

Greater Houston Weekly

Bridges to Life -- A Christmas Story

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In June of 1993, Houstonian Marilyn Sage Meagher was attacked and brutally murdered by two teenagers intent on stealing her car. The pretty single mother was moving clothes from the trunk of her car to her apartment when the pair, Erica Sheppard and James Dickerson, slipped inside. As she walked into her bedroom, they stabbed her with three different knives, repeatedly hit her with a small mother-and-child statue and then suffocated her with a plastic bag as she cried for mercy. Less than 48 hours later, they were arrested. A few months after that, they were sentenced to Death Row in Huntsville. Dickerson died nearly five years ago of AIDS while Sheppard remains there, one of the few women awaiting execution by the state of Texas.

This is not a very Christmasy story it may seem, but I chose it specifically as my holiday column. Why? Because of the path taken by Marilyn's brother John Sage in response to that horrific crime.

"In the months after my sister was murdered," Sage said, "I went into a valley of anger, rage, and depression. I couldn't sleep; I couldn't eat. I was in a very bad place. The pain was absolutely gut wrenching. I got to the point where I had trouble working."

The Sages grew up in a large, Catholic family. Only 19 months apart, they were closer to each other than to the rest of their siblings. They shared the same friends in high school, the same car while at LSU. John married Marilyn's best friend; they were all inseparable.

Marilyn lived in the same apartment complex as Erica Sheppard's brother. Sheppard and Dickerson were staying there when they decided they wanted to go to Bay City. During testimony, it came out that the murderous pair decided one night to "find a skinny woman and do what they had to in order to steal her car," John told me. "They stalked a few women in the parking lot the night before the murder. The next afternoon, we think it was around 5 or 5:30, they decided upon my sister."

Later that evening, Marilyn's daughter found her 43-year-old mother in a blood-soaked hallway. And nothing was ever the same.

The family was overwhelmed with grief – and then rage. "I was in a horrible, paranoid, cynical place. I was really struggling with the idea that you could just be walking down the street and a stranger could just kill you."

Sage says he has always had a strong religious faith and his solution to overcoming his pain was to seek answers in God. He spent five years praying, reading and studying the Bible which eventually led him to volunteer for the Sycamore Tree, a pilot prison

program, centered on offenders. In the spring of 1998, while volunteering, John Sage got the idea to start a ministry of his own. Bridges to Life began in November of 1998 with one employee – John Sage. Today, it has five full-time workers and they will be adding a sixth after the first of the year.

Bridges to Life is about reconciliation and forgiveness. But it is not centered on the inmates – its real target is the victims. Those who join as volunteers are of two types: victim volunteers have been impacted by serious crime and volunteer facilitators, who can be anyone. Bridges to Life brings inmates and victims together, although they do not share the same crime circumstance. Twenty to 30 volunteers commit to work one project, which is one 12-week course. They travel to the prison and then split into small groups. Using a course outline, the group discusses responsibility, accountability, confession, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, all within the context of telling their personal stories.

“When I started in the prisons,” says John, “I had never been around a group of people in my life who have absolutely no empathy for other people. None. Somewhere in their life they had missed the lessons of caring for others. They might think for a second about the person they were raping or killing, but had no idea of the ripple effect their crime would have on the victim’s family or on their own.”

Bridges to Life, Sage says, tries to create empathy in the offenders, to give them a conscience. The crime business is tough and produces tougher people, he admits. “We’re just trying to improve the odds.”

Sage’s path of transformation is somewhat a mystery to him, even today. Saying it is hard to describe how things went from such despair to such a productive place, Sage acknowledges God.

“It has been a phenomenon that such a good thing has come from such a tragedy. The most amazing thing is how much it does for the volunteers. It is a dual ministry. Our spiritual mission is to show the transforming power of God’s love and forgiveness. I started this because I had to do something about my pain and to try to see that others wouldn’t have to go through what we did.”

The intense anger most people feel after a family member dies in such a terrible way surely must have provoked a murderous rage in him too. Didn’t he want to take a gun and kill the murderers himself, I asked him.

“Well, I really wanted to choke them with my hands – I could visualize myself doing that. The death penalty is a very complex subject. There are strong arguments on both sides of the issue. Bridge to Life has no official position on the death penalty; but my personal opinion, however, is that I believe Texas juries should be able to assess life without parole.”

Since 2000, 1,780 inmates have completed the program run by hundreds of volunteers. Of those, 1,368 have been released from prison with 152 returning, an incredible 11 percent recidivism rate. The program does not have state or federal funding; donations come from individuals, churches, and organizations. In 2004, 17 Bridges to Life projects were completed in 10 different prisons.

“To see my family is such terrible pain, when they were paralyzed with grief, I just had to do something. I don’t know how it has all happened. Somehow it came to be that we saw the paradox of relief coming from talking to offenders. They have had tough lives with many so abused. But what the program does for the volunteers! They have a deep level of gratitude for their life, no matter what the past holds. You really can’t be angry and grateful at the same time,” John says.

Perhaps this is a message of Christmas – forgiveness, peace and finding light even in the darkest times. I don’t know how you go from the sort of piercing anguish experienced by John Sage to such purpose and all-encompassing forgiveness but God was clearly the orchestrator.

You can learn more about Bridge to Life at www.bridgestolife.org. The organization has 20 projects planned in 2005 and welcomes volunteers. [“Restoring Peace, Using Lessons From Prison to Mend Broken Relationships”](#) a book by Kirk Blackard, details the vision, concepts and mission of the Bridges to Life program. It is available for \$20 through the Web site.