

REMEMBERING THE VICTIMS

During the Christmas season of 1978, residents of West Summerdale Avenue in Des Plaines, Illinois, watched in horror as body after body was removed from the crawl space beneath the Gacy home, house number 8213. In the days to follow, as news crews focused their cameras on John Wayne Gacy's burial ground, neighbors were interviewed repeatedly about what they knew, what they saw, and how they felt.

Even after all 29 bodies were excavated from the property, interest in the murder site persisted. A steady stream of tourists invaded the block, understandably upsetting neighbors, just to get a glimpse of the infamous house of horrors. Gacy's home eventually was razed, yet curiosity seekers still came by to stare at the ground in the empty lot that once entombed so many young victims. Anonymous visitors decorated the weed-filled yard with their macabre artistry, including a replica of an electric chair and fake tombstones. Some gawkers, too lazy or too embarrassed to get out of their cars, chose instead to drive in circles around the block. "It got so you wouldn't know what you would see when you looked out the window," commented one neighbor (Kiernan, 1993).

In 1988, a decade after the gruesome discovery, the lot on which John Wayne Gacy's house once stood finally was sold, and a new building was constructed on the site. The new owners, eager to distance themselves from the tragedy of a decade earlier, were able to have their house number switched. Despite the change in appearance and address, however, the location forever remains the site of a horrible serial killing and, on occasion, still attracts sight-seers to Des Plaines.

In Killeen, Texas, souvenir collectors had a field day. By answering a “For Sale” ad, they could snoop around the home once occupied by mass killer George Hennard, Jr. Pretending to be serious house hunters, they walked through the house, and many took small mementos of their visit to the madman’s mansion.

The Oxford Apartments in Milwaukee, site of Jeffrey Dahmer’s grizzly crimes, also became a “tourist trap,” attracting curious visitors from as far away as Japan. In November, 1992, the 49-unit building was demolished. The owner had to place guards and barbed wire around the property to fend off arsonists and scavengers, some of whom offered the guards as much as \$75 for a souvenir brick.

Neighbors of Ronald Gene Simmons in Dover, Arkansas, didn’t wait for the bulldozers to arrive. The ramshackle house in which 14 members of the Simmons clan were shot and strangled was burned to the ground late one night, a year after the murders. The motive for this arson was clear: to remove all tangible reminders of the mass killing.

Unlike matters at the homes of Simmons, Dahmer, and Gacy, business remained as usual at the sites of many other mass killings. Luby’s Cafeteria reopened for business weeks after the mass killing of 23 customers and employees, and the Edmond, Oklahoma, post office was closed for only 1 day for the purpose of cleaning up. Edmond letter carriers had to deliver the mail, even that stained by the blood of their coworkers. The residents of the town received their blood-soaked letters in plastic bags bearing the printed apology, “The contents have been damaged in handling by the Postal Service. . . . We regret any inconvenience you have experienced.”

The towns of Littleton, Palatine, Killeen, Dover, San Ysidro, and Edmond have one notable trait in common: They were small towns with small reputations until they became host to mass murder. When mass murder strikes a small town, the town becomes forever associated in the minds of millions of Americans with the heinous act that occurred there. The goodwill and charity of its citizens are quickly overshadowed by the act of a single gunman. Residents of Edmond, for example, would like their town to be remembered for popular Olympic gymnast Shannon Miller or for the 1988 Professional Golfers’ Association (PGA) Championship held there; to their chagrin, however, Edmond is far better known in many circles for the 1986 post office massacre. Similarly, the Chamber of Commerce of Littleton, Colorado, would no doubt prefer that the word “columbine” bring to mind Colorado’s white and

lavender state flower rather than the site of the 1999 school shooting, the largest in American history.

In addition, it is particularly difficult for members of a small town to move beyond the community stigma brought on by a mass murder. Townspeople tend to identify closely with the geographic unit in which they live. Everyone feels victimized, therefore, even those not directly hurt.

The impact of mass murder on the public image of big cities is minimal by comparison. New York may have had its “Son of Sam” murders, but people from Omaha or Santa Fe hardly think of this particular serial killing spree when they consider visiting the Big Apple. Even the September 11 attack on the Twin Towers failed to reduce permanently New York City’s attractiveness to tourists. Similarly, the Los Angeles area is more associated with Disneyland characters and Hollywood stars than with Richard Ramirez or Charles Manson; Montreal is better known for its hockey team and French food than for the 1989 massacre of 14 female engineering students.

In the aftermath of the Montreal shootings, members of the university community, the city, and the nation as a whole came together to memorialize the victims of the tragedy. Long after the slain students were eulogized and buried, their memories were sustained by a plaque bearing the names of the dead, which was placed conspicuously on the building in which the murders had occurred. Years later, a second memorial was constructed out of stone and placed near the campus arts center. This project was initiated by a local women’s group and sponsored by local businesses.

Attempts to pay tribute to the victims of a mass slaughter do not always come off as smoothly as in Montreal. In San Ysidro, California, for example, a controversy raged for years over how to commemorate the victims of the McDonald’s massacre, most of whom were Hispanic. Immediately after the 1984 incident in which 21 victims were murdered, the McDonald’s Corporation tore down the bullet-ridden restaurant and donated the property to the community.

Following the McDonald’s gift, politicians debated what to do with the land. Some argued that a large-scale memorial would be out of place in a congested commercial area or that it would only bring back painful memories. Others contended that constructing a memorial of decent proportions—a park or a chapel—would make a fitting tribute and, besides, it was simply the right thing to do. Hispanic residents were particularly outspoken as advocates for an official monument. According to an ancient custom observed in rural parts of

Mexico, the site of a tragic death is sacred. It is held that the spirit of the deceased remains at that spot.

While the public debate dragged on, one concerned resident of San Ysidro took it upon himself to build, at the murder site, his own handmade shrine—a blue wooden shed containing religious paintings, candles, and figurines. On the side of the shrine were written the names and ages of all 21 people who had been slain at the McDonald's. In 1988, finally, the acre of land on which the fast-food restaurant had stood was sold to Southwestern College for \$40,000, a fraction of its original market value. Two years later, the college constructed a building, only a small corner of which was devoted to a permanent memorial.

Over the past two decades, criminologists, criminal justice officials, and the general public have become more sensitive to the needs, problems, and concerns of those left behind to grieve murdered loved ones, their suffering a victimization of another kind. Of particular importance and value have been strategies established to assist surviving victims, those who have lost a loved one to homicide. Victim/witness advocates have been assigned by the courts to help console and inform family members who suffer through heart-wrenching testimony describing the hideous circumstances of their loved ones' deaths. At the same time, families of murder victims have found empathy and understanding from support groups like Parents of Murdered Children and private agencies such as the Adam Walsh Victim Resource Center.

The problems of surviving victims of multiple murder are intensified from those associated with single murders, partly because of the peculiarities of multiple murder itself but also because of the intrusion of the mass media. In high-profile cases, members of the media often try to get close to surviving victims to obtain quotes and stories. The attention paid by reporters is often of great comfort and support to the family, particularly in vulnerable times when any willing listener is greatly appreciated. This can be a double-edged sword, however. Surviving victims can experience a tremendous sense of abandonment when their case is no longer newsworthy and their media sounding boards move on to report on newer crimes. "At first there was like a big rush," said Jill Paiva, whose mother, Nancy, had been murdered years earlier by an unidentified serial killer in New Bedford, Massachusetts. "After that it was like everybody forgot about it and nobody cares" (Coakley, 1994).

Surviving victims understandably tend to want to know everything regarding the death of their loved ones and the efforts by the criminal justice

system to bring the perpetrator to justice. Because of the newsworthiness of serial murder investigations and prosecutions, however, police and prosecutors tend to be especially cautious about sharing information about the investigation with victims' families. Officials fear that confidential material will surface in the newspaper. As a consequence, law enforcement authorities become more guarded about discussing cases even with surviving victims, out of concern that the family will succumb to pressure from the media for details.

In Gainesville, Florida, for example, the task force investigating the 1990 murders of five college students had to maintain tight control over what details of the crimes could be released to the families. Aware that reporters from around the country were constantly trying to interview the grieving parents, the police were cautious not to jeopardize the investigation. The families, in a sense, were seen as a liability.

Whether or not leaks are intentional, some information pertaining to a multiple murder and its investigation is bound to reach story-hungry reporters. When such information is released or "leaked" to the press, the relatives often learn "secondhand" about developments in the case from reading the newspaper. It is a major source of discomfort and aggravation to surviving victims that they are not the first to be told of whatever information is released to the public. Judy DeSantos, for example, whose sister was murdered by the New Bedford serial killer, frequently was caught off guard by new information printed in the local newspaper. Understanding that certain facts of the case had to remain confidential, she felt, nevertheless, that she and other family members had a right to know first, before the general public did.

Serial killers have a tendency to kill in particularly gruesome ways, often involving acts of torture prior to the murder as well as postmortem mutilation. Surviving victims, therefore, are confronted with the knowledge that their loved one suffered a great deal before dying or that the corpse was defiled and desecrated. Moreover, signs of mutilation may prevent a viewing at the funeral.

For example, the parents of Gainesville victim Christa Hoyt had to endure the painful task of dealing with the fact that their daughter had been murdered, eviscerated, and decapitated. Because of the gruesome manner in which their daughter was slain, the Hoyts were not permitted to view the crime scene photos. To do so might have provided them some degree of psychological closure, but it also would have been devastating.

Although they probably are intended merely as a defense mechanism against public anxiety, false rumors and insensitive jokes often spread through

a community, and communities often have insatiable appetites for details in high-profile multiple-murder cases. These rumors and jokes tend to add insult to injury for the surviving victims. Of greater insult to surviving victims, however, is the glorification, almost hero worship, surrounding the killer. The individual responsible for the crimes is too often celebrated and even attracts admirers because of his infamy, while the victims for whom the survivors mourn are quickly forgotten.

The families of Jeffrey Dahmer's victims suffered the indignity of watching Chevy Chase make light of the case on *Saturday Night Live* while millions of viewers laughed. That indignity was in addition to the hundreds of Jeffrey Dahmer jokes that circulated for years. Even worse, the families found nothing funny about seeing Dahmer's likeness on trading cards and in comic books. Some mothers of the victims were so incensed that they appeared as guests on nationally syndicated talk shows to express their outrage over the Dahmer craze.

Surviving victims of most homicides can at least make some sense of the underlying motivation for their tragedy, even if they cannot accept its legitimacy. For example, a mother whose daughter is slain by a former boyfriend can understand the motive of jealousy. Serial killers, however, tend to select strangers as victims, and for no particular reason. As a result, surviving victims must deal not only with their loss but also with more profound questions concerning "Why?"

In multiple-victim slayings, particularly serial killings, the state often will charge and prosecute the accused on fewer than all the crimes suspected. Frequently, only a few of the stronger cases are needed to guarantee a maximum penalty. For example, Atlanta child slayer Wayne Williams was charged and convicted on only two counts of murder, even though he was linked to as many as 28 deaths. Similarly, Ted Bundy was executed for three murders in Florida but likely was responsible for dozens of other murders around the country for which he was never prosecuted. As a consequence of partial prosecution, some surviving victims can feel that their loved one was neglected by the courts and did not receive justice. Furthermore, they lack closure to their tragedy. This is particularly true in killings that involve multiple states or provinces, in which many of the jurisdictions will never have the opportunity to try the case.

Because of the "motiveless" nature of the crimes, serial murder cases sometimes remain unsolved. The notion that the killer "got away with murder" retards the healing process for the surviving victims. In massacres, on the other

hand, the perpetrator frequently is killed either by suicide or from a police counterattack. In such instances, the death of the offender robs the victims' families of the chance to seek retribution and full justice, as well as to vent their anger.

Frustrated families often seek alternative channels for expressing their unresolved pain. In a positive way, they may form support groups or political action groups. Following the Pettit Martin law firm massacre in San Francisco, for example, families of the victims joined together in advocacy against assault rifles. In a negative way, however, the families of other mass murder victims identify scapegoats for their rage. In the Palm Bay massacre, for example, local police were criticized severely following William Cruse's shooting spree for failing to respond sufficiently to complaints about his disturbing and bizarre behavior prior to the crime.

The families of the killers themselves are also scapegoated and victimized by negative public opinion. Not only is their child or loved one taken from them, but they also are blamed, often without justification, for not intervening in time or for their role in "creating a monster." Haunted by self-doubt and wondering what they might have done differently, many suffer profound feelings of guilt and depression, yet they typically receive more condemnation than compassion from former friends, neighbors, and even relatives. There are no support groups for these survivors.

Etna Huberty, for example, has been bitterly chastised for not preventing her husband, James, from going "hunting for humans" at the San Ysidro McDonald's when he told her that he planned to do as much. In a poignant plea on behalf of her friend, Ann Ruiz of San Ysidro wrote in a letter to the *San Diego Union*, "Mrs. Huberty needs to conquer her guilt feelings. Her life has been destroyed and she has no idea what the future will bring. . . . Doesn't anyone have any feelings for this woman's grief? It is 22 times that of the rest of the people" (Michioku, 1984). In recognition of her suffering, \$1,000 was given to James Huberty's widow out of the San Ysidro Family Survivors Fund to help her move her children back to her hometown of Massillon, Ohio. This sum of money was earmarked for Huberty by former columnist Norman Cousins, who donated \$2,500 in total to the fund. When some of the other contributors learned of this, they demanded that their own donations be returned and organized a protest march.

Francis Piccione, mother of the Los Angeles Hillside Strangler, wasn't criticized for her failure to respond or for receiving victim compensation

money, but she was held accountable in the court of public opinion for being a bad mother to Ken Bianchi. In addition to her villainous status, she has her own sense of grief. As she remarked tearfully, “My heart goes out to every one of the families who lost a child. I have lost a son, too” (personal communication).

Thus, there are numerous victims of multiple murder—those who are slain, their grieving families, the killers’ relatives, and even the communities that are stigmatized as a result. One participant, however, is never a victim: the person who commits the murders.

In this book, we have attempted to explain the motivations and circumstances that inspire the act of multiple murder. We have discussed the failures and frustrations that strain the coping mechanisms of the workplace killer. We have explored the loneliness and isolation of the mass murderer who lacks any form of support and encouragement. We have profiled the serial killer whose quest for power derives from an abuse-riddled childhood devoid of love and acceptance. We have examined the obedience of the cult killer to a charismatic father figure who exploits his followers’ insecurities and need to feel special.

It is important that explanation never be confused with excuse. Multiple killers have raised their own variety of excuses, but we have downplayed the presumed causal connection between murder and such phenomena as pornography, child abuse, head trauma, neurological impairment, Satanism, drugs, and mental illness. Although each of these factors may contribute in some way to the making of a mass or serial murderer, none of them should be considered a determining factor, either by itself or in combination. Millions of people with similar biographies and disadvantages do not kill; many go on instead to lead productive lives. Regardless of the biological, psychological, social, and economic hardships they may suffer, multiple murderers generally are capable of making personal decisions as to how and how not to behave. They are, therefore, not victims, but instead “guilty as charged” when they make the murderous choice.