

My resolve disappeared a few days later, when I actually stood outside the gates of Johnston Prison. The proximity of convicted criminals, the high walls, the guards with guns all terrified me. Then I was led inside. I caught sight of the prisoners. The men who attacked me could be here, or guys just as bad! I froze in my tracks. I pressed my face against the cold, hard stone wall and squeezed my eyes shut. *Lord, I'm not strong enough to do this!* I took a deep breath, and was filled with a sense of awesome calm. *Yes you are, Connie.*

God was standing beside me in the corridor, as he always had, just waiting for me to lean on him.

That day I met with a group of about a dozen inmates. "I could be your

mother or your sister," I began. They were certainly a rough-looking bunch, tattooed and scarred, but as I told them what had happened to me I saw something I'd never expected: There was sympathy in every eye. Some of the men even cried. When I was finished, many of them came up to shake my hand and thank me for coming. I hadn't felt that strong in years.

I still fight against post-traumatic stress and depression. Even now, 12 years after that horrible night, I visit my counselor regularly. I know I'll carry the memories and scars of what happened forever, but I won't let it end my life. I know that I don't have to live trapped in a little room either. Not when God is there to open the door and set me free, and life is waiting outside.

Guideposts

TRUE STORIES OF HOPE
AND INSPIRATION

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SHE COULD NOT ESCAPE THE HORROR
OF THAT NIGHT. SOMETIMES SHE
WISHED HER LIFE HAD ENDED TOO.

BY CONNIE HILTON
TYLER, TEXAS



DETERMINED: "I couldn't let what happened to me destroy the rest of my life."

Aftermath

TRADING AN APARTMENT IN TYLER, TEXAS, FOR A LITTLE HOUSE IN THE country was a dream come true for my husband, George, and me. Our children were married or living away from home. An empty nest meant we could spend our free time doing the things we loved: fish, camp, go for long walks in the woods, or just kick back on the porch and watch the seasons change. Life was good.

But on the night of September 16, 1990, that life was shattered. I stepped out of the bathroom and saw a man standing in our hallway with a shotgun. I screamed, a scream I will never forget. George came running from the bedroom; he was shot and killed. The next hour was a living nightmare. The attackers — there were three of them — beat me until I couldn't move. Then one raped me while the others helped themselves to our possessions. I was blindfolded, tied up and left for dead.

In the days and weeks that followed I wished I *had* died. After I was released from the hospital I couldn't face living in that house. I stayed with my parents in town. At first I felt numb, frozen in that instant before screaming in the hallway, unable to confront what had happened. I replayed the events in my mind, as if I were watching a horror movie. I tortured myself with questions and accusations. *Why did this happen? Was it my fault? If I hadn't screamed, would George still be alive?*

Friends and family tried to comfort me,

Connie Hilton is Northeast Texas Regional Coordinator for Bridges To Life, the victims program founded by John Sage in 1998. Bridges to Life has been adopted in seven Texas prisons. "The program lets inmates meet victims so they can see the effects of their crime," Connie tells us. "Normally about forty percent of the released inmates return to prison. But our recidivism rate is only ten percent." Connie also urges anyone who's experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder not to give up. "It's horrible because you can't do anything for yourself," Connie says. "But you have to turn your pain into something positive. Find a program that will help you grow by confronting your past. Don't give in to fear." (See Bridges To Life website: www.bridgestolife.org for John's own story from Guidepost's August 2000 issue and further information on Bridges To Life).

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but they took my attack hard, especially my father. He had always tried his best to take care of us, and he'd loved George like a son. I withdrew from him—from everyone—burying my darkest thoughts. Why did I feel this shame? Why was I pushing my loved ones away?

Night after night I sat up alone in my bed, eyes fixed on the door, waiting for it to be kicked in by some evil attacker. *If this is what my life is now, then I'd rather be dead. Lord, why did you let me live?* In the past, I had always felt God's presence in my daily life, but now it seemed there was no answer. I had lost my husband, the man who filled my world with love, and I couldn't think of a reason to live without him.

The police arrested one of the men who had attacked me, but the other two remained at large, intensifying my feeling of vulnerability. I was scared to leave the house, scared to visit the doctor or go to court to testify against the man they apprehended. At night I was too scared to shut my eyes and sleep, terrified of the nightmares, or reliving that night again and again. I slept with my back against the door.

My savings disappeared into legal and hospital bills. I lost my job, then the house. Even the most basic aspects of daily life, like bathing or eating, became overwhelming, impossible tasks. I barely left my parents' house, barely left my bed, retreating deeper and deeper into myself and sinking further each day into an abyss of depression. I became so weak that eventually my sister, Cindy, had to spoon-feed me.

"You need more help than I can give," my doctor said, and ordered me to a counselor who specialized in something called post-traumatic stress disorder. She prescribed some medication, and we began to meet three times a week. At first our sessions didn't seem to make an impact,



FACE-TO-FACE: Connie talks with inmates about how their crimes affect others.

as if I was just running around in circles. I was living in such a fog that I often forgot what we had talked about as soon as I left her office. But little by little I began to open up to her in a way I couldn't to anyone else. "You can't change what's happened, Connie," she said during a session one day. "But that doesn't mean you have to let it destroy your life. If you do that, then the criminals have won. You can remain stuck where you are or you can start fighting back. It won't be easy, but the alternative is harder, and it will end tragically."

She's right, I thought later. *Hasn't there been enough tragedy?* I felt something rippling inside me. Not exactly anger, but definitely something cutting through my despair. Then the thought came to me: *I'm tired of being a victim. That's letting them win too.*

From that day, little by little, I was able to think about the possibility of a future. I tried to do the simple things in life, like eating and sleeping regularly, taking one

day at a time. Gradually the fog in my head began to clear.

I followed the court proceedings against my attacker closely, but the more I dealt with the legal system, the more I felt that crime victims weren't getting enough support. I complained about this to my sister Cindy.

"Well, why don't you do something?" she asked. "You never were one to take things sitting down." *No, I wasn't*, I thought. *And I'm still not.*

With Cindy's help, I put together an awareness package on victims' rights. In it I told my story for the first time, and in doing that I gained a powerful sense of release, as if by facing my ordeal I was able to let go of it. Then I took action. I sent out hundreds of my packages, to senators, journalists, even the President. Maybe I could help other people like me.

I moved in with two close friends, George and Jean Conner, who had a spare room in their house in Garland, Texas. They helped me get a job at a credit union

there. Life started to seem normal again. But there was still something broken inside me. The slightest thing—a change in the weather, a headline in the paper, an unfamiliar man in the doorway at work—could make me break down. Emotionally, I'd go right back to that terrible night.

Something was missing. Faith. Could I trust God again? I knew it was up to me, not Him. Without faith, there would only be despair and fear, that abyss from which I'd nearly been unable to turn away. But by then I had learned to reach out for support when I needed it.

I began to attend church again with George and Jean. We went to First Baptist in Garland. Standing in the packed sanctuary on Sunday morning, adding my own voice to the familiar hymns, I felt part of a caring community again. I found comfort and healing in the minister's sermons and in the words of the Bible. And I began to feel the Lord's presence again. *I was here all the time*, he seemed to whisper to my heart. *You were never without me, Connie.*

Six years passed since the attack. I had moved to a new town, and made a lot of new friends through my church and my work with victims' rights. In 1999 I met John Sage, who founded an organization called Bridges To Life. The group brought victims of violent crime into Texas prisons to work with inmates. "I think you'd be a great representative for us, Connie," he'd said after I told him my story. "How about giving it a try?"

Go into a prison? I thought. *Is he crazy?* Memories of that night flashed in my mind. As the old terror squeezed in around me, I remembered what my counselor had said: "You can remain stuck where you are or you can start fighting back." Maybe fighting back involved reaching out?

"All right," I said, "I'll do it."