

# Healing in a hard place

By Guest Columnist

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How do people heal from violent crime? How do they mend after a rape or assault, or after losing a loved one to murder? How do they get over the grief, anger and gnawing sense that no matter what happens, justice will never be served?

For Patricia Dahlgren, whose mother, June Duncan, was abducted and strangled in December 1995, the answer came from an unusual source: the man who killed her mother.

I spoke with Dahlgren, who is now 62 years old and lives on a small farm in Oregon's coastal mountains, shortly before the release of my novel, "The Crying Tree," a book about murder and forgiveness that takes place in Oregon. I was interested in knowing more about recent efforts by the Oregon Department of Corrections to help victim-survivors like Dahlgren come to grips with their loss, as well as help offenders take responsibility for their actions. Such efforts have been quietly gaining a foothold in the state and nationally, and seemingly have been missed by politicians, voters and journalists who are focused on the more punitive aspects of crime and punishment, such as mandatory sentencing laws and harsher penalties.

The program that brought Dahlgren together with her mother's murderer is called Facilitated Dialogue. Launched by the Corrections Department in 2004, it was modeled after victim/offender dialogue programs in Canada, which have been conducting such meetings for more than two decades. Ironically, the first state to offer victim/offender dialogues was Texas, a place better known as the execution capital than the resolution capital. Since the Lone Star State began its program in the late 1990s, 24 more states have developed similar programs.

"Victims have questions," said Betsy Coddington, a founder of Oregon's Facilitated Dialogue Program and the executive director of Resolutions Northwest, a Portland-based mediation group. "They have things they want to know and things they want to say. Things only the offender can respond to. Giving people that opportunity, it can be life changing."

Prior to the program's creation, the Oregon Corrections Department refused requests by victims to meet with their offenders. Even letters between the parties were prohibited by department rules. The policy was meant to protect victims. But according to Karen Roddy, the department's victim services coordinator, that concern may not always be necessary. "We're finding these meetings can have an incredibly healing effect on both the victim and the offender. Victims gain back their power over the situation, and offenders get the opportunity to be fully accountable for their actions. It's a very rewarding process."

That is the message Dahlgren recently took to several women incarcerated at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville. Her visit in April was the culmination of a brand-new 22-week Victim Offender Education Program.

During Dahlgren's daylong visit, she told the inmates of the years of grief and counseling she endured following her mother's murder. How she once horsewhipped a tree, slashing her anger into its brittle bark. She spoke about the loneliness of violent crime, the isolation and impenetrability of it, as well as its physical and spiritual tolls. Then she told them about the Facilitated Dialogue Program.

On June 13, 2007, Dahlgren entered the Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla and sat down with the man who killed her mother. They were in a conference room, and were accompanied by Dahlgren's best friend, two facilitators and a minister. The meeting lasted all day and concluded in a way that stunned everyone. With Dahlgren telling the man she calls Mr. H that she forgave him.

"I don't know if people will understand," she said, recalling the conversation two years later. "But I really didn't have a choice. My life changed when I saw that man's pain and remorse. I watched him struggle as he told me exactly what he did to my mom, how she reacted and how he hated himself for what he'd done. You have no idea what that's like, to watch the person who murdered someone you love break down like that. I got my life back that day."

The inmates' reactions to Dahlgren's story last month were "amazing," according to the Rev. Emily Brault, the chaplain at Coffee Creek. After Dahlgren concluded, the women shared their own stories, and people wept and helped each other confront the reality of what they had done to themselves and others. "There is something about that talking," Brault said, "that sharing of stories, that brings healing and hope. We are no longer bound by our secrets."

Brault does not think the program is for everyone. "But for those that are brave enough to face themselves and their lives head-on with no holds barred," she said, "it can be the most amazing and transformative experience of their lives."

Will these classes have an impact on recidivism? "It's too soon to tell," says Brault. But, she believes it will.

"That's what we hope," says state Rep. Judy Stiegler, D-Bend, a member of the House Judiciary Committee and former defense attorney. "Programs like these help not just the victim and offender, but everyone. We want people to live healthy productive lives, and if these efforts can help us do that, why wouldn't we support them?"

As a result of the positive reaction to the program, the Corrections Department will begin a second round of the victim/offender classes next week.

In contrast, only seven victim survivors have met with their perpetrators since the Facilitated Dialogue Program began six years ago. The most recent encounter occurred early this year.

Steve Doell, president of Crime Victims United, says that's a good thing. While his organization officially supports any effort that would help a victim, he's cautious about victims sitting down and talking with offenders. "These people are in prison for a reason. It doesn't take much

imagination to know these meetings could go wrong."

Coddington, who serves on the program's advisory board, agrees that people must be very cautious. Program rules require that offenders must be in good standing at the prison and must have taken responsibility for their crime before they are eligible. They also should be involved in education and enrichment programs. If program criteria are met, both the victim survivor and the offender then must work with facilitators to prepare for the meeting. During this time, the offender also may meet with counselors. "We want the process to be as safe as possible, and that means preparation," Coddington said. "If anything were to go wrong, someone being re-victimized or hurt, the entire program would get thrown off the planet."

It took Dahlgren and her mother's killer six months to get ready for their meeting. "I was afraid at first," Mr. H wrote in response to my questions about the process. "It was very difficult to think of revealing what a monster I had been. But I went to the meeting with every intention of being completely honest."

They sat at a large conference table, Dahlgren with her long gray hair pulled back into a soft bun, the 44-year-old inmate, hair neatly trimmed and dressed in prison-issued denims. There were introductions, and then, according to Dahlgren, "the world dissolved into just Mr. H and I."

For the next several hours, they talked. She told him about her emotional journey, and he told her exactly what he did on Dec. 18, 1995: the abduction from downtown Grants Pass, the drive into the hills, the things June Duncan said, the way she fought to live. Then he told Dahlgren he was sorry. And he said it again, and again. Choking out the words as he sobbed. He was ashamed of what he did, he said. "When you open yourself up entirely to a person you've hurt, it forces you to see yourself through their eyes, and this is not something that is easy," Mr. H said. "But it can be the beginning of some kind of change."

Does all this mean that it no longer hurts when Patricia Dahlgren thinks of her mother? Or that June Duncan's killer feels cleansed of what he did? No. But according to Brault, the prison chaplain, it does mean people's lives can be made a little lighter.

Healing, it seems, has no boundary, no landmass one can point to and call home. Instead, it is an ephemeral thing found, sometimes, in the most unlikely of places and from the most unlikely of people. In our haste to punish offenders and protect ourselves from crime, we should not forget that justice, at its heart, is about restoring balance and wholeness. After listening to Dahlgren's and others stories, I am more and more convinced that the important work in our criminal justice system lies not only in what sentences we provide, but also in the ways we can help both victims and offenders learn to build new, more generous and compassionate lives.

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