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Times-Picayune

Crime victim helps others cope in New Orleans

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When Rose Preston suddenly found herself the victim of a horrifying crime -- the murder of her husband and mother-in-law in their New Orleans home -- she looked around fruitlessly for books to help her navigate both her overwhelming grief and the confusing criminal justice system.

In 2003, Preston never found that publication. But on Friday, with the help of several local activist groups, she unveiled her own answer to that unmet need, a guide for crime victims particularly geared to the family members of people who are killed.

The "Crime Victims Guidebook" is part of a larger effort to provide more assistance to the relatives and loved ones of homicide victims by the Victim Allies Project, a coalition that includes the nonprofit groups Silence is Violence, Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans and Voice of the Ex-Offender.

Along with providing victims with the guidebook -- available through the Orleans Parish district attorney's office, the New Orleans Police Department and the Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff's Office, among other places -- volunteers will also be paired with surviving family members to help them navigate the often frustrating criminal justice system. An orientation session for volunteers will be held at 1 p.m. today at the Latter Library, 5120 St. Charles Ave.

For Preston, the call informing her about the murder of her husband came in September 2003, while she was in South Africa. Her husband, James Saporito, 38, and his mother, Patrina Saporito, were killed in the elderly woman's Mid-City home. The house had been set on fire after the Saporitos were brutally attacked. Both were stabbed repeatedly, while James Saporito was also shot in the head.

It took six months for NOPD detectives to arrest suspects Paul and Cheryl Willis, Patrina Saporito's longtime tenants who owed a year of back rent. But Paul Willis, who was charged with two counts of first-degree murder, died in October 2004 of a ruptured peptic ulcer at Orleans Parish Prison.

Arson and obstruction of justice charges were dropped against Cheryl Willis after she agreed to participate in a "restorative justice" process overseen by a mediator, Preston said. In the guidebook, Preston wrote about her experience of communicating with Cheryl Willis, although she didn't use her name, saying the process was cathartic.

"I found this to be tougher and more emotional work than I imagined," she wrote. "However, despite my resistance to it, there was information I'm convinced I would never have received otherwise."

Preston did not live in New Orleans before the murders and was initially apprehensive about relocating to a city that was the site of so much grief. But she made the move, in large part to allow her to closely follow the court proceedings after the Willises were arrested.

"The legal system is very protracted. I decided to move here and just deal with it," Preston said.

After relocating, Preston found a community of people who helped her, she said, which she now hopes to do for others as one of the volunteers working with homicide victim's families. "I feel very supported here," she said.

The book provides general practical advice about how to deal with the police and routine legal matters that come up when someone dies, as well suggestions on how to deal with grief and other emotional symptoms after the sudden death of a loved one.

The second half focuses largely on the Louisiana criminal justice system, particularly in Orleans Parish, explaining the steps of the process from an arrest to a conviction or acquittal at trial. Contact information for various service providers, including legal help and mental health treatment providers, is included.

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More information about the Victim Allies Project's volunteer program can be obtained by calling 504.214.7542. Financing for the Crime Victims Guidebook was from The Joe W. and Dorothy Dorsett Brown Foundation and U.S. Department of Justice grants.

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