

Role Play Stories: What did THEY do?

A mother forgives her son's killers

In August 2005, the brutal racial killing of black teenager Anthony Walker, who was attacked with an axe in Huyton, Merseyside, horrified Britain. Anthony was killed after he was subjected to racial taunts while waiting for a bus with his 17-year-old girlfriend and a cousin, Marcus Binns, also 17.

In the initial responses, Anthony's sister said she forgave his attackers. Dominique Walker said "we have to forgive" the gang who used an axe to kill her 18-year-old brother.

A few days later after the two involved in the killing gave themselves up. In December 2005, after their trial and conviction, Anthony's mother, Gee Walker, confirmed her family's readiness to forgive, saying:

"Why live a life sentence? Hate killed my son, so why should I be a victim too? Unforgiveness makes you a victim and why should I be a victim? Anthony spent his life forgiving. His life stood for peace, love and forgiveness and I brought them up that way. I have to forgive them... we don't just preach it, we practise it. I don't feel any bitterness towards them really, truly, all I feel is... I feel sad for the family." She even said she could 'admire' Paul Taylor, who butchered Anthony, because he expresses remorse.

Losing Teagan

On that July day in 2001, life was looking good for the Ferlaaks. Chip, then 33, enjoyed success as an assistant golf pro and sports referee, and Jody (Hackett), 28, a 1994 Bethel graduate, stayed at home to devote herself to their growing family. Just months before, they had moved into a comfortable home in a quiet neighbourhood. The couple especially liked the fenced-in backyard that offered their children a safe place to play. When it came to their kids, Chip and Jody worked to do everything right: tucking them in at night with a favourite story, taking them to Caribou Coffee for a frothy caramel cooler, or sitting on a grassy hill to look at nature.

July 29 seemed like a perfect day for Sunday brunch, Chip suggested that the family visit the Old Depot, a popular spot for lunch. As Teagan and Brock dug into their pancakes, Jody tried to soothe Wyndham, strapped in her infant seat. Before Jody could pick up the baby, a car came barreling through the front door and wall of the restaurant. In an instant, unimaginable devastation surrounded them.

The entire Ferlaak family was wounded. Chip, who was knocked unconscious, suffered eight broken ribs and injuries that required 80 stitches in his head. Brock had three skull fractures. Wyndham was pinned between the wall and the grill of the car. The force of this impact produced brain injuries that required a permanent shunt from the baby's head to her stomach.

Jody was struck from behind and thrown into the air, hitting a counter and tables before she landed. Despite extensive nerve, tissue, and muscle damage to her legs she was able to reach Teagan's side.

Horrifying images are etched in the young mother's mind. "I picked Teagan up at the scene. She was lying where her chair should've been at the end of the table with a big gash in the back of her head. As a mother, when I picked her up, I could just tell by her face and the blueness of her lips that there was no hope for her." Besides the Ferlaaks' injuries, a 29-year-old mother of two lost her life, and members of her family and a restaurant worker were also hurt. Final toll: two killed, nine injured.

A criminal investigation revealed that the 38-year-old woman driving the car had plunged into the building in a suicide attempt. The Ferlaaks chose forgiveness but did not neglect accountability.

For the Ferlaaks, being parents to a healthy and happy family was lost and a new perspective was needed to deal with new challenges. Letting go of dreams, habits, and hopes were crushing, but they

found that forgiveness frees the grieving person to deal with difficult issues. From this new outlook, a sense of hope and meaning for rebuilding their lives developed.

Forgiving a thief.

I hadn't just wanted to murder the guy; I was actually planning it out. He had stolen all of my money and cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to the charity we were raising funds for. The resulting stress caused my marriage to fail and at 47 I found myself broke, homeless, alone and without hope. I decided I didn't want to live any more, but I was not going to leave alone. I was going to take him with me.

The night before I was to execute my plan, I contemplated the events of my life. That is when I realized there was this lesson I had not fully learned. This was the lesson of forgiveness. I realized that my adversary was not the man who had stolen from me, but my hatred for him... my insistence on clinging to pride and money with no regard for others.

That night I forgave, in my heart, the man I had planned to murder, realizing he was no worse and no better than myself... just another who doesn't know how to live, and as such, prone to violence.

That realization allowed me to forgive myself as well and with it came a freedom I had not known previously, entirely changing the way everything looked. Forgiveness is not a gift to another. It is a gift to yourself.

Forgiving for your own sake.

I grew up in a physically and mentally abusive family. My stepfather was very controlling and had a substance addiction. My mother told us that she only stayed for us kids and was waiting for us to grow up so she could leave him. Well, that day came to pass. I left the house at age 17 pregnant. During my eighth month of pregnancy I got the dreaded call. My mother had left. Two weeks later I got a call saying my mother was in the hospital where she was in critical condition with 5 bullet wounds.

When I went to see her, my mother was laying in the hospital bed, her head the size of a basketball and purple in colour. She was in a coma and not coherent that whole week. She had been shot twice in her head and 3 times in the back at point blank by my stepfather. He was caught and sentenced to 22 years.

11 Years later he was eligible for release. My mother was there for the hearing, and even though my mother still has a bullet in her head because it's too risky to remove, and her face is disfigured and her hands show the broken bones where natural instinct caused her to try to protect her face, my stepfather was let out after serving only 11 years.

This past July we got a call from my stepfather's family members that he had cancer in his lungs, liver and kidneys. He was in his last days. After all my mother had gone through she found it in her heart to travel those 4 hours to the hospital to let my dying step-father know that she forgave him for all he did to her. He cried at just the sound of her voice. She was there on a Saturday and he passed away that following Monday. I am so proud of my mom, not just by her teaching that we must forgive, but that she taught us by example what true forgiveness is all about. My mother forgave him, not just for his sake but for her sake also.

Forgiving Dad

The moment I had waited for all day never happened. My grandmother said. "Your daddy will call in the morning. I'm sure that he has had car trouble." But I was now 14 years old, and he lived fewer than 45 miles away. I hadn't seen or talked to him much in the past few years. Being stood up that day was one more item I could add to his list of failures, a tabulation I had kept since my mother's death.

When I was in elementary school, I told classmates that he lived in New Zealand. Sometimes I told people that he died shortly after my mother died. By the time I was a teenager, though, I just stopped talking about him. But I was haunted by questions: *What's wrong with me? Did I do or say something that caused him not to like me? Maybe if I lost weight ... maybe if I got better grades ... maybe if I looked prettier ... then he would love me.*

That day my dad stood me up, I chose to hate him. I had dreams of confrontations with my father, in which I demanded answers to questions: "What have I ever done to you to deserve this treatment?" The dreams ended with my sobbing and asking, "What can I do to make you love me?" Bitterness consumed me.

During my second year of college, my best friend told about a talk on forgiveness. I asked if I could go with her again the following week. Again the message was on forgiveness. I knew what I needed to do. But I didn't know if I wanted to forgive my father. "I have a right to be angry," I thought. I realised though that I could choose to forgive my father, or I could continue to be led by angry feelings

While reading a book about mending relationships with parents, I understood that the first step toward healing was to be thankful for what my dad did for me - even if it seemed minuscule. Eventually, as I chose to think positively about my dad, I stopped having dreams in which I angrily confronted him. When bitterness crept back in I focused on what my father had done instead of what he had failed to do. Eventually the harsh feelings left.

By the time I finished college and married, the chip on my shoulder had disappeared. I wish I could say that Dad and I are close today, but we're not. We do, however, have pleasant conversation, for which I am grateful.