

# WHEN GUN VIOLENCE HITS HOME: A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE

◆ Rose Piacentino ◆

*W*e all recognize that violence has devastating social and psychological consequences.

*While the theme of this issue of the "OASW Newsmagazine" focuses on violence related to youth, we are making an exception in publishing the following article written by social worker, Rose Piacentino. This article highlights not only the trauma experienced by Louise Russo (who was an innocent bystander in a random shooting) and her family, but also the social work perspective and the inspiring advocacy role that her sister, Rose, took to address the gaps in the service delivery and criminal justice systems for victims of violent crime.*

As social workers, we are in the profession of offering hope and help to those in need. Through a hideous set of circumstances, I found myself on the receiving end of social work intervention. A terrible tragedy occurred in my immediate family. A single bullet shattered my sister Louise's spine and subsequently altered her life forever. That same bullet tore into our entire family, plunging us into an abyss of pain, darkness, and confusion and destroying the illusion of safety my family and I had held so dear.

On the night of Wednesday, April 21, 2004, Louise Russo became the victim of a heinous random shooting as she stood in a Toronto sandwich shop. She had walked in only 30 seconds earlier. Her youngest daughter, who had just turned 15, was just feet away from her mother. Within hours, we were informed that Louise suffered a T3 complete spinal cord injury. Delicately, the surgeon told us that there was no chance of Louise ever walking again, and she would live her life with a high-level paraplegia and with multiple complexities.

The nightmare had just started and, to this day, has not abated. Trauma was not foreign to me, as I was a social

worker in a trauma unit. Devastating sudden injuries dominated our patient population, but this was different. Trauma had hit home. We were now the victims of gun violence with extraordinary consequences. Our family looked at my husband and I for guidance, answers and reassurance. After all, he is a family physician and I, a trauma social worker. Yet we felt totally lost and helpless. Looking back, I'm not quite sure what we said or did — it is pretty much a blur. We had never encountered such a complex and traumatic personal experience. We were shocked and overwhelmed. Not only was Louise in grave condition, but there were numerous other issues at hand — her middle child has severe physical and cognitive limitations; we had a traumatized 15-year-old; as well as a shocked husband and a 19-year-old son.

Soon the intense media attention unfolded. Her story was repeatedly told both locally and nationally. All forms of media interviewed me. Although I had no media experience, I felt equipped and compelled as both a victim and as a social worker to share the overwhelming impact and never-ending uncertainties of crime to the public. Louise could have been anyone. I believe my social work profession provided me with a strong foundation, which helped carry me through the numerous questions and comments. Soon hundreds of notes and cards came pouring in from complete strangers. The support was overwhelming and heartfelt. It slightly alleviated some of the pain. Compared to the summer of 2005, Louise's random shooting was still seldom heard of to Canadians. The story introduced different components and effects of crime. Her name remains to be highly recognized in our city.

Eighteen months have passed, and the challenges continue. Issues and obstacles do not disappear. They simply evolve. The initial crisis and ICU phase differ from the acute hospital stay. In-patient



ROSE PIACENTINO

rehabilitation introduces new complexities and notions. Mastering new techniques to accomplish activities of daily living takes time, energy and a lot of hard work. Eventually, the reality of the daily restrictions strikes like a ton of bricks. Reintegrating into one's home and community is frustrating and anxiety-provoking. Change of roles and expectations deeply impact each individual. Family members are faced with their own mental, emotional and physical concerns.

Louise's special needs daughter, Jenna, was forced away from her home within hours of the shooting. She requires 24-hour assistance and her mother had been her primary caregiver. Reality hits hard and fast. Victims suffer rainstorms and raindrops each and everyday. Life is forever altered. Each stage encounters new and different challenges. Yet, fear, grief, anxiety and pain never seem to escape the victims left behind. Jenna returns home in August 2005 after 16 months; finally, the family unit reunites.

Diverse components and effects of crime add to ongoing struggles. Unlike car insurance claims, our social system does not provide case management for catas-

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trophic cases. Victims are not supported by a consistent advocate who can provide guidance, resource counselling, direction and support. At best, it is "choppy". Linked professionals are restricted within their scope of practice, workload or agency mandate. Victims become their own case managers. Navigating the system is not only difficult, but also intimidating — an overwhelming and complex role to undertake when coupled with the multiple losses and challenges already faced with as a victim. These losses must never be underestimated; they are profound.

Systemic challenges and basic physical or cognitive problems add grief to reestablishing oneself in the community. Victims are lost and forgotten. Whether it is the gaps in health care treatment, inadequate government compensation or lack of legal rights within our crimi-


nal justice system, victims are left to fend for themselves. In addition to the tremendous, long-term emotional burden, they find themselves having to justify need. They are scrutinized and questioned over and over again. It is perplexing and incomprehensible as to why victims are required to disclose detailed personal information in order to quantify eligibility. After all, the need is a direct result to injuries suffered from the criminal act. Again, we feel repeatedly victimized.

Still, the financial toll is one of the only measurable results of the crime. It is much more an issue than the general public is aware. Whether victims sustain serious physical or cognitive deficits, each require either costly home/vehicle modifications, equipment, diverse therapy or additional care-giving support, much of which is non-OHIP/insurance covered or exceeds special funding programs. It is important to take into consideration not only the financial cost, but also the incredible loss of income. The unimaginable strain adds to the stress and feelings of hopelessness and helplessness.

Hence, the birth of Into the Light Foundation — a

foundation established in honour of Louise Russo, whose first mandate is to help bridge the gap between government support and the cost of crime. As the Foundation grows, we hope to also provide resource information to victims and preventative seminars to our youth. Again, I feel the core of social work is reflected by our enabling, educating and empowering all those with whom we connect through the Foundation.

To conclude, my goal in writing from a victim's perspective is to share the myriad of struggles, touch on the devastating aftermath of crime, and heighten the awareness of the never-ending plight of victims. Our entire family has been profoundly impacted by this act of crime and the ripple effect is immense, truly beyond comprehension. As a social worker, I hope this unique perspective reinforces the importance of our profession, the instrumental impact we have on our clients, and the continuous need to advocate for and support those who cannot always fight for themselves.

*Rose Piacentino, BA, BSW, RSW, had worked, until recently, in the Trauma/Neurosurgery Unit at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto for five years. She is currently working in the Medical/Surgical Intensive Care Unit. Rose is a spokesperson for Into The Light Foundation ([www.intothelight.ca](http://www.intothelight.ca)), and is actively involved in various projects supporting victims of crime.* 

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