

## **Avenging Niece's Murder Leads Lawyer to Start Workshops**

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In the early morning hours of October 18, 1999, I received a phone call from my sister. "It's Maggie," she said, her voice trembling. "She's been shot. She's dead."

I couldn't believe it. Maggie, my brother's 19-year-old daughter, had been murdered at school by her ex-boyfriend who then killed himself. It was another senseless act of violence but this time, Maggie – our Maggie – was dead. In my heart, I had already felt this kind of loss. Two years before, I had been forced out of a well-paying job in state government when the political winds shifted and the impact of one trauma being heaped upon another was devastating for me. Shock, guilt and the cry for revenge welled up inside me but who could I blame? If only I could have saved Maggie. If only I hadn't have lost my job.

Oddly enough, I saw signs of my own recovery in Maggie's death. I had worked for years as a feminist attorney and advocate for women's rights but Maggie's death made the issues of violence against women more personal and more immediate. If this could happen to Maggie, it could happen to anyone. But what was I being called to do?

One morning it came to me. I was thinking about the power of the moment when a woman decides to leave her abuser. I realized that Maggie did not live beyond her moment but I could imagine myself working with other women to transform their lives after abuse. After all, wasn't getting on with one's life the most exacting revenge against a man who had tried to bend that woman to his will? By then I could see that for those of us who face a "life-altering event" such as abuse, death of a loved one or the loss of a job, there is either a road to recovery that brings new vigor and purpose to our lives or a spiraling down into anger, depression and hopelessness. I had indeed stumbled onto the more productive path, one in which I could:

- discover opportunity in what felt like loss,
- focus on positive emotions and energy that could move me forward,
- dare to create the life I so richly deserved, and,
- celebrate the life I had by living in the present, not the past.

How could I work with women who had been abused so that they too could be similarly transformed? Slowly I envisioned a workshop based on the quote by Victor Herbert, "Living well is the best revenge." Sure I wanted to avenge Maggie's death, but with a lighter touch like an angel's and without anger or recrimination. So I coined the name, "My Avenging Angel" and saw the workshops as the "next step" for women to help them move beyond abuse and restore the positive energy in their lives.

Is this work easy? Hardly. I have heard so many stories from women of abuse, betrayal and dashed hopes that I wish I had a magic wand to simply wave away their pain and anguish. They have suffered greatly. Their self esteem is low and they have little belief that their lives will ever get better. But they do have hope.

Each time I give them the choice of reliving the abuse and the pain inflicted on them or reaching deep down inside to uncover their true heart's desires, they do choose the latter. They set goals for themselves that are not only achievable but also can spur them on to making bigger and better changes for themselves.

Now I can see that the truest measure of our lives is not what we have experienced but what we have made of our experiences. We don't really know how good it can get once we get positive and focus our energies on our future, not the past. Whatever we might have imagined for ourselves is only a fraction of what we can have when we free ourselves to live well, be happy and create the life we want.

Then living well *is* not only the best revenge; it is, in fact, the song of our soul and the fulfillment of all our dreams.