

Here is our fourth bio:

Pat Duiker lost her 23-year-old son in July 2004. She has dealt with his murder by being grateful for her time with him. She is active with the Victims of Homicide support group and attempts to have good come from her tragedy by helping others deal with their loss.

**Presentation for CAVA Conference – October 2006:
Victims of Homicide Support Group
“Self-Help and Healing on the Path to Justice”
Mississauga, Ontario**

We represent mothers from Edmonton, Alberta, who have lost children to murder. Our stories are quite different, yet what we have in common is that we have each found comfort and support from our city’s Victims of Homicide group. We will each speak for about 15 to 20 minutes and will respond to questions for the last half hour.

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My name is Jane Orydzuk, and I am proud to be representing the Victim’s of Homicide Society of Edmonton, Alberta.

We lost our son Tim on October 1st, 1994. When we received the phone call from our daughter-in-law shortly after ten o’clock that evening, she told my husband that Tim and his co-worker at the Crown Paper plant had both been electrocuted. Loose wires hung overhead the baler they had been repairing that Saturday, and the power in the plant had been turned off. During the following two days, in our numbness, we began making arrangements for our son’s funeral and meeting family who had flown in from around the world. On Monday afternoon, we received a phone call from the coroner saying that our boys had been murdered – each shot through the head three times at close range.

By Monday, 36 hours after the boys’ deaths, the plant had been contaminated after several people had wandered through it on Sunday, leaving very little untouched evidence. The next two years involved one of the most intense and costly investigations ever conducted by the RCMP in Alberta.

With only circumstantial evidence, an arrest was made twenty-one months later, and the accused spent almost two years at the Remand Centre in Edmonton. We sat through bail hearings, and a long preliminary hearing three years later. During a botched trial that collapsed two weeks into the proceedings and the Crown Prosecutor walked off the case. By the end of that summer the accused was let go and we were back to the beginning.

I would have liked to have been better prepared for the arrest and the preliminary hearing three years after the murders. We were contacted by an advocate from Sherwood Park and invited to meet with her the following morning to go through the small courthouse and choose our seating. I recall looking around the courtroom in this small community, and feeling uncontrollable fear when I realized that, no matter where we sat, we would be

within fifteen feet from the prisoner's box and the man accused of murdering our son. There would be no safe place to escape to. I vaguely recall staring at this man's face every day for three weeks and wondered what went wrong in his life to enable him to shoot two innocent men in the head three times.

However, having grown up with a father who was a lawyer, and then a provincial judge on the Queen's Bench, I knew a man was innocent until proven guilty.

We had to make profound changes in our lives after Tim's death. I felt I had to connect with other parents of murdered loved ones, and my life went in a different direction than my husbands. He felt he couldn't grieve publicly and he chose to keep his pain inside. Joyce and Noel Farion were in a similar situation after their son Scott was shot in the head by a Young Offender the spring before we lost Tim. I had met the Farions at a Compassionate Friends' meeting and we sensed that we didn't belong in that group.

Joyce called me several times encouraging me to help them branch out and start our own support group and The Victim's of Homicide Support Society was formed in the spring of 1995, eight months after my son's death. For many years, we were unique in Alberta, but since then another group has formed in Calgary. Our meetings once a month are a safe place for us to vent our anger, support one another and share humorous stories of our murdered loved ones. It's also a safe place to talk about our disappointments in the Canadian Justice System. We've all felt abandoned.

We didn't wait in long lineups to gain entry into this group. It is not for the elite and there are no perks. The price we pay to belong is the lives of our children and loved ones who have been taken from us by another human being. It is a healing place where we band together and cling to each other while we attempt to move on with our lives. We will never return to where we were before, but we are forming a new-normal life without a family member who had been an integral part of our lives.

Many of us have come through botched trials where the offender slides into the role of victim. He often serves a minimum sentence, or in our case no sentence at all, and he or she walks back into our communities where our families wait in fear for them to strike again. There are no rewards; no congratulations for surviving the horror. We know the feeling of being sentenced for life, and we don't escape without pain. We live the rest of our lives with more questions than answers.

As the shock wore off, and reality set in, we all made changes. However, the justice system and the constant media reporting didn't help. We formed new rituals in our families where the circle had been broken, and we continue to move forward in a world that doesn't understand the magnitude of our loss. The majority of people who promised to be there for us have disappeared, and even twelve years later in my son's case, we remind them of a horrible event and a pain they don't want to be connected with.

Wilma Derksen tell us in her book, 'Confronting the Horror' that when the present is interrupted with the unprocessed past, we suffer from intrusive memories, flashbacks and

anxiety attacks. I have to work hard at pushing aside what I imagine were my son's last thoughts when a gun was held at his temple. Two of my greatest sorrows are that we didn't get to say goodbye to Tim and that he died alone.

Because of the confidential nature of most investigations, victim's families are often denied access to the very knowledge we seek that might help us to organize the information overload that happens in our minds. We need information to understand, and yet professionals often refrain from giving us straightforward answers for fear of hurting us more. There is a saying by Smedes: 'The most creative power given to the human spirit is the power to heal the wounds of a past it cannot change.'

Unfortunately, by not giving us the painful truth, the professionals and caregivers prolong the grief and accentuate the pain. We have the right to pain that belongs to us. We have an enormous feeling of wanting to understand, and not being able to. Even though we avoid painful situations at all costs, most of us have to admit that it has been during the painful moments in our lives that we have the courage to change and move forward; that we have become open to new learning and are forced to cross otherwise forbidden boundaries. We need access to the pain of violent crime to benefit from the learning. Not knowing the truth might hinder us from being able to tell our story the way it happened and until we are able to tell it, we don't own it and we remain out of control of our lives.

We all know that crime strikes anywhere. Members of the VOH group are a cross section of the population of Edmonton whose common bond is that we have been touched and devastated by the murder of someone dear to us. You may be surprised to learn that half the members of our support group are parents of victims whose murderers have never been brought to justice. We've felt despair over the delays, the lack of answers to our questions, many adjournments, the re-victimization of witnesses and all the complexities of the legal system. In most cases, we are left to flounder on our own, and that is why our support group is so vital to us.

My healing came in many different ways, most of all, my realization that Restorative Justice really can work. After returning from a conference in Ottawa in 2001, four members of our support group accepted an invitation to sit with fourteen lifers at one of their monthly meetings. These were people who had paid their dues after serving thirteen to fifteen years incarcerated. They were preparing for parole when we met them, and they were terrified knowing that they would be rejoining communities, and often connecting with the people who had encouraged them to make the choices that put them in prison in the first place. We met with groups on two different occasions, and it was at these meetings that I realized a sense of forgiveness. These were people who had made bad choices in their life, but they weren't bad people, only very lost souls.

Walking into these meetings was extremely difficult for us. However, in the course of several hours, we met remorseful human beings, in a lot of pain for their mistakes. Most of them had a strong desire to make things right and even though they themselves hadn't murdered our children, they apologized to us several times during those evenings. The majority of them knew they would never be able to meet with their own victims' families,

but sitting with us gave them a feeling of hope. There was a tremendous amount of healing that went on for both sides.

Unfortunately, the Justice System has not been set up to meet the expectations and needs of the victim. Most victims are appalled to find out that they are not even represented in the courtroom as individuals. Just recently, victims have gained the right to be consulted, but they still have no veto power. Their lives are being exposed and their belongings might be brought in as evidence during a trial, yet they have no role. Often years later, we realize that our needs were not met, that we have lost in terms of confidence, reputation and reparation. We feel that we ourselves have been prosecuted by the defense. Our loved one was somehow made to be the villain and we have been re-victimized by a Justice System we once trusted.

It is twelve years now since I lost my only son. In a real sense, I have often felt re-victimized over and over again. Each time an RCMP officer is killed in the line of duty; each time another dead soldier returns from Afghanistan. Each time I hear of another body being found in an open field or a back alley, it takes me back to my son's death. I feel their mother's deep pain and sense of loss; an empty feeling that never goes away.

When my husband died suddenly on Christmas Eve three years ago, I felt a great deal of comfort knowing that he and our son were finally together again. My life continues growing as I venture into new interests involving justice, and my hope is that some day, victims will be recognized and treated fairly in our courts across the country. Meanwhile, we in the VOH support group have learned to laugh again, and a certain amount of joy has returned to our world.

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My name is Kathy King and I am here today with three other women from Edmonton who have lost children to murder. We are bonded by our common tragedies and the support we experienced through participation in the Victims of Homicide Support group. We each share our story to illustrate the challenges and hopes of our individual journeys as we move toward recovery and healing.

My daughter Cara was a beautiful and impulsive young woman who had struggled with many challenges through adolescence and young adulthood. She had learning difficulties and developmental delays, later compounded with drug use and mental illness. Her immaturity, lack of discernment, and love of adventure left her vulnerable to people who did not have her best interests at heart. She was unable to maintain accommodation and often ended up on the street between admissions to hospital. The last few years of her life were a continual struggle to help her secure stable housing and adequate life supports.

Then one day in early August 1997, Cara simply disappeared from the shelter where she been staying. She was 22 years old at the time and was probably functioning at about a 10 to 12-year-old level. It is one of the most terrible things imaginable to have a child go missing, no matter how old they are. The month of August became a nightmare as time stretched on with no contact.

I had already experienced grief over the loss of her health and my dream of playing with grandchildren. My role had become one of support and advocacy within the harsh reality of concurrent disorders. I had learned that society is not always sympathetic, particularly when handicaps are not visible.

September 1st is the day my daughter's decomposed body was found by a young farmer harvesting his crop. The horror of knowing she had been left abandoned and exposed in a field for an unknown length of time while I continued to live was incomprehensible.

There was a strange relief in knowing that our struggles were over – her homelessness and illness, my fights with the bureaucracy she could not hope to understand, and the awful tension of her disappearance. But as much as I had prayed for resolution, this was not the answer I wanted. The failure of society to protect her angered me as much as the unknown assailant responsible for her final injuries.

Looking back over the past nine years, I realize my mourning has been long and complex journey. I believed “the only way out was through” so allowed myself a full range and depth of emotions, hoping they would pass some day. I read many books about others' experience of grief and loss, searching for words to express and validate my own.

I sought out various counselors and attended therapy groups, each step restoring little pieces of the shattered mosaic my life had become. An important milestone was the day I looked for a support group and was referred to the Victims of Homicide.

As meetings unfolded over the next months and years, I heard from others about their painful experiences of police investigations, court procedures, dealing with the media, and the unsettling knowledge that another person, known or unknown, had taken the life of their loved one. I cried my way through the first few meetings, reassured that at least there was a place people could come to talk about unbelievable tragedies, a place where people could laugh and where it was still OK to be sad even years later.

The group has remained a safe haven. It is an opportunity to share new information, to explore avenues of healing, and to reach out to other newly grieving families.

I believe it is important for grieving persons to find their own tools for healing. In the group we are able to share our own experiences and learn from others. I have continued to advocate for more services for the vulnerable and disadvantaged people in society. My work has helped diffuse my anger and challenged me to look for positive solutions.

I would like to share some of the feelings I experienced:

My first response was an **overwhelming grief**. It suddenly made sense to me that some people wear black as part of their mourning. I wished for a big button I could wear in public that said, “Be nice to me. I'm a grieving parent.” One of the biggest surprises I had at the group was that people could joke with each other.

My second response is what I called **dissociation**, the ability to live on many different levels. For example, I was able to go to work and manage all day, saving my tears for my way home, crying and driving blindly so that I could be semi-composed again for my husband. I remember choosing my answer carefully when people asked how I was. Most often I simply replied “fine” because it was too difficult to explain that the world didn’t feel real anymore.

I also experienced **alienation, numbness, and passivity**, feelings of being alone in the world, not really caring, and living for others rather than myself. My husband was my anchor during those first few months in that I was somehow able to believe that my life was important to him if not to myself. People would say I seemed to be coping well and I would think, “yeah right, just because I’m getting up each day.” I felt incredibly alone and empty as I went through the motions of ritual and necessity.

My **anger** was very diffuse. Because my daughter’s murderer was unknown and because she had suffered so much in her short life, many systems were the brunt of my rage. I felt I had failed her as a parent for not being able to prevent or cure her many afflictions and I was angry at society for not providing the supports that could have helped me help her.

Another surprising symptom was the **cognitive difficulty** I experienced, for example not recognizing former acquaintances in the supermarket. It was as if all my concentration was required to make it through each day. It was fortunate that I kept a record of calls and visits because to this day I have little conscious recollection of those first few weeks.

Spiritual crisis is often listed as part of grief. For me it was a **need for meaning and understanding**. I used to believe that good could conquer evil and I wanted to believe it again, yet it felt like a betrayal to think that good could come from my daughter’s death. It is still a struggle when I am acknowledged for some of my efforts because I would never have chosen this cost.

Guilt is common among parents who lose their children. We all wish we could have somehow foreseen and prevented the tragic circumstance. For me, it also became **a fear of contamination and a fear of loving again**. I had the feeling that if I dared care about anyone again, it would be a bad omen for them. Living with regret continues to be a difficult journey, as I learn to accept what I could not change, and choose what I still can.

I would also like to share some of my learning from my experience:

I learned that it is important to feel my own feelings and to accept a range of intense and often contradictory emotions that are often beyond understanding. There is no word to define a parent whose child has died. I needed to hear that life wasn’t fair, that it was OK to go on, and that a better way was possible. The need to formulate my own voice and to be heard has taken me to many and diverse projects.

I learned that grieving is hard work. It takes time. Recovery is multi-faceted. There are many different ways of grieving and many different ways of coping. Each person heals differently and in his or her own time. Finding personal resolution and building a “new normal” is a lifetime journey. It was very important for me to find ways to make some meaning from my daughter’s death and to try again when some attempts floundered.

Grieving involves choices. We need to find a way to honor and memorialize our loved ones. We need to choose if we are a victim or a survivor. We examine the options of social activism, forgiveness, restorative justice, or simply picking up the pieces of our shattered lives and continuing to smile through our sadness.

One thing I was not expecting to learn was **media management**. The family of murder victims are particularly vulnerable to reporters wanting that one poignant statement, that one tearful picture, to help sell their paper. I decided early on that the best defence was a good offence and that, like Princess Diana, if I was an object of interest, I could use the media for my own agenda of public education.

I also learned grief is more complicated when it is connected with trauma. In fact, the literature talks about **traumatic grief**, when the shock of horror keeps us frozen and complicates a more gentle release and remembering. Trauma and grief became fused in my experience and I continue to facilitate between the unrelenting unimaginable and unknown circumstances of my daughter’s death and the happy memories of her life.

Autopsies, police investigations, and media reporting compound the trauma of homicide and contribute to **secondary victimization**.

(1) With the intrusive influences of the media, the deceased becomes part of public domain and their tragedy is sensationalized.

2) Victims of homicide are often devalued by being stigmatized and blamed for contributing to their own death.

(3) Families dealing with the courts soon learn that is a different reality from justice. Charges are against the state rather than the victim, and suddenly attention is focused on the rights of the offender.

(4) Societal pressure to be “over it” comes in many subtle ways from other people who find our anger uncomfortable or improper.

In summary I would like to say a few words about **“closure.”** Everybody seems to think we need it and everybody has ideas about how we can get it. To me there is no such thing as closure. I believe the process of reconstructing life without a loved one is a continuing process. We are forever changed by loss and, as time goes by, we hopefully look more to the future than the past.

Counseling and support groups can provide a place of acceptance and a sense of belonging. We need a bridge back to the world of the living, to reconnect with our families and our community. Recovery means returning to a full range of human emotions so that we can accept joy with our pain and contentment with our sorrow. Thank you for your attention.

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My name is Pat Duiker and I'm here on behalf of the Victims of Homicide Support group from Edmonton, Alberta.

My son Don was 23 years old when he was murdered on July 8, 2004. He was murdered by a 15-year-old mentally challenged girl. There is still much I do not know about his death. As only this girl and Don were present at the time he died, only she possibly understands why she stabbed him in the heart. As she did not leave Don until she knew help was coming, she was aware of what she had done. She was frantically knocking on doors and telling neighbors 'she' had been stabbed. Since it was obvious she was not injured, people assumed she was possibly on drugs and she was therefore ignored. This delayed any help coming for my son. She didn't speak to homicide detectives for 3 days after the murder to even give her name. They therefore assumed she was a hardened criminal as she also appeared to be 20 to 25 years old. I am told that on most days, she is not even capable of having a conversation, therefore obtaining information, let alone accurate information regarding Don's death, is not possible.

Not knowing what happened is still difficult, but regardless, knowing more would not bring Don back to us. As he often befriended people in need, we can only assume he died doing one of the things he loved. Many people and animals have benefited from Don's caring nature and great sense of humor.

At the time of my son's death, the Government of Alberta had custody of this girl. She had left the facility or home she had been put in and was living on the streets. She could not have been in the proper type of facility or she would not have left. As we all know, parents are responsible for their children's care and if they are not responsible enough, the government takes their children. The government of Alberta did not meet the requirements of her care either. Parents are often taken to court if they do not meet their responsibilities, therefore the government should be taken to court so they will be more responsible for the children in their care.

I have chosen not to be angry with those involved with Don's death; the murderer who may not have been aware of the consequences of her actions; parents of the murderer (who are responsible for her mental problems & obviously had problems of their own); the provincial government who had custody of this girl but did not give her proper care; neighbors who did not answer their doors; police who did not prioritize the call for help, as well as hospital staff, the coroner's office, Victim's Advocates, funeral directors, the media, etc. I do not believe that any intentional harm was meant by any of them; in fact, most of them really wanted to be supportive. I am hoping to make people aware of some improvements needed to help eliminate problems that have caused unnecessary pain.

To explain the feeling of losing a child is almost impossible. I can tell you that functioning on “auto pilot” may somewhat describe the initial response. It is very difficult to comprehend or reason. Tasks, such as making decisions, completing documents and even processing the payment of bills, are extremely difficult. For persons not having family or friends nearby and willing to help, it is so important that assistance be available and offered, so as not to create more problems in the future. I don’t think such a service is in existence but if it is, it was not offered to me.

I was offered assistance by the Victim’s Advocates to help write a victim’s impact statement, but they never did contact me. When the homicide detective requested the statement, I explained I could not mentally do this on my own. He was to arrange for a person to help me and again I was never contacted. When people forget about us, it compounds the feelings of despair. It is crucial that victim’s advocates follow through with the victims you have made contact with.

It was important for me to see Don after he had passed away. The homicide detective told me I could not see him until after his autopsy. The simple task of finding the phone number for the coroner was difficult and they then informed me that I had to wait until he was moved to the funeral home. When I contacted the funeral home, I was then told that I could not get an appointment for three days. When I arrived three days later to finally see Don, I had not thought to tell them that I was anxious to see him, but they had not prepared him for viewing. Since he had been autopsied, they strongly recommended that I wait until the funeral. It was nine days before I was finally able to see my son.

Because of a series of misunderstandings and poor policies (or possibly wrong information being given to me) this was a situation that added to my grief and bothers me to this day. I am sure I was not the first, or the last person, to experience this. Hospital staff, detectives, coroners and funeral homes need to share information and set policies that prevent ongoing trauma for the families.

Another situation that I am aware involved an aboriginal person whose son was murdered in the United States. The body of the deceased must be present in order to hold a wake prior to burial. This is very important in their culture. They were only allowed to have his ashes, not his body, returned to Canada. I am not sure of all of the circumstances but am mentioning this as another problem that added to this person’s grief and certainly it needs to be addressed.

Another sad and unnecessary event occurred when a friend went to see her deceased son. She told me of the horrible memory of running her hands through his hair, and being shocked by the cuts left in his head from the autopsy. A mother’s need to touch her deceased child should not leave horrible memories that could have been prevented if the funeral home had prepared her.

The Crown prosecutor and the homicide detective explained this girl’s circumstances to us. It was decided that the murder charges would be stayed and that she would be placed

in a secure facility to receive counseling and medication. A reliable source advised me a short time later that she had escaped and was again living on the streets. The government is negligent in this case. They are not giving this girl the care she needs and are not providing a properly secured facility. Society has a right to be protected from unstable people. As my family has not had the strength to fight for change, we pray that we will not have to experience the guilt we will have if this girl murders another person.

Losing my son left me feeling as if I was lost but I didn't know where to go. I was looking for something, but didn't even know what it was. I was barely functioning but I kept myself busy with mindless tasks, pretending I was strong and doing quite well. This would protect my family and myself from believing that we really couldn't keep going on living with this pain. I wasn't able to push myself to do even simple things, such as sending thank you notes, because it would require me to get my thoughts in order. I truly felt that I had lost my mind and was not so sure it would return.

Through attending the Victim's of Homicide group I was able to realize that my thoughts and actions and inactions were quite normal and that there was not a normal for the survivors of victims of homicide. I have learned that I am no longer the same person and that in time I will find my new normal. I have met some wonderful people through this group. We laugh together and cry together. We give support or get supported – depending on our need. We talk about what helped us cope with our loss and about how some of us have been able to forgive in order to stop destroying ourselves with anger.

We learn to understand that people avoid us because they don't know what to do with our pain. We gain knowledge through books, lectures, our experiences and the experiences of others on this unwanted journey. We try to help others who unfortunately need to travel on the same road. The cost to belong to this group is very high, but I know that the friendships we've formed with each other, and the gentle memories our children left us with will sustain us through the years ahead. The Victim's Advocates gave me one of the VOH brochures along with much other printed information. Possibly if the advocates were to mention the group verbally as well, it would increase the awareness of its existence.

I hope I have been able to bring about some understanding of the mixed feelings experienced following the murder of one's child. Shock, sadness, confusion and anger would not be intensified if the people involved with victims' families were more aware of the problems we face throughout the sad journeys we travel on.

I will always be haunted by thoughts of Don's death, but I try to focus on the good times we had with him. I am so thankful for the twenty-three years I had with this kind and caring son who did and still does make me laugh. I hope to continue his work of befriending and helping those in need.