



**From the Director**

by Ann Dugger

# Because you asked...

People often ask exactly what we do at the Justice Coalition, so in the next few issues of the *Victims' Advocate* we're going to share events of typical days experienced by each staff member.

A few weeks ago I felt overwhelmed by all I needed to accomplish in the next hours and days. Jared Harrell, a young man named by Clay County Sheriff Rick Beseler as a person of interest in little Somer Thompson's murder, was being extradited from Mississippi where he had been arrested on pornography charges. I had been on the phone with Deina Thompson the night before as she agonized over the implications of his return to Clay County. I tried to calm and reassure her that we would be with her every step of the way through the ensuing legal process.

Families of victims are thrust into a myriad of circumstances when their loved ones are murdered or missing. As they and remaining family members deal with their grief and try to go on with their lives, they must continue interaction with detectives who are working to solve the case, respond (as they choose) to media personnel covering

every aspect of the trauma, and simply learn to survive. The Justice Coalition helps families in many ways as they struggle through this maze of events.

Working with Haleigh Cummings' maternal relatives, we had arranged two vigils in recent days - a prayer vigil in Glen St. Mary's and a candlelight vigil at Haleigh's home in Satsuma on the anniversary of her disappearance. Marie Griffis graciously agreed to share her thoughts at our Together We Can breakfast the week before, as did Phillip Bowling, Somer Thompson's grandfather, so I had spent time with them as they worked on their speeches.

During this time skeletal remains had been found beneath a pile of brush at a cemetery in Bradford County. While I was in a meeting I received a text message notifying me that Pamela Kay Hall's body had been positively identified and that her family was at the scene, not knowing what to do. As quickly as I could, I went to the site, met with them and helped them determine next steps. Pamela, whose parents are deceased, was laid to rest on Good Friday after her brother arrived from Iraq.

Preparing for the John Rowan Memorial Golf Tournament on March 22, I attended committee meetings, net-

worked to obtain sponsors and secure items for the auction to be held at the event and did whatever necessary to ensure its success. And as a member of the Mayor's Victims' Assistance Advisory Council, my responsibility is coordinating the press conference at Hemming Plaza as a kickoff for activities commemorating victims' rights week in April, so I was working on that.

While conferring with my editor that afternoon about the upcoming VA issue, she received word of her husband's death the day before in St. Petersburg. As Shirley dealt with the news and notified her family, I spent the next hour or two talking with St. Pete PD about its role in handling Jim's death (she learned about it from an organ donor company) and with the funeral home, negotiating rates and learning what she would need to do. We all helped to spare her necessary tasks as she worked late that night to finish second proof of the paper.

Friday morning, I went to Bailey Publishing to complete final proof of the March edition (which Shirley would normally do) then joined Attorney General Bill McCollum and other officials for the grand opening of two Seniors vs. Crime offices in Jacksonville - Regency and Highlands on Dunn Avenue.

Meanwhile, JC Board Chairman Charlie Wilson asked me to meet with board members in his office regarding a serious matter, so I drove to Mandarin following the Seniors grand opening event. That emergency meeting plunged me (and the Justice Coalition) into a shocking, devastating chain of events when I learned that a trusted employee, our office manager Terri Johnson, had been systematically embezzling funds from our organization, forging my name to checks and pocketing many thousands of dollars.

JSO Asst. Chief Michael Rutledge (JC board member) arranged for Terri to be arrested after I returned to the office, and she remains in jail as I write this article. Twenty-three JC staff and supporters attended her first court appearance and will continue to monitor the case every step of the way. She will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, and we have implemented safeguards to prevent a recurrence.

You ask, "How could this

happen to an organization that is monitored by CPAs on its Board?" We all, including our CPAs, ask the same question, and I know other organizations experiencing this crime do as well. Swindlers in one non-profit I know about were so clever their scheme passed two annual audits. Folks tell me that locks on a door won't stop a determined thief, and that must also apply to stealing funds.

We don't have words to express our dismay, the sense of betrayal and shame that someone in our office would abuse her position and blatantly steal money that you, our sponsors and supporters, have so generously contributed. Nor can we sufficiently thank all of you who have remained loyal, joining us in our determination to forge ahead, fulfill the role in which I fully believe God has placed us - to help any way we can the innocent victims of violent crime.

I've shared some of my days at the Justice Coalition - hectic and challenging, but blessed and rewarding... because you asked.

## Inspirational Thought



Now upon the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came unto the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared, and certain others with them. And they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre. And they entered in and found not the body of the LORD Jesus.

And it came to pass, as they were much perplexed thereabout, behold, two men stood by them in shining garments, and as they were afraid, and bowed down their faces to the earth, they said unto them, "Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen."

- Luke 24:1-6

## Faith Corner


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