

Looking through a Window "Pain"

"Missing Children's Day" 2005

By Nancy McGowan

Last summer, when I was invited to serve on the Executive Board of the Justice Coalition, I was honored by this request and said "yes."

A few days later, Executive Director Ann Dugger asked me to join her in September in Tallahassee for Missing Children's Day. "As a new board member," she said, "you'll experience the real perspective of what our ministry to victims is all about."

Concerned that I might be intruding on some very private moments of grief, I told her I'd think about it and let her know. She explained how special this event was, and that it honored all the families of the children who were either killed by sexual predators, or were still missing and most likely presumed dead.

I decided to go, although I didn't know what to expect or how to prepare myself to console people who had lost the most precious gift God gives you in life – your own child. As a mother of five children, this would be my worst nightmare. Not only your child's death, but to know they were killed so unmercifully by someone for a few moments of sexual deviancy. It was more than I could bear to contemplate.

The first night in Tallahassee Ann invited me to join the victims' families at a reception. Upon arrival, I recognized the familiar, smiling face of Sheila Delongis, Maddie Clifton's mother, whom I have known for many years. My mind went back to the first time I saw Maddie, a baby with huge brown eyes, then to the awful circumstances of her disappearance and murder. Now here was Sheila, many years later in Tallahassee, still honoring her Maddie, as were the other parents their children. I greeted Shelia with a big hug and proceeded to the somber reception.

Ann introduced me to someone I was not prepared to meet – Jimmy Ryce's mother. I felt a pain go straight through my heart. Although it was a very long time ago, I remember reading about the rape and murder of her little 9-year-old son who had been kidnapped at gunpoint as he got off his school bus in Miami. Here stood the mother of the child the Jimmy Ryce Act was named for, legislation enacted to keep sexual offenders from being released if the judge believes they are still a danger to society. Next, I met other victims'



L. to r., Ernie Hayes, Ann Dugger, Linda Alligood, John Walsh (host of America's Most Wanted), Alene Hayes, Pam Cantrell and Nancy McGowan.

Back row, standing l. to r., Claudine Ryce (mother of Jimmy Ryce), Ann Dugger and John Pitta (with National Center for Missing and Exploited Children); front row, seated l. to r., Bryan Hayes, Alene Hayes (grandparents of Bryan Hayes), Linda Alligood (Mark Degner's mother), Linda's sister, Pam Cantrell.



Pam Cantrell and Linda Alligood place a flower on Mark's picture.



Ernie and Alene Hayes stand before their grandson's picture.

relatives from Jacksonville: Mark Degner's mother and aunt, and Bryan Hayes' grandparents, the families of our two local missing boys. Then I met Wendy Hallowell, the governor's Victim's Rights Coordinator, who was friendly, unassuming, upbeat, and very professional. I asked, "How do you do this job?" I cannot imagine how hard it must be to deal with people under such sad circumstances, but Wendy does it with confidence and grace.

The following morning we congregated at the Capitol for breakfast before the ceremony. Lt. Governor Toni Jennings was there, as was John Walsh, the father of Adam Walsh, House Speaker Allen Bense, and a number of state law enforcement officials. Then we were taken downstairs to a private room for pictures with Governor Bush. It was an exciting moment for the families, but also a grim reminder of the reason they were there. It was an experience I will never forget.

The Justice Coalition group was first up for their picture and then we proceeded outside into the sunshine on the Capitol plaza. Children sang to open this memorial ceremony attended by Gov. and Mrs. Bush, Mr. and Mrs. Ryce, keynote speaker John Walsh, Attorney General Charlie Crist, and many others.

Walsh recounted the story of murderer/predator Joseph Duncan who this past year in Idaho bludgeoned to death Shasta Groene's mother, boyfriend and older brother. He described the ordeal of Shasta (8) and Dylan (9), whose torturous seven-week journey

involved both of the children being raped for weeks. Duncan then killed Dylan and kept Shasta with him on the run. A vigilant waitress at a Denny's restaurant spotted Shasta and called police. Without this brave effort, Shasta would not have been found. Stories like this


gave some positive highlights, but the sorrowful ones well overshadowed those.

The final touch came when each child's name was read to the accompaniment of a ringing bell, and the family, escorted by a Florida State Trooper, placed a long-stem yellow rose on the

large picture of their missing loved one. Truly this was the most touching part of the ceremony.

Kudos to Gov. Bush and Wendy Hallowell for making this such a special event to honor the lost children of Florida.

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