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Woman helps family, friends of murder victims gain control of their lives

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Sep. 4, 2012 Conversations with Sr. Camille

I met Vilma Torres a dozen years ago in an arena of enormous sufferings. The Cherish Life Circle, which the Sisters of Mercy founded in Brooklyn in 1993 to oppose capital punishment, holds a separate, annual service for families of murder victims. When Vilma learned of this endeavor, she, on behalf of Safe Horizon, offered to help us. And she has every year since, providing indispensable assistance. We know her as a competent, caring provider of services to individuals suffering the greatest of losses in violent situations. Over these many years, I've never asked what drew her into this work. I think this conversation is long overdue.

Sr. Camille: Vilma, what path brought you to this heartbreaking, essential work?

Torres: When I was a social work student, my interest in the criminal justice system led me to Victims Services. It was there that I met Maria Antonia Modica, who interviewed me for a position with Families of Homicide Victims Program. At that time, very few people knew the facts of survivors experiencing life's ultimate violation -- the murder of a family member. I saw the way that program worked to lift that heavy burden off them. It helped survivors know that expressions of grief and anger are OK.

The partnerships formed with the Office of Chief Medical Examiner, the New York Police Department, Office of Victims Services, and District Attorney's offices managed to convey the support of these agencies and our willingness to help.

You seem to have forged a special bond among service providers and advocates.

I have certainly experienced blessings from mentors and supervisors on the local and national level. They've been a guiding force, and colleagues are ever present to offer a helping hand, a laugh and a hug.

Can you describe some of these implications?

After a crime, victims feel helpless. They experience a loss of control. They find themselves in a state of shock. They're fearful and have to cope with flashbacks and bad dreams. They have great concern for their personal safety and that of their loved ones.

Can you describe the impact of these experiences on a particular client?

No, I couldn't single out a single story. There are so many instances of courage. They come through in person or over the phone. So many are treasures.

Can you cite an occasion or event that made you appreciate the opportunities you provide?

Not specifically. Many stories of inspiration live in the shadows of crime, no matter how rough the times are. Since 1978, Safe Horizon has been present and reachable to anyone impacted by violence or abuse. It offers services in criminal and family courts, in police precincts, shelters, community programs, family justice centers and through our hotlines. I find it is a privilege and honor to help victims and survivors regain control of their lives. We achieve this by providing support for individuals suffering the long-term effects of murder. Such violence takes a toll on the survivor's mental health.

What's the best thing about what you do?

For me, the value of being able to listen with compassion to crime victims and survivors is most important thing one can do.

Do any of the grieving people you help inspire you?

The families of homicide victims I have known in my life have one inspiring quality in common: resiliency.

I've observed you offering consolation and guidance to numerous people who attend our annual service for families of murder victims. Each one who comes through your contact seems to know and trust you and your helpers. You are absolutely present to them. There are many times, however, when you're out of town, having been called away to give talks in different communities. What do people want from you?

I'm asked to speak about children's grief, about the impact of 9/11, about available services for victims of crime and abuse, and victims' rights. There are so many bereavement issues stemming from violent death and trauma. Audiences want to know how to facilitate support groups for survivors of homicide and to provide long-term services for families and friends of murder victims.

Vilma, every year during our service for families of murder victims, our Cherish Life Circle witnesses your quiet, caring competence and we are so grateful for your help.

Honestly, Sr. Camille, your people get it. You allow victims to express any feelings they may have about the nature of the crime before you bring them to chapel to share a prayer service. I often hear comments like, "I did not feel alienated or that someone was judging me. I was treated with compassion and respect." I would like to see many more clergy persons working this way to support victims and survivors of crime.

Please say something about your family.

My parents came from Puerto Rico. They are my heroes. My father, Manuel Torres, died in 1990 from colon cancer. He, with my mother, Teresa Torres, created our family: one daughter and four sons. Currently, my mother has seven grandchildren and two great-grandkids. My parents sent me to St. Augustine Elementary School and Cathedral High School. From there, I went on to John Jay College of Criminal Justice for undergraduate studies and the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College for a master's degree.

It's often one's elementary and high school teachers who exert an influence on students. Does anyone come to mind?

I had several outstanding teachers at St. Augustine's. Mr. Miller inspired me to enjoy history and Sr. Grace William gave me a love of music and created a fun-filled interest in learning.

Does your faith impact your work?

Spirituality is present in many of the victims of crime and abuse and survivors of homicide I work with on a daily basis.

Do you have a favorite scripture passage?

What comes first to mind is The Serenity Prayer. It is universal and offers support and hope.

How do you pray?

Through conversation and dialogue I think I have God's ear pretty well.

What do you expect from Catholicism?

My parents created the foundation of my Catholicism. In addition to providing religious instruction, they helped me value questioning, reckoning and self-examination as ways to make my own way in life's journey.

How do you relax?

I love theater, especially on Broadway. I enjoy conducting training sessions. Meeting others in the victims' rights field is a source of inspiration. Together, we plant seeds that grow to help others in need.

What makes you happy?

Seeing the accomplishments of my nieces and nephews. I find great joy in witnessing their endeavors.

What makes you sad?

Hearing about violent acts. The immediate effects of victimization, including the emotional, physical, financial consequences, and the victim's fear that he or she will not be believed or that they will be blamed.

What are your dreams for the future?

Live in the here and now. The future is another chapter waiting to happen.

Do you have a favorite quote?

Yes. Mother Teresa said, "Do small things with great love."

And so you do. Thank you. Finally, is there anything more you'd like to say?

Yes, I'd like to let readers know about our two hotlines: Safe Horizon's Crime Victims Hotline is 866-689-HELP (4357). Our Domestic Victims Hotline is 800-621-HOPE (4673).

Also, families and friends of murder victims and those wanting to learn how to offer such a service might want to contact Safe Horizons Hotline about attending the Sisters of Mercy/Cherish Life Circle's next prayer service. That will be held in Brooklyn on Sunday, Oct. 28.

Thank you again, Vilma, for your concern for people suffering from life's deepest cruelties.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audio book is available through the book's website, storiesofforgiveness.com [1].]

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