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Golden Rule inspired woman to forgive after near-death experience

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Apr. 16, 2013 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Sr. Camille: We who live in the New York area remember with horror the teenager's prank that almost took your life and, in many ways, changed it. Would you please describe what happened to you in November 2004?

Victoria Ruvolo: I went out that night to see my 14-year-old niece perform with a band of older musicians. Despite her age, they thought she was good enough to sing with them. Thank God, my dear friend Lou Erali came with me that night. It was raining when we left the concert at about 12:30 a.m. The rain turned to wet snow, so I decided to take a local route. I don't like to drive in the snow and I didn't want to be on the parkway. Little did I know I was putting myself in harm's way. If I'd taken the parkway, my car wouldn't have been anywhere near the one with the passenger whose reckless action almost killed me.

What happened during that drive made the national news.ABC-TV described it[1] this way: "Ruvolo, 44, was driving down the highway when a group of teenagers, driving in the opposite direction, hurled a 20-pound frozen turkey at her oncoming car. When Ruvolo woke up from an induced coma two weeks later, she had no idea what happened to her."

You know, I was worried when I woke up in the hospital. I didn't know who got hurt. When I saw I was in a hospital room, I wondered who I was here to see. I thought they put me there so I could sleep until I got to see who was there. When I looked in a mirror and I saw the tracheotomy tube in my throat, that's when it actually hit me, and I went, "Oh my God. It was me!" My next thought was, Thank God it was me and not one of my sisters.

The damage was much greater than the mirror revealed. Your esophagus was caved in, your cheeks and jaw were shattered. You had a fractured eye socket and you suffered brain damage. Why do you thank God that Lou Erali was with you when the turkey came crashing through your windshield?

He truly saved my life! Every Farmingville, N.Y., fireman said that was true. After the turkey smashed through the windshield and hit me, he pushed my foot off the gas pedal, turned the now-bent steering wheel and let the car roll to a stop on the side of the road. Then he held my head up so I would not choke to death on my own blood.

The person responsible was an 18-year-old college freshman by the name of Ryan Cushing. Those who knew him said he was "shy" and a "follower." While you fought for your life and in a long period of recovery, Cushing faced up to 25 years in prison if convicted.

While you were hospitalized and unable to speak for yourself, your nieces and nephew contrived a way to let the hospital staff know how much you meant to them. They created a colorful sign and hung it on a wall across from your bed. It read, in part:

> **"Thank you for taking care of our very special Aunt Vicky. Though she has no children of her own, she has been a mother to all of us. She has cheered for our successes and wept at our sorrow. She has cradled us as babies in her arms, held our hands as toddlers, and walked beside us as**

adults. She cares for her family, selflessly giving her time, energy, spirit and love ... She is the life of the party and yet the best shoulder to cry on ... And she has never said "No" to any of us ... She is everyone's favorite aunt and asks for nothing in return. She is loved ... So please continue to take care of her. ... We have only one Aunt Vicky and we want her well again!!" --Francine, Jeff, Brianna and Julianna Greenberg

Was anyone particularly helpful during your long hospitalization and recovery?

My dear brother-in-law Benny Dierna. He was always at my side, taking care of me. To this day, I call him my Dr. Ben Casey [2]. He is such a wonderful man, always there for anyone in the family.

Nine months later, on Aug. 16, 2005, you went to court to see the teenager accept responsibility for nearly killing you. That day, you surprised everyone by your insistence that you were not there for retribution but for his redemption. You asked that he not be given a long prison sentence. What inspired that decision?

Well, after I came off of the strong medication I was on, I went through all the emotions that anyone would have: Why me? What did I do in my life that was so bad that this had to happen to me? Then I realized God is everywhere, and if he is everywhere, then he knew I was in such great physical condition and because of that, God knew I would be able to live through this terrible ordeal. That's what kept me moving on, to go through my rehab and get back to life because I was meant to save someone else's life. Now I know I did save someone else's life -- Ryan's.

Why did you ask for a lesser sentence than many believed Ryan deserved?

His was a stupid, ridiculous act, and locking him up for 25 years -- what would that do? Make him more bitter, more angry? He'd probably get abused in jail and come out ready to do something worse to someone else. I would not want anyone to feel the pain or anguish that I went through.

Can you identify anyone who encouraged you not to demand a harsh penalty for Ryan Cushing, or did it come from some deep belief in the power of forgiveness?

You know, no one encouraged me to do anything; they told me their opinions. My sister Rita knew where I was coming from. Her son had been hit by a car and killed while riding his bike. I could see her human nature shining through. My family knows when I believe in something and when I want to do something, I will get it done.

The New York Times [3] **reported[3] that when you saw Ryan for the first time in a Riverhead courtroom, you stopped to accept his tearful apology and embraced him, stroking his face and patting his back as he cried uncontrollably. Witnesses heard you whisper, "It's OK, it's OK. I just want you to make your life the best it can be." Has he been able to let you know how your forgiveness made him feel?**

You know, Ryan did write me a letter, not condoning what he did, just letting me know what was going through his head at the time. I needed that expression of regret as much as he needed my hug!

What bothered me most about the publicity was the reports that I said what Ryan did was OK. No, I never condoned the act itself. I simply forgave the person who committed the act.

At the time of the assault, you were described as "a 44-year-old office manager." Now 53, you've written a book about your experience,*No Room for Vengeance* *[4]*, and are often asked to give talks about it. How has your professional life changed?

I still work for the same company -- 25 years now. I've been a project manager for the past nine years.

What part did your Catholicism play in your handling of the unprovoked attack and your decision to save Ryan from a long prison term?

You know, I always believed you treat people they way you want to be treated. I made Ryan human and not this publicized monster when I started asking questions about him. I wanted to know what was going on with his life at the time. I truly believe we are all victims of circumstances.

Where did you grow up and what was your family like?

I grew up in Brooklyn, on the border between Richmond Hill and East New York. I was the last of seven kids and Daddy's little girl. I was always with my dad! I must say they formed me in the way I live today. My mom and dad were wonderful parents and taught me to treat people the way I want to be treated.

Do you have other role models who helped form your character?

Everyone in my life that has passed on before me. I keep them alive by taking pieces of their personalities and incorporating them into my own, My brother Billy was very compassionate; I am compassionate. My nephew Benny loved animals; I have three dogs and two cats. My brother-in-law Jamsey was always physically fit and taking care of everyone; I am here for everyone in my family, and I will eventually get back into shape. The truth is I'm just starting to feel like myself again. It has taken nine years!

Do you have a favorite Bible story or Scripture passage?

"Do unto others as you want them to do unto you."

Does it make a difference in your life?

Yes. I treat people the way I want to be treated

How do you pray?

Before the incident, I was going to church every Saturday evening, and that was my regular way of connecting with God. Now each morning at home before I get out of bed, I thank God for another day. There are times while I'm driving home and I'll just think, "Thank you, God!" That's always on my mind. Thank you, God, for keeping me here to see another day.

Some would consider your story an example of "when bad things happen to good people." How would you respond to that?

I believe things happen for a reason. I believe this happened to me because I would live through it in order to spread some goodness in our world. Right before the incident, I was working out six days a week and I'd lost 60 pounds. My doctors told my family to thank God I was in such great physical condition. I think God knew I could live through the suffering from the accident in order to help save someone else's life.

My spiritual and emotional health came from awareness that when we hold onto revenge the only person we

hurt is ourselves. Forgiveness is for ourselves, not for the other person.

These many years later, how would you assess the way your experience and your choice have changed you?

My life is so much richer now.

In light of the news reports, your book and public speaking engagements, do you think your story has helped change others?

After I speak, someone from the audience always comes up to me to thank me.

Are you still in touch with Ryan Cushing?

I was before the book came out, He's still young, and I know he is doing well. He has a job and his own apartment and he's paying taxes like the rest of us, instead of our taxes paying for him to rot in jail.

Your book contains Ryan's tribute to you on page 102: "Throughout our lives seldom do we have the chance to connect with the special person who possesses so much love and compassion. Your ability to forgive me has had a profound effect on me. It has already made a positive change life. Life is not only about the choices you make, it is about learning from the bad choices you make; it is about learning ... from those consequences, good and bad. Ms. Ruvolo, I wish you the best that life had to offer you. You deserve it. Thank you for everything. I'm sorry."

Vicky, we've looked back over 10 years of your life since that November turkey changed your life. What impact do you expect it to have 10 years from now?

I hope my book will be in all middle and high schools in New York and in all its jails with proven statistics on how I'm helping people have better lives!

Your compassion for Ryan surely had a positive impact on his life. As complicated as your decision seemed to others, you explained it in a very few words to Suffolk County District Attorney Tom Spota. Do you remember what you said?

Yes. God gave me a second chance at life and I just passed it on.

Thank you, Vicky, for your powerful witness to merciful forgiveness.

[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 audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, is available [5] from Now You Know Media.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Sr. Camille's column, "Conversations with Sr. Camille," is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: **Email alert sign-up** [6].

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