

Sisters ‘Take Back the Site’

The losses are heartbreaking.

Drug-related and drive-by shootings. Gang warfare that ends in murder. Women beaten or stabbed to death by their partners. A 3-year-old dying in a fire set by her father.

Three communities of sisters in Erie, Pennsylvania, do not let those deaths pass unnoticed. For each murder – there have been 110 since 1999 – they organize vigils to pray for the victims, their families and all who are involved, and to reclaim the place where violence occurred.

They call it Take Back the Site.

Spurred by tragedy

The brutal murder of a 5-year-old whose body was found in a dumpster moved the sisters to organize the first vigil.

“I think that they’re reminders to ourselves and a witness to the entire community of the dignity and sacredness of every life,” said Sister Anne McCarthy of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie.

She also is the coordinator of the Erie presence of the nationwide Benedictines For Peace. Sister Marlene Bertke was on its steering committee when Sister Mary Lou Kownacki asked their community to respond to the girl’s tragic death. She and Sister Mary Miller knew the young victim from her coming into the soup kitchen with her mother.

About 20 Benedictine sisters attended that first vigil in November 1999. Then there were more, each one growing as people came to share the mission to bring peace to where there was violence. The Sisters of St. Joseph of Northwestern Pennsylvania and the Sisters of Mercy of New York and

Pennsylvania came aboard, and the three communities rotate organizing the vigils. They also expanded to include incidents in Millcreek Township that surrounds the city of Erie.

“One of us will go to the funeral home to make initial contact with the family,” Sister McCarthy said. “We follow up with the family later and let them know about the prayer service that we hold a couple of weeks or a month after the murder happened.”

The families usually want to participate, and if they ask that the vigil be private, the sisters will honor their request. Otherwise, the vigil is announced to the news media and by flyers left at homes around the neighborhood in question. Sometimes a vigil is delayed pending investigation to rule out suicide or causes of death that weren't the result of a homicide.

‘I could feel their pain’

The ecumenical services begin at 5:15 p.m. and are over at 5:30. There are Scripture readings, words about the victim and words of comfort to the family. The prayers are for the deceased and family and for the perpetrator's family because their lives, too, are changed. There are also prayers for the person who committed the murder.

Ripples of Accompaniment

Shequel Overton, 29, attended two vigils just a year apart – in December 2013 and December 2014. Both were for her cousins who died in shootings.

“It was a sad time, but we were appreciative of the vigils,” she told Our Sunday Visitor. “The sisters prayed, and I felt it was something nice that was being done.”

As a business administration student in 2017, she had to come up with a capstone project that would give back to the community.

“I thought back to the vigils and remembered how it was for me and my family,” she said. “I wanted to give back then, but I didn’t know how.”

She came up with a project that she calls Transitioning Through Mourning. Now she attends the vigils with “comfort baskets” filled with something to remind families that someone thought of them.

“I might fill them with canned goods, fresh bread, a dessert, flowers or a plant that can be replanted,” Overton said. “I also give them a sympathy card with a prayer card inside, and a handkerchief with the project’s initials, TTM.”

It makes her feel like there’s something she can do in those tragic situations, she said, “for families just like mine.”

“When I go to see the family, I talk to them about wanting to have this end,” Sister of Mercy Natalie Rossi said. “I tell them I know they can have an awful lot of anger, but we’re here to pray for not only their loved one, but we are also praying for the person who did it so that it won’t happen again.”

Prayers are proclaimed to bless the site that might be a street corner or a parking lot or, in one case, in front of a bar. That time, Sister Rossi was asked to bless the inside of the tavern.

“I was a little concerned,” she said. “There were people inside, and I didn’t want to intrude. But someone asked, ‘Will you bless me?’ and other people in the bar wanted blessings,

too. It was a wonderful experience that they were open to receiving blessings.”

Some vigils are held outside the homes where victims were murdered. Those locations make healing more difficult because the survivors still have to live there.

In addition to a public outdoor vigil in August, the sisters privately blessed the home of a mother whose 20-year-old daughter was stabbed to death in her bedroom. Her boyfriend was charged with the murder.

“That was difficult because you could see the pain in the eyes of the mom who had just lost her child,” said Betsy Wiest, social justice coordinator for the Sisters of St. Joseph. “We were standing in the room where this happened, and I could feel that pain.”

Benedictine Sister Mary Ellen Plumb, who’s been involved since the beginning, is a grief counselor and hospice chaplain.

“A Benedictine vocation is a vocation of peace, and non-violence has been part of my life as a community member,” she said. “The vigils to me are one more way that we can stand for non-violence in a very personal and particular way.”

She feels moved by the families who seek healing after experiencing such tragic losses.

“The vigils move beyond what the site is to something sacred,” she said. “In this person’s name we are claiming this space back for non-violence. We claim this place for peace.”

Maryann Gogniat Eidemiller writes from Pennsylvania.