

The Beaumont Enterprise

Bridging the Gap

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By TODD SONNIER / The Beaumont Enterprise

NEDERLAND - Annie Stewart no longer lives with a demon. Neither does Anthony Shepard. Stewart's demon kept her isolated and afraid. In the years since her kidnapping, she had lived in a cocoon. Even if you didn't see me as an outcast, it didn't matter. I was an outcast, she said. I rejected relationships with people and rejected mingling. I played that role that nobody is going to accept me. And she had violent thoughts about her kidnapper.

Last year, Stewart volunteered for Bridges to Life, a program that brought her face-to-face with inmates whose offenses were similar to those who victimized her. She did so reluctantly. The one thing I was afraid of coming into this program was that the nightmares would come back, Stewart said. I worked so hard for those to stop.

Shepard's demon was a different one, rage. An inmate at the LeBlanc Unit, Shepard said he was recruited for Bridges to Life after having a soul-baring conversation with the warden. That's one of the things about this unit. I knew when I came here that I was six months from going home. At that point, I still didn't feel like I was a changed person, he said. I killed a man in 1981, so I know what it is to be angry. I know what rage is. But I never was able to look myself in the mirror and say I was an angry person.

Bridges to Life is a faith-based program founded by Houstonian John Sage in 1998. His sister was murdered in 1993. Sage created the program as both a source of empowerment for victims and rehabilitation for inmates. It is currently in place, in the LeBlanc Unit, the Carol Vance Prison Unit in Houston, and the Walls Unit in Huntsville.

Susan Detweiler, regional coordinator for Bridges to Life, said the program's primary goal is to discourage repeat offenses by released prisoners. Of the 135 Texas inmates who have been released since completing the program, only six have returned to prison since their release. Most of the about 90 prisoners who have completed the LeBlanc Unit program have been released and none have returned. The overall rate of return for inmates in Texas prisons is about 50 percent.

The theory behind Bridges to Life is that by getting to know crime victims, offenders will be discouraged from hurting others. They do that by sharing stories with one another, victims tell about their incidents, in-mates about their offenses. Then they break into discussion groups. Each week of the 12-week program focuses on a different theme, such as domestic violence. Group members share their stories relating to that topic, and guest speakers often are brought in.

Monday, Henry Hubbard narrated the different chapters in his life in which domestic violence has played a part, like seeing his mother fire three shots at his father when Henry was seven. As he told the story of the first and only time he ever physically attacked his wife, he paused to collect himself. "I didn't want to do it. I tried to run off but she wouldn't let me", he said. She hit me, so I hit back. I hit back one too many times and she stabbed me. I woke up in the hospital and my best friend was standing there crying.

By sharing such personal information, facilitators hope to form a bond between offenders and victims. Hopefully, if (inmates) see the impact of their crimes on other people, they won't go out there and do it again, Detweiler said.

Inmate Joe G. Garcia never really saw things through his victim's eyes until he formed a bond with victim volunteers in the program. That's when I realized that the people I hurt are you, Garcia told the group. "Now I realize the damage I had done was done to the same people who come to this unit and talk to me and try to help me."

Inmate Jose Tirado said though he was reluctant to speak to the group, opening up was therapeutic. "When I started the program, I didn't want to talk about the things that had happened to me and that I had done", Tirado said. I told myself I wouldn't talk about it. But I did and felt a lot of comfort. I told my friends that after I did I could sleep a lot better. Coming here has allowed me to vent and release some feelings I didn't even know I had, Hubbard said. Just listening to these people talk about what they've been through, what they're going through has helped me do that. At first I thought I was just going to be a whipping boy for someone to vent their anger on. It turned out to be altogether different. It has helped me.

Detweiler said many victim volunteers also find the program to be a healing experience, though she rarely tells them that when she is recruiting. Most of them feel like they're doing the inmates a favor when they first go in, she said. But some of them do get a healing out of it, depending where they are in the healing process.

Stewart's nightmares did not return. She also has found the program a therapeutic one. I'm finding out that it's okay to share what you've been through, she said. There are so many ways that this program has healed me from being able to share my fears, to being close to these men to even being a wife. It also has reduced the stress caused by her now-gone desire for revenge. In my mind, I had murdered that person, she said. I don't have those thoughts anymore. Being free in my mind, I can be free in my heart, and I can be open. I can love again. I can use what happened in my life to be a blessing to others.

The anger that had burdened Shepard throughout his life also is gone or, at least, better managed. Through this program and the therapeutic community, I started seeing things in myself when I saw other people acting out this rage, he said. I can talk about those things in my-self that I never wanted to talk about. I've facilitated anger management classes here for three months now. Had I made these changes 20 years ago, who can say where I might be? Somewhere other than here.

Volunteer's last names are never disclosed to inmates. Once the program has run its course, the bonds that have been formed are permanently broken. As a precaution, victim volunteers cannot contact released inmates previously involved in the program, and vice-versa. If we find out that they have, they are no longer able to work in the Bridges to Life program, Detweiler said. And it is very hard to do. Believe it or not, you form a bond like a family.

Although Bridges to Life is a biblically based program, volunteers of any faith are welcome, Detweiler said. For more information on the Bridges to Life program, contact Susan Detweiler at Susan@bridgestolife.org.

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