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Faces of Forgiveness

An East Texas prison ministry is trying to heal crime victims (Jim Buffington, left) and rehabilitate criminals (Kelly Schunior, right) by getting them to talk. PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARAH WILSON | TEXT BY PAMELA COLLOFF

The Next Frontier 110

How has the state's most storied ranch managed to survive and thrive in the twenty-first century? By operating in a way that its founder, Captain Richard King, would scarcely recognize.

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So what if Sandra Brown's novels have wildly implausible plot twists, banal endings, over-the-top characters, and other literary no-no's. She's published nearly 70 of them since 1981, and 55 have gone on to be best-sellers. We're sure the sex scenes have nothing to do with it.

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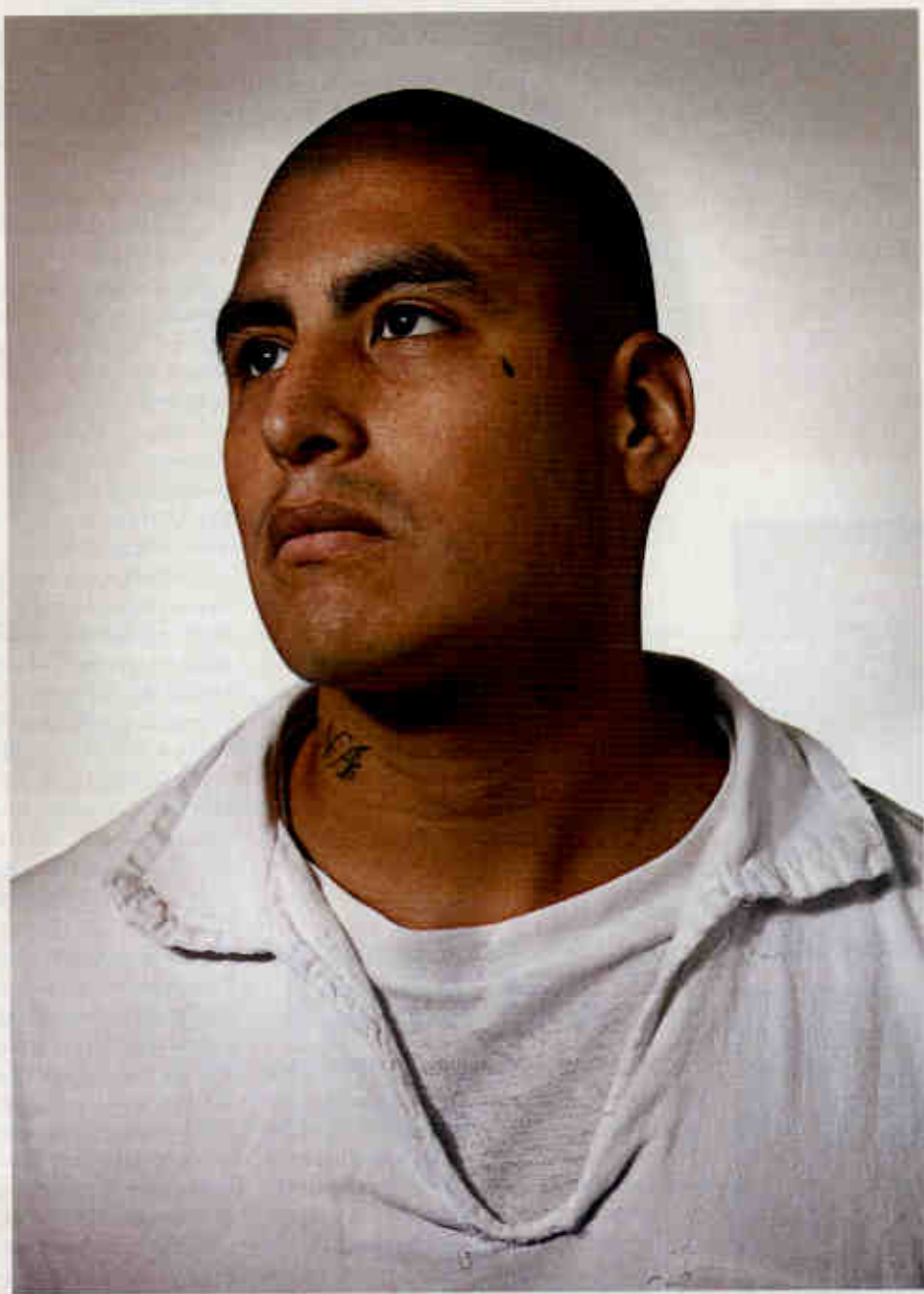
True-life tales from the files of one of Houston's top divorce lawyers.

BY MIMI SWARTZ

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faces of forgiveness

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARAH WILSON / TEXT BY PAMELA COLLOFF



ALBERT ANAYA, Inmate, Central Unit, Sugar Land

"I'M IN FOR INTOXICATION MANSLAUGHTER. It happened on March 14, 2003, over spring break. I was leaving a beach party, and I got in the wrong lane going sixty-five miles per hour and hit a truck head-on. I killed a lady and injured her friend. My little girl Aaliyah was with me. Now she walks with a limp, and I'm not sure she will ever be normal again. In prison, I heard a lady's story that changed me forever. She told us how her husband and oldest daughter had been killed by a drunk driver. I had never thought of it from the victim's point of view before. I talked to her afterward and told her how sorry I was for doing that. I felt as if I was the one who had hit her husband and daughter."

A prison ministry in East Texas tries to rehabilitate criminals and heal victims by doing something inventive: bringing them together.



BOB AND KATHY CONNELL, Victim volunteers, Crockett

"WE LOST FOUR OF OUR KIDS TO A DRUNK DRIVER IN 1997," KATHY SAID.

"It was a Friday night, and they were coming back from a football game in Centerville. Allen was nineteen, Laurel was seventeen, Leo was fourteen, and Sara was twelve. They were all good kids. The only reason we were able to move on was because we got back in touch with the Lord.

We started speaking at prisons and telling our story so inmates could see that crime victims have a human face. Each of these inmates is somebody's child, somebody's brother.

It has made the senseless loss of those kids a little less senseless."

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LOSING A CHILD IS UNBEARABLE;

losing four children in one night is the hell that Bob and Kathy Connell had to live through in 1997, when a drunk driver hit their kids' car head-on. "Someone could have dug a fifth hole in the ground for me, and I would have laid down beside them," Bob says. "The pain was more than we could stand. But there came a point when we had to decide if we were going to die along with them or if we were going to join the living." He and his wife decided to get involved with a prison ministry called Bridges to Life, and during visits to prisons around East Texas, they began having face-to-face conversations with inmates, including men who were serving time for the same crime that had claimed their children's lives. "It started off as a way to try to persuade people not to drive drunk, and it turned out to be a way to heal ourselves," Kathy says. ¶ Bridges to Life is one of only two prison ministries in Texas that are trying to rehabilitate violent offenders by creating a dialogue between inmates and crime victims. (Volunteers are not paired with the people who victimized them.) The eight-year-old program is an example of restorative justice, an approach that encourages offenders to see the profound impact that their crimes have had on others and to take responsibility for their actions. The fourteen-week program, which inmates participate in shortly before they are released on parole, requires them to listen to crime victims' stories, take part in weekly discussion groups, and write a letter (which is never sent) to their victims. In discussion groups, all information remains confidential, and repeat offenders often break down in front of their peers as they recount stories of hard-luck childhoods and bad choices made along the way to the penitentiary. Many inmates—who have often seen themselves as the victims—are startled to hear the devastating effect that crime has had on the lives of their group leaders, like the Connells. ¶ Unlike a number of prison ministries, Bridges to Life is not evangelical. "We don't proselytize," says John Sage, who founded the program. "These guys have already been preached at. Still, there is a big spiritual component to what we do. Instead of quoting Scripture, we try to *show* them hope and love and forgiveness." The program's goal, Sage explains, is to foster reconciliation. "Saint Francis of Assisi said, 'Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary use words.'"



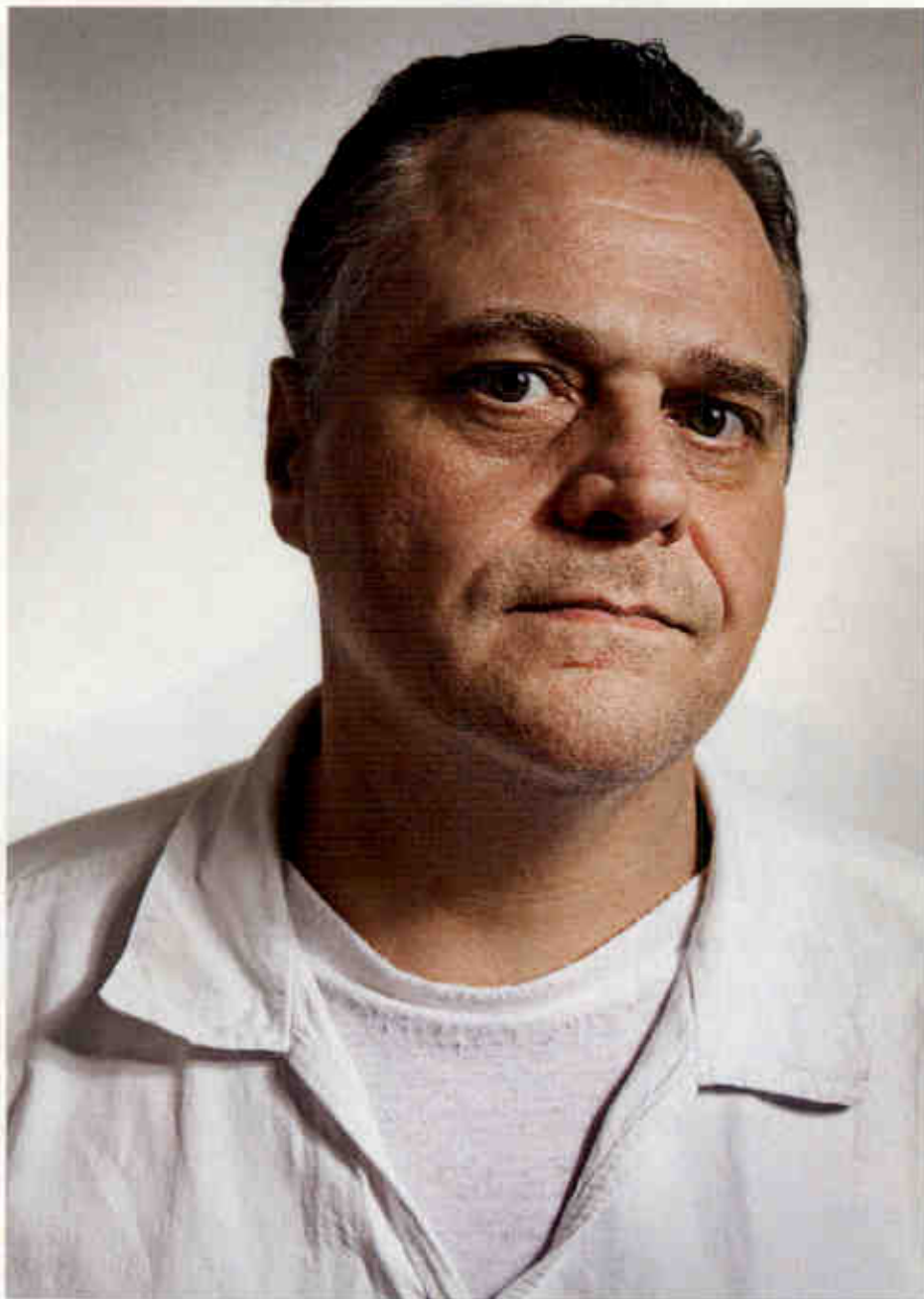
ANNIE STEWART, *Victim volunteer, Beaumont*

"I WAS VICTIMIZED AS A CHILD. The physical abuse started when I was four, the sexual abuse when I was seven. When I was thirteen, a group of pimps drugged me up, moved me around, and sold me out to older men. That went on for three and a half years. I was resistant, so they beat me. I was forced to do a lot of things that I will take to my grave. The first time I told my life story, it was to forty inmates. I was filled with rage. I said, 'If I had a gun, I'd shoot you all, because any one of you could have done this to me.' There were tears all over the place. Those men stood and applauded and told me how courageous I was. That was the first time anyone had ever said they were sorry for what had happened. That's when the healing began. The shame, the hatred, the nightmares—they're gone. Now I can sleep with the lights off."



CONNIE HILTON, *Victim volunteer, Tyler*

"MY HUSBAND WAS MURDERED ON SEPTEMBER 17, 1990. We were both asleep, and I got up to use the bathroom. That's when I saw a man in the hall with a shotgun, and I started screaming. George ran in, and he was shot in the face. I was raped, beaten, tied up, and left for dead. Three men had come to rob us. One is on death row now, but the other two were never caught. I want inmates to understand how their choices affect people. No crime is committed without a victim. I always tell them that I'm not there to judge them; the court system did that already. We talk about things like empathy and accountability, and I ask them to dig down deep in their hearts. Sometimes I say, 'Lord, work through me. Give me the words.'"



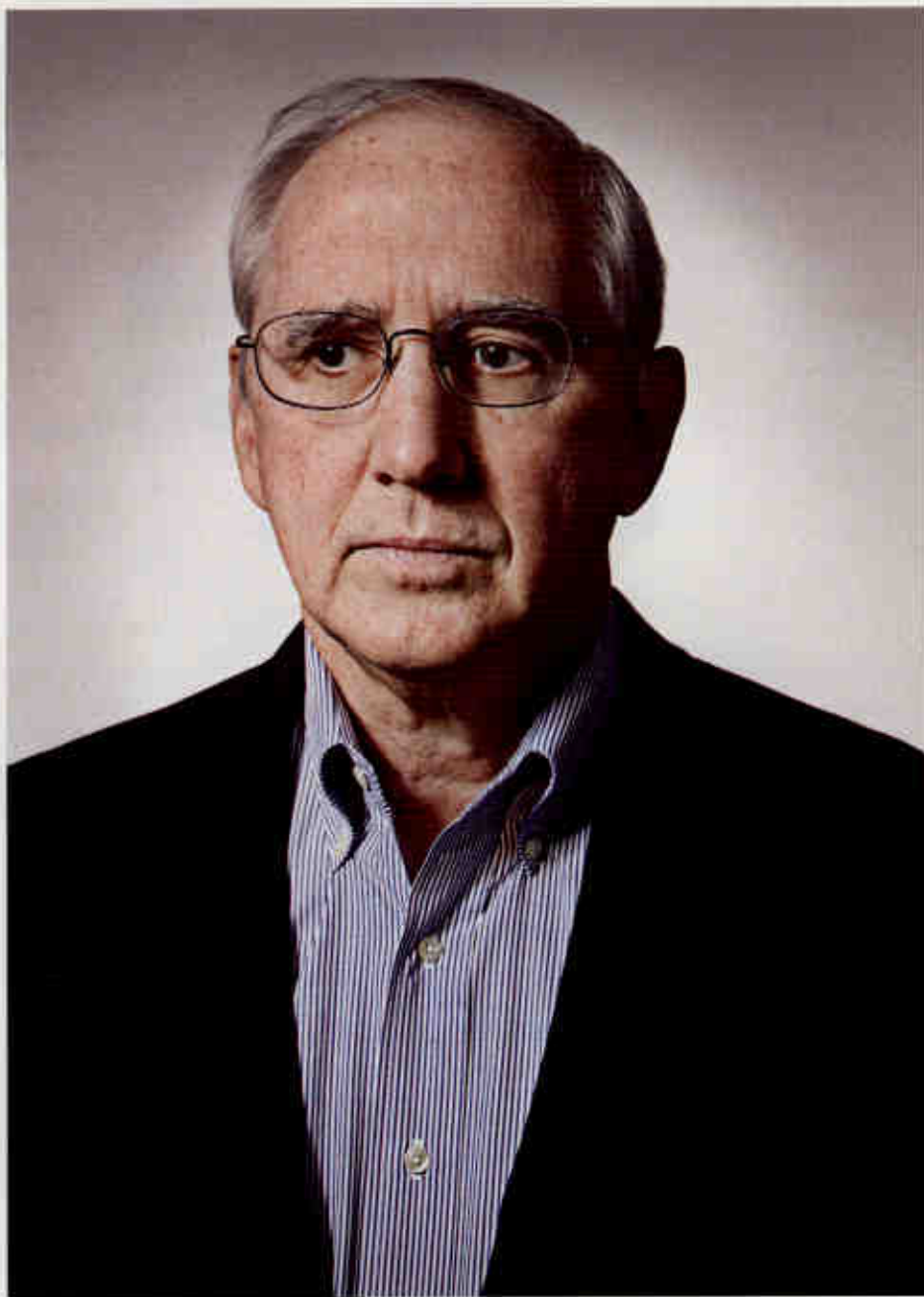
JOSEPH TIGERT, *Former inmate, Porter*

"I SHOT A GUY IN A DRUG DEAL GONE BAD. Back then I was just an idiot, really. I used to go around pistol-whipping people, running wild, doing all kinds of bad things. I've been an outlaw all my life, and prison didn't change me. I was in the Aryan Brotherhood. I did drugs, and I partied. In '91, I tried to escape, and I got shot. A few years ago, I gave my life to God. Then this program came along, and it's opened my heart up. I've listened to victims, and I can feel their pain. The old me never thought about how another person felt—that never came to my mind. Now I can see the pain I put people through in my life. It makes me feel the wrong I've done."



LONNIE JONES, *Inmate, Hamilton Unit, Bryan*

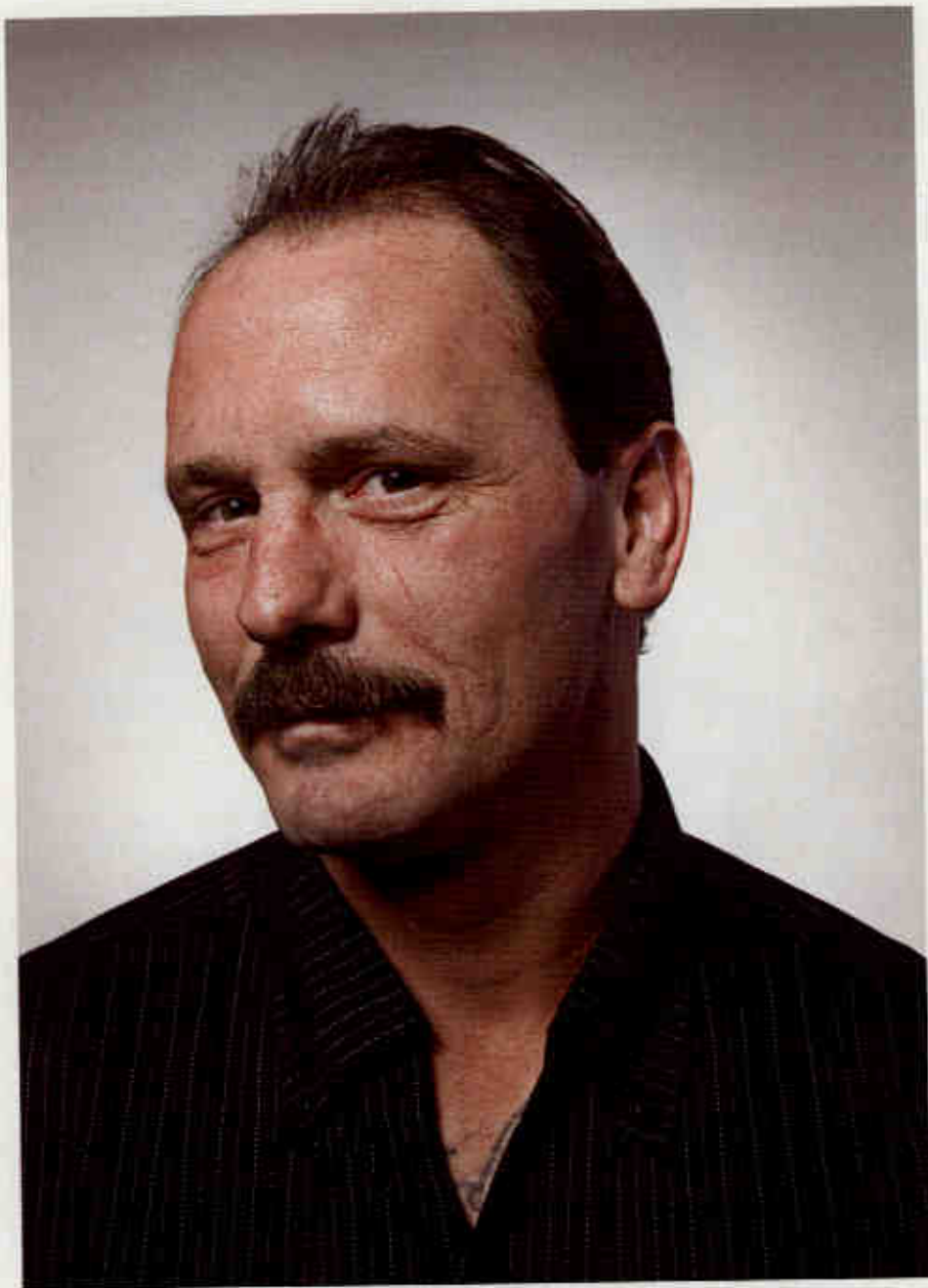
"IT WAS MY FIRST NIGHT BURGLARY. I didn't think anyone was home, but a lady walked in, and I stabbed her. I was just a kid—I was seventeen years old. I never meant to kill anyone. My father told me to turn myself in. I've been here now for almost thirty years. After being here for so long, I felt like nothing. I was beat down. This program helped me see what God had for me. The volunteers have all been hurt by crime, but they look us in the eye and say, 'We love you all, and we're here to help.' I told Mr. Sage that it could've been me who'd killed his sister; I'd done the same kind of thing. We talked for more than two hours, and he saw the good in me. The hug he gave me afterward said more than words."



JOHN SAGE, *Founder of Bridges to Life, Houston*

"MY SISTER MARILYN SAGE MEAGHER WAS MURDERED ON JUNE 30, 1993.

Two nineteen-year-olds were looking for a car to steal when they spotted her taking shopping bags out of her car. They crept into her apartment behind her and attacked her. She was stabbed with butcher knives; bludgeoned with a statue, and smothered to death with a plastic bag. Her last words were 'Please don't kill me. I have two kids.' Both murderers were sent to death row, but the pain didn't go away. There was no resolution; it didn't bring Marilyn back. I felt so much rage and despair. What helped me get to the point I'm at today is faith and forgiveness. Talking to inmates has allowed me to see their humanity, and telling them my story has helped me get on with my life. The healing we do here is as much for the victims as the inmates."



JASON HEFNER, *Former inmate, Kerrville*

"I WAS RAISED IN AN ABUSIVE FAMILY. My brother Curtis was the closest thing I had to a father, and he was murdered in 1986. When his killer walked free, I called the judge and told him I was going to kill him. I spent eleven years, four months, and twenty-nine days in the Texas prison system for making that threat. I joined a gang, covered myself in tattoos. My soul fed off of my anger. I shook my fist at God. But this program taught me how to forgive. I saw the strength in the victims who had found forgiveness, and they gave me the strength to do it myself. Otherwise, I wouldn't have lasted for five days when I got out. Now I'm married, sober, and I have two boys. This September, I will have been out for five years."



PATRICIA STONESTREET, *Victim volunteer, Houston*

"MY DAUGHTER LISA WAS MURDERED ON JUNE 7, 1986, WHEN SHE WAS TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS OLD.

Her next-door neighbor had been stalking her. One night when he was high on cocaine, he broke into her apartment, tied her up with her pantyhose, and raped her several times. Afterward, he strangled her and drowned her in her bathtub. I've always wondered whether she was already dead when he held her head under the water. When I speak to offenders, I always say, 'I don't want you to feel sorry for me. When I speak, I want you to think about your victims and what you have put them through.' I also tell them that if they don't forgive, they can't heal. Just as we forgave Lisa's killer, they need to forgive themselves. It's the only way they can move forward." ➔