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Son's killing leads mother to comfort, counsel those in grief

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Feb. 21, 2012 Conversations with Sr. Camille

On Dec. 9, Miss Vida Toppin, 81, invited a few friends to celebrate her son Paul's 46th birthday.

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Those who came to her assisted-living apartment in downtown Brooklyn, N.Y., enjoyed soft drinks and snacks, conversation and blessings. Paul's close friend, Daniel Escalera, was there, but Paul was not. He was murdered in October 1992, when he went to the aid of a friend being menaced by a 16-year-old with a gun. Paul, thinking he had diffused the volatile situation, turned to walk away. Bullets in his lung, arm and leg put him in the hospital, where he died 10 days later without regaining consciousness.

D'Arienzo: I am so sorry you suffered that loss. Are you able to talk about that night?

Toppin: My son was shot Oct. 10. I'll never forget that Friday night. It was raining, cold and dreary and Paul was home with me. After we ate supper, I was watching Barbara Walters on "20/20." Someone knocked on the door. Paul turned off the TV because I was half-asleep. When Paul left the room to go out with his friend, I had a funny feeling. It was as though something was pulling at my chest. That was the last time I saw him.

How did you find out about the shooting?

At approximately 1 o'clock in the morning, the telephone rang, but it stopped ringing before I could get to it. Then someone knocked on my door. Paul's friend, Kevin, was there. He said, "Ms. Toppin, Paul got shot."

I asked, "Is he alive?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"Kings County Hospital."

It was still raining out. When I got to the hospital, I asked if I could see the doctor and was told not yet because they were operating on Paul.

Was any family member with you?

I called my daughter, Myrna, and told her what had happened. She came right away. Myrna had gotten married in June and that night, in the E.R., I learned she was pregnant for the first time. That night held a great high and the lowest low. The baby she would have, the first of five children, is Lailonny. She's 18 now and away in college, but remains the grandchild closest to me.

How long did Paul linger?

Eight days until Sunday, Oct. 18. He never spoke after the shooting, but I remember about the 13th of October, I saw a light in his face. I thought maybe he was going to make it. He had tears in his eyes. I wondered if he was crying because he was leaving me. We were so close. He never forgot me at Christmas, my birthday, Valentine's or Mother's Day. I still have a blouse he bought for me.

Miss Vida, who in your childhood were you closest to?

My grandmother. She was very sweet, very kind and compassionate. Sometimes my mother would scold me, and when I felt she was picking on me, I would complain to my grandmother. I expected her to go to my mother, her daughter, and stand up for me. As a child, I felt as though I never did any thing to deserve a scolding.

What kind of childhood did you have?

I had good parents and a good life. I was born and raised in Panama City [in Panama]. I am the youngest and only survivor of seven children. Four brothers and two sisters are gone now. I attended public school through the 8th grade.

What was your father like?

He was a very good man. Her never drank or cursed. He worked as a janitor in the Canal Zone and the soldiers loved him. They gave him gifts from all over the world, and he would bring those home to my mother. He was well-appreciated until he retired. That day was the first and only time I ever saw my father drunk. It was because the soldiers gave him drinks at his retirement party. My mother, in turn, would set the table for him as if she were setting a table for a king. She always used linen napkins and separate dishes for each course.

When did you come to the United States?

I came here in 1961. I was 30 years old and had gotten married three years earlier. My husband was unfaithful, so I left him and came to make a life in this country. I worked as a housekeeper here as I had in Panama.

Did any work experience stand out for you?

I worked for a series of families. I had a special closeness to Ann and Joseph Kasper. I cleaned and cooked for them and baby-sat their daughter and son. They treated me like family, and Ann insisted I eat at the table with them. Sometimes she and her husband would go away for a few days and leave the children with me. I was most at home with this family.

Nineteen years have passed since Paul was taken from you. How have you managed to cope with this loss?

I don't think I'll ever get over it. It's a wound that never heals. When I hear of women losing their children through knives or gunshot, my heart knows there's another mother left to wonder, Why my child? Only God knows the answer to that question. I understand why some people get so angry. I was very angry, but not at God. I was angry at the person who robbed my son from my life.

Did you seek any professional help?

I went to an organization that used to be called Victim's Services. Now its name is Safe Horizon. I remember it was the day President [Bill] Clinton took office. Vilma Torres [director of Safe Horizon, Bronx Family Justice Center] was the first person to interview me She was so compassionate and understanding. Another helpful woman was Carmen Nieves. I used to go to monthly meetings, but after a while, it became overwhelming. Every month there was a new face, a new mother losing a child. I stopped going when an 85-year-old grandfather joined the group. He couldn't stop crying all the time. I couldn't take it any more, but the meetings had helped me a great deal.

You surely have helped others suffering the loss of son or daughter.

Yes. There was one woman who used to drink a lot. I told her. "Your son is not going to be happy seeing you like that." This woman used to call me Mom. She stopped drinking. I thank God every day I never took to liquor and drugs to escape. I just wanted God to heal me.

Miss Vida, you've come to 12 of the 13 annual services for families of murder victims the Cherish Life Circle holds at the Convent of Mercy in Brooklyn. We've watched you gently comfort and counsel recently bereaved mothers. Is this service an expression of your faith?

I feel that God has me here for a reason. I have faith and trust. I believe in him. After all these years of suffering and loneliness, sometimes I say, No, I'm not alone. God is with me. I ask Blessed Mother to intercede. When Good Friday comes, I always put myself in her feelings how they crucified Jesus. I say, Mother, you know what it is to lose a son.

Have you ever seen your son's killer?

I met Winston [Hewitt] at the trial. He showed no remorse. It was as if he had killed a fly. He's supposed to be released this year. I'm worried. At one of his parole hearings, in 2008, he behaved so badly he had to be put in solitary confinement. Now he's supposed to be deported to Jamaica, but I'm afraid he'll come back to harm me or others.

How did you get through the parole hearings?

When I went to the first parole hearing, Commissioner Hamilton was very kind. He treated me with respect and understood my pain. The last commissioner, Mr. [James] Ferguson, also was very kind. When we spoke, tears came to his eyes.

Does it get any easier?

It's now not like the fresh wound. I have no more tears. But the hurt is a wound that never heals. I remember Paul every day of my life.

What do you want to happen to Winston?

I hope he would turn his life around and do something better with it. I feel sorry for his mother. How can she stand knowing that her young son is a murderer? I don't want him killed. I'm against the death penalty, no matter how horrible the crime. I leave judgment to God. I can't imagine how a person would feel with poison going through his body, or shocks in an electric chair. I don't have the heart to hurt anyone like that. I leave it to the mercy of God.

Has the Catholic church helped you survive your loss?

Fr. Tony Rucando gave Paul the last rites and celebrated his funeral Mass. He reached out to me, even inviting me to his birthday party one June 29.He is a wonderful priest. Very different from one in another parish I visited on an Ash Wednesday. That priest wouldn't give me Communion because he said I wasn't a regular parishioner. I never went back to that church.

What is your favorite Scripture passage?

The Magnificat. God looks at me and sees a lowly servant. I talk to God every day and ask for forgiveness and strength. I know with our forgiving, compassionate, merciful God all things are possible.

How do you pray?

I pray to see my granddaughter graduate from college. My 9-year-old grandson Giovanni, too. He's so good. I never go to sleep without saying my rosary. I'm not always able to go to daily Mass, but every day I watch the Mass on television.

What causes you joy?

Seeing you. Vilma makes me happy. She makes me forget my aches for a while. And I love to see my grandchildren, but they are far away. Lailonny's in college and Giovanni's family just moved to North Carolina. Then there is my son's friend, Daniel. He's Lailonny's godfather. He is so good to me, so faithful. It is almost as though I birthed him. He is a wonderful man.

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Our conversation over, we walked out into the rain. Looking up, Miss Vida said, "Everything that comes from above is a blessing."

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, has written a soon-to-be-published book titled *Stories of Forgiveness*.]

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