National Crime Victims’ Rights Week
Helping Victims Heal, April 10–16

Jennifer Balber was only working for Southern California Gas Company for a few months. She had just returned to school and started working two jobs to help finance her education. Living back at home with her mom, she was hopeful about her future despite a recent health setback. Ever the optimist, Jen’s sunny disposition always put others at ease.

Jen was supposed to be working in the office that fateful day in November 1994. She took another assignment and was out in the field reading meters. When the shots rang out, they were not intended for the beautiful girl who was just two weeks shy of her 21st birthday. They were not meant to end a life so early, but they did.

The senseless shooting was gang related and within days, witnesses came forward that allowed police to make an arrest. Jen’s mom, Rose Madsen, considered herself fortunate to have a rather quick end to the usually long justice process. The assailant pled guilty and was sentenced to 25 years to life.

After he was incarcerated, Rose expected relief, maybe peace but she soon realized that her grieving had just begun. Her anger and despair only deepened and like so many crime victim families, she had little support in the days and months after her daughter’s death. Friends didn’t know what to say or do for her. They were scared to say the wrong thing - their silence was heartbreaking.

Friend, Sister Carmel Crimmins, RSM, encouraged Rose to attend restorative justice meetings with her in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. Rose shared her story with other victims and was later asked by Sister Sue Reif, OSF, former director of the Restorative Justice Ministry for the Diocese of San Bernardino, to join their committee.

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Now she assists the committee by telling her story when needed.

Restorative justice is an approach that focuses on the needs of the victims and the offenders, as well as the community and public safety.

Rose credits it in helping her heal and allowing her to move forward in life. Although she knows life will never be the same again, she is at peace with her “new normal.”

Rose recently visited San Quentin to speak to prisoners and give them some insight into a family’s grief. She tells them how it would have made such a difference if the offender would have apologized, had said that he didn’t mean to kill her daughter and took responsibility for his crime.

In this Year of Mercy, we are encouraged by Pope Francis to visit with prisoners. For those of us not directly affected by crime - we may view this as a daunting task but for crime victims and their families to visit with prisoners is an extraordinary act.

Woodford believes that states should follow a restorative justice model: “It is a better approach to keeping the victim and family involved in a healthy way and giving them a voice in the process.”

After her daughter’s death and her restorative justice journey, Rose advocates for families by informing them of their rights in the justice process. She often accompanies them to court and prefers to help families immediately so they can start on their own path towards healing.

Rose encourages parishioners, during this Year of Mercy, to reach out to others in their community when affected by crime. Just by sending a note or attending a prayer vigil means so much to grieving families, “even if you do not know them personally, it helps them to know people care.” Now she sends notes to families and knows that her daughter would be proud.

A few weeks before Jen was killed, there was a random shooting in their town on Halloween where three innocent children died. Rose remembered that Jen was so concerned for their families - she wanted to help the parents but Rose asked - how?

Now Rose has learned how and her empathy and Jen’s spirit keep her moving forward to help others heal.

For more information, go to:

- cacatholic.org
- restorejustice.com
- National Crime Victims’ Rights Week: http://ovc.ncjrs.gov/ncvrw/
- Vatican Website: http://w2.vatican.va/content/vatican/en.html
- Year of Mercy Website http://www.im.va/content/gdm/en.html