

Commentary: Murderer's classroom was prison

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by / Chuck Rupnow . [email](#) Leader-Telegram staff

I interviewed Ryan Beckler in 1995 in the Pierce County Jail, a few days after he was sentenced to 50 years in prison for his part in the double murder of Donald and Kathleen Deiss of rural Ellsworth.

He claimed he had found God and was anxious to begin a prison sentence that "will either make me or break me." He said his newfound faith provided forgiveness from the Lord, a spiritual freedom even if he was not physically free.

I was surprised in November to get a letter from Beckler, saying he wanted an interview so he could publicly express remorse for his actions, including a vow that he would not again seek parole.

I recalled the interview in 1995, in which Beckler gave a detailed account of the murders, his personal history and regret. There was something missing, though, something maybe a 17-year-old doesn't have, a revelation of the untold grief caused by the murders.

He wondered then, and still does, how he and his girlfriend were so headstrong, confused and self-centered that they joined with a man in his early 20s who spoke of armed robbery. They wanted money and saw a way of getting it without thinking of the potential consequences and harm.

Beckler, in the interview published today, talks of human services, school and police officials who tried to detour his criminal path, but he wouldn't listen, saying he couldn't relate. He can now.

I reported about Beckler's case in the mid-1990s and those of the two other suspects in the murders. I've spoken with attorneys and family members on both sides. Standing out, even after all this time, is the brutality, senselessness and multigenerational impact of the murders.

If Beckler is sincere in his efforts to not seek parole and help youthful offenders avoid his fate, and he appears to be, he is to be credited with that. After all, we are what we are today. He admits he fell away from God but has returned. He believes God's forgiveness, every day, is an essential and motivating part of his life.

Forgiveness pardons a debt that is owed, something many people find difficult to do without spiritual assistance.

Beckler is no hero for his change of heart or his willingness to help young offenders. He is being punished for his wrongdoing.

It's interesting what classroom we're in when we learn life-changing lessons. For Beckler, it was in prison. Let's hope others adhere to his message and alter their thinking and actions before they join him there.

Convicted in rural Ellsworth couple's murder, he seeks redemption

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by / Chuck Rupnow .
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OSHKOSH - It's rarely easy trying to atone for your sins. It's far more difficult when that sin was being party to the brutal slaying of two innocent, caring people.

That's the daunting challenge facing Ryan Beckler, sentenced as a teenager in 1995 to 50 years in prison for his involvement in the murders of an elderly Pierce County couple.

Having evolved from concern for himself rather than his victims or their family, Beckler, now 33, says he never again will seek parole.

Beckler, formerly of Prescott, said in an interview with the Leader-Telegram earlier this month that he will not seek an early release for two reasons - a newfound respect for the victims' family's grief, and a belief he has a mission within the criminal justice system.

Beckler, whose mandatory prison release date is a month before his 50th birthday in 2028, emphasizes that he desires youthful offenders to learn from his mistakes - that they would realize the destruction caused by "following the wrong crowd" and criminal activity.

Beckler was 16 when he and his 15-year-old girlfriend went with Arthur Foster to the rural Ellsworth home of Donald Deiss, 69, and his wife, Kathleen, 68, on Dec. 4, 1994, with the intention of robbing them. (They had heard, wrongly, that thousands of dollars were stashed in the house.) The teens entered the home on a pretense of needing to use the telephone because of car trouble.

Foster, now 40, used Beckler's .22-caliber rifle with a homemade silencer to shoot and kill the couple, including shooting Kathleen in the back of the head when she came to the aid of her husband. The trio collected about \$600 and jewelry before driving away in Beckler's truck.

A combination of Beckler's call to police and the girl's discussion at school the next day paved the way for Beckler's conviction on two counts of being party to felony murder and Foster's conviction on two counts of first-degree intentional homicide. Foster would not be eligible for parole until 2050, when he would be 78 years old. The girl was placed in juvenile supervision.

"When I first committed my crime, because my understanding was not right, I was more self-absorbed; it was more about how I felt. It was impersonal to the people I hurt," Beckler said in the interview at Oshkosh Correctional Institution, a medium-security state prison.

"It wasn't just a family I hurt, it was an entire community," he said, adding that he learned the far-reaching and ripple-effect magnitude of the murders through victim-impact meetings and restorative justice programs.

No forgiveness

Beckler said he is not asking for forgiveness, and he is not expecting it.

"I have no right to ask," he said. "All I want to say is I now understand. When I committed my crime, I didn't understand, but now I do.

"I'm trying now to put myself in the shoes of the people who I hurt, those who wouldn't want to see me get out anytime soon. I wouldn't want to see myself get out early because they (the victims' family) don't get an early release from their grief; they don't get an early release from their loss."

Beckler said his main intention of waiving future parole hearings is to "give my victims what I feel they probably would want."

"I feel they want me to do as much time that I can. That's what they said at my sentencing; that no amount of time would be enough. I can at least give them that."

Beckler, who was eligible for parole after 13 years, had parole denied in 2007, 2010 and 2011, and is scheduled for a parole hearing in April, according to state Department of Corrections records.

"In waiving any more parole hearings, I can do a lot of good here, helping inmates come to grips with what they've done," he said. "And I think that's what their family would want, for me to be successful when I leave

here and not hurt anyone else."

Pain still felt

Several Deiss family members were hesitant to discuss Beckler and the emotional pain they continue to endure, but admitted they hope Beckler is sincere and has turned his life around, even though his actions damaged their lives forever.

"Seventeen years after their deaths, Donald and Kathleen Deiss would want nothing less than for Ryan to continue to work hard to do well, follow through with purpose to help youth and adults, and approach each challenge in life with faith in God and in the goodness of people," said Noreen Deiss of Stillwater, Minn., the couple's daughter.

"If Ryan Beckler's life experience before and during prison can succeed in stopping even one family from knowing the loss and pain felt within Donald and Kathleen's community, then with faith in God and faith in justice I feel compelled to do whatever needed to help this happen," she said.

But the family members also questioned Beckler's recollection of the events that took the lives of two caring people. Various records indicate the trio thought no one was home, although the Deisses had lights on and were cleaning up from a Christmas party.

"Time teaches us to live a new kind of normal," said Noreen, 49. "Each holiday, birthday, grandchild graduation, wedding, funeral; each event large or small in everyday life reminds us two very special people are missing so senselessly."

Robbery was motive

Beckler said he and his girlfriend planned to run away, and Foster's idea of robbing the couple was a way to fund their escape. Beckler previously lived a short distance from the Deiss residence and even helped at their farm.

Deiss relatives say the couple would have helped Beckler, as they had aided other young people, if he had only asked. One family member said they killed two generous people.

The girl involved in the murders has met with at least one Deiss relative and given her apology. That girl, never identified by the Leader-Telegram, is married with several children and declined to be interviewed for this report. Her father also declined to be quoted for this story, saying the trauma and sadness of the event never will be extinguished.

'He wants some pity'

Rita and Kevin Baker, who live a short distance from the murder scene, said they are among many who never will forgive Beckler and his accomplices. "Sure, I believe he now realizes the impact, but I don't believe he is sorry; I just think he wants some pity," Rita said. "They knew what they were doing, that they were going to rob and kill people. He can say whatever he wants, but nobody around here will ever believe him." Said her husband, Kevin "Those murders are in the back of your mind all the time, every time somebody comes in the driveway. That's what it's done for people around here; made you feel scared at times when you shouldn't need to."

Beckler, who had a criminal juvenile history and came from a dysfunctional family that neglected him, apologized during his sentencing in July 1995. He now admits he didn't then comprehend the impact of his actions and wondered for years how he ended up with a lengthy prison sentence for murders someone else committed.

Pierce County District Attorney John O'Boyle challenged Beckler during sentencing, saying: "Ryan is going to have to do some soul-searching and pick out which direction he's going to go."

'The choices I made'

Beckler now wants to create videos and give public presentations, largely for adolescent audiences, to provide insight and education to youthful offenders.

"Nobody ever explained to me what 'party to the crime' is and how easily a person can get wrapped up with that crime," he said. "No one ever thoroughly explained what prison entails and what it means to be in prison for decades; that being in prison 17 years of your life will be the same as it was the first day; that you're looked at as a number in here.

"But I'm here because of the choices I made, and I want to tell kids who are headed in the same direction I went that they need to take a look at what they're doing and the consequences they face. Kids need to take advantage of the people and programs out there looking to help them, and not shut those people out, like I did."

Beckler's epiphany came in a prison victim-impact session several years ago when he heard a woman detail how she was raped twice, years apart, and the life-altering impact those crimes had on her.

It was then that he connected the emotional impact of that woman's ordeal with his sense of loss associated with the accidental death of his father when Beckler was 7.

"I realized I had never dealt with the thoughts and feelings I had when my father died, feelings similar to the loss this woman had and the loss the Deiss family had," he said. "I had been emotionally vacant until then."

Wants to reach out

Beckler has been in contact with Kris Miner, executive director of the St. Croix Valley Restorative Justice Program in River Falls, about offering services to help others. While in prison he earned a degree in Braille transcription and hopes to someday produce restorative justice materials for blind victims.

(Restorative justice is a theory of justice that emphasizes repairing the harm caused or revealed by criminal behavior, according to the Centre for Justice and Reconciliation in The Hague, Netherlands. It is best accomplished by including all stakeholders - victims and perpetrators.)

Miner said she was prohibited from discussing any communications she may have had with Beckler, but, in general, said: "Stories of those who have had a significant change of heart can have a significant impact on victims."

Miner emphasized her program is victim-centered and routinely offers life skills sessions in which victims and perpetrators provide accounts and responses to the magnitude of crimes.

Beckler, whose mother died several years ago and has had no contact with his younger brother or other relatives, plans to write a book about his experiences titled, "From Disparity to Empathy, The Tyler R. Story." (Tyler R. would be his pen name.)

Beckler, who has learned barbering and cake decorating skills in prison, mentions in a Feb. 10, 2010, nine-page typed letter to Deiss family members of planning to attend college for a counseling degree when released.

"I can't take the past back, but I can change who I become and change what I can about the future," he said. "I just want kids to know that I became self-absorbed and out of control, which got me here."

If only one child learns from Beckler's mistakes, he would be satisfied.

"I just can't say I'm sorry enough," he said. "You learn you can't take things back in life, so you have to be careful what you do and who you hang out with before you do something stupid like I did."

[HTTP://GARGOYLE.LAW.WISC.EDU/2014/10/22/RESTORING-JUSTICE/](http://GARGOYLE.LAW.WISC.EDU/2014/10/22/RESTORING-JUSTICE/)

“Never in a thousand years would I have ever dreamed I’d be watching my mailbox for the next letter from Ryan Beckler.” — Noreen Deiss

To understand why Noreen Deiss would say this, one need only look back to the evening of December 4, 1994. That was when a sixteen-year-old Beckler, his fifteen-year-old girlfriend, and a twenty-two-year-old man

named Arthur Foster drove to the home of Deiss's parents in rural Ellsworth, Wisconsin, intending to rob them. After gaining entry with a story about car trouble, Foster shot Donald and Kathleen Deiss in the head with Beckler's .22-caliber rifle. The trio then drove off with \$600 in cash, leaving the couple to die. When Noreen Deiss arrived later that night, she found that her family home — the house where her mother had been born and where she herself had grown up, the house that had been in her family for ninety-eight years, and where she had recently helped decorate her parents' Christmas tree — had become a crime scene.

The trauma of that night remains as present to Noreen Deiss today as it was nearly twenty years ago, haunting her in nightmares and visions. In a letter she wrote to Ryan Beckler in 2012, Deiss summed up the consequences of his actions for them both: "You went to prison, and so did I."

That Deiss should now be engaged in regular correspondence with a man she once considered to be a monster — a man who was sentenced to fifty years in prison on two counts of felony murder, and who now intends to become a social worker in order to help others avoid his own mistakes — is the direct result of their mutual engagement with restorative justice. Restorative justice is a victim-centered philosophy that focuses on repairing the harm that crime does to individuals and communities.

There are many ways of practicing restorative justice, but perhaps none is more intense than the kind of victim-offender dialogue that brought Deiss and Beckler together last March. They met in a private room at the Oshkosh Correctional Institution, where Beckler is currently incarcerated. "It took me 6,670 days to get there," Deiss says of the four-hour-long meeting, during which she and Beckler talked and wept. "It's allowed me to live again."

The criminal justice system, says Restorative Justice Program director Jonathan Scharrer, asks three questions: "What law was broken? Who broke that law? And how do we punish them?" The state uses an adversarial court system to seek retribution for the violation of specific codes or statutes, but the victims and survivors of the crimes committed often have little role to play in the process. For example, while Deiss was permitted to make a brief victim-impact statement in court, for the most part, she felt voiceless.

"When people get murdered, it's a crime against the state, not a crime against the victim's family," she says. "In the courtroom, I was looked upon as a member of the community, and as a community member, I needed to keep my mouth shut so it didn't interfere with the judicial process."

She was given no opportunity to confront the defendants, to ask them questions, or to make them understand the impact of their actions on her family and on her parents' community. Deiss's family members must now come to grips with the murders of their loved ones, while Donald and Kathleen's neighbors, who in the past never even thought to lock their doors, feel a twinge of fear whenever they hear a strange car pull up in the driveway.

Restorative justice, on the other hand, looks at crime as a violation of relationships. "What we're asking instead is, who has been harmed?" says Scharrer. "How have they been harmed? And how do we repair that harm?"

Those questions can be asked in a variety of contexts. Some municipalities employ restorative justice circles that bring together victims, offenders, and community members to handle property crimes or reintegrate returning inmates into society, while some school districts use them to address issues such as teasing and bullying.

Scharrer, for example, cut his teeth in restorative justice facilitating circles in Milwaukee public schools when he was a student at Marquette University Law School, where former Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice Janine Geske runs a restorative justice clinic. Some prisons, meanwhile, host victim-impact panels that allow crime victims to share their experiences with inmates, helping offenders to understand how they have affected the lives of others and to develop empathy and a sense of accountability for what they've done.

Proponents of restorative justice contend that such encounters can prevent offenders from reoffending — a contention that is supported by a growing body of evidence from North America, Europe, and elsewhere that shows restorative justice programs drive down recidivism rates.

By intervening early in schools, or in diversion programs that keep offenders out of the criminal justice system in the first place, advocates argue that restorative justice can help head off more serious problems later on.

Scharrer is part of a pilot program in Dane County this fall that will refer offenders aged seventeen to twenty-five who have committed misdemeanors to a restorative justice program rather than to the district attorney's office, keeping their records clean and perhaps preventing them from traveling down the road to prison. Scharrer admits that restorative justice isn't for everyone. But when it works, as it has for Deiss and Beckler, the results can be astonishing.

While incarcerated at Green Bay Correctional Institution, Beckler attended a victim-impact panel led by Geske. Hearing a rape victim describe her experiences sparked an emotional epiphany in Beckler, allowing him to connect the victim's trauma to the pain he felt as a child after losing his father in a snowmobile accident — and also to the pain he later caused the Deiss family.

As a result of his shifting perspective, Beckler wrote a nine-page letter of apology to the Deiss family in 2010. The letter was deposited with the Wisconsin Department of Corrections' Office of Victim Services and Programs (OVSP), but Noreen Deiss learned of its existence only in 2012, when she specifically asked an OVSP staffer if he'd ever received anything from Beckler.

The OVSP does not automatically notify victims about such letters in order to prevent them from being re-traumatized by unwanted contact from offenders. For the same reason, only a victim can initiate a victim-offender dialogue.

By then, Deiss had already met with Beckler's former girlfriend for the purpose of encouraging her to lead a productive life. (She has since become a nurse.)

After reading Beckler's letter and learning of his desire to help others and the progress he had made toward bettering himself in prison, she wanted to do the same for him. She also wanted to thank Beckler for calling the police to confess what he had done — “without him, it would've been an unsolved crime” — and to ask him the many questions she still had about his involvement in her parents' murder.

“It's a very intense process, and people come at it for different reasons,” says Scharrer. Some victims, for example, simply want the opportunity to look the offender in the eye, while others want answers to questions that never came up in court. For their part, offenders may want to apologize or take responsibility for the harm they've caused by answering victims' questions.

As Deiss learned, the process takes time and doesn't happen overnight. From the time Deiss decided to request a meeting, it took well over a year to meet with Beckler. “I had to practice patience,” Deiss says. This is not unusual: according to Scharrer, it can take as long as two years to prepare for a victim-offender dialogue. First, the facilitators must assess the suitability of both the victim and the offender and determine their goals. (The process is completely voluntary for both parties because forcing an offender to participate could produce a meeting that wouldn't be helpful to anyone.)

Next, they must act as facilitators and go-betweens for the participants, ferrying questions between them and exploring all possible answers in order to minimize the possibility of unsettling surprises.

They even walk the victims through everything that will happen on the day of the meeting, making sure that all of their concerns, including such seemingly trivial details as who will enter the room first, are addressed in advance. The goal is to anticipate the needs of the victim as fully as possible so that during the dialogue itself, the facilitators can fade into the background, and the victim and offender can engage in a free-flowing conversation.

Entering Oshkosh prison wasn't easy for Deiss — “I could barely breathe,” she says — but once Beckler joined her, the other people in the room melted away. She didn't even notice the woman taking notes at her side until she was handed twenty-five pages of transcribed dialogue — pages she slept with under her pillow for weeks afterward. The two answered one another's questions. Deiss played Beckler a DVD containing photos of her parents that she'd made as a kind of therapy after their murder. Before they parted, she gave him a hug of forgiveness. “It was one of the best days of my past eighteen years,” she says.

Since then, Deiss and Beckler have continued to communicate by mail, comparing notes on the Bible and catching one another up on what they have been doing to help others. Deiss has been addressing groups of prison inmates through victim-impact panels and advocating for restorative justice at workshops, and Beckler has spoken to visiting groups of troubled teens. Both would like to meet again, and Beckler recently met with Deiss's nephew Bill.

For Deiss, maintaining a relationship with Beckler gives her a way to support him as he seeks to help others. “I have a vested interest in his doing well out here, and preventing this kind of crime and pain from happening to other people,” she says. Her advocacy stems from the same source: speaking at a St. Croix Valley Restorative Justice Program workshop at Wisconsin Indian-head Technical College last March for a wide range of community members (lawyers, judges, educators, human services personnel, police, and corrections officers), Deiss argued that restorative justice offers a means of preventing young people from following Beckler's trajectory. She lobbied her audience to help implement restorative justice in schools and social services programs.

“Each offender in every prison seems to share a common similarity; each one is there because something went wrong, really wrong in their lives as a child,” she told the workshop attendees. “I often wonder, if restorative justice programs existed in Ryan's school when he was growing up, how would his life be different today? How would my life be looking tomorrow?”

By participating in victim-impact panels, Deiss also hopes to reach individual offenders in precisely the same way that a victim once reached Ryan Beckler. There is evidence that she is already succeeding: after speaking to offenders at the St. Croix Correctional Center in New Richmond, Deiss was thanked by eighty-seven inmates. Seeing their handwritten responses to her personal narrative — “I will always think of your story before I do something that could hurt others again”; “you have opened my eyes, and because of you, I am going to change” — has given her hope and more.

“It gives me purpose,” Deiss says. “And it gives some meaning to this whole, entire journey.”