

Collaborations

The Maryland Crime Victims' Resource Center, Inc.

Volume 5, January, 2004

Crime Victims and Forgiveness *by Roberta Roper*

The issue of forgiving the criminal offender who harms you or takes the life of a loved one is one that challenges most victims and survivors of faith. The necessity "to forgive those who trespass against us" is at the core of most Christian and non-Christian religious heritages and teachings. It presents a true test of faith that forces many of us to struggle with in our hearts and minds before we reach a resolution. I believe that it is one that must be approached with caution and with dignity and respect to the individual victim or survivor. It cannot be rushed or forced, but rather guided with loving support as the individual journeys through their personal grief, suffering or loss.

Forgiveness, however, remains an issue that is often misunderstood by many, including the media, the public and the clergy. A recent experience has made me painfully aware that as service providers and/or victims and survivors, we have failed to properly understand and articulate ourselves in regard to forgiveness.

Several weeks ago, I was approached by a representative of the Goodlife Television Network who was launching a new series entitled "The American Family." It was explained that this new show would feature up-lifting stories about the complexity and diversity of American life as families faced adversity, disease and crime victimization. The producers requested an opportunity to visit and film the grief support group sponsored by the Maryland Crime Victims' Resource Center, Inc. They also asked for referrals for individuals who not only had lost a loved one to homicide, but were direct victims in that crime.

After presenting the request to our support group and securing victim/survivors who agreed to be a part of this show,

(cont. p. 2)



Highlighted Program: Victims to Victory, Memphis, TN. Dr. Kitty Lawson and her staff at Victims to Victory provide a wide range of victim services through a faith based non-profit organization. The services they provide include: short term counseling, referrals, crisis intervention, support groups, emergency assistance, advocacy, assistance with filing victim compensation, court accompaniment, memorial services, grief assistance, community education and training. They are funded through individual donations as well as by VOCA. For more information contact Dr. Lawson at: Klawson550@aol.com.

"One person can make a difference—and every person should try." Stephanie Roper

The Maryland Crime Victims' Resource Center, Inc.

14750 Main Street, 1B
Upper Marlboro, MD 20772

Phone: (301) 952-0063
Fax: (301) 952-2319
Email: ScottBeard@mdcrimevictims.org



that would accurately portray the reality of crime's consequences for victims and their families and importantly would demonstrate how most survivors valiantly and courageously are able to triumph over their tragedies. We were very pleased when one of our strong male victim/ survivors was chosen to be a feature story. This man was shot by an individual who took the life of his young wife, leaving him the sole parent of two very young daughters. Not only did he endure with dignity a criminal justice system that failed him, but has succeeded in raising daughters that would make any parent very proud.

I was asked to participate in a round table discussion on the day of filming. I anxiously awaited an opportunity to discuss the need for improving victims' rights and services and partnerships that link faith communities and service providers. The show featured two main segments: (1.) The Maryland man who survived the attack that took his wife's life; and (2.) A California woman whose daughter was raped while her husband was forced to observe the crime and was then murdered. The second story focused on the wife/mother's decision to reach out in forgiveness to her daughter's rapists and husband's murderers even before their convictions. That choice, unknown to me at the time, would be the focus of the round table discussion.

I want to be clear in saying that forgiveness is something I believe that almost all victims wrestle with, believing that it is a goal they must work toward and achieve. However, I also believe that it is an on-going process in which a survivor moves toward at their own pace, not being pushed by the expectations of others. Forgiveness becomes the final stage of letting go. It is being able to say that this experience will not be allowed to dominate and control your life. But forgiveness is not forgetting or pretending that the evil or harm did not happen! It does not excuse that behavior. Real forgiveness requires a change of heart (repentance) and behavior on the part of the offender. It should include accountability and restoration (restitution) whenever possible. Sins against people require an admission of wrong doing and asking for forgiveness of the person harmed. It should have true meaning and never be dispensed like cheap grace.

I also want to clarify that I am not condemning the woman who chose to forgive her daughter's rapist and husband's murderer. That choice was the right one for her. We must however, be very careful not to demand that every victim quickly respond in the same ways. We should not make judgments for the failure to do that according to someone else's time-line. Loving comfort and support from their faith community helps every victim and survivor deal with forgiveness with integrity, but each must choose their own way.

I was introduced to the show's host and moderator, Bettina Gregory, now a psychologist. Also part of the roundtable was a clinical psychologist and researcher from Virginia, whose mother had been murdered. So what went wrong in our discussion? To begin with, there was little opportunity to talk about ways to improve the treatment of crime victims and their families. Instead, the thrust of the discussion implied that the best course of action for victims and survivors was to take steps to forgive their offender as quickly as possible, and with or without any acknowledgment or change on the offender's part. I said that it was very difficult for victims to do that and it was especially offensive for some victims and survivors who feel abandoned by God and left without the solace and support of their faith communities. Rage, anger, grief and frustration are normal reactions to an abnormal event ... they are a victim's reality in the aftermath of crime. Most crime victims and survivors simply seek the ministry of presence from their faith community. Victims and survivors know that their pain cannot be taken away, and ask for acceptance and respect in their struggle. Their doubts and fears are real, but in the end can reaffirm and strengthen their faith. They need to know their faith community will be there for as long as needed.

The program closed and in the end I silently concluded that like too many programmed media events, this one was little different from so many others. The premise remains: let's look at an issue, focus on stories that fit our needs and rap it up in a neat little package in the allotted one hour time slot.

All of this reminds me of the enormous value of our national faith project. All of us involved recognize the work to be done. Let us also be mindful that the foundation this project lays will produce enormous benefits for all victims and survivors in the years ahead.

This Project was supported by Grant No. #2002.VF.GX.K017 awarded by the Office for Victims of Crime, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

