

Date: May 9, 2023

To: Michigan House of Representatives
Criminal Justice Committee
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Rep. Penelope Tsernoglou
Rep. Mike Mueller
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Rep. Mike Harris
Rep. Brian BeGole

From: Karen Jackson

Subject: An essay "My Story of Murder" by Karen Jackson

Thank you for allowing me to speak before the committee today and provide this follow up piece.

My comments here will walk you through my story and my experience. I am hopeful it will help you better understand the intensity, severity, and longevity of the trauma, grief and ensuing mental health issues that co-victims suffer.

My Story of Murder

For co-victims of murder, it starts when we receive a call from the police or another family member or friend notifying us that a loved one has been murdered. Details are slim at this point. Shock sets in immediately. In my case I was in Florida. My daughter called me in the middle of the night and told me her brother and a female friend had been murdered. She took the brunt of it. There was no sleep that night and for many to come.

Police came, searched my son's house believing the killer may still be there while my daughter stood by. The coroner came and many more police and the police dog. The police asked my daughter to continue to stand by in the Quality Dairy parking lot so they could brief her on the details. She did so with a family friend as her husband sat at home with her then young daughter. Meanwhile my husband and I frantically arranged for a flight and ground transportation home. My son and his friend were taken to the morgue. The scene was active and cordoned off to be processed by detectives collecting evidence. Not even the family was allowed in.

A lot of this is a fog to me due to the extreme shock of it all. My husband and I arrived home the next morning. The killer was on the run so there were multiple meetings with detectives covering details over and over. We were all in fear of further action by the killer.

Once detectives fully processed the scene for evidence, they called in the crime cleaners for us. This was a brutal murder in which the killer stabbed to death my son and his friend multiple times. Our chief detective told me the killer had even stabbed my son in his eye repeated times after death. The scene was horrific, ghastly, and cost over \$10,000 to clean up. The Meridian Township officers who came to the scene said it was the most horrific crime scene they had encountered. Police had to identify with our help the two bodies taken to the morgue.

After the offender killed my son and his friend, he went through my son's house stealing items including my son's pistol which he had tucked away for safety. This has brought me to believe there really is no safety when someone is intent on killing you. To add to the horror, a little over a week later someone broke into my son's shed and stole his two prized minibikes. Every part of my son's existence was violated.

A killer was on the loose and we were scared. We armed ourselves with whatever we could to feel safety. We installed security cameras and deadbolts on all our doors. We lived in a prison of fear.

The Meridian Township Police apprehended the killer from a tip given by his Ex-girlfriend within one day which was a relief, although we were made aware from continued interviews with detectives that his family was angry and not cooperating. We found evidence that someone had reentered the house, so our detective set up a police security system and camera.

Next came the ongoing discussion with the assistant prosecutor (AP) assigned to our case and the back and forth with police. We went over the details repeatedly. It was somewhere during this time that the reality and the trauma set in further. The police had collected enough evidence according to the AP to charge and prosecute 1st degree murder. Although the AP was confident that based on the evidence, a jury would convict on premeditated murder, he was told by his boss, the Ingham County Prosecutor (ICP), that he would have to offer a plea deal. Her belief was that anyone, even heinous killers, could be rehabilitated, and no one should have to spend their life in prison with no possibility of parole. To achieve her goal, she was denying us a jury trial in exchange while offering the killer a plea deal to a lesser charge that would allow him to avoid Michigan's automatic sentence of LWOP for a 1st degree murder conviction. These actions thrust us into shock and disbelief once again. The very person we expected to get justice from, had totally abandoned us in favor of her personal beliefs. As much as we protested, our AP told us that the ICP had the final say. Although ICP would have preferred a sentence of fewer years, our AP jumped in and offered a plea deal for 60 years. The system let us down which added to our trauma. I am not sure why, but it was an answer to our prayers that caused the killer to refuse to accept the plea deal. This set us on the way to a jury trial and gave us hope that a guilty verdict would be followed by a sentence of LWOP.

Along the way there was so much more to address - a funeral to plan and estate for us to clear. It was only because my son's many friends and our family and friends pitched in to help move and distribute my son's belongings and plan the funeral that we were able to get through this part of the ordeal physically and mentally. I do not have words to describe the pain of planning my son's funeral. We opted to have his body cremated as it was too mutilated for a casket. So that meant picking out an urn and a casket. This seems like a simple task, but when you consider the cost and emotion involved in picking out a casket that will be burned along with the body and an urn that will be the permanent home for my son's ashes, it was an unbearable task. I remember vividly bringing home my son's ashes and having the funeral home attendant tell me that I should strap the urn full of my son's ashes in the backseat rather than carry it on my lap. This struck me as odd since he came home from the hospital on my lap back in

1968. Really the stress of making any decisions was impossible while in denial that my son was even gone.

There were so many painful calls to make to the funeral home, closing utility and other service accounts, arranging to empty his house and then sale of a "murder house." My son ran a successful computer repair business that we were forced to close and dismantle. Making these arrangements and going through my son's belongings was the hardest thing I have ever done. Each step kept pointing out that my son who was an innocent, productive, happy man and a loving part of our family had been taken from us in one senseless act by a killer. The circumstances forced me to accept that a future with my son was gone. There would be no more birthday dinners, no family celebrations, no Christmas tree in his window. His beloved cat had to be rehomed. He would never cook another turkey again on Thanksgiving for the family, something he was immensely proud of the year prior. I would not attend his wedding or watch grandchildren born. He would no longer be able to tease my niece or ride his motorcycle or minibikes. He would not be there to take care of me in my old age as he promised.

Grief and its repercussions play another role in this tragic story. I have found that grief doesn't end. It goes on forever in one form or another. To survive for our families, we learn to carry it, but underneath it all it continues to live and, in my case, has repeatedly caused depression. I think it may be hard for those who have not experienced it to understand that a killer doesn't kill just one person, they kill the psyche of whole families. Our otherwise healthy family dynamic was assaulted and turned upside down. Family members grieve in separate ways which is not always conducive to a supportive family unit. My daughter was so grief stricken she was unable to continue in her marriage. Her daughter then became a child of divorce devoid of the doting mother she had been used to. Although we have lost none to suicide, there was an attempt. My point is that our relationships were under a severe burden and still are. None of us coped very well. We were all desperate to find relief from the pain.

After a grueling, long wait of well over a year we went to trial. During that time, we rehashed the details of added information as it became available on the conduct of the killer. Our detective shared a confession letter the killer wrote while in jail. Professionals assessed the killer's competence for trial and sanity at the time of the crime. All the while we had no closure whatsoever, just more reliving the killing and more stress and trauma.

I sat in a courtroom where the prosecutor laid out the case to the jury. Evidence was presented including the knife used to kill two people, ghastly photos of the crime scene and mutilated bodies were shown along with a timeline of events in vivid detail. Along with my revulsion, my mind was absorbing the physical pain both my son and his friend must have felt while the killer repeatedly stabbed them.

On May 4, 2018, a jury found the killer guilty of two counts of homicide along with weapons, firearms, larceny, and armed robbery. It was on June 13, 2018, just two days before what would have been my son's 50th birthday, Judge Draganchuk sentenced the killer, Manuel Pena, to life in prison without parole. I was not getting my son back, but at least I felt relief that he had received justice under Michigan law. I read my long and grueling victim's impact statement in the courtroom to the killer. I reeled off all he had taken from me and my family and assured him that I would not allow him to take any more by preoccupying my mind. With the promise of LWOP I felt confident to say I would close the door, forever relieved of fear and walk away to pick up the pieces of what I had left of my life.

Little did I know at that time, the promise of LWOP and the Truth in Sentencing act would be under fire by progressive groups choosing to push for leniency for killers. I truly do not understand why the impact

of leniency for killers is not deemed to be a detriment to the mental health of co-victims. We are the ones left to function in a healthy way in society and raise children who must function in society after we are brought to our knees. We are barely able to keep our heads above water. Why must we be revictimized by giving a second chance to a killer when there is absolutely no guarantee of rehabilitation. How am I going to feel safe? How is the public going to be safe?

I wish it could all end here, but the pain goes on. The murder scene of my son is something that comes back to haunt me most nights as I settle in bed. I can hear the voices of Jeff and Kris calling out to each other for help. I feel their physical pain as the knife strikes again and again. As legislation for leniency for killers is discussed, my PTSD reawakens, and I feel guilty and inadequate that I have no control of its forward movement.

An adult killed my son, so your decisions on JLWOP bills will not impact my case immediately, although I am aware of other legislation announced that will impact my case. This essay is intended to reveal some of the details of my shattered life and help you better understand the true horror of having a loved one murdered which applies regardless of the age of the killer. I hope walking in my shoes will help you understand the impact your decisions will have on me and other innocent co-victims.

I love and miss my son everyday and pray that I will one day see him again.

Karen Jackson