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Soul Freedom

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By RICHARD VARA / Copyright 2000 Houston Chronicle Religion Editor

PATRICIA Stonestreet is free. She has escaped from the prison of anger and sorrow that came with the 1986 murder of her 28-year-old daughter, Lisa Stonestreet.

John Sage is no longer filled with hate and rage. It was a rage so profound that he barely stopped himself from killing one of the two people convicted of capital murder in the 1993 stabbing death of his sister, Marilyn Sage Meagher.

Gilda Muskwinsky's faith has opened the door to meeting and working with the imprisoned murderer of her 17-year-old daughter, Raynell Muskwinsky.

Stonestreet, Sage and Muskwinsky have learned over the years that hate cannot incarcerate open hearts.

"If you truly, truly want to be free when you have something devastating done to you, you need to forgive," Stonestreet said.

The three will speak on forgiveness and reconciliation Sunday during the Roman Catholic Diocese of Galveston-Houston's Day of Healing service. The 2:30 p.m. service at All Saints Catholic Church, 215 E. 10th in the Heights, will begin with 45 minutes of music featuring the Harris County Sheriff's Chorus, the Plane State Jail Choir of Dayton and the St. Bartholomew Catholic Church Hispanic Choir.

The service, open to members of all denominations, is intended for crime victims and their families, ex-offenders and the families of the incarcerated, said Deacon Darrel Moulton, a former prison chaplain and now assistant director of correctional ministries for the diocese.

Many clergy "don't know how to deal with these people" who have suffered violence, Moulton said. "Many times the clergy is insensitive to their needs."

Violent deaths are different from accidental deaths and those that follow illness -- and the survivors often need more time and help to deal with it.

"They can't do that on their own," Moulton said. "They need to have assistance."

The annual Day of Healing provides some of the inspiration, solace and encouragement to bring hope to devastated lives, he said.

"One thing it does is give you peace," said Stonestreet, a Protestant who also participated in last year's service. "It was very wonderful and had a lot of healing in it. Lives can be touched, and anytime you can be touched, life can be changed."

Here are the stories of lives touched by hate and forgiveness.

Patricia Stonestreet's life changed forever in June 1986 when her daughter, a legal secretary, was choked and drowned by a serial rapist who lived next door to her southwest Houston apartment.

Kenneth Bernard Harris was arrested six weeks later and convicted of her murder. He was executed in 1997.

"It was absolutely devastating," Stonestreet said. "It nearly tore our family apart. It left a great big gaping hole in our lives and in our hearts."

Lisa was buried three days after her murder, and although the assailant was then unknown, the family decided to forgive him. "We made the decision to forgive the young man the night they buried her, but it was several years before the completion of the forgiveness came," Stonestreet said.

"I really did not actually hate him, but I was angry that he could take part of our lives and turn our lives upside down."

The pain subsided slowly. "Every time I would open (the Bible), the Lord would bring forgiving Scriptures to me," Stonestreet said. It took a few years, but eventually she decided to completely forgive.

"My life had been so bound up and so tortured for so long, I really needed to be free. The Lord told me in prayer one day that that the reason people need to forgive is because he doesn't want their lives destroyed."

It was a miracle for her that the same week she decided to forgive, everyone in her family -- her husband, her two sons and her remaining daughter -- all forgave, as well.

On the night Harris was executed, her daughter told him in a note that the family forgave him.

"I am sorry for all the pain I've caused both families -- my family and your family, too," Harris said before he was executed. "I have had time to realize the pain I have caused you. I hope you can go on with your lives and we can put an end to this."

Her youngest son, now 38, recently announced he is engaged. "He said he could never get married until he was totally over this," Stonestreet said.

Stonestreet, an interior designer, now volunteers to speak to prison inmates in a prison ministry.

"My life will never be back to normal. But it is rebuilt and it is even better today because I am doing more for the Lord than I have ever done before."

Marilyn Sage Meagher was 43, a divorced mother of two teen-agers and a successful real estate agent. She was stabbed and clubbed to death June 30, 1993, by James R. Dickerson and Erica Sheppard, both then 19. They killed Meagher to steal her car.

John Sage, one of four brothers and three remaining sisters, was consumed by anger and rage. "If she had been killed in a car wreck or something, we would have had a grieving period and probably gotten over it.

"But (it was) the horror of someone taking knives and stabbing and beating one you love in such a vicious manner," said Sage, a successful businessman.

Even more traumatic was when Sage saw Meagher's bloody apartment a week later. He wanted to kill, and he nearly did at Dickerson's trial a year later.

"I started walking toward him in the courtroom and saw my hands go around his throat," said Sage, a former all-American tackle for Louisiana State University and 19 months older than Marilyn. "I really felt my hands ripping his throat apart and killing him."

Only his conscience and the dismal consequences for his wife and two children kept Sage, a Catholic, from acting out his rage.

Today, Sage no longer harbors hate or rage. He doesn't want the death sentence imposed on Sheppard to be carried out, although he does want her to remain in prison for the rest of her life. Dickerson, who also had been sentenced to death, died in prison last year.

Sage has formed a prison ministry, Bridges to Life, that brings together prison inmates and victims of crime in an attempt to break the cycle of prison recidivism.

For Sage, the healing began after Sheppard's trial in 1995. He remembers walking from the courtroom and realizing that a horrific nightmare in his life was concluded.

"You never really completely heal," but forgiving is part of the Gospels, he said. Through believing in redemption, people can change. That is the value of the Day of Healing, he said.

"People come here searching for something. They are hurting."

In her heart, Gilda Muskwinsky knew her daughter was dead when she woke up at 1:30 a.m. Aug. 15, 1984. Raynell and her fiance, David Lopez, had gone out on a date. Her

daughter's curfew was 1 a.m., and she always turned off a hall light to let her mother know she was home.

When Muskwinsky woke up, the light was still on. "Raynell was a good kid about calling," she said. "No matter where they were, she would call me. I knew she was someplace she couldn't call. I just knew she was dead."

Her daughter was the victim of a drug transaction gone awry. Lopez, 20, was buying cocaine from Steve Wayne Figueroa, 17, while Raynell waited in a car. Figueroa, intending to rob Lopez, shot him and then shot Raynell when she screamed.

"She was at the wrong place at the wrong time," her mother said.

Figueroa and David Botello, then 16, robbed the couple and placed their bodies in a car they rolled into Brays Bayou.

Figueroa was sentenced to life in prison, and Botello was given seven years.

Muskwinsky admits she hated the killers and everyone associated with them, including their families. "If they had a dog, I would have hated the dog," she said. "The first two years, I was kind of numb and angry. It was a mixture; you would churn and go from one to the other."

Over time, she began to realize that the families were not at fault.

Ten years after Raynell's death, Muskwinsky met with Figueroa through a state mediation program. They spent six hours together.

"I told him what he did to my family," she said. She took a photo album that she had put together for her son who was 14 when his sister was murdered.

"My main purpose meeting with Steve was to let him know that Raynell was a real live person; she was not pretend or imagined. She was a real live person with a real future that was taken away from her."

"I have not forgiven him," she said. "It is not my job to forgive him. I think that is between him and his God."

But she met with the Figueroa family in January and has forgiven them. His father wants to arrange a visit to Raynell's grave. The Figueros are planning to attend the Day of Healing.

Muskwinsky and Figueroa are cooperating in a program to bring together victims and inmates.

"A lot of offenders want to meet with the victims, but many victims are not willing, which is understandable," she said.

Muskwinsky, a Catholic, credits her faith in surviving Raynell's death.

"If it had not been for God, I would not have made it," she said.