

The Catholic Herald

Finding forgiveness

In murder's aftermath, faith-based program helps families, offenders heal

03/10/2002

By JENNIFER LIM / Texas Catholic Herald Staff Writer

HOUSTON - "Do you believe in angels?" asks Gilda Muskwinsky. From her worn pocketbook, she pulls out a creased, laminated photo of the young girl whom she believes has been her angel for 16 years. "My daughter was so pretty. She was just beautiful."

Most would agree she was. Soft, chestnut hair hemmed the slender face of 17 year-old Raynell, Muskwinsky's only daughter. A model with the Prestige Agency, the teen was about to begin her senior year at Northshore High School when she was murdered with her fiancé, August 15, 1984.

That was a Tuesday night, Muskwinsky recalled. The pair was found the next morning in a car, shot by two boys close to Raynell's age. After the funeral, Muskwinsky got into a truck and started beating the dashboards with her fists. "I couldn't stop myself. I kept screaming."

The Catholic mother of two said she had so much hatred in her heart that she scared herself and her family. "I did not just hate those two boys, I hated their families; I hated everything about them. I would have hurt any one of them, if I thought it was going to make them hurt like I did."

It was the same kind of fury that engulfed John Sage in 1993, when his younger sister, Marilyn, was murdered by two 19 year-olds stalking her apartment complex. Sage was a year older than Marilyn, a single mother of two who was killed at age 43. At the first teenager's trial in May 1994, Sage said he "literally saw (his) hands around (the offender's) throat."

"At that point in time, I would have felt good about killing him. That's where I was; that's how much rage I had."

But after nearly two years of sleepless nights, Sage said he turned to God to make sense of the pain. "God just led me on a spiritual journey," said the St. Michael parishioner, who also attends St. Anne Church. Sage began joining Bible studies and reading books by Henri Nouwen and Scott Peck.

Four years later, a reporter asked him if he was excited that an execution date had been set for his sister's second killer. His response? "No."

Instead, Sage simply wished the inmate would not be released from prison. 'I was kind of overcome with the realization that I wasn't angry anymore...and to me, not to be angry, not to be upset, not to be full of rage was my definition of forgiveness.'

It was a forgiveness, Sage said, that he hadn't intended to give. "I just set out on this spiritual journey for a closer connection with God. And I think this (forgiveness) came as a result of grace."

With that newfound grace, in Nov. 1998 the businessman founded "Bridges to Life"; (BTL), a faith-based, restorative justice program in which victims like himself and Muskwinisky talk to prison inmates about what violent crime did to their families. According to Sage, the goal of the 12-week project is two-fold: to discourage offenders from returning to prison by facing up to victims, and to help victims process their trauma and develop an empathy for offenders.

"The (program's) ultimate hope is for God's love and forgiveness to transform" the victim and the offender, said Sage, executive director of the non-profit organization. In confidential groups which couple four inmates with two victims and a facilitator, each participant shares his or her experience of crime. The program includes a six-hour training for victims and a three-hour training for inmates.

"I tell them, 'You need to look into our eyes and see the pain,'" said Muskwinisky, who has volunteered for five BTL projects. "My daughter was killed in 1984...and the pain is still there." Like the other 175 victim volunteers and chaplains, Muskwinisky said she channeled her suffering into BTL because she agrees that inmates "are not going to be rehabilitated until the see what they do, until they see the devastation they cause."

In addition to praying during the two-hour sessions, group members also discuss topics such as responsibility, forgiveness and restitution. The curriculum outlines scripture verses which relate to each week's theme. Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Atheist inmates have participated in BTL.

The program, which is currently implemented in the Carol Vance Prison Unit in Houston, the LeBlanc Unit in Beaumont and the Walls Unit in Huntsville, targets offenders who are scheduled to leave prison within 18 months. Inmates who voluntarily participate in the program are required to share their story of crime with their small group, as well as write a letter to their victim and to their victim's family.

Paula Kurland said she feels "a little bit more healing" each time she completes a BTL project. In 1986, Kurland's oldest daughter was stabbed to death on her 21st birthday in her Austin apartment. "Mitsy's murder destroyed my life," said the St. Mary Magdalene parishioner. "It's been almost 15 years, but in some ways, it's only been five minutes."

Kurland was reluctant to work with offenders. "When I first did (the program), I couldn't see that I would get anything out of it," she said. "What could I possibly receive from those people?"

What she was given, Kurland said, was the awareness that there are people in prison "who are basically good people, but they've made a lot of bad choices and they're having to live with the consequences of their choices." The Houston native does not pretend the program is easy. "It's very difficult for me to be a room with people who have killed people," said Kurland, who has told inmates about her daughter's murder in six BTL projects since Feb. 1999. "But it's not very difficult for me to share the pain; I can give them all the pain that they caused."

Still, the program is not a chance for victims to simply express anger at offenders, she explained. "By doing BTL, inmates listen to our pain, but they also see our love," Kurland said. "Our hope is that they go out...and start helping other people and become productive citizens who don't hurt anyone anymore."

Since its inception, 226 inmates have completed the BTL process; of those, 135 were released from prison and only six (or 4.5 percent) have returned. The normal recidivism rate for Texas is 50 percent, according to Sage.

"Believe it or not," Kurland continued, "victims and offenders bond during this process." However, that relationship is terminated at the end of each 12-week project, since released inmates and victim volunteers are not allowed to contact each other after the sessions end.

"My level of forgiveness has reached the bottom of my heart," Kurland added. "It's not easy to get to this place, but there are a lot of victims who do reach this place."

Muskwinsky admitted she is still trying to arrive at that stage of total forgiveness. But through a state-sponsored mediation (in a program separate from BTL), she met with her daughter's killer in 1996 for seven hours, and met with his family in Jan. 1999.

The mother no longer "hates" the family of her child's murderer, admitting she even feels compassion for his kin. "After four or five years, I realized it was not his mother or father, it was not his sisters or brothers who did this. It took a long time for that (understanding) to come."

And perhaps a longer time to forgive her daughter's shooter. But Muskwinsky said she sensed her angel's presence in the mediation, asking for just that. "She was saying, 'Mom, you need to forgive him.'"

The mother hopes if the teen is released from prison, he might turn from a criminal way of life, like those in BTL.

"If he does get out, I do want him to become a productive person." "At least," she said, "make something good come out of this."

BTL was named an exemplary program by the Texas Corrections Association last year.

This May, Sage will accept the 2001 Governor's Criminal Justice Volunteer Award for Restorative Justice. Anyone who has been dramatically affected by crime is welcome to volunteer for BTL. Although most participants are of Christian faiths, people of all denominations are welcome. For more information, call (713) 463-7200 or e-mail JSage1@aol.com.