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After daughter's murder, mother finds comfort in God, family

by Sr. Camille D'Arienzo

Conversations with Sr. Camille

Sister of Providence Mary Mundy describes Mary Winnecke as a woman of extraordinary faith and courage. She told me about the murder of Mary's daughter Natalie and the execution of Eric Wrinkles, the man convicted of killing Natalie. What touched Sister Mary deeply was Mary's journey from anger to forgiveness.

***Sr. Camille:* Are you willing to share your story?**

Winnecke: Yes.

You're 69 now. How old were you were when the murder took place?

That date was July 21, 1994. I was 50.

Eric had been threatening the family for several weeks. How did he finally get to them?

Eric had dressed in camouflage and cut the phone lines. He'd hidden guns in their doghouse. He shot his wife, Debbie, killing her. He also shot and killed my daughter Natalie's husband, Tony. My grandson, Matt, who was 3 at the time, had been in bed with his father. He saw him being shot. Inside the house were my 9-year-old granddaughter, Kim, and Eric's two children.

Eric returned to the living room and pointed the gun at a teenage niece, Tracy, who was visiting. Natalie stepped in front of Tracy and pushed her out the front door. Tracy ran to a neighbor, who called the police. Eric pointed the gun at my daughter's head and shot her. Natalie died on the porch.

How did Kim, then only 9, react to the horror she witnessed?

She and the other three children woke to the sound of gunshots. When Kim opened her bedroom door, she had to step over Debbie as she went into her parents' bedroom and found her father dead in bed. Kim grabbed her 3-year-old brother, Matt. They all hid in Kim's room. The door slowly opened and a gun came first. The children thought they were going to be shot, but it was the police. The officers told the children to close their eyes and carried them out. They took them to the hospital and kept them there until we came to bring them home with us.

What else was happening that confusing night?

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I went to the hospital and I said, "We're looking for three people. We know some have been shot." And this doctor came out and looked at me and said, "They are dead." I never knew; I never expected that they were all dead.

One of the dead was your daughter, Natalie, Kim's mother.

I see Natalie in the children and that's warm, and it feels good, but then I miss her so much. Mae McIntyre's children, Debbie Wrinkles and her brother Tony, were the other victims. I do a lot of crying, you know. You always think you are getting over it, but it's rough.

You two women share the same loss but hold different views about Eric Wrinkles' punishment. Mae supports the death penalty; you disagree.

There's no closure as long as the death penalty is hanging over our head.

No matter how you feel about forgiveness, the impact of such a loss must be unimaginably devastating.

When Natalie died and I was told, I fell into the deepest, darkest pit that existed. I believe I was a step away from dying, which would have been a blessing. Even today, I have to tiptoe around the outside of this pit because I fear even getting near it. It is only because of God's love that I am here. I remember sitting in my car in parking lot, screaming and wailing. I hurt so bad. I understood the wailing wall.

From where did you draw your strength?

From God. The night it happened, as I was dressing to the hospital, I looked up at my Cursillo crucifix; I saw Jesus hanging above our bed and said, "Thy will be done." Had God not held me and given me the love of my family, I would not be here. We had four generations in our home for 15 years. God knew I would need all this love to keep me going.

Who among your relatives and friends were most supportive?

My husband, my children, my mother, sister and brother. God gave me beautiful people in my family, friends and church.

How did they help?

They came immediately in many ways and are still with me today. My son David and his wife, Michele, moved back to Evansville, Ill., to help raise Natalie's kids. Most of mine were already raised. Steve, my brother, came that night to stay with Kathy, my youngest, and my mother, who was elderly. My son Adam was also with us. My sister, Barb, and her family came immediately to town. We were close then and still are. She would listen to me for hours on end. I never walked alone.

Please tell us something about your daughter.

Natalie was born in December 1967. She was a beautiful person with long red hair. At 16, she got pregnant. She married the daddy of her children in her senior year. Natalie was a beautiful mother even at such an early age. She would take Kim everywhere, even after school when she worked on the school paper. Off they would go, Natalie and Kim on her bouncy seat or little walker. At the time of her death, Natalie worked as a secretary for the IBEW. She was going to school at night to better herself. She was a wife and the mother of two children. She always stood up for the underdog. She'd always call me to say good night. She was my best friend.

Did you ever meet your daughter's killer?

I knew him somewhat before he became her brother-in-law. After Natalie married Tony, I got to know him better.

What was he like?

He was always very polite to me. He'd offer me his chair. I didn't realize he was a drug addict. I also did not realize he was abusing his wife.

Did you meet his family?

I knew his wife, Debbie, Natalie's sister-in-law. She was a very sweet person. One night not long before things happened, Natalie woke us, standing by our bed, saying she needed to use our car because Debbie and her kids needed to get away from Eric. They'd climbed over fences to get to my house.

I got to know his mother after court, though we were not friends. She knew I prayed for her and Eric.

Were you glad he paid with his life?

No. Our church was open for us, or anyone, to come and pray that he would not get the death penalty.

How did the experience change you?

I -- we all -- live this experience every day. I am the most blessed person on this earth as I have a daughter in heaven, but I hurt so bad at the loss of my daughter.

What in your faith strengthened you?

Knowing that I was never alone. God held me tight, and I know the Blessed Mother held Natalie when

she died. We are never alone.

Where, with whom and in what circumstances did you spend your childhood?

My mother and father raised me along with my brother, Steve, and my sister, Barbara. We lived with my grandparents.

Would you please describe your current family?

I live with my husband, Bob. I had three children by my first husband: Natalie, David and Adam. Bob and I had a daughter, Kathy. Bob had two sons, Rodney and Robbie.

How, when and where did you meet Bob? Please tell us a little about him.

My husband, Bob, is a beautiful, patient man. He is one of God's gifts to me. He's a convert. We balance one another. Bob is a very good father and husband. We were always first in his life. He retired as an underground coal miner, then retired as a maintenance man, after which worked as a night watchman. He now works at Wal-Mart. After he and I had been divorced by our spouses, we met in 1980 through a friend. My first husband remained part of our life and when he was dying, he hugged Bob and told him that he loved him like a brother.

What do you consider your everyday challenges?

I want to be the best person God has made me to be. I always tell people that if we were perfect, our name would be God. But it is not. And it is OK to be human, but being human sure gets in the way when I try to do things my way instead of listening to God

What gives you the courage and wisdom to address them?

God is my strength.

How do you pray?

I pray with my heart and my tears. In the beginning, I would just hold my rosary and cry. I knew the Blessed Mother had each of us. I can't imagine sleeping without my rosary in my hand.

What is your favorite Scripture passage or Bible story?

One is: "Thou shalt not kill."

Does it make in difference in your life?

It has changed my life.

Where do you worship?

I belong to Holy Redeemer parish in Evansville and do adoration there and at a parish near us, St. Johns, Daylight. Because Bob has to be at work early, we normally attend St. Benedict church daily.

What is your image of God?

God is love.

Has it changed?

It has grown because he has shown me his love and I can feel it constantly.

What about your faith is most meaningful to you?

I've been given the gift of faith and knowing this is such a blessing. I am never alone.

Who most influenced your belief system?

Probably my mother. She would walk to church daily and my brother served 6 a.m. Mass. Going to a Catholic school was a big part of my formation.

What do you consider your greatest accomplishment?

Raising my children.

Is there anything in our Catholic church you would change?

I would encourage the churches to celebrate feast days with more fanfare, have confessions more and speak stronger against abortion, but then we have fewer priests to do everything. They can't be everywhere all the time. But they should be only our spiritual leaders, not have to be the brains and spiritual leader of our parishes both.

What gives you joy?

Going to church, feeling God's love, knowing my husband and children love me.

What gives you hope?

Knowing that we know the end of life's story, that we are not alone. God never leaves us, but accompanies us every step of the way through this life to the next. I am hoping to join all my loved ones in heaven.

[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 from Now You Know Media.]

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