor.

"Here I was, face-to-face with the man who caused me so much pain and changed the course of my life forever. My first thought was that I could hurt him and make him feel what I felt. I wasn't a little boy any more; I was a man.

"My second feeling was fear and trepidation. But ultimately I had two choices – make a move or make an excuse.

"I handed him his DVDs, looked him in the eyes and said, 'I forgive you.' I felt a huge weight lift off me. I was 'freaked out' yet it was OK; I needed that closure."

The amazing timing of their encounter proved to Gareth that he could entrust



Gareth and Beth got married in October 2018

his life to God: "From then on, I started taking God seriously."

## Spectacular

Gareth's life improved and in 2015, he joined The Light Church in Bradford. He struggled internally with the question of what to do with his wrestling career now he was a Christian; some people at church felt that wrestling was too violent, although he personally describes the sport as "safe but spectacular".

"I asked myself, 'Why am I doing this? Is it just an ego trip?'" But one day, while listening to a sermon, he realised that he could use the platform that wrestling afforded him to share his faith with others.

"Once I got serious with God, I chose the name 'Gareth Angel'



Gareth doing the 'cross face' move at a fundraising event for Christians Against Poverty in May 2019



Gareth, Beth and baby Isabella, born on Valentine's Day 2020

met at church; their first child, Isabella, was born on Valentine's Day 2020.

## "I never imagined I'd be performing in front of crowds, with Jesus in my heart"

## Performing

Today, Gareth works part-time for Christians Against Poverty, a debt counselling charity, and part-time for his church. He also

has his own ministry (gtministries.co.uk) with Christian Vision for Men, performing at churches and gatherings on the weekends: "We've seen hundreds come to faith [in Jesus]."

He adds: "My T-shirts say: 'Pray, eat, wrestle, repeat'. There are kids wearing those T-shirts, praying with me during my entrance.

"I never imagined that I would be performing in front of crowds, with Jesus in my heart, and be leading others to know him. I am blessed beyond my wildest dreams and thank you, Jesus, for not giving up on me."

A similar version of Gareth's testimony appeared in Challenge newspaper in March 2019

## Gareth's life lessons

"I'm a work in progress, as we all are," says Gareth, who says that forgiveness has been the key to moving on. Here are his tips:

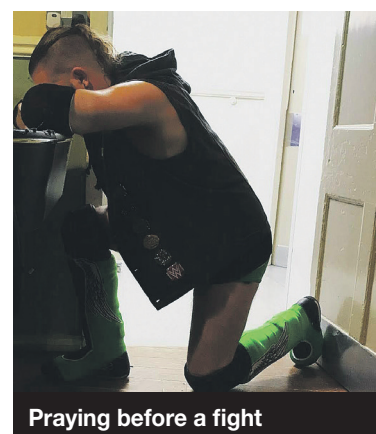
1. There is hope for us all and with Jesus, anything is possible.
2. Forgiveness doesn't mean you are a doormat; if someone is hurting you, it's OK to cut them from your life.
3. Forgiveness is for your own benefit, as it releases you from the burden of unforgiveness.



Gareth and Bishop Philip North at St Andrew's, Leyland, for an outreach event with Gareth's ministry in 2019

to reflect my faith. Having grown with Jesus, I've also evolved as a character, quoting Scripture, praying before my matches and doing my best to be a positive role model and ambassador for Christ."

God was taking care of Gareth's personal life, too, and in October 2018, he married Beth, whom he



Praying before a fight



# FRIENDLY CHURCHES NEAR YOU

We can't guarantee when they'll be holding meetings, but do call them for a chat and say you found out about them in this paper. See the full list of counties and towns that get this paper on page 18



## EAST & WEST SUSSEX

### ANGMERING

- **Angmering Baptist Church**  
Sundays 10.30am, 6.30pm
- **Immanuel Church**  
Meeting in St Margaret's School at 10.30am, Arundel Road, Angmering West Sussex BN16 4LP  
[www.immanuelchurch.org.uk](http://www.immanuelchurch.org.uk)

### ARUNDEL

- **King's Church**  
07956 789 112  
Sundays 10.30am  
10 Tarrant Street BN18 9DG

### BATTLE

- **Battle Baptist Church**  
01424 774825  
Mount Street, Battle, East Sussex TN33 0EG  
[office@battlebaptistchurch.org.uk](mailto:office@battlebaptistchurch.org.uk)  
[www.battlebaptistchurch.org.uk](http://www.battlebaptistchurch.org.uk)

### BOGNOR REGIS

- **The King's Gate Church**  
07594 780515
- **Our Lady of Sorrows Church**  
01243 823619

### BRIGHTON

- **Brighton Elim Church**  
07523 849646  
The Fountain Centre, Braybon Ave, Patcham, East Sussex, BN1 8HG  
[christy@brightonelim.org.uk](mailto:christy@brightonelim.org.uk)  
[www.brightonelim.org.uk](http://www.brightonelim.org.uk)

### HAYWARDS HEATH

- **Lindfield Evangelical Free Church**  
01444 483576
- **Ruwach Christian Church**
- **RCCG –The Joy of All Souls**  
0800 093 8766  
Former Kents Road Church, Kents Road, Haywards Heath, RH16 4HL  
[admin@thejoyoffallsouls.org](mailto:admin@thejoyoffallsouls.org)  
[www.thejoyoffallsouls.org](http://www.thejoyoffallsouls.org)

### HORSHAM

- **RCCG Living Faith Assembly**  
07878 108989  
Holbrook Community Centre, Holbrook, RH12 5PP  
[www.rccglfa.org.uk](http://www.rccglfa.org.uk)  
[info@rccglfa.org.uk](mailto:info@rccglfa.org.uk)

### PEVENSEY

- **Ellel Ministries**  
01323 440440

### SOUTHWICK

- **Christian Community Church**  
01273 870103  
Sundays 10.30am  
1-5 Roman Crescent, Southwick BN42 4TY  
[info@southwickchurch.org.uk](mailto:info@southwickchurch.org.uk)  
[www.southwickchurch.org.uk](http://www.southwickchurch.org.uk)

### WALBERTON

- **Walberton Baptist Church**  
01243 584435  
Sundays 10.30am and 6.30 pm  
The Street, Walberton BN18 0PH
- **St Mary's Church**

### WESTERGATE

- **Westergate Christian Fellowship**  
01243 263821  
Sundays 10.30am at Eastergate Village Hall  
[davegwenlan@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:davegwenlan@tiscali.co.uk)  
[www.westergatefellowship.co.uk](http://www.westergatefellowship.co.uk)

### WORTHING

- **Coastlands Church**  
01903 600584  
Sundays 10.30am, 6.30pm  
Sidney Walter Centre, Worthing, BN11 1DS  
[office@coastlands.church](mailto:office@coastlands.church)  
[www.coastlands.church](http://www.coastlands.church)
- **Highdown Church, Durrington**  
Contact: 07871 195572  
[www.highdownchurch.org.uk](http://www.highdownchurch.org.uk)

## BRISTOL

### HARTCLIFFE

- **River of Life**  
[www.riverlife.co.uk](http://www.riverlife.co.uk)

## CORNWALL

### PENRYN

- **Stirring of the Water Ministries**  
07968 080258  
[enquiries@stirringofthewater.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@stirringofthewater.org.uk)

### TORPOINT

- **Grace Community Church**  
**01752 815331**

## DORSET

### BOURNEMOUTH

- **Discover Church**

## GLOUCESTERSHIRE

### FAIRFORD

- **Fairford Christian Fellowship**  
07900 190190

## HAMPSHIRE

### FAREHAM

- **Living Word Church**  
Henry Cort Community College, Hillson Drive, Fareham, PO15 6PH  
Sundays 10.30am.  
01329 841619  
[www.livingwordchurchnetwork.uk](http://www.livingwordchurchnetwork.uk)

### SOUTHBOURNE

- **Southbourne Free Church**

## KENT

### FOLKESTONE

- **Cheriton Pentecostal Church**  
Sundays 10.30am, 6.30pm  
5 Park Road, Cheriton, Folkestone, Kent, CT19 4DG  
[cheritonpentecostalchurch.co.uk](http://cheritonpentecostalchurch.co.uk)

### KNOCKHOLT

- **Knockholt Evangelical Church**

## LANCASHIRE

### ROSSENDALE

- **Menorah Faith International Congregation**  
01706 218683

## LEICESTERSHIRE

### LEICESTER

- **Cropston Evangelical Free Church**  
Sundays 10.30am

## LONDON

### WESTMINSTER

- **Emmanuel Centre & Church**  
020 7222 9191  
9-23 Marsham St, Westminster, SW1P 3DW  
[www.emmanuelcentre.com](http://www.emmanuelcentre.com)  
[enquiry@emmanuelcentre.com](mailto:enquiry@emmanuelcentre.com)

## SURREY

### GUILDFORD

- **Bethel Christian Assembly**  
01483 898083  
Sundays 10am  
[office@bethelchristian.org.uk](mailto:office@bethelchristian.org.uk)  
[www.bethelchristian.org.uk](http://www.bethelchristian.org.uk)
- **New Hope Church**  
[www.newhopeguildford.org](http://www.newhopeguildford.org)

## WALES

### LLANDUDNO

- **Emmanuel Church**

### VALE OF GLAMORGAN

- **Rhose Village Church**