

Healing Power...

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Giving marriage another chance, she moved to Louisiana with her second husband. This home, which also lacked the peaceful sanctuary she desired, had drug abuse with a large dose of domestic violence thrown into the mixture. As if Deanna wasn't experiencing enough misery, she was gang-raped and became pregnant with her second son, Bud.

Her self-esteem was almost non-existent. The sexual abuse she experienced as an adult only confirmed the low self-worth image she acquired during the childhood abuse. Eva said, "She always thought she was ugly. I guess that's what all abused people think. When I would speak to her, I'd always say, 'Hello, beautiful.'"

Five years later she gave birth to her third son, David, and placed him in the care of her sister Nadine. At the time, Michael was living with friends, so Deanna had nothing but Bud and her strong desire to keep them both safe. He gave her the courage to finally leave after 16 years of marriage. Without money, she had no choice but to stay at domestic violence and homeless shelters in order to get away from her abusive husband.

A fighter from conception, Deanna refused to settle for this kind of life for her children. Pushing above the surface of the destructive tidal wave trying to keep her submerged in homelessness and poverty, Deanna broke free and bought her own home, although it was quite the fixer-upper. She didn't mind; she was proud of her accomplishment.

A new beginning... and the end

But the beginning of her new life was actually the catalyst for the end of her life. David "Troy" Stelly showed up at her house as one of the workers providing repairs and maintenance. He was quite smitten with her, making her feel beautiful, a feeling she desperately craved. They became a couple in March 2007.

At the end of that month, they were celebrating Deanna's 40th birthday when she had an accident that fractured her skull. Troy notified Eva, who got on the next plane to Louisiana to care for her daughter. She stayed for a week before returning to Florida, comforted in knowing that Deanna was going to be fine. After all, Troy and the neighbors

promised to take good care of her baby.

Eva said, "I didn't see any signs of abuse...just attentiveness." That was in April 2007. During the next several months, Troy's dotting evolved into smothering, a familiar yet unacceptable feeling that Deanna knew all too well. At the beginning of November she broke up with him, but Troy refused to accept the end of their relationship and tried to get her back. She obtained a restraining order against him, but it proved to be as good as the paper on which it was printed.

Deanna called Eva on Nov. 14, and their 45-minute conversation was light, full of her daughter's dreams and plans. She was so proud that, despite the past, she had finally put her life together. She was going to Dallas that weekend to visit her brothers. And, she had recommitted her life to Jesus Christ. Yes, things were finally looking up for Deanna Waldrup. They told each other, "I love you" and promised to talk after her trip.

Little did either of them know that would be their final conversation - Deanna would disappear the next day.

Eva woke up Friday morning, welcoming the day as always, but this day would turn into one she would never forget. That afternoon Deanna's 19-year old son Michael called his grandmother to tell her that he had been filling out missing person forms for his mother.

Eva froze. Missing? Surely she heard him wrong. She couldn't make sense of the news. She had just talked with her daughter two days ago. And, Deanna was going to visit her brothers this weekend. Missing? Not her Deanna.

But Eva had no idea what had been occurring in Louisiana. She didn't know things had gone terribly awry. No one knew where her daughter was, but red flags had been raised. First, Bud had come home from school Thursday afternoon and walked into an empty house, an unusual occurrence since his mother had always been there to greet him. State troopers had found Deanna's car abandoned in a ditch. Furthermore, a neighbor had heard Troy and Deanna arguing that same Thursday afternoon, with his yelling, "If I can't have you, nobody will."

Her family, a tight-knit clan, arrived to help search

for their loved one. Eva stayed in Florida, remaining hopeful and believing that Deanna would be found, but when Saturday's search was fruitless, Eva packed her bags and left for Louisiana first thing Sunday morning. This drive proved to be the longest one she had ever taken.

Lying in a pool of blood

Approaching Baton Rouge, her cell phone rang and she prayed for good news as she answered it. Her son was on the other end. His six-word proclamation will forever resound in her ears: "God has taken another angel home." The world stopped for Eva. Pulling over to the side of the road, she screamed and cried for the next hour.

Heavy with grief, she finally managed to reach her destination where she was apprised of the details. Deanna's former boyfriend, David Troy Stelly, had confessed to killing her and his 80-year old former employer.

"Don't waste your life dwelling on the way you lost your loved one. How they died doesn't define who they were; instead, celebrate the times you shared."

"When I left her in April, I had no idea I was leaving her in the hands of a murderer," Eva said.

It appears that Stelly had gone to see his former employer earlier on Thursday. After beating the elderly man and then cutting his throat, Stelly hid his bloody clothes and grabbed his victim's gun. He would need it for a visit to his former girlfriend.

Except for the reported argument between Stelly and Deanna that afternoon, ensuing events are speculative. Whatever transpired, it led them to an abandoned barn 25 miles outside of town where Stelly made the deliberate decision to end Deanna's life as he fired four shots into her head. He had ensured his promise would be kept - nobody else would have her. He then left her lying in that lonely and desolate place, confident that she wouldn't be found.

Eva said, "I don't know how he was able to get her to go with him. She had just bought a car. He took her car after murdering her, drove it into town and into a ditch."

On Sunday at 4 a.m., the mystery of Deanna Waldrup was solved. She had been lying in her place of execution for almost three days before

Stelly finally led the police to where he had left his victim lying in the dirt in a pool of blood.

Deanna's family was still reeling from the news when they met with the Sheriff on Monday. They were surprised to learn that Deanna had been working with the Jennings City Police as a drug informant. That afternoon, Eva and some of Deanna's siblings were taken to the crime scene. With a cracking voice, Eva said, "When we walked into the room of that barn where she died and saw the bullet hole in the post and puddle of blood, I thought, *Oh, Lord, that she had died in that place and in that way.*"

"That day, those present had to witness their mother face down in a fetal position with hands touching the spilled blood of one of her babies and listen to me scream from the pit of my soul." While there, Deanna's brother Alan discovered her sunglasses. Also found were Deanna's purse and the

sisters in the Lord praying for her.

On March 26, 2009, Eva faced Deanna's murderer when she gave her impact statement in court. Holding a simple piece of paper, she read the words written upon it, trying to stay strong the whole time.

"She was a valuable human being. She deserved better than to be brutally murdered and left for days in an abandoned barn. Her loss has visibly aged me." And then she felt a courage that she hadn't felt in a long time. She looked Stelly in the eyes, her voice bold, strong and forceful. "You called me 'Mom,' then you destroyed one of my precious reasons for being one (a mom). The last time I saw her, she was with you. Can you live with that?"

She then turned and walked away, but not before seeing the tears on Stelly's face.

"How do you get from that place to being able to extend forgiveness to the person who has ripped your

murder weapon - the first victim's gun.

Thanksgiving Day plans for Eva's family were changed that year. Instead of gathering to cook a feast and give thanks for their blessings, the family gathered to mourn as they waited to view their departed loved one the next day.

Eva reported, "When I walked into that room and saw her lying on that table, I noticed that she was black and blue from her left shoulder down. He had shot her in the corner of her right eye, the back of her head, and twice behind her left ear. The first shot had mercifully killed her. It was overkill. I know my daughter. She had to have put up a heck of a fight. She was a fighter before she was born."

And evidently, Deanna Waldrup was a fighter until death.

"Celebrate the times you share"

For the next two years, Eva couldn't stop grieving the loss of her child. She asked God to take her home so that she could be with her daughter. She refused to give up on God, though. Neither did her friends give up on her. Thankfully, Eva had plenty of brothers and

heart out?" Eva asked. "Through it all, God held me close, just as you would your hurting child and told me to just trust Him."

And whatever became of all of those prayers for Eva? They surely paid off. Today she is stronger and able to embrace everything life offers. Looking at her grandsons and now Deanna's new grandson, she sees her own child in each one of them. She feels blessed that Deanna left behind a part of herself.

But it wasn't until Eva found herself forgiving her child's killer did she find peace, and the cloud of depression lifted. "It's a hard journey I'm on, but my Father is restoring my joy and is turning my mourning into dancing." (Psalm 30:11,12)

Tearing up and voice breaking intermittently, Eva finds it difficult at times to talk about Deanna's death. "What keeps me going is knowing that my baby is with God. And one day, I'll see her again."

Her final words of encouragement to anyone who has lost a loved one: "Don't waste your life dwelling on the way you lost your loved one. How they died doesn't define who they were. Instead, celebrate the times you shared..."