

In March 1978, at the age of 18, I decided to take a journey that was long overdue. There was a man that I needed to find. That man was my dad, James K. Edwards. Not knowing exactly where he was became a little frustrating, but I was determined to take the information that I had (which was very little), jump into my little powder blue Opal GT and begin the long journey from Bloomington, IN to Wichita, KS.

Traveling was only part of the journey God had in mind for me. He was leading me toward a journey that would last a lifetime.

When I arrived in Wichita, I started with my first little piece of information and looked for the convent that was on a big curve. I remembered going to my aunt's house when I was very young and had the idea that she might be able to help me find my dad. Unfortunately, when I finally found the convent and then her home she wasn't there, but her neighbor was very kind in helping me find her. She was at my grandmother's (dad's mom) house. He told me how to get there and away I went. My heart was pounding because in my heart I knew I was close to finding him.

I knocked on the door and an older lady answered and I introduced myself to her as Jim and Shirley's daughter. She excused herself to put the dog away and I waited at the door and I waited and I waited. To my surprise she did not return to the door, although a man did. With thick wavy hair, a big walrus mustache and bright blue smiling eyes, there on the other side of the door was my dad.

Wow, total excitement and extreme joy rushed through me and I think in him too. He grabbed me and gave me the biggest hug ever and we both had big ole' happy tears in our eyes. What an amazing moment for both of us!

We spent a great deal of time together doing all kinds of things. I remember once we got in trouble together for being on the Arkansas River in a rubber raft. Oops! There were many teaching moments in our time together, he taught me so much about how to treat people and how to really respect them and most of all how to really love people. It wasn't that I had not been taught those things as a child, it was just this incredible enhancement of all of the traits that make a human being a wonderful person that walks on this beautiful earth.

Moments with a dad that smiled as brightly as he did should not ever end, but they did and very abruptly.

On December 15, 1978 three men had decided to rob a pharmacy around the corner from where my dad lived. They terrorized the employees of Hudson Pharmacy and then made their way to the get-away car, which was parked on the street my dad lived on. As they ran across the yard of my dad's elderly neighbor they began shooting at him and at just that moment my dad turned the corner and witnessed the horror that was taking place. He sprang into action to help his neighbor and three bullets were fired that landed inside his heart making his heart explode. He died very shortly afterwards.

How does a person live with such a horrible act of violence? That was such a huge question for me. I was angry that they took my dad from me, just when we were

finally able to be together! How dare they? If I had a gun I would have taken their lives just like they took his. Or so I thought.

Being brought up as a Christian I knew that I had to do the right thing and forgive the men that had brought so much pain to my family. So, I did.

Fifteen years passed by and to my shock the first of three men came up for parole. It just had not dawned on me that it was time for them to begin going through those processes. At first, I was very angry that I had to deal with this all over again. After all, I had been through enough! Years of nightmares, years of the fear of them returning to hurt my family and me. Years of living my life without a father, a man that I loved and needed so much. Why did I have to do this?

The answer to why was simple in the language of the justice system. Each had received the maximum penalty of life in prison. That meant that they were eligible for parole after serving fifteen years in prison. And so, I had to endure the pain of reliving the most horrible nightmare I had ever had.

I took a little petition around to all of my friends for them to sign to keep Glendal Rider in prison. Every friend signed it gladly and I was extremely grateful, but one friend challenged me. She knew I had forgiven them all and asked if I had ever considered meeting with them individually to let them know of my forgiveness. The very quick answer I returned was absolutely not.

Over the next year God began to work on my heart and mind about visiting these men. As much as I didn't want to, God wanted me to more. I began to think about not only letting them know I forgave them, but also about how this might be a great way to

deal with my fear. Taking fear by the horns and looking it straight in the eyes might be a very good thing for me. So I decided to meet with them.

Billy Lemons was the next one up for parole, so I did my little petition signing drive and visited with the Parole Board and started paving the way to meet with him.

A pilot program was underway in the Hutchinson Correctional Facility that I could take part of and I went for it. Billy and I both had to interview with various people, write letters and prove to the powers that be that it would be a positive meeting. We both passed the trials we had been put through and were ready to meet.

In April 1994, my husband and I drove to HCF to visit with Billy. I had not ever been in a jail much less a prison. I was very scared, but I knew it was right. That thought kept me going even though my legs were trying to run the other way.

When we entered the conference room there were probably twenty people in there already. All of us sat and waited for Billy to come into the room. When he did it was very strange. He looked just like he had in the courtroom so many years ago.

Billy sat down across from me and he began to tell his story of the events that happened that day and early evening. All of them had been drinking and doing drugs all day long. They were completely out of their rational minds. He talked about the robbery, shooting at my dad's neighbor and shooting my dad. He admitted that he could have stopped Glendal from shooting my dad but he was petrified that Glen would shoot him too. He added that my dad had not threatened them with anything, not even words. Billy said my dad truly was just trying to help his neighbor and how brave he was to help

out. He was completely remorseful about the fact that he had allowed a father to be taken from his children. Over the years he had thought about it many many times.

Then it was my turn. I shared with Billy how my life and my brother's life had been since the murder and how much it had affected my grandmother (my dad was her only child). I shared with him about how I walked down the aisle to marry my husband without my dad beside me, how I had my babies and he wasn't there to be the proud grandpa and how much I missed his voice and his bright blue eyes that held so much joy. I shared about how my college education fund was depleted the day dad died and the same for my brother. It had been a hard, sad and long road to travel without dad. After all of that I shared with him that I forgave him and I read Psalm 23 to him with a heavy but pure heart.

His reaction to my forgiveness was simply that he did not deserve it, but he did accept it. And we cried.

That day Billy and I both experienced something wonderful, each of us walked away with heavy burdens lifted from our shoulders. I had no idea that I was carrying such a heavy load, but I was glad that it was gone. From that day until now I have not had a single nightmare and I am not afraid anymore.

If we had had the death penalty in Kansas at that time I would not have been able to find the peace that I have found. In states where the death penalty was being used on a routine basis, offenders are executed long before their sixteenth year in prison, therefore leaving a family member without the ability to reconcile. Reconciliation is a key part of healing for many of us and it is accomplished in many different ways. For some it is just

Death Penalty Informational Hearing
House Corrections and Juvenile Justice Committee
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a letter or two, for others possibly a phone call, and for a few of us it's facing the person that did so much evil that our hearts could almost explode.

Without meeting Billy I would not be where I am today and I am thankful that we did not have the death penalty at the time of my dad's murder.