

Another member and myself from the Victim's of Homicide Support group attended a Restorative Justice Conference in Hull, Quebec late in November 2002. While there, we met Roy Trace, who was the Lifeline coordinator in Edmonton. A couple of weeks later, four of us were invited to attend a meeting that Roy held monthly with lifers preparing for parole. This is the story of our meeting.

One More Step

I knew this was something I wouldn't have been able to do earlier on in my journey after my son was murdered in October 1994. We were scared as we walked into the tiny filthy room in an old downtown building. I had envisioned monsters and I was not prepared to stare into the faces of fourteen lifers who seemed to be as lost as we were.

They had come with their parole officers, street workers and members of the John Howard Society, and some came with friends who had supported them and made them feel human again. Many of them hadn't felt human for many years.

I learned that night that Roy's work meant the difference between hope and despair as he attempted to teach profound lessons on life's choices. These were broken people who in themselves were searching for peace.

One by one, around the circle, they talked about their crimes and the length of their sentences. They didn't hold back. Some of them cried; others were not able to say anything, or even look up from the floor. But one thing became very clear to us early on in the evening; we weren't the only ones hurting. As these people spoke, some of them told us who their victims were and occasionally circumstances were mentioned, and we waited for our turn to speak. We told them of the pain our families had experienced since the loss of our loved ones, and of how the murders had changed our lives. We told them how much we wanted to get our lives back, too, but we felt that we would take our losses to our graves.

We broke for coffee and chatted with some of the lifers. We learned that most of them were terrified to return to a society and a community that they know will not accept them once they have served their time. One man said that one moment of hate, one flash of anger had ruined his life and he'd taken so many people with him. Many felt that the turning point for them would be to face their victim's families and admit their remorse to the very ones they had hurt so deeply. They all knew they hadn't only taken the life of another human being, but they had shattered the lives of family members – mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters and loved ones. They weren't making excuses for the way their lives had turned out; they were accepting responsibility for their actions and were wishing things had been different.

One man told us that after serving fifteen years, he returned home up North and visited the grave of the friend he had murdered when he was seventeen. For him, that was the start of his own healing. One big burly man sobbed when he said he had been unable to look in a mirror during the first four years in prison. One woman told of how she had murdered her three-year old daughter, and that day the authorities had taken away her other two children. She felt she would never see any of them again.

It was an evening of sorrow, a time to share and to try and understand. It was also a time when I felt a sense of forgiveness. The tragedies that had shattered our lives became turning stones that evening as we sat with murderers other than the ones who had murdered our loved ones. They told it like it was and we sensed that it had to be very difficult and painful for them, too.

It will be a long time before I forget the sobs that came from some of these people. They thanked us for coming and as the evening came to an end, and several of the lifers approached us to offer hugs and invite us back again, I wondered why I had been so afraid to meet these people face to face. They were people who had made terrible choices in their lives. Most of them were truly sorry for where those mistakes had taken them, and for the pain they had caused so many families.

Every one in the room healed a little bit that night, and when it ended, I knew I would carry some of those hugs with me for a very long time.

We met again one year later, and it was easier walking into the room this time. Most of the lifers were in various stages of their life sentences and the emotions ran deep between us. This time, eleven of them were waiting for us, although when we approached the building from outside, Roy was talking with a tall, blonde woman who had an escort on either side of her. Without making eye contact with us, she nervously rushed away and disappeared around the corner. Roy explained that the woman had expressed an interest in meeting with some victims, but at the last minute had gotten scared and wanted out of the commitment. This woman had already served seventeen years.

As we went in, we recognized several of the lifers from the year before. One large man, who had murdered his common-law wife and her male companion years earlier, asked for the stone that circulated around the room. He hadn't been able to say a word the year before as he choked on every thought he held deep inside. This time, he started by thanking us for being there one year earlier and helping him account for his crime. He reminded me of a volcano erupting for the first time, spewing out remorse and gratitude to the VOH members sitting in the room.

A blue-eyed Native man, sitting low in the center of an old couch, sat quietly and missed his turn to speak before the evening ended – either out of fear or shame. We didn't hear of his crime that night. He wore a fringed deer skin jacket and snakeskin moccasins he had made himself as he sat in prison and served his life sentence.

I was more comfortable this time. I knew now these were not the monsters I had envisioned them to be before I entered that meeting one year earlier. They were sad souls and they felt less than human as they faced victims other than their own.

I left with a feeling of hope – for them and for myself.

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