

## **P.E.A.C.E. in the City: An Interview with Teresa Evans**

Lisa Murray-Roselli

Hope is a powerful, humming force that drives us through the night and into the next day. It is the reason why we go out into the world and work, go to religious services, maintain friendships, keep our families close, have children...we are hopeful that life is worth our efforts, that life will be better in the future for our efforts. Though evidence abounds – on the news, in the stories of our personal lives, and in the general swagger of carelessness that seems to taint our culture – for a world that should be drained of hope, it flows still. Nowhere in Buffalo, NY is that more apparent than in an organization called “P.E.A.C.E.” (Parents Encouraging Accountability and Closure for Everyone).

In 1996, Teresa Evans, whose son was the victim of a homicide, joined forces with Leslie Jordan of The Children’s Hospital of Buffalo Bereavement Services. They formed a support group called “Rebuilding Life after a Violent Death.” Families began coming to this support group and sharing their stories. However, after a while, Teresa and Leslie realized that, because of their lack of information about the legal system and the unsolved status of most of their cases, these families were not able to get past dealing with their frustration to begin facing their grief. As a result, members of the support group met with members of the District Attorney’s office and, in 2003, formed P.E.A.C.E. as an “offspring” support group to help families deal with the legal and business side of how to cope after a homicide.

Prior to the formation of P.E.A.C.E., Evans says, “There was no support for families of murdered children,” as far as helping them to navigate the legal system, the police department, and the process of funeral arrangements. P.E.A.C.E. can walk families through these procedures and help them to understand their rights and what to expect from various organizations.

Teresa Evans is currently the president of P.E.A.C.E., whose other founding members include Alison Wells, David Collins, Shaqurah Zackery, Esq., Carol Reis, Vivian Thomas, Rosemary Speed, Pamela Jordan, and Teresa McLaurin. Its mission is “to provide support and assistance to families and friends who have lost a loved one to

homicide. P.E.A.C.E. will seek to engage the authorities as they proceed through the stages of the investigation, arrest, and prosecution of the person(s) who are responsible for the murder(s).” The organization is a legal 501(c)3 not-for-profit, well-organized, and effective. It is important to mention this because it illustrates the depth of commitment the members of P.E.A.C.E. have to the community and one another.

For Teresa Evans, and many other members of P.E.A.C.E., this commitment can be emotionally draining. She says, “I have been burned-out on several occasions. So, whenever I see something (a class or seminar) that pertains to self-care, I’ll take it. [In addition to] the love of a close-knit family here in Buffalo, the support group is like a family; you can always go to another mother, just to talk.” A person such as Teresa Evans takes Christ’s message of service very literally. Although she could have shut herself away after losing her son to violence, she reached out for help and then took a leadership role in providing help for others who were suffering. “It’s one day at a time,” Evans says. “You have to make that decision – do you want to live?” Teresa Evans has done more than just live; she has shown others what the human spirit is capable of, in the face of a tragedy that does not ever leave the heart.

In June of 2005, Evans met Sister Karen Klimczak of the Bissonette House and they became fast friends. Together, they developed the idea of holding Prayer Vigils at the sites where homicides occurred. With the permission of the family, wooden peace doves (designed by Sr. Karen), bearing the name of the victim, his or her age and day of death, are placed at the site of the homicide. Then a prayer is said, peace candles are lit and given to the family, and speakers (arranged by Sr. Karen) try to provide solace and healing. The experience is powerful for all who attend. The uncle of a murdered boy said, “After experiencing this prayer service, my heart has truly been changed. I am no longer angry and filled with vengeance. My heart is sorrowful, but I am at peace.” Attendance at P.E.A.C.E. meetings increased after the vigils began.

Sr. Karen quickly became P.E.A.C.E.’s greatest ally. She loved the community in which she lived and worked, and families came to love and depend on her. The members of P.E.A.C.E. were very protective of Sr. Karen and offered to accompany her as she ministered throughout the neighborhood, but Sr. Karen brushed aside their concerns, feeling quite comfortable among the people she considered her own. Evans says that,

during one of their nightly telephone conversations, Sr. Karen said, “Teresa, I just love being with families. I just love being with the mothers.”

Sr. Karen’s murder in April of 2006 was a tremendous blow to the community, but to the members of P.E.A.C.E. in particular. They lost a good friend, confidante, and an irreplaceable inspiration. The irony of a woman so dedicated to the families of homicide victims becoming a victim herself, was almost too much to bear. But hope continues to motivate Evans and the members of P.E.A.C.E. When asked how she would like to see the organization develop in the future, Evans says, “I’d like to stop doing prayer vigils and I’d like to see the people start healing. We have so many children left behind. I would like to see [them] taken care of so they don’t grow up to be angry kids. I hope that one day we will get the service providers that deal with grieving children. [There are] a lot of lost people, hurting people.”

Until her vision of a city without homicide is realized, Teresa Evans and the dedicated members of P.E.A.C.E. will continue to do what they can to provide healing and direction for those families who lose a loved one to violence, especially the children. Sr. Karen’s spirit and example will continue to guide them, and her peace dove, as seen on the ubiquitous signs throughout the city, reminds us that, “Nonviolence begins with ME!”

Lisa Murray-Roselli is a freelance writer and editor living in Buffalo, NY. She has her Master’s Degree in Education, is the mother of two little girls, and she and her husband, Paris Roselli, are members of the Sisters of Social Service Advisory Board.