Forgiving my daughter’s killer

By Linda L. Whiteteacher

One of the two 15-year-old boys who killed my 26-year-old daughter Cathy was released from prison last month after serving 23 years of a 54-year sentence. Gary Brown was released from prison one week before the Supreme Court decided in Graham v. Florida (http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/17/AR2010051701355.html) to end the practice of sentencing juveniles to life without parole for crimes other than murder.
Until November of 1986, I was not very knowledgeable about or interested in criminal or juvenile justice matters. I spent most of 1987 in limbo awaiting the trials of Gary Brown and his co-defendant. All I knew about them was that they were certified to stand trial as adults and had long criminal records as juveniles. At the time they seemed to be non-persons. It would take years for me to get over my indifference toward them, to eventually discover their humanity.

Ten years ago I found out that Gary was willing to meet me in a mediated dialogue through the sponsorship of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. I had never laid eyes on him and had, over the years, gradually come to ignore his existence. As the time approached for us to meet, I know that Gary became more and more apprehensive, but not me. I wanted to see him and tell him how grateful I was for his remorse. I know that this was an unusual response, but it was only possible through my discovery of restorative justice and, of course, by the grace of God. I strongly believe that most of my journey over the last 23 years has been through grace. Otherwise, I have no explanation for it.

When I met with Gary, I discovered a young man whose life had been one of abuse and neglect, a world apart from that of my childhood and that of my children’s. Though he offered no excuses for his actions, what he told me helped me to place my daughter’s murder in a larger context and helped me to understand how he could have done such a tragic deed. His total remorse was an incredibly healing encounter for me.
I think it’s the love shown him by an adopted family that transformed Gary and made him the person he is today. He wants us to go and talk to kids about our experiences, and I hope we can do that. My experience with Gary has taught me that we have a responsibility to protect our youth from the kind of childhood that Gary had, from treatment that recklessly disregards their inherent vulnerability. He is proof that young people, even those who have done horrible things, can be transformed.

When my daughter was killed, I would have supported a sentence of life without parole for the juveniles who killed her. Today, I am glad the Supreme Court ruled that young offenders must be treated differently from adults even for heinous crimes.

We cannot afford to lose our young people to desolation and cruelty. The Supreme Court has taken one small step, but we must go further. Our policies should reflect what I truly believe is God’s will for forgiveness. We must end the practice of sentencing youth to prison for the rest of their lives without hope of release, because people should never be declared worthless and stripped of the opportunity for rehabilitation due to crimes committed in their youth.

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