

What Now for the Grieving Families of 'Son of Sam's' Victims?

By JOAN KRON

New York Times (1923-Current file); Aug 15, 1977;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2007)

pg. 47

What Now for the Grieving Families of 'Son of Sam's' Victims?

By JOAN KRON

"The hunt for the 'Son of Sam' was a fight between the good guys and the bad guys—and the good guys won. It's an opportunity for the community to celebrate victory over evil," said Dr. Bruce Danto, a Detroit psychiatrist who has been specializing in crime-related psychiatry since he and his children were held hostage by burglars eight years ago and survived unharmed.

Dr. Danto, who recently set up a treatment program in Detroit's Burt School for the children whose teacher was murdered in front of them, said the media barrage and jubilation when David Berkowitz, the alleged 'Son of Sam', was captured served "a therapeutic purpose."

But for the families of the six victims who died, it is the beginning of a new life. When the attention dies down, the TV reporters stop coming and the initial numbness wears off, how will the bereaved families of murder victims fare?

Although there are certain similarities in all grief reactions, no matter how the death occurs, "being the survivor of someone who was murdered is different in subtle ways from other bereavements," said Dr. Edwin Schneidman, psychologist and professor of thanatology at the University of California at Los Angeles.

"If there were a scale of onerousness," said Dr. Shneidman, "after suicide, homicide would be the worst."

Problems of Survivors of Homicides

According to experts on loss and grief, survivors of victims of homicide, especially well-publicized homicide cases like the "Son of Sam" killings, have a number of additional problems to deal with. But, according to Clelia Goodyear, a New York City psychiatric social worker, "There's hardly any place to go for grief therapy in this city." Mrs. Goodyear is one of the handful of people in the country who are experienced in therapy for the dying and bereaved.

"Stigma is a very big problem in homicide," said Mrs. Goodyear. "Often the families will move from their communities after the murder because they can't face the neighbors. They feel ashamed—it's dirty linen—not like a child dying of cancer. And the death

almost always causes a major disruption in the family.

"Of course," she explained, "the people who come for help are those having the hardest time, so you can't generalize. Anyone with previous conflicts in their marriage will have a harder time after a violent death in the family. It will bring any conflict to a head. Sometimes the pre-existing problems become a greater issue than the death of the child.

"Siblings will have a lot of guilt (which is sometimes called survivor guilt), just guilt for not having died too. They also identify—will this happen to me too? And parents may place all their expectations on their remaining children."

Dealing With Violent Death

"The survivors of victims of homicides have all the problems of sudden death as well as the problems of violent death," said Dr. David Peretz, a New York psychiatrist who has written and lectured on grief and has treated survivors of victims.

"These people often go through life with the image of the child or sweetheart at the moment of demise—they have a horrible image," he explained. "No one can say they died peacefully—[the survivors] are left with images of terror and mutilation, now knowing if the person died instantly or not." There is also a heightened sense of vulnerability, he said.

No matter how a person died there is guilt and anger, but in homicide cases there is often an irrational blaming of the victim, much as there is in rape, explained Dr. Shneidman, who practices what he calls "postvention" or aftercare with families of victims of suicide and violent death.

"There is an erratic, illogical feeling that the victim shouldn't have done it. Parents will say, 'We warned her not to park in deserted places,' as if the victim had precipitated it," said Dr. Shneidman.

"The unconscious meaning of the 'Son of Sam' deaths was punishment for people who were young, attractive, sensual, romantic," said Dr. Peretz.

"Therefore whatever conflicts there were within these parents regarding sex education can come up now," he



The New York Times/Edward Hausner

Neysa Moscowitz, center, mother of 'Son of Sam's' last victim, with her own mother, left, and an aunt at the funeral on August 3.

said. "Maybe I wasn't strict enough." "Maybe I was too strict and she was rebelling." For some of the families involved there is the stigma of a child being shot in lovers' lane."

In homicides the anger is often directed at the community—the police, the courts, for permitting the killer to be at large. In the "Son of Sam" killings, the police are the heroes for a change.

"This is the best city in the world," said Johnny Diel, the fiancé of Christine Freund, one of the five young women murdered by the "Son of Sam."

"Because of the tremendous community support in these highly publicized cases," said Dr. Danto, "the families may pull together faster. 'You can't indict cancer and send it to prison—you just feel helpless, but when someone captures the killer, you can feel justice and vindication.'"

However, "homicide inspires homicidal fantasies and society supports them," pointed out Dr. Danto.

"I want him [the killer] to be tortured and his eyes gouged out," said Neysa Moscowitz, the mother of Stacy Moscowitz, the last victim of the "Son of

Sam," on television.

"I'm not a violent man, but they ought to bring back capital punishment," said Michael Lauria, father of the first victim, Donna Lauria.

Members of the press play a prominent role in the lives of survivors of these homicides—at least for those families that permit it.

"The press has been wonderful," said Jerome Moscowitz, father of Stacy Moscowitz. "They come in and do their work and then they stay for hours and talk. Geraldo Rivera kissed my daughter. Ricki. goodbye."

"The new phenomenon is the reporter as social welfare agent," said Dr. Shneidman. But are the families subjected to another loss when the reporters move on? "It's worth it to bring someone out of the water, even if you don't help for the rest of his life," Dr. Shneidman said.

But while media, police and community attention can help in the first awful days, in the long run it's the family condition that counts. "If there's a strong family and a strong community you'll have a lot of grief and sadness, but no massive falling apart" said Mrs. Goodyear. "But if it's a shaky family, you'll have more problems."

Counseling Can Help

Counseling can help work out feelings. "For seven years," said Dr. Shneidman, "I've been treating the parents of an only child who was a victim of a homicide. The murderer still hasn't been caught. My role was to keep these parents sane. I had to take all their hostility. It was so enormous that I was practically accused of being the murderer."

"By the end of the first year," he said, "the parents were much better. But I still treat them. The mother still has a start every time she sees a 19-year-old with long blonde hair. Her daughter is frozen in her memory at 19."

"In cases like these," he explained, "you can expect crises at special events—for instance when a contemporary of the victim marries and has children."

"And you can expect normal hallucinations—and I repeat normal—seeing her, hearing her voice or her footsteps, for some years," he said.

"I can't accept the death of my daughter," said the tearful mother of a homicide victim. "Who can ever accept the violent death of a child you had dreams for?" explained her therapist, Mrs. Goodyear. "People shouldn't be asked to accept it."

"When the mother I was treating asked me if she would get over the murder of her child," said Dr. Shneidman, "I said if you mean will you ever get over it totally—no. But if you mean will you be able to live in this world—always missing her, but going on, the answer is—yes."