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Crucified for a crucifix

Families Against Crime & Trauma may have been born by those who have suffered, yet the changes in the Criminal Justice System that it is seeking, is for all Canadians. This mother will not allow her tears to go waste. A report by Dr. Neelam Verma

For families of victims of crime, every day is a remembrance day. Nah- every moment is a remembrance moment, every step they walk, reminds them of some moment in the lives of their loved ones they lost in vain, every laughter and every tear they try to hide reminds them of their son or daughter lost to senseless violence. The rising sun, the beautiful moon behind the mountains of beautiful British Columbia, those Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners and those Diwali prayers, just feel so empty and the feeling of missing something, lingers. Those unfulfilled dreams and emptiness in their lives, squeezes the zest of living. But they live on - hoping their sorrows can help someone else in a similar state, heal.

While some grieve alone, others fight to change the system to save others that helps their healing process and become activists- perhaps giving them a mission. The Criminal Justice System in Canada gives paramount importance to rehabilitation of criminals by giving full support to them, even releasing them back into society as soon as possible, it is the victims of crime who have been watching from the sidelines as the killers of their son or daughter are out in the open before they could start living again.

All the diminutive 16-year-old Matthew Martins wanted to do on July 2, 2005 was to enjoy the Canada Day festivities with his friends. And as the unsuspecting teenager walked to the bus stop near the Surrey Central Sky Train station, to meet his friends, that night at a bus stop, 23-year old Katherine Quinn and her boyfriend 28-year old Robert Forslund were outside their home in Surrey with a few of their friends. Katherine noticed Matthew walking their way and had made reference to Matthew's crucifix to a girlfriend that was standing with her. As Matthew walked past them Quinn decided to jump Matthew from behind to steal his chain, a scuffle ensued and she fell to the ground. Matthew then took off running and would eventually be chased down and cornered in the Surrey Central Skytrain Station and stabbed to death.

Mathew's parents Sandra Martins-Toner and David Toner prefer not to talk about the details as the memories are very painful. But why did Mathew have to die for that chain and crucifix. Says the distraught mother, "It maybe just a few hundred dollars, nothing extravagant. My sister bought that after he had been assaulted not even a year prior to this and had had it stolen right off his neck. It seemed that because Matthew was so tiny for his age, that he was always a target for bullies. The chain and pendant were gold."

Not content to suffer their grief in silence, Sandra and David teamed up with Nina Rivet, a North Surrey resident whose sister Irene Thorpe was killed by street racers in November 2000 and formed F.A.C.T.- Families Against Crime & Trauma (FACT). Talking to The Asian Outlook, David said, "We have been affected in everyway possible, emotionally, physically and financially. I don't think we will ever find closure in this tragedy, but by creating F.A.C.T. we have found a way to allow our son's memory to remain. Every time we help a family like ourselves, we are able to heal a little more."

The mission of F.A.C.T. is to create change in the Criminal Justice System, to provide guidance and direction pertaining to court procedures and to educate the community and victims about their rights. The belief is that there is no justice in the Criminal Justice System, it's become a legal system. Legalities and judicial procedures have become the focus, rather than Justice. Says David, "We believe that Judges have allowed a liberal attitude to affect their common sense, and the "anything but prison" mentality has made sentences steadily more and more lenient. They are so concerned with rehabilitating offenders (which rarely works, and there are stats to prove this) that they sacrifice the safety of the general public by releasing violent criminals back into society. We also believe bail should be a reverse onus issue, where the accused must prove him not to be a threat. Several of the high profile killings recently were committed by those on bail or awaiting sentencing after already being convicted. The Federal government has been introducing new laws that will toughen sentences and deal with gun crime more strictly; however, they have had difficulty passing bills due to opposition in the House."

Since Mathew died, there have been a number of incidents in and around sky train stations. In 2006, there were as many as 412 serious incidents near sky train stations. "The GVTA Police report 412 serious incidents took place on the system in 2006, which is a pretty low rate considering we provided about 70 million rides," CEO Doug Kelsey had

claimed to the press earlier this year. "Still, even one assault on an employee or a passenger is one too many, and with recent concerns over the safety of people walking to and from some of the stations, we recognize our responsibility to address the situation." However, while talking to The Asian Outlook, Kelsey accused the media of creating a scare surrounding sky train stations. "Even if the incident happens a couple of blocks away from the station, it is presented like it happened there. Last ten months, we have improved lighting in and around stations, cut down bushes, given the constables powers to arrest people who don't pay, have more bodies working on stations so that if they see something, they can report. We have telephones everywhere and I can tell you our response rate is 3-4 minutes which is much less than the 7 minute response rate of the police. We are also planning retain stores in at least ten stations so that there is constant movement of people, giving some security to passengers."

Just four days after Martin was killed, a 35-year old man was brutally beaten, putting him in hospital in critical condition with serious head injuries. On March 18, 2006, a 15-year-old was stabbed six times outside the Lougheed Sky Train station after a failed robbery attempt quickly followed by a passenger being stabbed while on a train between the Scott Road and Gateway stations. A 30-year old woman was attacked at the New Westminster Sky Train station on December 14 2006 and two weeks later four women were clubbed and robbed at the 29th Avenue and Nanaimo Sky Train stations. In April this year, an elderly woman on way to work was brutally beaten and robbed at the 29th Avenue Sky Train station. It took her close to six months to come out of coma.

The last few years has seen only minimal improvements around sky train stations feels David. "Translink promised 24 hour security guards in problem stations such as Broadway, Surrey Central, and more Transit Police, but there has been little follow through. We have found that they tell us what we want to hear, but there is no follow through on their part. If money is not an issue, then what exactly is the problem?"

Security around sky train stations is one issue which is yet to be dealt with despite the fact that a number of ministers have taken foreign junkets in an attempt to study transport systems. Eight years ago, Jenny Kwan, the NDP minister responsible for Sky Trains, and nine transit officials went on an expensive junket to England to view London's transit system and the fare gates there. But early the following year, TransLink board members were handed a report downplaying fare evasion and crime on the system. Then, that summer, an opinion poll of Greater Vancouver residents showed 89 per cent believed gates on both the Expo and Millennium lines would, guess what, deter fare evasion and improve security. But still nothing was done. And still the system relies on the "honesty" of riders to cough up the cash, when it is clear many aren't honest at all. Some are even violent. Now, following a trip to Europe in September, Transportation Minister Kevin Falcon says he is impressed by the London and Dutch transit systems and has become convinced of the need to install turnstiles.

David believes that 10 per cent of criminals are responsible for 80 per cent of crime and the law must change to curb them. "If you could lock them up and keep them locked up, that would reduce crime dramatically." According to reports, in the last 25 years close to 500 Canadians were murdered by convicted killers on early release and parole. Earlier this year the Conservative government appointed a long-time victims' advocate as the first federal ombudsman for victims of crime, a national office that to look out for the their interests in the justice system. Steve Sullivan, who has been president of the National Resource Centre for Victims of Crime for nine years, is in charge of new victims' initiative for a three-year term. Federal prisoners already have a federally appointed ombudsman to vet their complaints, but crime victims have not had a similar advocate. The appointment of a victim's ombudsman was a Conservative federal election promise and is part of the government's \$52 million commitment over four years increase services for crime victims.

As Ombudsman, he may review complaints and concerns on behalf of registered victims of crime with respect to the Corrections and Conditional Release Act, or on behalf of any victim about any federal service. Says David, "The office will try to assist victims through the review process and find a quick resolution. When this is not possible, I can issue reports and make recommendations to the Minister of Justice and/or Minister of Public Safety. I can tell you that we met with Mr. Sullivan a few months back, and have not heard from him since."

A tragedy changes lives of families forever. Mathew's mother Sandra, who worked in a medical clinic, and was on call as a R.C.A. at the Hospital, was not able to work anymore, suffers daily but will not allow her tears to go waste. "The pain of losing our son has made it next to impossible for her to complete her duties, and work with patients and her residents."

In a victim impact statement, she said "I can not even begin to describe the emotional pain I have endured since the loss of my beautiful son Matthew. There are no words to explain the pain that emanates from my soul. My life as I knew it, ended on the morning of July 2nd, 2005, when I had to say goodbye forever to my 16 year old son. I would not even get the chance to kiss his beautiful face, or even look into those eyes, as he was covered with blood soaked towels. The only thing I was given to hold were his hands, and even so, the stench of his blood that had seeped into his skin and fingernails remains with me always. Watching my son take his last breath was the most terrifying moment of my life, I

wanted it to be me, not this child who had so much to give back to this world, who had so much love to give.”;

Years later, it is not easy for Sandra to talk about her son’s brutal death and the impact the tragedy has had on the family. Her two other sons still miss their older brother and are in counselling to help them deal with their fear and uncertainty unleashed that night but it’s a struggle, she says. “Matthew’s younger siblings lives will forever be changed, nothing will ever give them pleasure, as they tend to have guilt, guilt for having a moment of happiness, when their big brother will never have any of it. It has taken me over a year to even allow my children the luxury of having any kind of social lives, I’m afraid that something will happen to them, afraid someone will hurt them, or even worse kill them. I have become a hovering mother, who must be in constant contact with my children. If they are even 5 minutes late coming in from school, I begin to panic, and have anxiety. My mind starts to think of the most horrible things, and I’m ready to call the police over every little thing,” says Sandra.

Despite her pain and constant daily struggle with her own self, Sandra wants to convey through The Asian Outlook that she would like to reach out to those who are in need of support. “I have found that by sharing what my family went through during the murder trial, I have been able to reach many who are feeling the same way. F.A.C.T. wishes to reach out to those like ourselves, to let them know they are not alone.”;

F.A.C.T. has now gained support and has attracted the attention of those in government, law enforcement and the judiciary. It was recently awarded the 2007 Madd Greater Vancouver Chapter Award for its efforts in providing a voice to victims of crime. The group wants changes in the judicial system, for accountability to the judiciary and for amendments to the Criminal Code that will protect all citizens from violence. And it seeks your support and wants readers to write to their MP’s, the newspapers and the federal government as the changes are for all Canadians. But most of all, senseless killing of the innocent has to come to a stop immediately. Period.