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LSU graduate's program pairs criminals, crime victims

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John Sage has traveled a long, sometimes painful journey since his days as the LSU defensive captain of the 1970 SEC championship football team. The business finance major never thought his life would take the direction it did in 1993 when his 43-year-old sister, Marilyn Sage Meagher, also an LSU graduate, was brutally murdered in Texas by two 19-year-old strangers whose identified motive was to steal a car and money.

What Sage didn't know then was that her death would be the impetus for a new life direction, a restorative justice program, Bridges to Life, he founded in his home state of Texas. The program has been so successful that Sage was honored with the 2004 Social Entrepreneur Award by the Manhattan Institute in New York City. The award is given to the founder of an organization that meets social need, is innovative, and receives little or no government funding.

Inmate Juan Garza holds hands with volunteer Betty Even at Jester 1 Prison Unit in Richmond, Texas. They are participating in the restorative justice program Bridges to Life, which the founder says he would like to bring to Louisiana. From Texas, Sage said he hopes the program, which brings victim volunteers together with prison inmates, will spread to other states, including Louisiana, now that a book about the program -- "Restoring Peace, Using Lessons from Prison to Mend Broken Relationships" -- has been released.

The restorative justice concept is not new to Louisiana, according to the Rev. John Johns, restorative justice coordinator for the United Methodist Church in Louisiana. It is, however, further along in some states than others, he said. Even though Louisiana has "probably incarcerated more prisoners than anywhere else, we don't network very well."

Johns, who also coordinates Grace Camps where children of prisoners come together in a camp setting, said there is a new momentum toward restorative justice. What he would like to see, he said, is better recruitment, funding, public relations and more communication between community agencies, prisons and denominations.

"There is a real market for this," Johns said. Considering the number of people in the system, from the criminals and their families to the victims and their family members, "that's a pretty good chunk of people in Louisiana involved in the criminal justice system," he said.

Bringing victims and prisoners, not their offenders, together is one of the more exciting and dramatic ways to bring healing to the two parties, Johns said. "I've talked to a lot of

people in situations (such as Sage's) that, rather than drown in bitterness, they want to get involved in these types of programs," he said.

It was Sage's journey after his sister's death that brought him into the depths of the justice and prison systems, and along the way, through an overwhelming bout with depression.

"The first two years were enmeshed in trials. That was the first chapter, so to speak. I remember walking out of the courtroom after the second trial thinking 'What's next?' I was on a spiritual journey from the time that happened for about five years. I was traumatized, anxiety ridden, depressed and in a bad place. It affected my work, my life, family and my internal person," Sage said.

"I was cynical about the world, but I never doubted my faith. The only solution I knew was a closer relationship with God, a more spiritual life."

Five years after the murder, he learned through the state's Victim Services Division about a pilot program the prison was implementing with inmates and crime victims. He volunteered and said he was moved by the changes he saw in the hearts of the inmates.

The concept of restorative justice was unknown to him in those days, he said. What he would learn, he said, was that once prisoners are released, they often return to the prison system. "While we've got them in prisons, why not do more while they're there?"

In talking to the inmates, Sage said he began to see there was very little rehabilitation effort addressing victim awareness and victim impact. Initially, some authorities were hesitant to embrace the inmate/victim contact because they considered it potentially too emotional and volatile. He would take those early observations and experiences and turn them into an expanded concept and curriculum.

Bridges to Life was formed in 1998 and began its pilot program in one Texas prison the following year. The 12-week program that brings victims together with prisoners, not their offenders, had 41 inmate graduates in 1999. The program is now in about 15 prisons, and there have been nearly 1,800 graduates. The start-up wasn't without a few problems.

"The biggest challenge was why would a victim want to go into a prison? At first, I spent a lot of time begging volunteers to participate," he said. There are now about 300 active volunteers, and about 80 percent that participate in more than one project, he said. Once they get involved, the program becomes a positive influence in their lives.

Being in a prison setting among murderers, armed robbers and drug dealers means that victim volunteers hear things many have never heard about, he said. "It's a learning experience and very emotional. Everyone tells their story, and the inmate has to take responsibility."

The 12-week project typically includes 40 inmates and 25 volunteers divided into small groups for discussion purposes. The confidential faith-based discussion groups typically

include five inmates and three volunteers and often there is a healing response on both sides, he said.

While the program is faith-based, Bridges does not try to convert the inmates to any particular faith. Volunteers and inmates are of all faiths, including Muslims, agnostics, and others "who don't know what they are," he said.

Sage describes the program as a spiritual process, one that is designed to enhance faith and spirituality. The curriculum does include Scripture, and while volunteers can talk about their faith, they may not preach.

"It's been therapy for me to work through some of those issues. If my life background had been like many of theirs, I may have ended up in prison. You grow in your understanding of the other side of the problem. You don't excuse it, but you understand it better." The program is transformational, he said, because it has the "change of heart component."

As for his sister, Sage said she is always on his mind and he often feels her presence in his work. "My sister was a warm, nonjudgmental, loving person. I think she would be pleased."