

ULTIMATE FORGIVENESS

Family extends mercy to mother's killer

By John W. Kennedy

Shirley Shell gained a reputation as a giving and selfless person in Edmond, Okla. Ron McCaslin, pastor of Cathedral of the Hills, the Assemblies of God church Shirley attended for 15 years, admired her committed attendance, generous volunteerism and strong faith.

With her husband, Joe, sometimes gone for two-week business trips, Shirley, 67, had for a dozen years been the primary caretaker for her 95-year-old mother, Pearl Friend. Joe worked in a niche business, customizing computer software for feedlots.

By June 2007, Friend's health had declined to the point where she could barely see and needed extensive personal care. Still, the never-complaining Shirley felt blessed to care for the woman who had taken her to church every week at the Seneca (Mo.) Assembly of God while growing up.

Shirley's son, Brian, 42, had moved to the Los Angeles area. Daughter Tracy, 40, settled in Seattle. But youngest child Cindy lived only two miles down the road

in Edmond. At 35, Cindy Shell, an information technology project manager and business analyst, viewed her mom as her best friend and spiritual mentor.

Shirley took Cindy's dog to her house when her daughter worked. Cindy took care of her parents' yard. Cindy spent most of her free time with her mother, and the two chatted frequently on the phone when apart. Shirley always insisted Cindy stop by the house for dinner after work.

Cindy spent the evening with her mom as usual on June 4, 2007. Joe had gone to Amarillo, Texas, on a sales meeting.

That night, Shirley slept in the same room as her mother in order to help her if she needed to get up. Friend awoke in the middle of the night, and Shirley turned the light on to see what she needed.

Around 2:45 a.m. on June 5, Shirley calmly called her husband of 45 years to inquire about a credit card PIN number. But the message went to the cell phone's voice mail.

About 45 minutes later, Joe noticed the phone message from

Shirley. He tried to call her back, but Shirley didn't answer. Joe then called Cindy and asked her to go to the house. He didn't understand why Shirley had inquired about financial information in the middle of the night. Perhaps she needed to take the ailing Friend to a hospital.

At 4 a.m., Cindy arrived at the house, to hear her confused grandmother yelling while crouched behind a recliner. Friend told Cindy that a man had come into the home and demanded money. Friend, in moments of lucidity, remembered bits of the conversation between Shirley and the intruder, whom she described only as a young male with a deep voice. Friend told Cindy she thought Shirley had been abducted.

Cindy called 911 at 4:04 a.m. and relayed the details. While still on the phone, Cindy walked into her parents' bedroom at the other end of the single-story house. Immediately she says she sensed oppressive evil. She saw her mother motionless on the bed, covered with blood from neck wounds.

"I pulled her close to hug her, but I realized she wasn't there; she

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was in heaven,” Cindy says. “I had a feeling of utter loss and devastation. But I realized God would carry me through.”

McCaslin arrived on the scene soon after police arrived. The pas-



Shirley and Cindy Shell

tor consoled Cindy, and stood by her as she told her grandmother what had happened. Friend died just three and a half weeks later.

That traumatic first month, Joe and the children decided not to blame God, even if police never apprehended the murderer. Cindy prayed that the unknown criminal would repent and soften his heart toward God so that he wouldn't spend eternity in hell.

The family determined to trust in the Lord for strength and peace rather than speculate on how the situation might have been altered. What if Cindy had stayed overnight at the house as she had the night before? What if Joe had answered his cell phone? What if Grandma had slept through the night so the home had not been illuminated?

A BREAK IN THE CASE

The killer left no fingerprints or DNA behind, and that stymied the investigation. But about a month after the murder, a credit card statement arrived in the mail. With Joe away traveling for work, Cindy opened the Visa bill and immediately deciphered that the

robber had left a trail of clues via 20 charges. The first happened on June 5 at a Tulsa gas station, only two hours after Shirley's death. Until then, the family hadn't realized anything had been taken from Shirley's purse.

Police traced the transactions to Ohio. They examined gas station security camera videos and turnpike toll tapes to track down a license plate number and car description. On July 31, police arrested Michael Lamont Gary in Cleveland.

Initially, Gary acknowledged using the stolen credit card, but denied involvement in the killing. Gary claimed he swapped marijuana to another man he met at a party in exchange for the charge card. For seven months after the arrest, Gary showed no intention of pleading guilty.

Then, in March 2008, Gary tried to commit suicide by swallowing dozens of antidepressant pills he had stashed while incarcerated. He fell into a lengthy coma, and doctors initially believed his loss of oxygen would require amputation of Gary's hands and perhaps one of his arms. Although he no longer has feeling in one of his hands, nothing had to be amputated.

THE TRUTH REVEALED

After waking up, the guilt-ridden suspect admitted murdering Shirley. Only after Gary confessed did the family learn details of what happened that night.

A money-obsessed Gary drove around Edmond and chose the Shell home at random because of the lights on in the house. He burst into the home looking for money, but Shirley had virtually no cash in her purse or anywhere else in the home. She offered TV sets that Gary could hock, but he wanted dollars immediately. Shirley called her husband to find out information that Gary needed to access the couple's credit card he planned to snatch. (Ultimately he took a Visa

card in Shirley's name that didn't require a PIN number.)

Shirley told Gary he didn't have to steal, and that God would forgive him. She started to pray for Gary, but that only agitated the man who thought that God had forgotten him long ago. The frustration spurred Gary to stab Shirley in the neck and leave her there to die.

After the revelations in March, Cindy wrote a remarkable letter to Gary. She told him that she hoped he accepted the love and mercy of Jesus Christ as his Savior.

“My family and I thank you for taking responsibility for your actions,” Cindy wrote. “We also want you to know that we forgive you. We do not hate you or wish you any harm. We are saddened that this terrible event ever had to happen — but if you begin a relationship with Jesus as a result — then good will have won out in the end.”

On June 2, nearly a year after the crime, Gary, 37, pleaded guilty to first-degree murder and received a life term without parole, plus 40 years. The sentencing hearing marked the first time the family saw Shirley's killer in person. Gary, shackled and wearing a jail-issued orange uniform, declared that he didn't feel worthy to live because he had taken another person's life.

While being led out of the courtroom, Gary turned to the Shell family and said, “I am so sorry.”

Brian replied, “It's OK.”

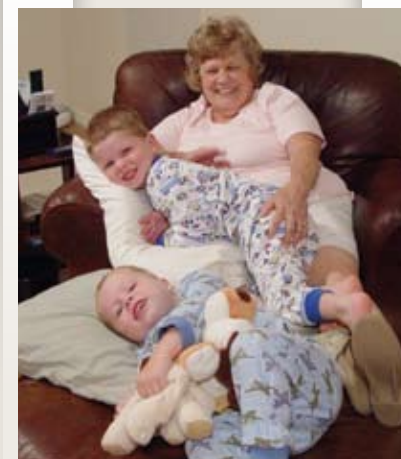
The same day, the Shells released a statement conveying contentment with the outcome of the case.

“Our entire family would like to thank Jesus Christ, who has carried us through this past year with amazing grace and peace,” began the letter, published in *The Edmond Sun*. “Instead of allowing such a tragedy to destroy our faith and turn us into victims of anger and hate, He has supernaturally provided us His healing compassion and enabled us to, in turn, offer forgiveness and prayer to the person that took our mother's life.”

In the letter, the Shells thanked McCaslin for his steadfast support. They also expressed hope that Gary would be redeemed in prison.

“No sinner is too far gone to receive the forgiveness that Jesus died to offer,” the family wrote. “We offer our forgiveness to Mr. Gary and more importantly pray that he will seek true forgiveness from Jesus.”

Three weeks later, Gary wrote to Cindy, repeatedly apologizing for the sorrow he caused the family and expressing amazement at the forgiveness they had shown. Gary explained that he felt prompted to confess to the killing because he had put his trust in God. But Gary wrote that he didn't know why God allowed him, of all people, to have a second chance at life. He prayed that one day he could forgive himself.



Shirley Shell enjoys time with grandsons Matthew (center) and Nathan Shell.

A week later, Cindy sent a Bible and half a dozen inspirational books to Gary through his defense attorney. Then she penned a letter to him.

“The Bible is full of human beings who have sinned in graphic and violent ways — but upon realizing their sin have repented and turned back to God — all getting a second chance to allow God to use them for His purpose,” she wrote.

Through the ordeal, Cindy has

discovered a deeper level of faith.

“Selfishly I would give anything to have my mom back, but I wouldn't want to go back to the way I knew Jesus then,” she says. “He is so much more real now.”

Cindy encourages others to offer mercy to those who have wronged them, whether in a consequential or insignificant matter.

“If we give that feeling of hate or anger power over us, we are a slave to it, and it can and will destroy us,” she says. “Evil happens to good people, just like it happens to bad people. Holding unforgiveness only hurts us.” **tpe**

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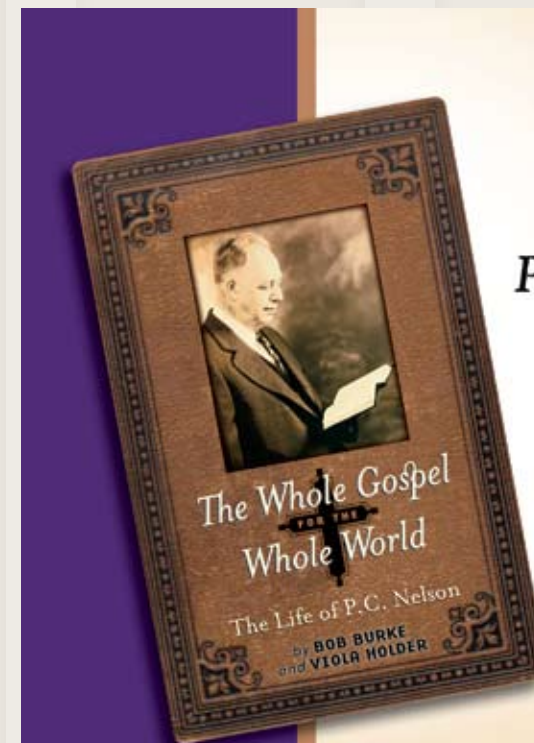
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