

In early October 1989 I had ordered some custom drapes to hang in my living room, after being in my house for a year without any window coverings. One morning my youngest brother Ralph (I'm the oldest) called me to ask if I knew where our middle brother Duane was. I said he should be on his way back to Shemya for his job. Ralph said he knew the Reeve agent handling that flight and that she had called to tell him Duane hadn't checked in. Ralph called me several times, brainstorming where Duane might be. Ralph called hospitals and jail, all the unlikely places one would call when somebody is missing. My drapery installer showed up. By that time, Ralph had called our dad and then Dad started calling me, trying to figure it out.

Duane was a 29-year-old civil engineer working for the Corps of Engineers, based on Ft. Richardson (now called JBER). He worked very long stretches, eight weeks at a time, on Shemya Island, near the end of the Aleutians. He had recently purchased a condo a couple miles from my house. His sports car was always parked in his driveway because the previous owners had turned the garage into a bedroom.

Duane came to visit me and the kids (my 4-year old daughter and 1-year old son) a few days before he was due to go back to work. He said that someone had broken into his condo while he was gone and that they had tried to steal his car, but nothing was stolen, it was just a weird thing. It had spooked him enough, though, that he got a friend from his old job at the BLM to move in to be his roommate.

After calling everyone and every place imaginable looking for Duane, Ralph and Dad came over to my house and decided to go with my husband Larry down to the condo and see if they could get in and find anything that might tell us where Duane was. They were gone a very long time. The drapery installer left. There weren't cell phones, so the guys couldn't just call and let me know what was going on.

Larry finally returned, looking more ashen than anyone I've ever seen. He proceeded to inform me that they discovered Duane's body in a closet, covered with clothing pulled off the hangers. He had been shot three times. It was at that moment my life became like an episode of the Twilight Zone, it was surreal.

They had called the police from the condo. The press arrived about the same time as law enforcement. The police briefly questioned the three of them. Images of Ralph, Dad, and Larry talking with the police were shown on the evening news for several days while crime-scene tape was being strung around the condo in the background. Because most homicides are committed by family members, a surveillance car was parked on the very narrow dirt road where we live.

Duane's car was missing. No one knew about the roommate except me.

An APB was put out for the car and the roommate was located and questioned. He had been unaware of the body in the closet, assuming that Duane had left early for work or their schedules had just missed, typical roommate living. Two days after the discovery of the body, Duane's car was pulled over on a traffic stop with several teenagers in it.

At that time anyone under the age of 18 was charged as a juvenile and then the state had the burden to prove they were not amenable to treatment by the age of 21. For that reason, the shooter was charged as a juvenile and then we began a six-year ordeal of legalese, press influence, recovery, and set-backs. Six years later, in 1995, after a couple trips to the Alaska Supreme Court and having exhausted all his appeals, the shooter was sent into adult court where he immediately pled no contest to the first degree murder of Duane Samuels.

The details of the murder itself are gruesome and I don't think this is an appropriate place to talk about it (as if there were an appropriate place). The short, sanitized version is that a young sociopath carrying a 357 magnum rang Duane's front doorbell at nine o'clock on a Wednesday morning, demanded his car keys and then shot him dead. It was one of Anchorage's more notorious murders, mostly because of the rarity that it was pre-meditated and they were strangers.

Death creates a ripple effect of change through many people's lives and murder even more so. Here we are 28 years later and many of those changes are clear to see. The drapery installer knew how worried we were, then went home and watched the end unfold on the TV. The poor parents of the murderer were devastated and their marriage ended in divorce. Ralph was so angry at our treatment by the justice system that he ran for public office and effected a change in the law. Years later, Duane's roommate committed suicide. I myself am jabbed by fear when my doorbell rings unexpectedly.

Forgiveness has been a process over all these long years. A sociopath is defined as an extreme personality disorder manifested by a lack of conscience. Being wronged by one has taught me that forgiveness is one of those rare, appropriate times to say it's all about me me me. I cannot affect him. I asked myself if I wanted to be one of those people who lets that bitter root grow so deep inside that it informs their actions and their thinking. No, that's not me, that's not who I wanted to be. I had to let it go.

In the months following the murder I attended Victims for Justice's homicide support group. I met many other people going through various stages of grief and horror and injustice. Janice Lienhart, who was one of the founders of Victims for Justice, asked me to go to a grief counseling session with Fred Kiehl. She twisted my arm, hard, so I went.

It was an ambush. If I had been forced at that time to define my relationship with Jesus or church, I would have said that I went to church because that's what I wanted for my children, it's how I was brought up. Fred and Janice asked me a series of questions designed to get me to think about heaven and hell: where do you think Duane is now, being the most horrific, but impactful, question.

My detection of their purpose did not detract from what they were trying to accomplish. It really caused me to think about my own eternal life, where would I be if I were killed this very minute? Fish or cut bait. Decide. I decided I wanted to be with Jesus. John 17:3 tells us that Jesus prayed, "And what is eternal life? It is knowing you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

My eternal life began on that day.

Paula Lindstam

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First Evangelical Covenant Church of Anchorage