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Family members reach out, help to build bridges

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By AMY PEARSON / The Beaumont Journal

When Chris Castillo's mother was killed in 1991, he never thought he'd find himself trying to help the very kind of people who took her life.

In fact, when Susan Detweiler, Bridges To Life regional coordinator, approached him about speaking to prison inmates about his experience, he thought "she was nuts."

"She doesn't know what she's asking me to do," Castillo said he thought at the time.

However, Detweiler did. A victim of a violent crime herself, Detweiler knew exactly what she was asking Castillo to do by becoming a Bridges To Life volunteer and spending 12 weeks, several hours a week, with prison inmates who had committed violent crimes.

"The point of Bridges To Life is to take crime victims into prison to affect prisoners with what they've done to victims," Detweiler said.

Houston resident John Sage, who lost a sister to a slaying, founded Bridges To Life, a Texas-wide, faith-based outreach program. Since 2000, Bridges To Life has provided services to seven prisons in the state. They have graduated 813 prisoners from their program. Currently, 579 of those prisoners have been released, 50 have returned to prison, for a recidivism rate of 8.6 percent.

"It's a very successful program," Detweiler said.

The program runs for 12-week segments. Volunteers spend at least 2.5 hours a week, and one 8-hour day, with inmates. They work in a large group, then break into small groups for more intimate discussion.

At first, most inmates are "pretty nervous" about meeting crime victims, according to Detweiler.

"They're afraid we're going to use them for a verbal whipping post," she said, "But pretty quickly they find out we're there to help."

Castillo said the volunteers are often initially pretty nervous as well.

"It feels like you open yourself up and your guts spill out onto the floor," he said.

However, both sides tend to become comfortable quickly, Castillo and Detweiler agreed.

“In my small group, I told them I didn’t know why I was there,” Castillo said, remembering his first session with Bridges To Life. “One of the inmates said to me, ‘You’re here because you want to make a difference’. A light bulb came on for me.”

The sessions cover topics like “what is crime,” forgiveness, reconciliation, DWI, domestic violence, child abuse and robberies. On opening day inmates face an impact panel of crime victims collectively, although about 85 percent of the program is done in small groups of five inmates, two victims, a facilitator and a co-facilitator.

“We stay in small groups so there is the chance for volunteers to build a relationship with and really affect these inmates,” Detweiler said.

“After 21 years of prison, I got my compassion back for human beings. I never knew the hurt and pain I caused until I sat in front of a victim,” said an inmate testimonial on the Bridges To Life website, www.bridgestolife.org.

The inmates who attend the program are there voluntarily as well, and are usually close to being released. The volunteers use only their first names with the inmates, but that doesn’t prevent a close relationship from forming.

“You get to know them, you share a lot and you end up getting pretty close to them,” Castillo said. “I’ve met incredible people through this program.”

Castillo said volunteering for Bridges To Life had provided him a lot of closure on his mother’s slaying.

“I was pretty lost,” he said. “But it gave me closure to get in there and talk about what happened.”

Castillo said he sees firsthand the affects of the program on the inmates. Through the course of the program, he said, he sees the inmates change for the better. He also sees the volunteers change and grow.

“Everyone in there has an impact on someone,” Castillo said, “Initially, I thought I was going there for them, but I get as much out of it. There is healing on both ends.”