THe woman in the front row of the mini-bus, who we’ll call Penny (for legal reasons), is heading to Woodford Correctional Centre, about 100km north of Brisbane, to tell six male prisoners how it felt to be gang raped two decades ago. In her late thirties, she has done this twice before today and will do it five more times before the year’s out. The first time she went in, escorted by security through five gates and two holding bays, she had a conversation with one of the six prisoners, a man named Scott.

Scott was perplexed by her presence. “I can’t believe you would come here like this,” he said. He scratched his head. “To talk to us prisoners?” he went on. “I mean, you don’t have to do this.”

In the second row of the mini-bus, Lyn Smith, in her early forties, will soon tell the same six prisoners about the ripple effect of being held up at knifepoint while working behind the counter in a petrol station. She will speak of the trauma caused by the incident, the flashbacks, how her nervous system shut down for eight months, reducing a once-vital mother of two to a shaking, wheelchair-bound mess of fear and paranoia.

It’s 8.30am on a Monday. The white mini-bus passes through suburban northern Brisbane.

In the third row, 58-year-old Ross Thompson looks out on the Queenslander houses in the backstreets of Kedron. Ross will tell the prisoners about his son Michael, a big-hearted, selfless 30-year-old community education worker who in 2005 fell victim to an inexplicably brutal murder at his flat in Toowoomba, west of Brisbane. It’s uncertain exactly how much of his story Ross will share with the prisoners: how his son’s neck was twisted from side to side, how his head was struck repeatedly with a metal bar, his face battered with a hammer, the hammer’s claw used to gouge out his right eye, how a metal bar was forced into Michael’s mouth, then driven out the side of his face.

Sitting beside Ross, I’m as perplexed as the prisoner Scott was when he saw Penny for the first time. Ross doesn’t have to do this. He’s a father with every reason in the world to hate, to feel nothing but enmity for criminals – his son...
It’s a faith-based project, but it’s not preachy. "It’s easy to find a crime victim – almost one in 20 of our clients are ex-offenders. If I just save one life, then that’s one less person to worry about," Penny said. "I don’t even know who's on the inside, it’s that one less person to worry about." Other people have had similar reactions. "I haven’t had one successful relationship in my whole life, because of what happened. That’s why I just wanted to disappear. I didn’t want to exist anymore. I didn’t want to be here anymore," Scott told her. Howard, a trained mediator, takes the group through a series of carefully planned encounter sessions which give both victims and prisoners the chance to reflect on their experience of crime in a fresh way. The project has been running in the West Australian prison system since 2005. There have been no definitive studies yet made of the project’s impact but many of the more than 100 prisoner graduates from the WA project wrote, in letters that were compiled in a booklet by Project coordinator Michael Cockrham, that they had experienced a personal transformation as the course unfolded. In 2007 in Britain, Margaret Wilson conducted research for her master’s degree that measured the one-year reoffending rate for 62 Sycamore Tree participants. She found a reconviction rate of 32.2 per cent compared to the national reoffending rate after one year of 46 per cent. In Texas, a study of a similar restorative justice prison project showed reconviction rates dropped from 51 per cent to 17 per cent. "You look at what effect a crime has on the community and you say, ‘How do we repair it?’ We’re not going to be repaired by excluding the community and letting the community suffer. We’re asking the community to come in and help heal their lives." Howard, a trained mediator, takes the group through a series of carefully planned encounter sessions which give both victims and prisoners the chance to reflect on their experience of crime in a fresh way. The community doesn't recognize the victim, nor understand what they're going through. Not least because the victim is dependent. They might start connecting with things that we've got because there's no support. Penny, who is married to a fellow lawyer and has now spread to 25 countries. Howard casts an admiring eye over his three prisoner graduates – Penny, Lyn and Ross – all looking out the windows of the mini-bus, putting a brave face on and making other people laugh. "His father abused him up, putting a brave face on and making other people laugh," Penny says. "He told me I looked like a country person," Scott told her. "I was sweating. You're embarrassed. You're having a personal struggle. A lot of stuff. No touching. I'm the type of person who will shake your hand, give you a hug." Scott told her he struggled academically. "I've got a boyfriend. It's been going for me for three hours. I haven't told him yet [about the rape]." Howard invites me to fill the spare seat next to her at the front of the mini-bus. "It wasn't the upfront contact and overwhelming fragility of the victims. To witness their emotional state and then the damage the actions have done was really first-hand. Two precious people in our group had to endure a lifetime sentencing of a lifetime sentence. So it's hard not to notice what had been taken away. (In cases we can bring some things to light and try to help them guide away from stuff I don't even know that's inside him. "I'm not going to ask him. I'm going to wait until he tells me. I just think it's better for him to want to say it to me, rather than force him to tell me." "What he told me was the worst part which I was supposed to know. It was just not acceptable for me to be there."

If I just save one life, then that’s one less person that heartache.

Yet back and again, military post to post. “It’s a lot like me in the way that he covers up a lot of his emotions by laughter.” Penny says. “He finds it easier to deal with life by covering it up, putting a brave face on and making other people laugh. Because his father abused him up, putting a brave face on and making other people laugh.” Howard’s claim that he remains confused and has pondered the same thing for two decades. "If I just save one life, then that’s one less person to worry about. Scott told her he struggled academically. "We must be street-smart, then?" Penny says. "He’s been going for me for three hours. I haven't told him yet [about the rape]." Howard casts an admiring eye over his three prisoner graduates – Penny, Lyn and Ross – all looking out the windows of the mini-bus, putting a brave face on and making other people laugh. "His father abused him up, putting a brave face on and making other people laugh," Penny says. "He told me I looked like a country person," Scott told her. "I was sweating. You're embarrassed. You're having a personal struggle. A lot of stuff. No touching. I'm the type of person who will shake your hand, give you a hug." Scott told her he struggled academically. "I've got a boyfriend. It's been going for me for three hours. I haven't told him yet [about the rape]." Howard invites me to fill the spare seat next to her at the front of the mini-bus. "It wasn't the upfront contact and overwhelming fragility of the victims. To witness their emotional state and then the damage the actions have done was really first-hand. Two precious people in our group had to endure a lifetime sentencing of a lifetime sentence. So it's hard not to notice what had been taken away. (In cases we can bring some things to light and try to help them guide away from stuff I don't even know that's inside him. "I'm not going to ask him. I'm going to wait until he tells me. I just think it's better for him to want to say it to me, rather than force him to tell me." "What he told me was the worst part which I was supposed to know. It was just not acceptable for me to be there."

If I just save one life, then that’s one less person that heartache.
committing suicide a few years ago,” she says. “Just from the effects and the build-up of everything.” She shakes her head. “All starting from that one incident [at the petrol station].” She grips a handbag on her lap. “How many people in there might have held someone up to get a quick fix and not thought anything of it?” she says. “That little five-minute moment in their life has a lifetime effect on the victim.”

Penny leans over the back of her seat, nodding with Lyn. “You go out anywhere and anything can trigger the incident again,” Lyn says. “I couldn’t go into a service station for years.”

Lyn writes poetry to help channel her trauma – the perpetrator of the crime against her has never been found. The poems speak about her helplessness during the eight months her body shut down. They speak about the fear her children, four and eight at the time, felt through her. She speaks of being emotionally distanced from friends, family and her husband of 20 years.

Lyn looks at the gates of the prison. “It’s about them understanding,” she says. “I’ve always wanted prisoners to understand what they’ve done.” The van pulls up outside the square, brown-brick administration fortress with tinted windows that stands in front of the prison gates. Howard meets an officer to discuss entry of the volunteers. Journalists aren’t legally allowed beyond the gates but, sitting in the van, Prison Fellowship Queensland’s state executive director David Way describes the setting for the Sycamore Tree meeting: “A Besser Block building where the chapel is with heavy security doors and bars. Industrial carpet flooring. Murals painted by inmates. Tiled artworks by inmates. Country scenes with trees, birds, kookaburras.”

Ross sits quietly. He’s still finding it hard to comprehend how life brought him to right here, right now. “If you asked me five years ago would I be on a bus going to Woodford jail to see some inmates …” He trails off, shaking his head.

Three months after the death of Michael, Ross and his wife, Margaret, lost their youngest son, 21-year-old Johnny, in a car accident. They have one surviving adult son, Nathan. “I’ve lost two children,” Ross says. “My second one I count as part of the first. And I think, ‘Why!’”

Ross, former manager of a Darling Downs egg farm, is now general manager of the Queensland Homicide Victims’ Support Group. Several months ago, Way spoke to the group about the benefits they might get from the Sycamore Tree Project. “Some of the members were not impressed,” says Ross. “There’s a lot of anger there. But there were also members who welcomed him.”

He takes a deep breath. The journey here has got him thinking deeply about his son, the man who got him to these prison gates.

“Personally, you lose your way when you’re affected by trauma,” he says. “I lost my way a little. My wife is still not fully …” He searches for a word. “ … well … she’s hospitalised three or four times a year because of the incident and she’s very dependent on drugs just to keep her sane.” He shakes his head. “If I can get to just one of these guys and get them back on the straight and narrow and educate them within the system,” he says. “I just want to save one life. That’s what I want to do.

“If nothing else goes anywhere, if I just save one life, then that’s better than where I was before. And I’ll have saved one family that heartache. That’s what it’s all about. We hurt so much. I don’t want people to hurt like we do.”

Howard pokes his head back into the van. “All right, everybody ready?” he says.

The three volunteers nod their heads enthusiastically, exit the van. At the prison entrance they are checked by security and then, one by one, they disappear through a doorway, gone to be guests with men who are sinners.