

ROSE'S STORY

Rose's daughter, Jennifer LeAnne, was fatally shot on the job as a meter reader for the Southern California Gas Company. It was November 10, 1996, just three weeks before her 21st birthday. Jennifer was the victim of a senseless drive-by shooting.

After Jennifer's death, Rose searched for support and a way to deal with her pain. "I was in limbo, sick with grief and anger. I wanted someone to tell me how I was supposed to act. My family avoided talking about Jennifer because they thought it was easier for me. It wasn't. I held my pain, and it grew."

At a friend's invitation, she joined a grief support group in her parish. "People were there to talk about losing a husband from a heart attack or a parent to a stroke. When I said, 'my Jennifer was murdered,' all conversation stopped. They couldn't identify with my pain and were unable to support me in a way that I most needed. I was angry with God. I kept going to the group because I needed the spiritual comfort, but I remained shut down and depressed."

Then, almost a year and a half after Jennifer's death, Rose discovered Families & Friends of Murder Victims. This organization exists to restore a sense of hope and a pathway to well-being for people who have lost a loved one to murder and those who are victims of attempted murder. Although the meetings stirred up sad memories, they became a place where Rose was able to express her deepest emotions and know that she was understood. It was the beginning of her recovery. "I kept waiting to be myself again. Gradually I learned that the 'old me' would never return. At the same time, I began to believe that it was possible for a 'new me' to emerge and find joy again."

Today Rose's life is very full, and she is gratefully giving back so that families of the murdered can also find their own peace. She leads the local chapter of Families and Friends. Her deep empathy with people who have been devastated by the loss of a loved one comes from her own story. People arrive with rage, helplessness and despair. Having been through such a trauma herself, she gently encourages them and leads them to a place of healing. Grief knows no timetable. Rose's patient support has led many people to a recovery they could never have envisioned in their grief.

Rose's leadership does not stop with individual care. She writes monthly newsletter and organizes the annual Christmas Memorial for Victims and Families held in the Diocese of San Bernardino. Since 1997, Rose has spearheaded the annual Candlelight Vigils during Victims' Right Week. The vigils have been held with active support from the San Bernardino District Attorney's Office and are attended by hundreds of people. Rose's leadership and careful planning have made these events a great success and a source of hope and consolation for many families.

When asked about the role faith has played in her story, she replies emphatically, "Faith is the key for me. I could not have survived without it." She challenges the Church today to do more for the families of murder victims, however. "We need to offer support for this special kind of grief from a Catholic base. It's what I most needed, and my parish was at a loss about how to give it to me. I know it can be done, but it has to come from people who have experienced the loss firsthand. People like me. Maybe that's my next challenge."