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## The tree represents restorative justice, not retributive. It starts with the people directly involved in a crime – victims, offenders, and their families.

Story Trent Dalton Photography David Kelly

**T**he 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 pack 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 ►

was killed by three teenagers, one of whom was released from jail last year after serving five years. But here he is, on his way to Woodford Correctional Centre about to take his place beneath the Sycamore Tree.

“And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, ‘He has gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner.’”  
– Luke, Chapter 19

In the seat beside Lyn sits Martin Howard, the Queensland coordinator of the Sycamore Tree Project. He smiles at something Penny is saying, nodding his head. And the smile lingers.

“There’s no actual tree in the Sycamore Tree Project,” Howard had told me almost a year ago at a Parliament House art auction for Prison Fellowship, a Christian ministry for the almost 6000 inmates in 16 state correctional centres from the Gold Coast to Cairns. It’s a metaphor, he explained, inspired by the biblical tree that the crooked and despised tax collector Zacchaeus climbed to get a better view of Jesus, who saw him and spoke to him, inspiring the wrongdoer to repay his victims fourfold.

Howard was deep in red tape then, trying to convince government departments to green-light a breakthrough project aiming to transform the lives of crime victims and perpetrators alike in 20 countries around the world.

The restorative justice and victim awareness project was begun in the United States in 1998 by a Prison Fellowship International lawyer and has now spread to 25 countries.

“What happens under the Sycamore Tree?” I asked.

“Amazing things happen under the Sycamore Tree,” he said.

Twelve months later, as the van turns onto the Bruce Highway ferrying Queensland’s first group of Sycamore Tree Project volunteers to Woodford for their third visit in the eight-week program that began in March, Howard has every reason to smile.

“The project is about restorative justice,” he says. “Instead of the alternative idea, which is retributive justice – a crime happens, we find the perpetrator, punish them by putting them in jail and that’s the end of the process.

“That process ignores the fact the crime has a lot of impacts across the community,” Howard says. “It starts with the immediate people involved in the crime. It affects the victim. It affects the victim’s family. It affects the offender. It affects their family, and on it goes. Instead of one thing that one person did wrong we look at all of those elements. What impact has it had on the victim’s life? Have there been medical repercussions? Are there practical financial repercussions? How does it affect their relationships?”

It’s a faith-based project, but it’s not preachy. It’s about sharing stories. It’s about empathy. Putting oneself in another’s shoes.

According to Queensland’s Department of Corrective Services, recidivism rates (offenders returning to jail within two years) have fluctuated between 28 and 38 per cent over the past decade. Under the Sycamore Tree project, unconnected victims and a group of offenders (it was seen as too complex to link victims with the actual perpetrators of their crimes) meet for two-hour sessions over a period of eight weeks. Offenders are invited to explore ways of making restitution for the harm caused by their criminal behaviour, taking their first steps to being a functioning member of society. Victims share their stories and in the process both they and the prisoners are given techniques – through homework exercises, roleplays, empathy training, prayers and reflection strategies – to 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 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

**Towards healing ... (below) Crime victims Ross Thompson and Lyn Smith; (opposite) Sycamore Tree’s Martin Howard and David Way, of Prison Fellowship Queensland.**

coordinator Michael Cockram, 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 recidivism rate of 32.3 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 recidivism rates dropped from 50 per cent to 17 per cent.

“You look at what effect a crime has on the community,” Howard says. “How do we repair it? It won’t be repaired by taking someone out of the community and paying them to stay in a secure area. That’s a very expensive cost and it doesn’t address, usually, the problem that is created, that the offender has damaged a person’s life and that damaged person is not really addressed by the system. They’re not given direct input into the process. They’re not asked their opinion of what sentence is appropriate. The community doesn’t recognise the victim, nor understand what they’re going through. Not least the immediate medical problems they face if they’ve been offended against in a violent way.”

Howard casts an admiring eye over his three volunteers – Penny, Lyn and Ross – all looking out the windows of the mini-bus. He drops his voice to a murmur. “Working through the serious effects of crime is a major personal struggle,” he says. “And a lot of people don’t make it. They decide to kill themselves. They can’t struggle through the very difficult territory that we’ve got because there’s no support. And they can end up being enmeshed in the crime system themselves. They become drug-dependent. They might start connecting with people they shouldn’t.”

It’s easy to find a crime victim – almost one-third of Australians have been victims of some form of crime. It’s not easy to find a crime victim willing to enter a prison and sit in an intimate setting with criminals. “First of all there’s a lot of bravery in just living the day-by-day battle with the very physical and emotional consequences of their trauma,” Howard says. “And trauma is one of those things that gets at you when you’re not expecting it. It takes a long time to adjust to the experience. Someone might open the door in a certain way, someone might put a knife on the table in a certain way and you’re suddenly sweating. You’re embarrassed. You’re having a shock attack and you don’t know why.”

Penny invites me to fill the spare seat next to her at the front of the mini-bus. “It wasn’t the rape that affected me,” she says softly. “It was

what happened afterwards. I got away and I was in a toilet block, naked. I locked myself in the toilet and I was stuck in there for three hours, but one of the guys from the group that raped me was inside the toilet block just tormenting me for three hours.

“I was scared at first. And then angry. After that I just wanted to disappear. I didn’t want anyone to know me. I’m a very guarded person, but I’m strong. I won’t let anybody put me in a position where I feel like I’m locked in, like I was in the toilet. I won’t allow anybody in. I haven’t had one successful relationship in my whole life, because of what happened.

“I’ve got a boyfriend. It’s been going for a while. Fingers crossed it works out. But I haven’t told him yet [about the rape].”

This morning is the group’s third session with the Sycamore Tree Project: Week 3. When Penny entered Woodford Correctional Centre for the first time, she was struck by how little the prison resembled the prisons she’d seen on television. “It actually looks kind of homely,” she says. “They have their own courtyard. I mean, going in there I wasn’t afraid. But I did get a little nervous when we went through the induction with all the security, that’s when I felt a little scared. They talk about hepatitis, HIV, all sorts of stuff. No touching. I’m the type of person who will shake your hand, give you a hug.”

She did just that with Scott. During a prior visit she shook his hand to say hello and shook his hand to say goodbye. Penny’s from the country. So was Scott. He noticed the country boots and leather jacket she was wearing, the same boots and jacket she wears this morning. “He told me I looked like a country person,” Penny said. She said Scott felt comforted by this. He told her he was a “tough nut”, an army brat, dragged around from town to city



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and back again, military post to post. “He’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 when he was younger. Instead of getting mad, he just went and hung out with his friends and made them laugh.”

Scott told her he struggled academically. “We’re similar like that,” Penny told him. “I’m not book-smart either.

“He said, ‘We must be street-smart, then?’ I said, ‘Yeah, probably.’”

Things were comfortable after that. A brief

window of trust opened between strangers. Penny shared her memories of the rape. “He’s like a gentle giant, Scott,” she says. “He just said, ‘Why?’ He couldn’t understand why they would want to do that to me.” Penny has pondered the same thing for two decades.

And as the trust built, she peeled back the layers of her story. The instigator of the rapes was Penny’s boyfriend at the time. Penny didn’t have the courage to report the rapes to police and felt justice was never served because the boyfriend died in a traffic accident shortly after his crime.

Penny told Scott that she thought she might find peace through him. Scott was confused. “The only way I can get some form of healing now is by helping other people,” she said. Then she was blunt: “The less rapes that happen, the better. If I help one person, that’s one less person to worry about.”

And Scott understood that. “I still don’t even know what he’s inside for,” Penny says. “I’m not going to ask him. I’m going to wait until he tells me. I just think that it’s better for him to want to say it to me, rather than force him to tell me.”

“What hit me hard was the upfront contact and overwhelming fragility of the victims. To witness their emotional state and then the damage actions have done was reality first-hand. Two precious people in our group have had to endure a lifelong sentence of suffering and I felt helpless and guilty, not being able to restore what had been taken away. I guess we all can bury our heads in the sand and hope the pain goes away but sadly for most it doesn’t.”

– Gerald, convicted murderer & West Australian Sycamore Tree graduate

The van nears Woodford Correctional Centre. Lyn looks at the coils of barbed wire running along the top of the prison’s fences. “I tried ▶



**Working through the serious effects of crime is a major personal struggle. A lot of people don’t make it.**

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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. ■



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