



When Crime Victims Speak

by Valerie Padley, Communications Manager
Bridges To Life

What does it mean to be a crime victim? What are the costs—physical, emotional, spiritual—of such violation? And once this violation has occurred, how does that victim heal?

Bridges To Life (BTL) is a 14-week restorative justice program that brings crime victims into the prison setting to share their stories with inmates. The program was designed in this way to help crime victims heal. In fact, this was the primary intention of BTL's founder, John Sage, so that other families would not have to go through what he and his family did in the aftermath of his sister's murder in 1993. "Marilyn was a beautiful person, and her tragic death affected many people," he says. Though the two killers were caught, tried, and received death penalty sentences, John continued to be haunted by Marilyn's murder and endured an extremely difficult period for several years following the tragedy.

Searching for a way through his pain and grief, in early 1998 John volunteered for a pilot program that brought people who had been seriously affected by crime into the prisons to meet with inmates and share their stories. He saw compassion sparked in the inmates as they awakened to the impact of crime on real people, and victims found it healing to be heard. That experience spurred John's own healing forward and provided the catalyst for founding Bridges To Life later that year.

Over the course of the 14-week BTL program, volunteer facilitators guide inmate participants through a carefully constructed curriculum which includes homework questions, reading, journaling, and telling their own life stories. **But it is the power of victim impact—the sharing by crime victims of their experiences—that is at the heart of the BTL process.**

Jim Buffington, BTL's Chief Operating Officer and a crime victim himself, understands the value of sharing his story. He has been a TDCJ Victim Services volunteer since 2000 and participates on victim impact panels along with other crime victims. Jim tells of the devastation of losing his mother who was murdered when he was just 12 years old. Adding to that pain was the eventual discovery that it was Jim's own father who ordered the contract killing. "Honestly, it was anger that motivated me to speak on victim panels when I first started. I wanted those inmates to feel bad about the things they'd done, and my story was horrific enough to accomplish that."

Jim began volunteering for BTL in 2004, which provided another platform for sharing his story. On four occasions during

the 14-week BTL process, a crime victim comes into the prison to speak before the inmate participants about the impact of crime on their life. Afterward, the inmates discuss the story in their small group sessions which are each led by two volunteer facilitators, one or both of whom may be a crime victim. Inmates have not typically considered the impact of crime from the victim's point of view. For most, the experience is both eye-opening and humbling, and creates the opportunity to take a deeper step. As Jim explains, "In the BTL process, inmates have to look at what factors in their lives led them to make the choices they made so they can take responsibility for those choices. Hearing the victim's story is the beginning of that process."

It's no coincidence that almost all of BTL's 18 staff members have been affected by crime at some point in their lives; in fact, many first came to BTL as volunteers. Being a crime victim is not a requirement to volunteer for BTL, but that experience is a common thread. In my case, I was not familiar with the organization when I was hired, and later started volunteering as a way to learn first-hand about the program. That's when my life changed.

On my first night as a small group facilitator, sitting in the circle with 10 inmates and my BTL co-facilitator, one inmate asked whether either of us were victims of crime. To my astonishment, a light bulb went on in my mind and I heard myself answer, "Yes, I am." It's not that I'd forgotten about the sexual assault I experienced at 15, it's that no one had ever called it a crime. Instead, because it had happened at the hands of several college friends of my older brother, the whole event had been swept under the rug within my family and never mentioned again. That such awful things "sometimes happened to girls" was a source of shame, not outrage or empathy, and certainly not a matter for the police or court system.

After this revelatory moment in my first BTL small group, I became a crime victim speaker for the program and started telling my story. Each time I did so, it was as though a layer of dirt was being washed from my body. I felt cleaner and freer and lighter as I let go of a burden I'd been unwittingly carrying for years. And the inmates who listened to my story responded with compassion each time, some even approaching me afterward to

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apologize for what I'd been through. One in particular said, "If you can tell your story in front of all of us, then I can tell mine." And that night in his small group, he shared how he had been molested by an older boy when he was 9 years old and had never spoken of it until that moment. In Bridges To Life, we seek to make inmates aware of the ripple effect of crime, showing them through the words of victims how crime causes harm to the individual, their family and friends, and the community. When inmates feel empathy for victims, the door opens to taking responsibility for their own criminal actions and moving forward in more positive ways. **And so, the crime victim's story has a ripple effect, too.**

The term "restorative justice" is heard more and more often these days as society recognizes that incarceration alone, while often necessary, is not the entire answer to the problem

of crime. The goal of a restorative justice program such as BTL is to connect the victim and inmate in a way that promotes healing and change on both sides of the prison bars. I have been privileged to hear the stories of other crime victims in the BTL program, as well as to tell my own. And I can say with certainty that when crime victims speak, healing happens.

Crime victims who are interested in participating in Bridges To Life as a speaker or facilitator may contact BTL at 713-463-7200 or contact@bridgestolife.org to learn more. BTL volunteers need not be victims of crime to get involved. Check out the Volunteer page at www.bridgestolife.org for more information.