



## A note from Joan Shirley to you as one victim to another,

It was mentioned to me that some of our readers may not realize that even though I am now a certified victim advocate for the Resource Center, that I have also been a traumatized victim like most of you. So I decided that I'd share my story with you so you'd realize that I have walked a similar path, not like yours, but just as difficult. None of our stories is the same as another's, but each of us has a story to tell that will encourage others; I look forward to hearing yours.

It has been almost 14 years since our Kevin, age 17, along with his two friends, Matt and Luis, and was taken from us on May 29, 1999 in a hail of bullets. Sometimes, it feels like a lifetime, especially when I realize that a whole generation of children have gone from kindergarten to their second year of college in that time. Sometimes, the pain is as real as it was on day one. I know for some of you, you understand what I am saying about the passage of time. However, many of you feel a grief so fresh and raw that thinking that you can live another hour is an incredible feat of will. Unfortunately, this is a club that nobody wants to belong to and whose dues require the death of someone we love; a club I didn't want to join.

As I think back through these years, I can see not only the progression of time, but suffering and healing. I can remember that "wailing cry" that racked soul and body to the core, the inability to function, the incredible grief that wreaked havoc in and on my body which ate up my brain cells so I couldn't think of anything else, and not being able to breathe. Would the killer be in line with me at a grocery store? I wasn't able to sleep, I was angry at God, and I thought that my life was over; I didn't think that I could go on. I did actually think, for a short moment, of killing myself which propelled me to seek help. I found NM Survivors of Homicide, Inc, (NMSOH) I started private counseling, I took medication for a short time, and my husband and I went to the ABQ Compassionate Friends; a support group for parents who have lost children. I was desperate to find a way to live again, the case was getting cold, and I needed someone to walk along side of me through it all. I learned that others felt similar; I was not alone in my grief, anger, fears, or ignorance of the criminal justice system. I learned about the immense, and yet often lack of, the criminal justice system, how to work effectively with our detectives, and I learned positive coping skills; although I admit we tried "retail therapy" until we couldn't afford it anymore. I watched my family members suffer and I couldn't help them! This is a lifetime journey that can destroy a person's soul and strength; I couldn't live that way. I had to have an understanding what was going on inside and to me by emotions and a system I had no control over.

In Nov. of 2007, we finally had an arrest. I was surprised that intense anger, sadness, and shock returned to my life after almost 8 yr. I can't tell you how angry I was at Kevin. I was angry at myself for being an awful, neglectful parent. I was drowning in guilt that was self-imposed, although, natural for a murder survivor. I went to see the OMI photos; I wasn't about to see those horrible pictures for the first time in a courtroom with TV cameras on me. Although an arrest doesn't mean a trial, it could have meant a plea bargain. Once again, these groups, my friends, helped me climb out of this darkness.

In March of 2009, we had our days in court. It was grueling to watch the "theatrics" of the defense lawyers; the two top defense lawyers in the nation at the time. Our prosecutors did their very best with failing memories, questionable witnesses, and a different presentation style. How difficult to hear people lie on the witness stand! Those were days of extreme stress and disbelief. On April 1<sup>st</sup>; the

jury acquitted this person and he walked free three hours later. The jury foreman admitted on TV that some on the jury felt that he had killed the boys but that the state hadn't proven its case. We, because of my training with NMSOH, went into the courtroom understanding what to expect and realizing that a jury trial is often a "crap shoot," 12 people who might not see or hear that a killer sat at the defense table; that understanding helped make it all bearable. Back again came the anger, so intense, so disabling, and now, this person was on the streets once again. My husband actually did run into him at the grocery store three days later; he was just paralyzed. He just couldn't move or talk. Our son's killer spent 2.5 years in jail, not nearly enough for the taking of three lives. It took a few months before I was able to put this experience into my life and not dwell on how unfair it was for our families. In all fairness, the system worked for us even though the end result was not to our liking.

Many of you reading this today have placed me where I am today; healed and able to live my life as well as possible; able to help others. For that, I will be forever grateful for your confidence in me and continuous support and love. We were blessed with widespread media attention, unlike most murder families, and detectives that worked tirelessly for 10 years to bring this person to justice; even when the case went cold they pursued this killer. We were blessed to have an arrest and most importantly, our day in court. The killer chose not to accept any plea bargains offered to him; we wish now that he had and would be in prison.

***Pat, with her years of investigation and law enforcement and I can help. We cannot guarantee an arrest and trial, we do want to walk along side you on your journey; educating you, helping you understand how to work with the system and if you wish, help you with your grieving process. I sincerely wish that I could give every homicide surviving family the same attention and care our family enjoyed by law enforcement, the DA's office, and the media; that's my desire for every homicide family.***

Every other month, you will receive a newsletter from the Resource Center. The other months, I will write about something about our journey. I would like to know what subjects you'd like for me to write about; what would you find most helpful. Starting in April, each "Victim to Victim" note will hold the names of our victims who are remembered in their death month; going back to January. If we do not have your loved one's name on our list, please get us your information and we will remember them. Please be patient with us as we start this process until we have a complete list of all of our victims' death dates.

- Next support group meeting; February 13<sup>th</sup>, 6-8pm at our office-you can join by phone  
We will be making valentines for loved ones here and gone.
- National Crime Victim Rights Week event on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1-3pm, South Broadway Cultural Center, childcare provided upon request

**Hoping that this was helpful and thinking of you,**

*Joan Shirley*

**505-294-1018 or 505-238-1663 or office 505-243-2222 or -1-800-430-2232**