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Parents of slain help each other cope

By Shelby Grad

'I didn't do it out of altruism....I needed to break this loneliness I was feeling.'

--Jean Lewis, support group founder

It has been 10 years since her 21 year-old-son was murdered, and Jean Lewis' memories are still most painful around Christmas. "I keep remembering the last time we saw him in person at the airport and the last thing he said that he'd see us at Christmas" she said of her son, Scott, who was a student at the University of Colorado when he and his girlfriend were abducted and killed by drug dealers. "That always gets me during the holidays when families are getting together.... We'll never see him again," she said. Before Scott's death, there was no place in Santa Clara County that offered support specifically to survivors of homicide victims, who often are left with emotional scars that can lead to divorce, substance abuse and other problems. Then in 1981, Lewis founded the Peninsula/South Bay Chapter of Parents of Murdered Children, a national self-help group that meets once a month at the Centre for Living With Dying in Santa Clara. The organization, open to anyone who has family member who was murdered, is designed to help survivors combat the special problems that come with homicide cases. "I didn't do it out of altruism," she said. "I needed other people to talk to. I needed to break this loneliness I was feeling."

Senselessness of death

The senselessness and timelessness of death in murder cases makes the grieving process extra-difficult for survivors, who often must also deal with a criminal justice system they come to believe helps defendants more than the victims. "Premature death is always hard to accept. But with the violence (of homicide), it scares people," Lewis said. "They don't want to talk about it.....It is a conspiracy of silence." Lewis knows the process and the pain all too well. Her son was listed as missing for seven months before his body was found. During that time, Lewis and her family tried everything including enlisting the help of a psychic to locate him. Five people were eventually arrested in connection with the murder. But just as the shock of finding Scott's body eased, another jolt hit Lewis: the way the legal system works.

Incredulous

Lewis decided against going to Colorado Springs for the trial but did receive newspaper clippings about the case. The progress of the trials so surprised her that she called a detective on the case to make sure the articles were accurate. "I couldn't believe what was going on," she said. "They were dragging my son through the mud and making the defendants out to be so good." The situation got worse when the man accused of firing the gun that killed Scott went into a vegetative state after a failed suicide attempt. Later, another defendant tried but failed to have his sentence substantially reduced. "I just burst into tears. The ripples never stop," Lewis said. "From a hurtful thing like this, so much can hurt everyone." Lewis first got involved in Parents of Murdered Children by attending a meeting in Oakland. The Peninsula/South Bay Chapter she founded now has 283 people on its mailing list and operates a hotline for people with questions. The group basically provides a rap session where participants take turns discussing their feelings and problems.

Members say talking to other survivors about a homicide is often easier than talking to other family members. Many couples "are just so devastated that they don't have anything to give each other," Lewis said, noting that families often break up or grow apart because they can't cope with a death. Relationships between children and parents also change. "I went from being over-protective (with her surviving children) to saying, 'What the heck, go ahead and do it. Life is too short.' ...I built a wall because I didn't want to be hurt like that again." In addition to the discussions, Parents of Murdered Children help survivors find ways to channel their feelings, such as the publication of prose and poems by members in a recent newsletter. "We do a lot of talking. It's therapeutic," said Pam Ross, a Sunnyvale resident who joined the group five years ago after the death of her daughter and is now leader of the Peninsula/South Bay Chapter. "I've met some wonderful, sensitive people here....you can talk to (them) about things no one else can understand." The group avoids taking up issues like the death penalty, where members have differing opinions and the discussion could become polarized.