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SEPTEMBER 1997

A Grief Like No Other

Americans are fascinated by murders and murderers but not by the families of the people who are killed -- an amazingly numerous group, whose members can turn only to one another for sympathy and understanding

by [Eric Schlosser](#)

ON the first Friday evening of every month thirty to forty men and women gather at Our Lady of Sorrows Church in Kansas City, Missouri. They meet in the parish hall, a low modern building not far from the headquarters of the Hallmark Cards corporation. They bring cookies and sodas, newsletters, notebooks, and photographs of their children. They sit in folding chairs around two large banquet tables. They are white, African-American, and Latino, middle-class and working-class, a cross-section of midwesterners. From all appearances this could be a session of the local PTA or of a church group planning its next book fair. The meeting opens with everybody explaining, one by one, why he or she has come. Each story seems more poignant and more horrific than the last. This is the monthly gathering of [Parents of Murdered Children](#), Kansas City chapter, a support group for the relatives and friends of homicide victims. A hand-stitched quilt on the wall has the photographic image of a different face in every square -- mostly young men and women, innocent, full of promise, unaware of their impending fate. The quilt seems as American in its own way as the violence that brought these families to this room.

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The fear of murder has grown so enormous in the United States that it leaves a taint, like the mark of Cain, on everyone murder touches. One might expect that the families of murder victims would be showered with sympathy and support, embraced by their communities. But in reality they are far more likely to feel isolated, fearful, and ashamed, overwhelmed by grief and guilt, angry at the criminal-justice system, and shunned by their old friends. America's fascination with murder has not yet extended to its aftermath. As a result, the victims' survivors must seek comfort from one another. Throughout the country hundreds of support groups like the one in Kansas City meet every month. The amount of

bloodshed in the United States is difficult to comprehend, like the carnage of a shadowy, undeclared civil war. During the past two decades nearly half a million Americans have been murdered, and an additional 2.5 million have been wounded by gunfire -- more casualties than the U.S. military has suffered in all the wars of the past 200 years.



Terri Smith (left), shot to death at age 23, Kansas City, Missouri, 1987

The murder rate in the United States (the number of people killed each year per 100,000) has been declining since 1993, most dramatically in New York City. Nevertheless, it is still extraordinarily high compared with the rate in Western Europe or even in the United States of just a generation ago. After years of diminishing violence in the 1950s, a murder wave began to engulf the United States around 1960. By the late 1970s the U.S. murder rate had doubled, reaching an all-time high in 1980. Since then it has fallen slightly, climbed a bit, and dropped again. The U.S. murder rate today is roughly the same as it was in 1989 -- eight homicides per 100,000. About 70 percent of the murders in America are committed with a firearm. About 90 percent are committed by men. The murder rate among men of all ages in the United States is approximately five times as high as the rate among men in Canada, eleven times as high as the rate among men in Germany, and twenty times as high as the rate among men in Ireland or Japan. The murder rate among young men in the United States, aged fifteen to twenty-four, has roughly tripled since 1960. It is now about thirty-five times as high as the murder rate among men of the same age in England.

From the archives:

- **"The Crisis of Public Order,"** by Adam Walinsky (July,

The increase in the U.S. murder rate has been accompanied over the past few decades by a rising incidence of crimes once considered rare. Mass murders, serial murders, and murders committed by strangers have become more commonplace. A mass murderer kills a

1995)

"The Department of Justice now says that 'stranger murders' have become four times as common as family killings, and that the chances of getting away with one exceed 80 percent. Scholars say the nation's murder rate may soon double."

number of victims at one time and often then commits suicide. A serial murderer kills a number of victims over an extended period and tries to avoid capture. After studying old newspaper articles and police reports, Ronald M. Holmes, a professor of justice administration at the University of Louisville, concluded that there were fewer than twenty mass murders in the United States from 1950 to 1960. Holmes says that three or four mass murders are now committed every month. Eric W. Hickey is a professor of criminology at California State University at Fresno, and an expert on serial murder. According to his count, there were about nineteen serial killers in the United States during the 1950s -- and about 114 during the 1980s. Various estimates place the number of serial killers at large in the United States today at thirty-five to 200.

Instead of producing widespread revulsion toward violence, or mass demonstrations, or an "anti-war" movement against the daily slaughter, America's murder rate has inspired an altogether different response: a culture of murder, with the murderer at its core. Edgar Allan Poe invented the detective story more than 150 years ago, with the publication of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," and tabloids have always relied on crime stories to lure readers. But only in recent years has the serial killer become a national icon, endlessly portrayed in movies, books, and popular music. The first mainstream Hollywood "slasher" film, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, was released in 1960, as America's murder rate began to climb. Six years later *In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote's nonfiction tale of murder, was published to great acclaim. Both works were inspired by real murderers; both created whole new genres; and both continue to be widely imitated by lesser talents. The slasher film and the nonfiction murder tale share a fundamental premise: the killer is the protagonist.

Since 1966 hundreds of books have been published that follow murderers along their paths of destruction. Every serial killer, it seems, now has a biographer or two. And yet just a handful of books have looked at murder from the victim's perspective. Slasher films are even less likely than their literary counterparts to address the plight of the victim. Indeed, a slasher film's plot, characterization, and internal logic are far less important to the audience than the methods and choreography of its murders. Comedy plays a large role in the genre, with humorous crime-scene details and serial killers tossing off one-liners.

Even academic elites are drawn to the figure of the murderer, which has long been a focus of attention for psychiatrists, sociologists, and criminologists. A vast

amount of research has been conducted on murderers in order to predict their violent behavior, understand their social context, restrain them, rehabilitate them, and promote their moral and spiritual reform. During the past twenty-five years hundreds of articles in psychiatric journals have examined the homicidal mind. Fewer than a dozen have explored how a homicide affects the victim's family.

In a study of murder in Romantic literature the theater scholar Laurence Senelick used a phrase, "the prestige of evil," that goes a long way toward explaining why our culture has become obsessed with the murderer while ignoring the victim. The murderer is a powerful figure who dares to violate the central tenet of almost every human society: Thou shalt not kill. "There's no greater feeling of power on earth," a former gang member once confided, "than what it feels like to take another person's life." Most serial killers are impelled by a craving for power, by a desire for the sort of control over life and death that is usually attributed to God. When the murderer is the protagonist of a story, we can vicariously experience that power. The victim is a defeated soul, a loser in this contest of strength. Perhaps it is easier to identify with the murderer. To do otherwise means choosing the side of the powerless -- and confronting some unsettling truths.

Almost twenty years ago Lucy N. Friedman, the director of the Victim Services Agency, in New York City, helped to organize one of the nation's first support groups for the families of murder victims. Friedman says that the survivors of murder victims are often treated like pariahs, avoided like a source of bad luck. They feel cursed. Even the counselors who work with survivors come to feel stigmatized by their jobs. What they have learned contradicts the way the rest of us would like to view the world. We want to maintain an illusion of safety, Friedman says; we want to believe that the children of good parents will never be harmed. Our refusal to acknowledge the plight of murder victims and their survivors is a dangerous form of denial -- a flight from reality that allows lethal violence to flourish.

More than anything else, the relatives of murder victims need to be heard. The stories of a few survivors in Kansas City give a sense of what murder in America really is and what it does. Kansas City is by no means the murder capital of the USA. It is a midsize city in the middle of the country with a level of violence comparable to that of many other urban areas. The aftermath of homicide in Kansas City is emblematic of what ordinary men and women are experiencing every day throughout the United States. A culture of murder now surrounds us, like a dark, poisonous fog. By looking at the victims of murder and

listening to their survivors, we may find a way out.

A Killing

WHEN Harriett Smith was born, her family lived in a granary. The year was 1929, and her father was a tenant farmer who grew winter wheat on a series of small farms in western and central Kansas. Harriett had twelve brothers and sisters, all of them healthy and strong. Her family was Catholic, and treated like second-class citizens wherever they settled. Every few years her parents loaded their children and their farm animals into cars and trucks and moved to new land. Harriett grew up outside small towns like Washington, Morrowville, and Linn, amid rolling green hills and beautiful old trees. None of the houses her father rented had central heating, indoor plumbing, or electricity. When Harriett turned twelve, she was sent off to live with another family and work as a hired girl. One day she overheard her employer say that girls like Harriett were "good for nothing besides making babies for the Pope." From then on Harriett was determined not to remain a servant all her life. She became one of the first in her family to go to high school.

While attending a nursing college in Lincoln, Nebraska, Harriett began to date a young man named Albert Smith. Harriett was small and sturdy; Al was tall and boisterous. He had grown up with five siblings on a truck farm in South Dakota, also without central heating, running water, or electricity. Al was the son of a laborer who dug basements with a pick and shovel, year-round, for a flat fee of \$24, and later worked as a railroad engineer. After serving in the Army during the Second World War and losing a brother at the Battle of the Bulge, Al expected to become a laborer like his father. Instead the G.I. Bill paid his tuition at the University of Nebraska, where he majored in business administration. Al and Harriett got married and moved to Kansas City after graduation. They bought a house in a brand-new subdivision rising from farmland south of town. Al wound up working for the Bendix Corporation, eventually becoming a superintendent in a plant that made components for nuclear warheads. Harriett worked as an elementary school nurse. The couple had five children -- three boys and two girls. Although Al and Harriett had faced many hardships in their youth, neither had witnessed any violent crime or had ever lived in fear of it. In their middle-class neighborhood, with its modest houses and its campers parked in driveways, what violence there was occurred in secret, within a family, behind closed doors.

On Christmas Day in 1986 Harriett prepared a big family

dinner for their children and grandchildren, nineteen people in all. A week and a half later their daughter Terri turned twenty-three and their other daughter, Kathryn, turned thirty-one. Terri was the secretary to a dean at DeVry Institute of Technology; Kathryn worked at the post office. On Monday, January 19, 1987, Terri's boss called the Smiths to say that Terri hadn't shown up for work that day, and that nobody answered the phone at her house. Terri was reliable and conscientious; it was unlike her to miss work and not call. Harriett phoned Kathryn, who lived just a block from her sister. Kathryn walked over to Terri's house. The doors were locked, the curtains were drawn, and Terri's Plymouth was in the driveway, still covered with the weekend's snow. Al dropped by the house after work and found it dark. He left a note on the door.

Al and Harriett had spent most of Saturday with Terri. She had come over to do her laundry, and they had enjoyed a lazy day, chatting and watching television. Terri was their youngest child, the little girl who was going to keep them young forever. She was warm and nurturing but strong-willed -- just like her mother. She phoned her parents at least once a day, always with the same greeting: "Hi, it's me." She lived in a rented house a few blocks away. On Saturday, Terri had mentioned having some problems with her live-in boyfriend, Gary Rawlings Jr. He seemed depressed lately; the two weren't getting along, and she was thinking of moving out. Rawlings was shy, handsome, and intelligent, five years older than Terri, a carpenter and the son of a local bank executive. Al and Harriett liked him a great deal, thought he was a real gentleman. Rawlings had been at their Christmas dinner and told the Smiths afterward that it was his best Christmas in years. Harriett tried hard not to worry. She wondered if Terri and Rawlings had eloped.

Monday night Harriett worked the late shift; she was now a nurse in the cardiology ward of a local hospital. Tuesday morning Al's note was still stuck to Terri's door, and there were no fresh tracks in the snow around her house. Al called the police. An officer met the Smiths at Terri's house. While Harriett used a neighbor's phone to call the landlord for a key, the policeman removed a storm window and climbed into Terri's living room. He looked around the house. There were dirty dishes in the sink and on the kitchen counter. Two baskets of clean laundry sat in the hall. Bills and papers were scattered on a small desk in one room. In another the officer found Terri lying face down in bed, under a pile of blankets and a flowered quilt, shot once in the back of the head. A spent 9mm casing was on the bedside table. Terri's right arm extended from the bed, as though she were asleep.

As homicide detectives searched for Gary Rawlings, a different picture of the young man emerged. Terri's friends and co-workers told the police that Rawlings had been acting strangely over the past few weeks. He had also been physically abusing Terri. During a recent fight he had thrown a knife that barely missed her and stuck in the wall. Terri had spoken about his hostile behavior with reluctance. She was by all accounts a lovely person, protective of her boyfriend. She was planning to break up with Rawlings, but she was afraid of him. Terri had never revealed the physical abuse to her parents or to her sister.

Gary Rawlings Sr. told detectives that his son had a history of mental problems and had suffered a nervous breakdown three years earlier, when his parents split up. The young man was married at the time and had two small children. He claimed to have developed clairvoyant powers. He said that airplanes were flying over him and taking pictures, that cartoons and comic strips were making fun of him, that people were following him and trying to control his mind. Rawlings was admitted to the psychiatric ward at the Shawnee Mission Medical Center, in Overland Park, Kansas, suffering from depression and paranoid delusions. His diagnosis was schizophrenia. While Rawlings was hospitalized, his wife left him. He was given a low dosage of an antipsychotic drug and discharged from the hospital. He was free of the paranoia and delusions and felt much better. But after a while Rawlings began to regard his medication as "poison" and stopped taking it. The strange and disordered thoughts returned. His father pleaded with him to take the medicine. The two fought bitterly over the issue, and at the time of Terri's murder they had not spoken for a couple of months.



Gretchen Mayer, stabbed to death
at age 27, Kentucky, 1989

From the archives:

• **"The Story of a Gun," by Erik Larson (January, 1993)**

"After 60,000 deaths from firearms use over the past two years, America is in a gun crisis. Yet gun laws remain weak, gunmakers continue to promote killing power, and gun dealers accept no responsibility for the criminal use of what they sell."

The Kansas City Police Department issued a nationwide WANTED notice, warning that Gary Rawlings should be considered armed and dangerous. He was a martial-arts enthusiast, a gun collector, and an expert marksman. He assembled his own bullets and customized the stocks of his rifles, inlaying them with gold. His attempts to join the armed forces had failed, but at Terri's house the police found dog tags stamped with Rawlings's name and Social Security number. Before the murder his fondness for guns had not seemed abnormal. Kathryn's two sons, Jason and Billy, thought Gary Rawlings was pretty cool. He seemed like a good guy; there was nothing scary about him. Rawlings obtained his weapons at local gun shops, at the Bullet Hole and the Second Amendment. The owner of the Bullseye Gun Works told investigators that Rawlings had recently traded a rifle for a Cobray M-11 pistol that could fire up to thirty-two 9mm rounds without a reload. In order to obtain this semi-automatic weapon Rawlings had signed a federal form swearing that he had never been "adjudicated mentally defective or ... committed to a mental institution." Rawlings had not lied: his admission to the psychiatric ward had been voluntary.

The day after Terri's body was discovered, Kathryn entered her sister's house and frantically started packing things up. Kathryn and Terri had been extremely close. Despite the eight-year difference in their ages, they liked to think of themselves as twins and best friends. Kathryn had introduced Terri to Rawlings the year before, and now she wanted to get Terri's things out of the house as quickly as possible. Part of her refused to believe that Terri was dead, despite a positive identification by the police, despite the blood that had seeped through the bedding and the mattress to the floor. And if Terri were still alive, somewhere, somehow, she would need her things. Kathryn was afraid that Rawlings would return and destroy everything that had belonged to Terri, everything she'd loved most. As Kathryn gathered her sister's clothes, pictures, and books, she was terrified that Rawlings might walk in the door at any moment. When the telephone rang, she couldn't answer it. Terri's cats were hiding somewhere in the house, completely spooked. The cats had been there at the time of the murder and had gone unfed and untended for days as Terri lay there. One of the cats fought bitterly to avoid capture, scratching and drawing blood. Kathryn's husband, one of her brothers, and some friends helped her clear the place out. Al Smith could not bear the thought of entering Terri's house. "I'd rather burn it down," he said.

About 600 people attended Terri's funeral, on a cold, windy morning. The priest gave a wonderful eulogy, even though he hadn't known Terri. Kathryn's son Jason looked at his aunt in the open coffin and wished that he could

kiss her and wake her up. Although it was bitterly cold at the cemetery, Al did not want the funeral to end. He asked the priest to read the Twenty-third Psalm one more time as a way to delay the burial. After the funeral Al found a note in his van that one of his grandsons had written at the cemetery. The note said, "Dad, I'm cold," and Al instantly imagined Terri lying in the ground, calling for him with those words. The phrase haunted him for years.

Al and Harriett's close relatives, 150 of them, gathered for supper at the church. When the Smiths got home, a detective called and said that Gary Rawlings had been arrested. He had been spotted the previous night at a shopping center in Lewisville, Texas, apparently casing the stores, wearing black clothing and gloves and a black ski mask rolled up like a cap. Inside his old Chevy pickup Lewisville police officers found a twelve-gauge sawed-off shotgun, a .45 pistol, a .308 Remington rifle with a scope and tripod, boxes of ammunition, an eight-inch commando knife hidden in the roof above the driver's-side door, and a ten-channel police scanner with a master list of frequencies used by the State of Kansas and the Kansas City police departments. This was the second time in three days that Rawlings had been stopped by the police. Just hours before Terri's body was discovered, a patrolman in Norman, Oklahoma, had found Rawlings asleep in his truck with a loaded handgun beside him. After bringing him back to the station, examining his various weapons, and finding he had no criminal record, the Norman police had allowed Rawlings to drive off.

Officer Scott Pedigo, of the Lewisville police, ran a check on Rawlings's Kansas license, found that he was wanted for homicide, read him his rights, and arrested him. Rawlings confessed to the murder. He explained that Terri was not just planning to leave him -- she was also out to "get him," drugging him and feeding him ground glass.

Rawlings had been suffering from insomnia lately. After Terri fell asleep, he had sat on the bed for hours, full of anger and distress. Then he had removed a gun from under the bed, shot Terri as she slept, waited several more hours, checked her pulse to make sure she was dead, locked up the house, and gone on the run. The murder weapon was not in his truck. Rawlings told the police it was now in a "safe" place.

Under Missouri law a charge of first-degree murder could bring the death penalty. Rawlings was more likely to face a charge of second-degree murder, which carried a maximum sentence of life in prison. A few days after the arrest Harriett called the Jackson County Prosecutor's Office, in Kansas City, and spoke to Matt Whitworth, the prosecutor who'd just been assigned to the case. Harriett

had kept a journal since nursing school; she liked to think of it as "a poor man's psychiatrist." According to the journal entry she made that day, Matt Whitworth said that the evidence against Rawlings was compelling but that a trial was at least a year away. Rawlings might choose to plead guilty in return for a lesser sentence, or to plead not guilty by reason of insanity. Whitworth seemed to think that an insanity defense would never hold up in court. "Insanity" was a legal term that applied in very few cases, even when the killer was mentally ill. Rawlings had an all-too-familiar motive for killing Terri: she was going to leave him. And by fleeing the state Rawlings had demonstrated an awareness that killing his girlfriend was wrong. The defense might find psychiatrists to testify that Rawlings was moved by an "irresistible impulse" to commit the murder, but Whitworth told the Smiths that he would find psychiatrists to say exactly the opposite.

AS the months passed, Harriett called the prosecutor's office once or twice a week to keep track of the case. Rawlings had been charged with second-degree murder and armed criminal action. After an initial examination he was found incompetent to stand trial. He was sent to the Biggs Forensic Center, a maximum-security complex at the state hospital in Fulton, for further evaluation. In December, Harriett called the prosecutor's office and learned that Matt Whitworth was no longer employed there. His replacement, Charles McKeon, seemed friendly on the phone but less enthusiastic about the case. In the spring of 1988 Rawlings was found competent to stand trial. A trial date was set for early September, and then postponed for several weeks. McKeon told the Smiths that beating an insanity defense would be tough -- and that in any event he was leaving the prosecutor's office for a new job. On October 3 the Smiths called his replacement, Dale Close. Although Close had not yet examined the evidence in the case, he reassured the Smiths. "After all, anyone knowing he was facing prison will want to plead insanity," Close said, according to Harriett's journal. The Smiths felt good about Dale Close; he seemed to have a sincere interest in their daughter's murder.

Two days later a judge found Gary Rawlings not guilty by reason of insanity in the murder of Terri Smith. The Jackson County Prosecutor's Office had agreed to a plea bargain. The following week Al and Harriett called the prosecutor's office to learn if a trial date had been set. "Oh, we accepted the insanity defense," they were told. "It's all over." Al and Harriett were stunned. Dale Close later told them that Gary Rawlings was a sick young man who would most likely spend the rest of his life locked away in a mental institution.

After giving the plea bargain more consideration, the Smiths felt satisfied. They knew a fair amount about paranoid schizophrenia. Harriett had worked as a nurse in a psychiatric ward -- and one of their own sons, Kenneth, was a paranoid schizophrenic. He lived nearby, unable to work, relying on powerful medication to keep the voices and hallucinations at bay. Harriett thought that the mentally ill were unfairly burdened with a reputation for violence, too often portrayed as "psycho killers" in movies and on television. The vast majority of paranoid schizophrenics never committed any violent crimes. But Gary Rawlings had crossed the line; he had killed in response to an imaginary threat. In the same situation most paranoid schizophrenics would have simply walked away. How great a threat could Terri have posed, fast asleep? Rawlings's mental illness was subtle enough that others, even the Smiths, had not noticed any warning signs until it was too late. Al and Harriett did not want to see Rawlings cruelly punished in a state prison; they just wanted him off the streets.

In the spring of 1990 Harriett called the prosecutor's office to learn where Rawlings was being held. On May 21 she was told that he was at a mental hospital in St. Joseph, Missouri, and that he had applied for a conditional release. His hearing was set to take place in three days.

A person found not guilty by reason of insanity in Missouri had the right to petition for release from the hospital. An unconditional release granted total freedom; a conditional release had to be renewed periodically and allowed varying degrees of freedom, according to its terms. A few months after being declared not guilty by reason of insanity, Rawlings had been transferred from the maximum-security complex at Fulton State Hospital to St. Joseph State Hospital, a minimum-security facility. For the past three months he had been assigned to the independent-living-skills (ILS) unit, the least restrictive form of housing -- an unlocked building on the hospital grounds. Rawlings was now applying to leave the hospital with his father.

The conditional-release hearing was held at a civil court in St. Joseph. This was no longer a criminal case; Gary Rawlings had been found not guilty of the murder. He was represented by a lawyer from the Missouri Attorney General's Office, acting on behalf of the Department of Mental Health. To oppose the release the Jackson County Prosecutor's Office sent a young intern, a law-school student who had looked at some psychology textbooks.

Judge Bill Roberts opened the hearing by explaining that when a patient like Gary Rawlings is placed in the mental-

health system, he is to be afforded treatment. And when that patient is no longer a danger to society, he is eligible for release from the hospital. Mario Decanini, a psychiatrist in the mental hospital's ILS unit, told the court that Rawlings seemed to be in good contact with reality. He had not exhibited any psychotic behavior, he regretted killing his girlfriend, and he understood the need to take his medicine regularly. The schizophrenia was in remission. Rawlings met all the department's requirements for a conditional release. A forensic caseworker and another psychiatrist from the Department of Mental Health supported this view, although both psychiatrists acknowledged that without his medication Rawlings might kill again.

Kathryn testified that she lived in constant fear of Gary Rawlings. Indeed, she was afraid even to testify as he sat there in the courtroom. Harriett read a prepared statement, arguing that paranoid schizophrenia can never be cured, that Rawlings needed to be carefully monitored for the rest of his life, and that without medical supervision he posed a threat to himself and to other people. She asked the court to keep him institutionalized. Judge Roberts denied Rawlings a conditional release, but asked the Smiths to face some unpleasant facts: Rawlings had a legal right to keep applying for release. If he remained free of delusions, made no threats, and committed no violent acts, it was just a matter of time before he left the mental hospital.

The Smiths drove back to Kansas City, and not long afterward Judge Roberts changed his ruling. Rawlings was granted the conditional release, though not under the terms he had requested. He was limited to day passes in St. Joseph under the supervision of his father.

From the archives:

- **"Coddling the Criminal," by Charles C. Nott (February, 1911)**

An argument that the framers of American criminal law, having made extravagant efforts to ensure that innocents brought to trial do not end up unjustly convicted, have actually pushed the law too far in the opposite direction, making it excessively difficult to obtain convictions for those

Al and Harriett felt profoundly betrayed, not only by this judge but by the entire criminal-justice system. The Jackson County Prosecutor's Office, they felt, had at important times ignored and then misled them. The Missouri Department of Mental Health was now treating them with condescension, as though they had no right to interfere in this case. Gary Rawlings had never been in touch with the Smiths to express remorse. Nobody from the Rawlings family had attended Terri's funeral or sent condolences. Just three and a half years after Terri's death her murderer would be enjoying day passes with his father. In the eyes of the law no crime had been committed against the Smith family; a crime had been committed against the state. Somehow the world had turned upside-down. Everyone seemed deeply concerned about the murderer and his rights. The victims of murder and their loved ones, Al and Harriett now believed, did

who truly are guilty. not have any rights.

The Victim's Role

IN many societies throughout history a murder was avenged by the victim's family. If the killer's family offered resistance, the result was a blood feud -- a vendetta -- that might last for generations. As societies became more prosperous and more settled, they gained a strong incentive to resolve such conflicts peaceably. The victim's clan and the murderer's clan were encouraged to negotiate an equitable solution. Tribal elders served as mediators. If negotiations broke down, the blood feud resumed. The murderer's clan was responsible for carrying out the settlement -- for paying any fines and for ensuring good behavior in the future. A murderer who violated the terms of an agreement might be killed by his or her own family in order to keep the peace. Punishments for murder varied among tribes. In Morocco the Berbers forced the murderer into exile, although the victim's family might later permit his return. In California the Yurok Indians forced the murderer to compensate the victim's family; payment might include strings of seashells, red obsidian, a woodpecker-scalp headband, and a daughter. In East Africa the Jolou often required not only the death of a man's murderer but also the impregnation by a member of the victim's clan of a woman from the murderer's clan, so that the ghost of the victim might have a wife and children. A murderer's obligation to the victim's family, the need to appease the victim's ghost, and the threat of divine retribution are themes occurring so often in so many cultures that they seem to express some fundamental human loathing for murder and demand for justice.

Under Anglo-Saxon law a murderer paid a mandatory fine, called the wergeld, to the victim's family. The exact amount of the wergeld was determined through an elaborate calculation involving the social status of the victim. Everyone's life had a price, eventually codified in the *Dooms of Alfred*, a ninth-century handbook of criminal fines. If a murderer failed to pay the wergeld within a year, he or she was deemed an outlaw -- a person at war with the community, who could legally be killed by anyone. In addition to paying the victim's family, the murderer had to pay a fine, called the wite, to the local nobleman or to the King. By the twelfth century the wite had grown so much larger than the wergeld that the nobility took the murderer's entire payment, usurping the monetary claims of the victim's family. The ancient relationship between the murderer's clan and the victim's clan was erased. A murder was now considered a breach of "the King's peace" -- a crime against the monarchy.

The victim's family no longer had a protected legal status, or a right to compensation, or any authority to determine the murderer's punishment.

The Founding Fathers had little reason to be concerned about the legal status of crime victims and their families. As the criminologist William F. McDonald has noted, the machinery of law enforcement in Colonial America functioned without any police forces or public prosecutors. A private citizen could investigate a crime, obtain an arrest, and then hire an attorney to write an indictment and prosecute the case. In the absence of detectives, "thief-takers" pursued criminals for a bounty or a reward. Men were often obliged to go after a murderer; a New York law required them to be "ready and armed and accoutred" for the job.

This reliance on private prosecutions undoubtedly favored the rich, but it also placed the victim at the heart of the criminal-justice system. The authors of the Constitution, having recently battled the arbitrary power of the British monarchy, recognized the need to protect the rights of the accused. At the time, the rights of crime victims hardly seemed endangered.

From the archives:

• **Issues: Crime**

An index of Atlantic Monthly articles and features on crime in America.

The rise of American cities in the nineteenth century was accompanied by the development of police forces, prosecutors' offices, and departments of correction. Power to enforce the law was transferred from ordinary citizens to professionals. The state or federal government became the offended party in a criminal act and also the recipient of any fines. Crime victims were relegated to the sidelines, valued mainly for their testimony in court. The growing interest in rehabilitation as a correctional goal placed even greater emphasis on the criminal. Theorists strove to uncover the social forces responsible for crime, and penologists experimented with humane methods of reform. An individual victim's plight seemed less important in the grand scheme when a crime was not only committed against society but caused by it as well.

The victim was rarely considered by criminologists until a few years after the Second World War, when Hans von Hentig wrote his landmark study, *The Criminal & His Victim* (1948). Von Hentig was a German criminologist living in Kansas City. His work proved influential, helping to launch a new academic discipline: "victimology." According to Von Hentig, "the victim shapes and molds the criminal." Indeed, Von Hentig thought that the victim was often to blame for the crime. His theory was partly inspired by a Franz Werfel novel, *The Murdered One Is Guilty*. Von Hentig argued that murder victims sometimes caused their own deaths, certain women encouraged rape, a large number of incest victims were willing participants,

and "the cupidity of Negroes" tended to attract confidence men and swindlers. In explaining the behavior of many criminals, Von Hentig quoted King Lear: "I am a man/More sinn'd against than sinning."

During the 1950s the English penal reformer Margery Fry revived the long-forgotten idea that criminals should compensate their victims. The payment of restitution, Fry believed, would be of great moral benefit to the criminal; the victim's gain, though desirable, was of secondary concern. Fry later became a champion of state compensation for crime victims, and compensation schemes influenced by her views were established in England, New Zealand, and California. The first federal studies of crime victims in the United States were conducted in the late 1960s. They measured how many crimes were going unreported, and the federal programs based on them were designed to encourage victims to testify in court.

The "victims'-rights movement" began largely among feminists in the early 1970s, with the opening of the first rape-crisis centers. Outrage at the mistreatment of rape victims soon led to a reappraisal of how the criminal-justice system treated all crime victims. A grassroots movement in behalf of victims' rights attracted support from unlikely allies: women's groups and law-and-order Republicans. In 1982 President Ronald Reagan appointed a Task Force on Victims of Crime. Its report condemned the treatment of victims by the criminal-justice system and called for a constitutional amendment on victims' rights. Congress passed the Victims of Crime Act in 1984, using revenues from bail forfeitures and criminal fines to subsidize state programs for crime victims. Prosecutors began to hire victims' advocates; crisis centers for crime victims were opened; and a number of states amended their constitutions to protect victims' rights.



Pamela Lamoreaux (center), raped and strangled
at age 22, Michigan, 1987

The rights being demanded by crime victims and the families of murder victims were hardly revolutionary. State victims'-rights amendments usually guaranteed the right to be notified in advance of any court hearing in a case, the right to be consulted before a plea bargain, the right prior to sentencing to give a statement about the crime's impact, and the right to be notified of a criminal's parole hearing, release date, or escape from prison. Crime victims and their families also sought the right to remain in the courtroom throughout a trial. Defense attorneys often placed the victim's family members on the witness list, whether or not they might testify, in order to remove them from the jury's sight. Victims were not demanding the authority to select punishments or veto judicial decisions. According to Paul G. Cassell, a professor at the University of Utah College of Law and a leader in the victims'-rights movement, crime victims were simply asking "to be notified, to be present, and to be heard."

Opponents of the movement, such as Lynne N. Henderson, a professor of law at Indiana University School of Law at Bloomington, stressed "the wrongs of victims' rights," arguing that such proposals were merely a smokescreen for a conservative political agenda. Crime victims were being manipulated as an excuse to build more prisons and cut social programs. Henderson and others contended that none of the traditional goals of criminal law -- deterrence, retribution, rehabilitation, and incapacitation -- justified giving victims a larger role in the system. Nevertheless, the call for victims' rights struck a popular chord, appealing to common sense and gaining huge support at the polls.

From the archives:

• **"The Politics of Crime," by Richard Neely (August, 1982)**

"Why have governments not done what they can to reduce violent crime?"

The answers are complicated, but chief among them is that for every proposal that might be made to reduce crime, there is a powerful, organized interest that opposes it. What's needed is an organized citizen lobby representing the interests -- and wielding the political clout -- of

The strongest resistance to victims' rights came from within the criminal-justice system, not because such rights might harm defendants but because they threatened the time-honored workings of the machinery. Perhaps nine of every ten criminal cases were settled through plea bargains. Angry confrontations between the prosecution and the defense were common only in fictional courtroom dramas. In real life defense attorneys, prosecutors, and judges routinely collaborated behind closed doors, disposing of cases and choosing punishments by mutual consent. Including the victim's opinion would complicate the equation, diminishing the prosecutor's freedom to strike a deal. Empowering the crime victim would place a limit on the power of the state.

IN the fall of 1990 the Smiths learned that Gary Rawlings wanted another conditional release. With support from the Department of Mental Health,

the middle class."

Rawlings applied to leave St. Joseph State Hospital and move into a private boardinghouse. For both philosophical and fiscal reasons Missouri law encouraged the de-institutionalization of mental patients, requiring that they always be housed in the "least restrictive" environment practicable. Psychiatrists at the mental hospital felt that Rawlings was a good candidate for release. He had exhibited no psychotic symptoms and no dangerous behavior. He seemed to understand the nature of his illness and the importance of taking his medication. He denied having violent fantasies or uncontrollable impulses. The department's community-placement staff planned to meet with Rawlings at least once a month after his release. He would be forbidden to consume alcohol, use illicit drugs, or possess a gun. The owner of Smitty's Sit 'N Siesta boardinghouse, in St. Joseph, a private facility with about a dozen mentally ill residents, said in a letter that she'd be "glad to give Gary Rawlings a try."

The second conditional-release hearing was held on December 10, 1990, in the same courtroom and before the same judge as the first one. The Smiths were accompanied by an assistant prosecutor from Jackson County; Al and Harriett had informed the local media about the details of the case. Gary Rawlings was represented by Natalie Coe, an assistant attorney general. Before the hearing began, Gary Rawlings Sr. approached Kathryn and said that his son had always been very fond of her -- a comment intended, no doubt, to reassure Kathryn that the young man meant her no harm. But the words had the opposite effect, unnerving Kathryn even more. She did not want his affection. Rawlings had killed her sister, had never expressed remorse to her family, and now might go free. Kathryn testified again about her fear of him. For the rest of the hearing she was unable to look at Rawlings. Harriett told the court that a paranoid schizophrenic's behavior in the highly structured setting of a mental hospital offered no reliable guide to his behavior outside the hospital. Someone needed to make sure that Gary Rawlings took his medicine every day. At the end of the hearing Judge Roberts granted Rawlings another conditional release and, as a courtesy, wished the young man good luck.

Al Smith later wrote to the judge, asking how Gary Rawlings could be allowed back into the community so soon after being found mentally incompetent. "This man is an admitted murderer," Al wrote. "Please, I beg of you, do not let him loose to kill again." In reply Judge Roberts explained that under Missouri law someone trying to block the release of a mental patient had to provide "clear and convincing" evidence of that patient's dangerousness. If the Department of Mental Health thought that Rawlings no longer posed a threat, then the burden of proof fell on the Smiths. Rawlings had not committed any violent acts

since the murder; there was no sound legal basis for denying his release.

The Smiths had begun to meet other people in Kansas City who felt equally betrayed by the criminal-justice system. The insensitive treatment of crime victims and the families of murder victims seemed not the exception but the rule. A local chapter of Parents of Murdered Children had recently been formed. At the first POMC meeting Al and Harriett attended, a man named Mike Solaberry spoke about the injustices of the system. Solaberry's daughter Julie had been murdered by a friend, stabbed 163 times. The killer had received a life sentence but would be eligible for parole in eighteen years. Solaberry was a recent immigrant whose faith in the American dream had been shattered. His anger was eloquent and pure. It affected Al deeply; he felt the same outrage but had not yet been able to find the right words. During the meeting Al's anger was finally unleashed in public -- a scathing, Old Testament anger. He refused to accept the way things were in Missouri. Gary Rawlings would be seeking more freedom, and Al was determined to keep him off the streets. If the laws were unfair to victims, Al decided, then it was time to change the laws.

A Grief Like No Other

PARENTS of Murdered Children was founded by Charlotte and Robert Hullinger in 1978. She was a legal secretary and a teacher at the time; he was a Lutheran minister. The Hullingers had three children and lived in Cincinnati, Ohio. Their daughter Lisa, a junior in college, had been murdered by her ex-boyfriend while studying in Germany. She had broken up with him several months earlier. He killed her with a sledgehammer. His father was a corporate vice-president in St. Louis. A defense attorney at the trial argued that the young man could not be held entirely responsible for the crime. A psychiatrist reported that the killer had "never learned how to tolerate rejection." Lisa's murderer was found guilty in a German court, given a prison sentence of three to five years, and released after spending less than a year and a half behind bars.

Charlotte went back to work in the fall of 1978, a couple of weeks after the murder. Many of her friends soon stopped asking how she was doing, stopped mentioning Lisa's name. Life began to seem surreal. Charlotte felt as though she were walking around with open wounds, bleeding, and yet few people seemed to notice. Cheerful Christmas cards arrived at the house without any acknowledgment of what had just happened to Lisa. Old

friends who did not know what to say chose to say nothing at all. Bob Hullinger thought that people's response to the murder often seemed like "a conspiracy of silence." Desperate to find a book on the aftermath of murder, Charlotte visited local libraries, but found none. She needed to speak to other people who had experienced the same kind of loss. She heard about a Catholic priest who counseled grieving mothers. Although her husband was a Lutheran minister, as was her father, Charlotte did not hesitate to give Father Ken Czillinger a call.

Czillinger had been interested for years in how Americans deal with, or more often don't deal with, the issue of death. His interest was more than academic. The first funeral he performed as a priest, at the age of twenty-seven, was his younger brother's. Within five years Czillinger had also lost both his parents. Much was being written in the late 1960s and early 1970s about the "denial of death" in American society. Czillinger came to know the psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and many of the early pioneers in the study of bereavement. Subjects that had long been suppressed -- the realities of death and dying, the stages of grief and mourning -- were now being openly explored. Czillinger viewed his priesthood not as a stamp of authority for providing answers but as a means for joining the search.

Czillinger introduced Bob and Charlotte to a few other people whose children had been murdered. The meeting took place in the Hullingers' living room. These grieving parents immediately felt a close connection. They could easily express and understand feelings that were considered awkward or inappropriate or disturbing by the rest of society. Hearing that others felt the same way relieved the sense of isolation. Charlotte decided to form a support group for the families of murder victims. "If life experiences are not used," she maintained, "they are wasted." She began to seek out the relatives of murder victims, convinced that many others felt alienated and alone. Whenever she read about a murder in the newspaper, she would get in touch with the victim's family, sometimes driving at night for miles to pick up people at their homes and bring them to the meetings. A group begun out of a desperate personal need assumed a larger importance, as the Hullingers learned how many other devastated parents needed help. At first the Hullingers' living room served as the group's meeting place, Lisa's old bedroom as its office. Chapters were soon formed in other cities and states. Although the group welcomed grieving siblings, spouses, and friends, most of its members had lost a child to murder. Bob and Charlotte wanted a name for the organization that was direct and to the point, not sugarcoated. "Parents of Murdered Children" said it all. This was a group no one ever hoped

to join.

The Hullingers learned that the grief caused by murder does not follow a predictable course. It does not neatly unfold in stages. When a person dies after a long illness, his or her family has time to prepare emotionally for the death, to feel an anticipatory grief. When someone is murdered, the death usually comes without warning. A parent might have breakfast with a child on an ordinary morning -- and then never see or hold or speak to that child again. The period of mourning after a natural death lasts one, two, perhaps three years. The much more complicated mourning that follows a homicide may be prolonged by the legal system, the attitudes of society, the nature of the crime, and the final disposition of the case. A murder is an unnatural death; no ordinary rules apply. The intense grief experienced by survivors can last four years, five years, a decade, even a lifetime.

In the days and weeks right after a murder the victim's family is often in a state of shock, feeling numb, sometimes unable to cry. The murder of a loved one seems almost impossible to comprehend. Life feels unreal, like a dream. Survivors may need to go over the details of the crime again and again, discussing them endlessly, as though trying to put together the pieces of a puzzle, struggling to make sense of it all. They tell themselves, "This can't be true." After other kinds of crimes the victim lives to tell how it happened and to describe how it felt. A murder often forces the victim's family to reconstruct events. They ask, How did this take place? Why? Did my loved one suffer? The police usually try to shield family members, keeping them away from the crime scene and from gruesome photographs of the victim. Nevertheless, many survivors demand to see these things. They want to confront the reality of the murder and to know the worst. Denied access to the facts by the authorities or by a lack of information about the crime, the relatives of murder victims are frequently tormented by their imaginations and by questions that can never be answered.

After a natural death the family of the deceased can begin the process of mourning. After a murder the criminal-justice system usually delays and disrupts the grieving of the victim's loved ones. If the murderer is never found, the death lacks a sense of closure; if the murderer is apprehended, the victim's family may face years of legal proceedings and a resolution that is disappointing. Insufficient evidence may lead the prosecution to drop charges or to reduce them from murder to manslaughter. Co-defendants may be given a lesser punishment, despite a role in the murder, in order to obtain their cooperation. Each new hearing may stir up feelings that were seemingly laid to rest. "You never bury a loved one who's been

murdered," one survivor has explained, "because the justice system keeps digging them up." The sense of powerlessness that a murder inspires in a victim's family is frequently reinforced by the courts. When the victim's family is barred from the courtroom during a trial (while the murderer's family is allowed to attend, looking somber and well dressed), it seems that the murderer still somehow has the upper hand, still exerts more power. Even when a trial ends in a verdict of guilty and a sentence that seems appropriate, the family of a murder victim may be left with a hollow feeling. They may realize for the first time that no amount of punishment given to the murderer can relieve their sorrow or bring the victim back to life.

The long duration and repetitive nature of the grief following a homicide can become a source of frustration to old friends. With the best of intentions, friends may want the survivor to "get over it." They may not see the point of discussing the same details of the crime again and again. The desire that survivors end their mourning also has a selfish component: the magnitude of their loss and pain is not easy to accept. People search for ways to distance themselves from such tragedy. One way is to assume that the victim was somehow responsible for his or her death. Blaming the victim has a strong intrinsic appeal. It preserves the illusion that the world is rational and just, that things happen for a reason. It sustains the American belief that a person can control his or her own destiny. And it gets everybody else -- at times even the murderer -- off the hook. If the victim is somehow to blame, according to this logic, then the rest of us are still safe.

Although others frequently put the blame for a murder on the victim, the families of murder victims are often plagued by their own guilt. A sudden, unexpected death may leave all sorts of issues between the victim and his or her family unresolved. The victim's family may feel regret about words that were said or left unsaid. Siblings may feel guilty about surviving. Parents may be torn by self-doubts. Parents are supposed to keep their children safe from harm, at any cost. The murder of a child looms as a profound failure of parental responsibility, regardless of whether or not that murder could have been prevented. The parents of a murder victim wonder what their child might have become someday. The murder of a child violates the natural order, destroying a parent's stake in the future.

Each member of a family is likely to grieve differently, creating great potential for conflict. Siblings of the victim may feel neglected by their parents or suddenly overprotected. Spouses may be unable to give each other

support when it is needed most. One may be having a good day while the other feels down; the discrepancy in moods often breeds resentment. Women tend to be more demonstrative in their grief, crying more readily and putting their thoughts into words. Traditional notions of masculinity often complicate a father's grief. As the putative head of the household, a father may feel an added burden of responsibility for the murder, for failing in his role as protector. Men who do not show emotion are sometimes accused of being distant and unfeeling; those who cry openly may be thought weak. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the stresses of losing a child are responsible for an extremely high rate of divorce among grieving parents. Events that once brought a family together -- holidays, birthdays, anniversaries -- become reminders of loss. The internalized grief felt by most men, and many women, may precipitate a variety of serious illnesses. Some parents of murder victims soon follow them to the grave.

From the archives:

- **"Growing Up Scared," by Karl Zinsmeister (June, 1990)**

"Spurred on by family instability, violent crime now touches millions of young lives. The control of crime in the streets, in the schools, and in the home ought to be the pre-eminent 'children's issue.'"

Children suffer perhaps the most of all. Rachel Burrell is the founder and director of Fernside, in Cincinnati, one of the nation's first centers for grieving children. Burrell says it is a myth that children bounce back after a tragedy -- a sign of wishful thinking among adults. A child's grief tends to be cyclical, coming and going amid intervals of play. Children whose parents have been murdered exhibit a wide range of behavioral and developmental problems. They may suffer from psychosomatic ailments, such as headaches, stomachaches, dizziness, and uncontrollable trembling. They may be teased or avoided at school. Their self-esteem may plummet, and also their trust in authority. Many studies have shown that children who are directly exposed to violence are much more likely to commit violent acts as adults. Millions of children in America are now particularly at risk. A study in one Chicago neighborhood found that 33 percent of its schoolchildren had witnessed a murder. A study in Washington, D.C., found that 31 percent of the city's first- and second-graders had witnessed shootings, and 39 percent had seen dead bodies. The children of murder victims often lack the language skills or even the proper frame of reference to express their grief. Rachel Burrell encourages them to put their feelings into their art. The walls at Fernside are covered with children's paintings and drawings. In crude but powerful works parents float in heaven, killers are punished, and bright-orange jack-o'-lanterns shed tears.

The emotional and psychological distress suffered by the relatives of murder victims in many ways resembles that of rape victims, combat veterans, and prisoners who have been tortured. During the 1970s researchers showed a renewed interest in the long-term effects of trauma. The women's movement was encouraging rape victims to

speak out about their experiences, and soldiers returning from Vietnam were exhibiting an array of psychiatric illnesses. A syndrome previously labeled "battle fatigue" or "shell shock" was renamed "post-traumatic stress disorder" (PTSD). Some of its common symptoms are recurring nightmares and flashbacks, insomnia, memory loss, difficulty concentrating, feelings of alienation, hypervigilance, and an exaggerated startle reaction. A severe trauma like the murder of a loved one can also induce depression, phobias, changes in personality, and substance abuse. The British psychiatrist Colin Murray Parkes has observed that trauma victims sometimes develop obsessive-compulsive disorders. One of his patients was a ten-year-old girl whose sister had been abducted and murdered. The young girl developed the habit of constantly glancing over her shoulder to make sure nobody was sneaking up behind her, a habit that turned into a nervous tic.

Anyone can fall prey to mental disorders after a traumatic event. A prior history of psychological problems is by no means necessary for the development of PTSD. Studies of soldiers in combat have found that even the healthiest people will crack if the trauma is severe and unrelenting. The meaning of a trauma, or its absence of meaning, is an important contributing factor. During the Vietnam War, U.S. Army mortuary workers who handled the personal effects of the dead -- the photographs of girlfriends, the cards and letters from back home -- were more traumatized than the workers who handled the bodies.

Post-traumatic stress disorder stems from physiological changes in the central nervous system, according to Bessel van der Kolk, a professor of psychiatry at Boston University. A person's stress response becomes fixed in a heightened state of alert, preparing the body to fight, freeze, or flee at the slightest provocation. When the traumatic event is something that cannot be undone, the heightened stress response becomes both useless and destructive. People suffering from PTSD become "stuck": they constantly relive the trauma in powerful detail and then organize their lives around avoiding anything that might provoke these terrible memories. They swing between vivid, almost lifelike re-creations of the trauma and total denial of it. Van der Kolk helps his patients to move beyond the traumatic memories and develop a broader perspective, one that finds meanings in life that will counter the feelings of loss and sheer terror. "Sometimes a little bit of denial," he says, "can be a beautiful thing."

If a family member actually witnessed the murder, the nightmares and flashbacks often revolve around details of the killing. For other survivors, the moment when they

first learned about the murder becomes the traumatic event, relived again and again. The means of death notification can influence a survivor's development of PTSD. Hearing about the murder over the phone or from a reporter adds significantly to the trauma. Concerns of Police Survivors, an organization serving the family members of police officers killed in the line of duty, recommends that the families of victims always be notified in person. The message should be straightforward, compassionate, and direct. Ideally, at least two people should conduct the death notification. They should be prepared for all sorts of behavior. Survivors may try to harm themselves, to run away, or to attack the person bringing the bad news.

Nearly a decade ago Dean G. Kilpatrick, the director of the National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center, at the Medical University of South Carolina, led the only large-scale study of homicide's effects on surviving family members that has ever been conducted. Kilpatrick found that about a quarter of the people who lose an immediate family member to murder subsequently develop full-blown PTSD. About half develop several symptoms of PTSD. About five percent of the survivors in his study were still suffering from full-blown PTSD more than ten years after the murder, and 22 percent were still experiencing one or more of its symptoms. Kilpatrick estimates that perhaps 10 million Americans have endured the murder of a family member or a close friend.

The relatives of murder victims often lose not only their faith in society, the legal system, and old friends but also their faith in God. The sense of personal invulnerability that allows someone to lead a normal life -- to leave the house, drive a car, say good-bye to loved ones before a mundane errand, confident of seeing them again -- may be utterly destroyed. A murder can provoke an existential despair completely at odds with a person's lifelong beliefs. The anger many survivors feel, along with often violent fantasies of revenge, may conflict with religious traditions that stress mercy and forgiveness. Ministers and priests may alienate the families of murder victims with comments like "The Lord knows best," "Everything happens for a reason," and "It's all part of His plan." The murder of a child is difficult to reconcile with belief in a just, all-powerful God. A congregation may react insensitively to the persistence of a survivor's grief. Ken Czillinger thinks that America's religious institutions tend to promote a male-oriented approach to grief, stressing both repression and denial of feelings. The families of murder victims often find themselves pulling away from churches that have long been the focus of their lives.

In 1985 Bob Hullinger decided to start a ministry for

crime victims and survivors, one that would reach out to them and educate others about their plight. Hullinger had learned that the United States had more than sixty prison ministries devoted to the spiritual needs of criminals -- but no ministries designed to meet the needs of their victims. Saving a murderer's soul seemed a more interesting challenge, perhaps, than looking after a murder victim's family. Hullinger spent a year assembling a proposal. After some debate his proposal was narrowly rejected by a majority of the Lutheran ministers in Cincinnati. More than a decade later the United States has only a handful of national Christian ministries devoted to helping crime victims and their families. One of the largest is Neighbors Who Care, founded in 1993 by Lisa Barnes Lampman, which serves more than 5,000 victims and survivors each year. Its parent organization, Prison Fellowship Ministries, serves 200,000 inmates each year.

Not Forgetting

WHEN Terri Smith's body was discovered, Harriett was next door at a neighbor's house, trying to reach Terri's landlord on the phone. Harriett heard Al yell "Harrie!" from the street, and she knew from the tone of his voice that something terrible had happened. She came out of the neighbor's house and asked, "Is she dead?" Al said, "Yes," and Harriett blacked out. Moments later she heard horrible screaming and wailing, like the sounds of a wounded animal way off in the distance, and then she suddenly realized that the sounds were coming from her, that she was screaming and wailing and pounding on Al's chest. In an instant she came to, and saw that Al was sobbing, and regained her composure, and decided that her family needed her to be strong. It was her duty to be strong. And for almost a decade afterward Harriett never lost her composure again in public, never fell apart.

Kathryn was at home, having worked the night shift at the post office, when Al called and told her to get down to Terri's. Kathryn had been worried about her sister, and now she knew from her father's voice that the worst had happened. When she got to the house, she wanted to go inside and see Terri. She could not believe that her sister was dead -- she needed to see for herself. But her parents wouldn't let her go inside. The rest of the Smith family soon arrived, except Kenny, who was much too sensitive to handle this kind of stress. Al sat in his van talking to one of the homicide detectives, an older man who was visibly affected by the crime scene and fighting back tears. A television-news crew shot footage of Terri's house but kept a respectful distance, never trying to

interview members of the family.

Harriett had been around death for many years. She spent most of her twelve-hour nursing shifts at the bedsides of dying patients. Perhaps it was her maternal instinct; whereas some nurses avoided the terminally ill, Harriett felt a strong need to make sure that none of her patients died alone. Death was no stranger to her, but murder seemed an entirely different thing, evil and unknown. Harriett did not understand how anyone could choose to take another life, especially Terri's life. Within an hour of hearing about the murder Harriett instinctively felt surrounded by Terri's presence. She said a prayer for Terri -- "Eternal rest grant upon her, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon her, and may her soul rest in peace, amen" -- and silently repeated the prayer over and over again in the following weeks and months. She prayed that God would have mercy on her daughter's soul and would accept her into heaven; she refused to believe that Terri's murder was part of any divine plan. As a nurse, she had been trained to switch off her emotions and hide them until she was alone. Whenever Harriett felt the grief become unbearable, she would lock herself in the bathroom and weep.

Al felt numb for almost two years after the murder, keeping his feelings tightly shut inside. Every now and then Harriett would try to use her nurse's training in bereavement, subtly asking Al questions that might prompt him to share his thoughts. When he finally realized what she was doing, he said, "Don't give me any of that Goddamn psychology." Al felt drawn to the cemetery, visiting Terri's grave about once a week without telling anybody. Harriett's twelve siblings and Al's three sisters were a tremendous source of support, and old friends of the Smith family stood by them. Al's co-workers and Harriett's fellow nurses were sympathetic, but not a single doctor at the hospital where Harriett had worked for years offered condolences or even mentioned the fact that Terri had died. Harriett finally walked up to a cardiologist and said, "Did you know that my daughter was murdered?" The doctor's deeply embarrassed reaction made Harriett regret her bluntness. The Smiths were determined to keep Terri's memory alive, to consider her part of their family forever, regardless of what other people might think. When the time came for a new family portrait, Al and Harriett decided to include a framed picture of Terri in it.

Kathryn had great difficulty believing that her sister was dead. At the wake and at the funeral the person in the casket did not look like Terri. Kathryn often blamed herself for the murder. She had hired Gary Rawlings to install new windows at her house. She had introduced him

to Terri. If she'd just hired someone else, maybe Terri would still be alive. Kathryn regretted not having spent more time with her sister in the weeks before the murder. She had recently started a new job at the post office, working nights, and she had let slide a number of chances to get together with Terri. Kathryn had suspected that her sister and Rawlings were having some problems. Perhaps if she'd spent more time with Terri, then Terri would have spoken about the physical abuse, and her murder could have been prevented. Kathryn thought about the murder constantly, wondering how much pain Terri had suffered. Night after night Kathryn had the same vivid dream: Somebody would be at the front door, knocking. She'd go to the door and open it, and a person would be standing there, dressed in a black cape and a black hat, looking down. Suddenly the person would look up, and it would be Terri, and she'd smile and say, "Don't worry, Sis, I'm not really dead."

Kathryn's friends began to lose patience with her. Whenever she started talking about Terri's death, they would abruptly change the subject. A co-worker at the post office once cut her short, saying, "Aren't you over that yet?" Kathryn began to have trouble eating and sleeping. She would sit by the window for hours holding one of her sister's cats, as though the pet were a tangible link to Terri. She was terrified that Rawlings would return and kill the rest of her family. She was always alert, awaiting his arrival, afraid to sleep, afraid to close her eyes in the shower. She developed a serious respiratory illness. She cried and cried and could not stop. Everyone seemed fake and artificial, like actors in a bad play. "Why do people rush around doing this and rush around doing that," she wondered, "when they could be dead tomorrow?"

A few months before the first anniversary of Terri's death Kathryn was admitted to the psychiatric ward at a local hospital. She was convinced that there was a secret plan, that Terri was alive and in hiding. She became obsessed with true-crime magazines, reading anything she could about actual murders, trying to make sense of what had happened to her sister. During her hospitalization the post office tried to fire Kathryn for missing work. Her union blocked the dismissal. After thirty days of treatment her insurance coverage ran out. Kathryn was discharged from the hospital, still mired in a severe depression. If she had murdered Terri instead of mourning her, Kathryn thought, all the psychiatric help in the world would have been provided free.

This article continues in [Part Two](#)

The photographs that appear throughout this article were provided by

the families of murder victims. We are grateful for their generous cooperation.

Eric Schlosser is a contributing editor of *The Atlantic*. His articles on marijuana and the law that *The Atlantic* published in August and September of 1994 won the 1995 National Magazine Award for reporting.

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