

A mother who lost sons to gunfire spearheads a group for mourning parents. She also works to reduce future violence by reaching out to at-risk boys.

# Moving Beyond the Violence

MARY ELLEN PELLEGRINI

**S**tanding around Lueana Coward's dining room table in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, the eight women holding hands in prayer have more in common than their neighborhoods. Each has lost a son to gun violence. "We have differences, but all our circumstances are the same in this type of situation," says Lueana who has experienced more loss than most.

On May 11, 2001 (the Friday before Mother's Day), her oldest son, Harry, 18, was shot in the chest, abdomen, and legs during an argument at a cookout and died. Four years later, on December 11, 2005, her second son, James, 17, was killed by a shotgun blast to his back after being lured to an alley. "The grief was so overwhelming," says Lueana. Not only had she lost two sons, but her beloved nephew, Ivan, died of an apparent suicide five months after Harry's murder.

Enveloped in an unbelievable sadness, Lueana found it hard to concentrate. She moved her family 400 miles away, returned to her hometown, and briefly remarried the father of her two youngest sons, James and Don. Nothing, however, could ease Lueana's pain. Her song, "Murder," and a self-published book, *Unexpected Events*, detail the emotional turmoil that engulfed Lueana. "There was so much inside of me, I had to get it out," she says.

In 2009, as Lueana was driving past a museum, she says God spoke to her. "It was a shiny day and I was hurting inside," she continues. The word *relief* popped into her mind. That word would articulate both the purpose of the group and the object of Lueana's personal quest. **RELIEF**, an informal support group that stands for **Recognizing Every Lingering Inward Emotional Feeling**, reaches out to mothers

and fathers in mourning. "God knew the RELIEF group would soothe us because you want to get with somebody who knows your pain," says Lueana. The grieving mother understands the pain of losing a child as well as the street mentality creating this loss. A teen mom who abused alcohol and then added illegal drugs, Lueana has been sober since July 6, 1996.

According to the 2013 Protect Children Not Guns Report from the Children's Defense Fund, an American child or teen is injured or dies from gun violence every thirty minutes. Eighty-six percent of gun deaths in 2010 occurred in people fifteen to nineteen years old. Of those fatalities, black male teens were almost thirty times more likely to be victims than white teens and three times more likely than their Hispanic counterparts.

"There's nothing more profound

than the loss of a child,” says Tracey Provident, administrative vice president and chief operating officer of the Center for Victims of Violence and Crime in Pittsburgh. Race, neighborhood, income, education all are irrelevant to the families and loved ones of the victims, Provident says.

“A mother who lost her kids is the same everywhere,” agrees Lueana. In cases of homicide, the impact of violence runs especially deep, adds Provident. Combating the epidemic

ent in each gathering. “Nobody else can experience your feelings of grief. Nobody can tell you where you should be,” stresses Lueana. The group leader functions best when she experiences peace and solace through her faith in God. Other times, she finds herself in the trouble zone, days in which the weight of her tragedy becomes unbearable. “That’s when I pick up and do something positive to feed the void of overwhelming disbelief,” she explains. One of those positives is



of violence is a multifaceted solution akin to putting puzzle pieces together. “There is no easy solution,” says Lueana. She believes RELIEF is one small piece of that puzzle.

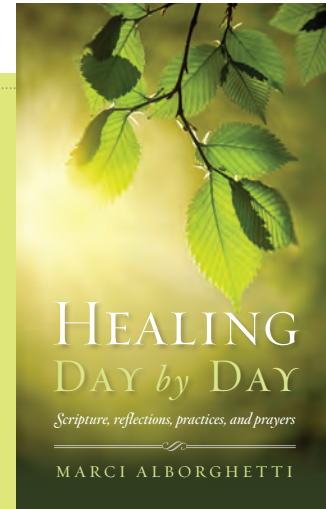
**L**ueana lists God as the founder and executive director of RELIEF. “God is of peace and he gives relief. I want to give him all the credit,” notes Lueana. RELIEF meets the first or second Saturday of every month in the comfort of a safe, homey environment, and on a full stomach. Each meeting begins with a potluck lunch. The informal setting in a familiar neighborhood has drawn dozens of participants. Lueana calls the group “an incubator to start the healing process. After a funeral, friends and family are pretty much done with the process,” notes Lueana. RELIEF offers a place “where you can freely express your feelings. The ears are all open,” she adds.

Respect and compassion are inher-

ent in each gathering. “Nobody else can experience your feelings of grief. Nobody can tell you where you should be,” stresses Lueana. The group leader functions best when she experiences peace and solace through her faith in God. Other times, she finds herself in the trouble zone, days in which the weight of her tragedy becomes unbearable. “That’s when I pick up and do something positive to feed the void of overwhelming disbelief,” she explains. One of those positives is

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nity. While Rosina hasn't lost a child, her living-room window was pulverized by gunfire after Rosina's older son, Harlan, refused to drive a suspected gang member home from a public event. In a twist of fate, Rosina and her younger son, Jordan, were in their bedrooms earlier than normal that night. "We all went to sleep peacefully and the next thing I know, bam! Bam! Bam! My whole window was shattered,

ing in May 2009, Don had just celebrated his sixteenth birthday. At that same time, Lueana had a special ceremony every morning praying that she wouldn't lose her sole surviving son to violence. As soon as she awoke, Lueana would retreat to her den, meditate, sing spiritual songs, and read Scripture. The ritual helped her feel "protected, like everything would be OK." Lueana also encouraged Don to

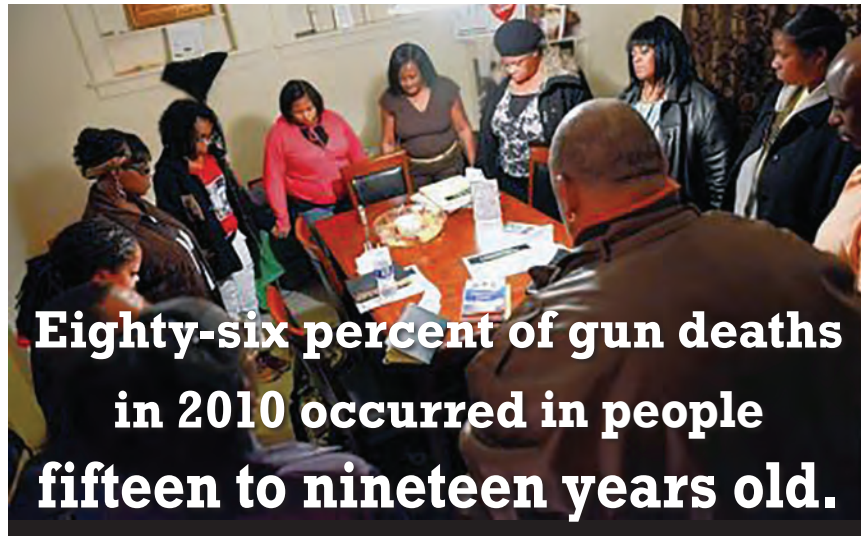
too," says Lueana.

From the beginning, Lueana envisioned RELIEF as a comprehensive ministry to others including a network of individuals reaching out to families from the first moment of tragedy. Volunteers render emotional support at the hospital when a fatal shooting occurs, attend calling hours, provide food, assist with funeral expenses, and babysit when needed. RELIEF has partnered with a local funeral company that offers burial services, coffins, and headstones at minimal cost to ease the burden on families with limited financial means.

For someone who is spiritually and mentally empty after losing a child, small gestures generate big results. "Everything you can do for a person at that time brings relief," says Lueana.

In addition to her efforts with RELIEF, Lueana has become a motivational speaker, relating her story of drug use and her sons' lives to the teens in juvenile detention centers. "I feel like my calling is with the young boys (in their teens), because none of my boys reached age twenty. When I go to speak to these teenage boys, I see my sons in those seats," she says. Lueana visits placement centers and group homes in her area, talking to teens whom she terms at a crossroads in thinking and decision-making. "I'm attempting to reach these boys before they come out on the pavement and back to the familiar, while their mind is clear," explains Lueana.

Lueana's presentation covers consequences, personal accountability, the false lure of money, and the impact of violence on family members. "The old is going to lead you to juvenile detention, the penitentiary, or the grave," she tells the youth. Stressing their opportunity for a second chance, Lueana's message is, "change you must, or die you will." During her visit, Lueana sets a pair of Harry's shoes on a table and says, "I wish when Harry put these shoes on, he would have walked another way."



**Eighty-six percent of gun deaths in 2010 occurred in people fifteen to nineteen years old.**

*Members of RELIEF pray at Lueana Coward's dining-room table before the start of a monthly meeting.*

bullets all through the house. If I had been sitting on the couch, the bullets could have gone through my back. It took me a long time to sit in my living room again," says Rosina.

A counselor's explanation of post-traumatic stress disorder at a RELIEF meeting showed Rosina the roots of her anxiety. "Every time I turned the lights out to go to bed I was afraid someone would shoot up my house," says Rosina, who adds it was comforting to know she wasn't going crazy. The discussion also helped her convince her sons not to retaliate. Today, Harlan works in a restaurant and Jordan has completed training for the carpentry profession, but Rosina remains fearful a stray bullet may cross her sons' paths. "When my sons go out, I worry about whether they'll come home," she says. "With violence in every area, how can you *not* worry?" adds Lueana.

When RELIEF held its first meet-

leave his street friends and complete the three remaining credits needed for his high-school diploma. Those hopes evaporated on the evening of April 16, 2012, when Don's life ended on the same street where Harry died. For the third time, a son had walked out the door and never made it back. "Don had a desire to change his life, but..." Lueana's voice trails off.

**L**ueana, who was mother and father to her children, says, "all I got is memories and a message." Reflecting on the anger of so many affected by violence, Lueana has no desire for revenge. "I hate that these individuals had the audacity to take my sons from me for the rest of my life, but killing them won't bring my sons back." As part of RELIEF, Lueana posts obituaries of the group members' sons on her basement wall. "It hurts now that Don is down there,



From left, Jeannette Curley, Ebony Jones Middleton (Lueana Coward's daughter), and Lueana behind quilt squares created by RELIEF members that tell the stories of their murdered loved ones. Photos, pieces of clothing, favorite sayings, family pictures, and bits of treasured objects were used in the squares.

In her discussions, Lueana asks the young men to consider what the future might have held for their murdered friends and family. “You never know how far they could have gone. All that talent is buried because their lives have been cut off,” she says stressing that change has to come from within. Lueana hopes to see more job or job training opportunities for the teens upon release rather than a return to their old routine. “Whatever they discovered they could do positively (while in placement) goes down the drain if they go back on the same pavement around the same kind of people,” says Lueana.

While her insight can't save her own sons, Lueana says, “I can save somebody else's. I care enough about the next teenager, the next mother, to give everything I got so maybe another mother won't have to be standing here (in the emergency room or in the cemetery) like me.”

In addition to motivational speeches, Lueana is a voluntary advocate for **Victims of Violent Crime** and serves as an on-call family facilitator for **Hill House** in Pittsburgh. Lueana cautions parents to watch for signs of trouble such as new shoes, new clothes, new friends, different slang, or negative behaviors. “As parents, we want so

much for our kids. But sometimes we push them right into the ones we don't want them around,” she says.



Lueana Coward (second from right), family, and RELIEF members hold a candlelight vigil in memory of Lueana's son, Don.

**P**ainfully aware that deadly violence can shake a family's core at any given moment, RELIEF members have participated in antiviolence marches and are contributing to a national memorial book on murdered African American males that aims to help at-risk youth recognize the potential costs to themselves and their families. Most recently, they designed a bumper sticker that reads, *Stop the killing/Death is permanent*. “We hope reading this message on a passing car will somehow change the hearts of potential killers,” explains Lueana.

RELIEF is also one of several groups

participating in an exhibit exploring artists' responses to violence. Sarah Cuervorst, a development assistant for individual giving with **ENOUGH Violence: Artists Speak Out**—a world premiere exhibition at the Society for Contemporary Craft in Pittsburgh—says, “the RELIEF group's purpose of trying to heal, commemorate, and rise above the violence was a perfect fit for our exhibition.” ENOUGH Violence melds the creative process with empowerment, both for the artists and viewers. “Everyone is affected by violent crime, either directly or indirectly,” says Cuervorst. RELIEF uses the spoken word to heal. For those who can't express feelings orally, ENOUGH Violence offers another avenue of expressing grief. “This is another extension of their healing process,” adds Cuervorst.

As part of the exhibit, RELIEF members created a quilt. In it, squares with written tributes, photos, and pieces of the deceased's clothing emanate in a circular fashion from the centerpiece, a heart. “I wanted a heart in the center because that's where all emotions come from. The heart leads the mind,” says Lueana. Lueana says, “I'm trying to bring some good out of tragedy, even if it's no more than peace of mind one day at a time.” ●

For more information on RELIEF and Lueana Coward, visit [lueanacoward.com](http://lueanacoward.com).