

GET ORGANIZED

A Monthly Column by Grace Bauer – January 2011

Difficult Times



Grace Bauer, a field organizer, joined the Campaign for Youth Justice in 2008. She has worked to unite the parents and allies of children to change laws and practices that result in children being prosecuted and confined as adults.

I last left you all in our November newsletter, with thoughts of how torn apart our holidays can be when one of our children is locked up, away from us and those who love and care for them the most. I told all of you how I hoped that my son would still be with me when the holidays came after spending six lonely years without him. I am happy to say that he was with us on December 25th and January 31st and I enjoyed every minute of his almost child-like joy. You revel in all of their joy and happiness when you are fortunate enough to have those moments. We took family pictures during the summer and not one day goes by that I don't smile at his smile, in those photos which are proudly displayed around my home, kept close in my wallet and whirling by on my screensaver for my computer. Those moments can only be savored, with such delight, by those who have lost precious time with our children. As with so much about the pain families and loved ones can only know, we take what we can before it is taken from us, yet again.

Many of you, as families, will understand my decision to write this article and to go public with what for many of us has been our own private hell. You are forced to keep telling the story, reliving your own pain and then to see the hurt, disappointment and pity of others as they hear the horribly predictable yet somehow unanticipated story unfold.

Here is the story as it unfolded on January 10th.

I wake up on Monday morning to find his bed empty, which wasn't usual but not unheard of either. I immediately check my phone to see if I have missed a call or text. When I don't find anything, I make the call and he picks up. Whew! Everything is O.K.! Not in jail, not hurt, I can breathe again!

He picks his sister, Carrie, up for school and all is well. He will be looking into another job

with more hours and better pay later in the day. "Rough morning, but all is well". Relief is welcome and I can go to work". And work I do, because the criminal justice system takes no holiday breaks and the same outrageous indifference, abuse and neglect exist today, just as they did on December 17th when we left for a much needed break from the sadness and despair we see every day.

At 3:00, I get a text from Carrie to ask if I heard from Corey. "No", I text back. I immediately try to call and get his voice mail. I leave my first message, "Please call." Carrie and I text and call him for an hour and we get nothing. By 4:30, in our hearts, both she and I know he isn't just sleeping, something is wrong; he doesn't just forget his sister. We keep trying but already the two of us, in separate cities, are beginning to feel the dread and are trying to keep ourselves from full-blown panic. But we know. The other shoe hasn't fallen just yet, but as we have known for the last year, it's coming and it's very close now.

I take the train home and try to convince myself that "*I am over reacting,*" maybe "*he is asleep*" or maybe "*he lost his phone*" and Carrie hopes with all she has, that he hasn't "*finally crossed the wrong people and may be laying hurt or shot dead somewhere*". Nothing to show proof yet, not one thing but our years of hard experience, but we know. Yet, we hope against that experience because we can't give up on him just yet.

At 6:30, he calls from a number I don't recognize.

"Are you O.K.?" I say. I know the answer is surely "no" but I ask and hope against all I have felt for the last three hours and pray that he says "yes". But he doesn't. He says "Momma, I'm sorry". In the next 30 seconds, I accept many things, he is in jail, things are bad, he is on probation and that means it is worse, but I also hold onto hope. It is what we do as mothers, we hold onto hope until it snatched away completely. "Where are you?" I ask. He doesn't know but he is in a jail in one county or another. Another few things fly through my mind, "*drug charges, bail, short sentence, I can handle this.*"

The shoe is falling... "What's the (the...meaning one) charge?" He says, in a voice slow and so far away, that only a mother who has been on the receiving end of these calls for the last decade can comprehend, "Three counts of armed robbery and possession of a handgun by a convicted felon." Though I am on the street, walking my dogs, steeling myself for the shoe, I never see this coming. My knees just give out and there on the street, tangled in the dog leashes, my heart breaks. My breath just stops and my heart is now slamming in my chest, "*No this can't be right because my son would never pick up a gun and threaten another person, some better explanation is coming*".

Five days have come and gone and there is still nothing better and absolutely no understanding. This is what we know today. On Monday morning, after Corey dropped Carrie off at school, he went to Wal-Mart and purchased a Daisy Pellet Gun and in broad daylight robbed the pizza place where he had been working. An employee of the business saw him and his friend enter the restaurant from the rear entrance with masks on and called 911. Corey and his friend then told the three employees to get down on the floor and turn over all the money, which they did. They walked out and headed to my car parked a little

ways down the alley. The witness followed them on foot, while reporting their location to the 911 operator. The witness then returned to his car and followed them until they pulled over a few blocks away to take off their masks and clothes. The police pulled in right behind them. Corey immediately climbed out of the car and lay down on the ground. The cash and gun were in plain sight on the driver's seat. Corey is 24 and his friend Courtney, 20. Now both are facing long term sentences. It is very dark.

Everyone, that cares enough to ask, wants to know what he is saying about this senseless act. What he says doesn't make much sense to most but as his mother, having seen what he has faced and from where; I think I understand some of it. His first thoughts go to those he feels counts on him the most, Carrie and I. He wants us to know that he knows we believed in him and how sorry he is. Secondly, he wants to know what my partner thinks about him and wants him to know how sorry he is that he caused problems for him. Thirdly, he wants whatever help or assistance we can bring to bear on this, not to help him because in his words "he's gone and it's too late" but to help Courtney, his friend. You see, for the last few months Corey took Courtney under his wing and has been trying to help him get his birth certificate and his social security card so he could get his driver's license and maybe find a job. They have been exploring going to school together, one needing what strengths the other had, to move forward and search for a better life. Between the two of them, having just enough to make an almost whole person, struggling to find the way to fit the pieces together, but on this morning one of the pieces gave up and convinced the other to follow. In these moments, I cry the hardest, the good in him is lost; I want to hang up because I can't stand to hear where his heart and mind are at. I want to go to sleep and not wake up until the pain passes. I want to be somewhere else, someone else, anything but this. I have known this pain before, I have known this desperation but somehow this seems worse. He has crossed a line, a line that I hadn't envisioned. The other shoe has fallen and I am not sure I can get through this. Still two more family members wait in the dark as I gather the courage to report on this latest tragedy.

As Corey's grandfather lies dying in Louisiana I must now tell his father and sister. It seems unfair to lay yet another burden at their feet but I know time will not change this. His sister, Robyn, just cries uncontrollably for almost an hour before she can to gain control of her emotions. Robyn has tried for many years to be a good sister and help her brother, but she also feels a strong sense of anger that he continues to betray her love and care. Only slightly older than him, she hasn't yet gained the understanding of where he has been and how it can be to live with such shame and disappointment in yourself. His Father says he doesn't know what to say. He has to tend to his father and he just can't take this in at this moment. I hang up, not knowing what else to say, myself. My heart is broken in a way that I haven't yet known. Tears wash me to sleep.

I don't want it but daylight comes and life must go on. I force my body to rise and perform daily functions, but all the while my heart doesn't want to face a day without my son. I move through my day brushing against his things and feeling intense jolts of pain at every turn. I see his Sprite and orange juice in the refrigerator, his hair gel in the bathroom, his jacket thrown haphazardly on his bed, his towel in the bathroom, and his work boots by the front door and I cry out to no one, "Why?" Carrie cries in brief but intense bouts when she realizes time and again that he isn't here to take her to school, hang out with her, or do any

of the other things they have done together. On the first morning she tells me she thought for a moment maybe all this had been a bad dream and she will go into his room and find him there asleep. She cries and I hold her and when she is at school I lay down on his bed and cry for all of us.

Someday soon, Corey will stand before a judge here in the state of Maryland and he will stand alone. That thought brings sadness and anger. "He shouldn't be alone." Corey made the poor decisions that morning but it feels unreasonable to me that the failures of the adults in charge of his care don't stand beside him. There are plenty of us. The Calcasieu Parish Police Jury from the state of Louisiana that allowed their children to be sent away to brutal and inhumane state facilities because they didn't understand community based alternatives were a better choice for kids. The probation officer who said, "He is better off with the state, we have no more resources here." Judge Ezell, surely he must have known what he was sending this child to face. What about the state probation officers? What of the Department of Corrections? None of the others will stand with him on that day to be accountable for the damage they inflicted; only he will be held accountable for his wrong.

That day we will stand with him but when they lead him away, he will go alone to begin doing his time and we will go someplace else but we, too, will begin doing our time.