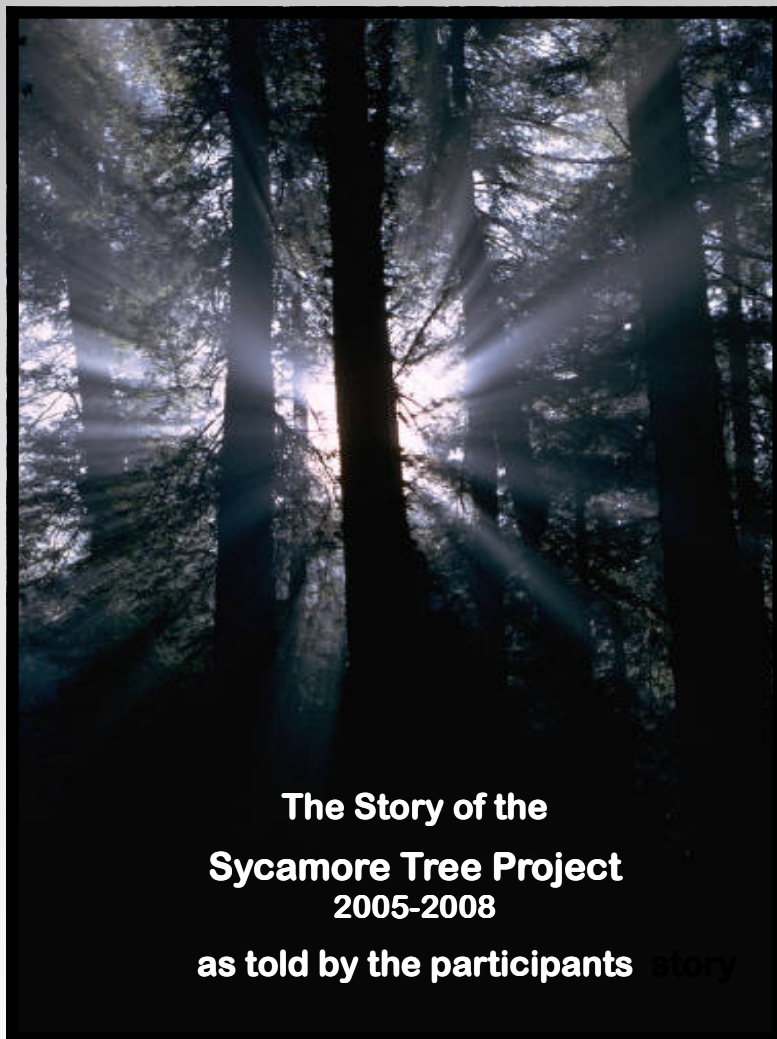


SHAFTS OF LIGHT FROM A DARK PLACE



**The Story of the
Sycamore Tree Project
2005-2008
as told by the participants** *story*

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Introduction

In September 2005, I entered Acacia Private Prison (Medium Security) with my friend John White and four survivors of significant crime (three were secondary victims to homicide of a close family member and the fourth was a secondary victim to child sexual abuse). John and I were facilitators of a pilot course in Western Australia called the Sycamore Tree Project which has, since 1997, been operating in New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

We met with six prisoners in the Protected Unit at Acacia, including four people convicted of offence against children and one convicted of murder (the prisoners were not related in any way to the visitors). The course lasted for seven mornings over three and a half weeks – including a graduation ceremony (the course now usually runs for eight mornings over two months).

During the course, we each told parts of our personal stories to the group and to one another, looking at what had happened in our lives, what issues we were struggling with and examining anew, concepts of accountability, confession, owning the truth, repentance, forgiveness, restoration and reconciliation.

The results on both sides exceeded anything we could have imagined in terms of response, truth telling, honesty, expressed compassion and determination for change and could thus truly be described as “life changing”.

The Sycamore Tree Project is a Christian program which does not involve preaching. It involves an invitation to all participants (of whatever religious persuasion or world view), to enter into a healing movement inspired by God. The bible story of the Sycamore Tree, on which the course is based, is to be found in Luke Chapter 19 where a small crooked tax collector (despised by all), climbs a tree to “get a better look” and discovers more than he bargained for. It changes his life forever.

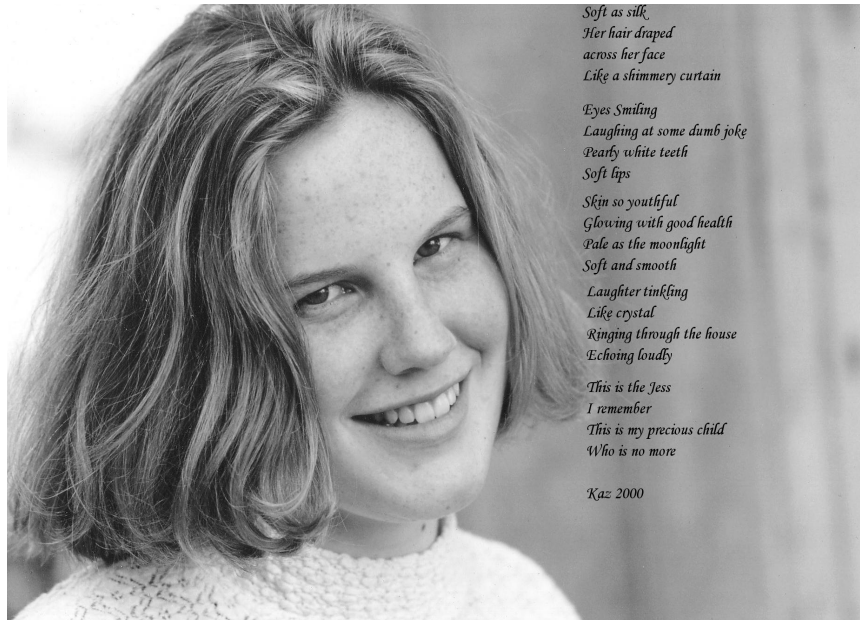
We have now conducted 15 courses in four prisons and one measure of the success of the program is to be found in the letters which are the content of this book.

We trust that by publishing these, more people will come to understand the value of this programme for all who struggle with the harm caused by crime and to support the programme personally and in other ways.

Michael Cockram
Course Co-ordinator

NOTE: To protect the identities of the authors of the following writings, some names have been changed (including all prisoners referred to).

Jess



*Soft as silk,
Her hair draped
across her face
Like a shimmery curtain*

*Eyes Smiling
Laughing at some dumb joke
Pearly white teeth
Soft lips*

*Skin so youthful
Glowing with good health
Pale as the moonlight
Soft and smooth*

*Laughter tinkling
Like crystal
Ringing through the house
Echoing loudly*

*This is the Jess
I remember
This is my precious child
Who is no more*

Kaz 2000

On her murdered daughter's birthday in 2006, a mother gave this harrowing account to a group of prisoners (including two convicted of murder) and fellow victims in Sycamore Tree Project 2

Karen's Story

I think you all know that seven years ago we lost our daughter Jess to murder. She was 15. Today would have been her 18th birthday, and to honour this day I would like to share a bit of Jessie's life with you, so that you could get a sense of who Jess was, and what our journey was like.

Jess was almost born on April Fool's Day at Port Beach. I was body surfing and went into labour. I was with my mum and a crusty old bachelor friend of ours. I staggered up the beach clutching my considerable stomach, convinced that any moment I was going to give birth right there on the sand. The look of horror on the faces of some of the local surfing lads was priceless. Anyway, I managed to get as far as the car park and it was quite a sight, let me tell you. This bachelor friend was having a pink fit... all he could manage to say was that he had gardening gloves and secateurs in his Kombi van - if that would help. My mother, who was a nurse, assured him that it wouldn't be necessary – I might add, much to my relief.

Anyway, by the time we got to the hospital, the contractions had died down and Jess ended up being born a month later, in May. That was typical of Jess – a real joker. As she grew, it became evident that she was going to live her life on her terms and God help anyone who thought differently. She was like a little Tasmanian tiger. Never still, always wanting attention and rushing at life like a bull in a china shop.

By the time Jess started school I was exhausted... luckily she loved school ... always had lots of friends and was pretty good at sport. Jess loved animals, loved music and people and loved her family. Life with Jess was never dull and sometimes her energy seemed to know no bounds. Jess drove her brother nuts. He was six years older and the opposite to Jess and they fought like cat and dog.

By the time Jess got to high school, it was obvious she was going to be a challenging teenager, always pushing the boundaries, always wanting to live every day as if it was her last. Jess was never content to just fritter her life away. She had to bound through life – a bit like Tigger in Winnie the Pooh. Jess was a really good netballer and also did a bit of modelling.

When Jess was 14, she started working at the local roller skating rink to earn extra money. She was tall, nearly six feet, with blonde hair and an infectious smile. Jess was very popular with the crowd at Rollerways and used to help the little kids skate.

A few weeks before her death, Jess decided to leave school. She wanted to be a hairdresser. We struggled with this – we wanted Jess to finish her education – but with Jess, once she had made up her mind about something, nothing changed it. We came to a compromise. Jess would not leave school until she had a job. So that same weekend, she typed a resume and went trotting off to different hair dressing salons around Fremantle. A month later Jess came home triumphant - she had an apprenticeship. Two weeks later she was dead. The day of her funeral was the day Jess was to have started her apprenticeship.

Jess had met a boy at Rollerways, his name was Myk. Myk was the disc jockey there and he had recently broken up his relationship with another girl who was three years older than Jess. I had gone overseas on my first ever holiday without the family. The day I arrived in Paris, I received a phone call that was to change my life forever. I was told that Jess was murdered, stabbed to death in our home. I was to find out later that the person who murdered Jess was the girl who used to go out with Myk. Jess had been seeing Myk for ten days. The girl was jealous and had come to our home armed with a fishing knife. 47 stab wounds later, Jess died on my kitchen floor. Her father came home from work that afternoon and found her. Our nightmare began.

One image stands out especially. On hearing his sister was dead, my son Ryan drove from the other side of town to try to get to our home to be

with his father. The street was cordoned off with the police everywhere and barricades in place. Ryan stood there, in the rain, powerless, unable to reach his dad, with the press everywhere and bystanders trying to figure out what was going on. It was a month after Ryan's 21st birthday. That image of him standing there in the rain haunts me. Can you imagine what he was going through? The police would not let him through. Eventually my brother drove his four wheel drive through the barricades and made such a scene that they let both my brother and Ryan through.

I can't begin to describe what the next few years were like. Trying to pick up the pieces after something so horrific – I have no idea how we survived really. As the shock waves went out into the community and the reality hit home that Jess was dead, and worse still, someone had taken her life, the casualties started piling up. Some of her friends couldn't cope. At 15, they had woken to find the world they knew was turned on its head and nothing made sense anymore. The once invincible teenagers began their own nightmarish journey – and for some of them the journey was almost fatal. Several of Jess's friends went severely off the rails.... just couldn't cope with what had happened. We were so busy trying to hold our own lives together, we had no energy left to deal with their pain.

At the graduation two weeks later Karen read the following to the course participants and guests, including her husband John, who was himself profoundly moved by the impact of the course on everyone.

Karen's thoughts

In so many ways, secondary victims of crime are prisoners too... prisoners trapped in pain, fear and sometimes hate.

Seven years ago, I lost my daughter to a horrific murder. The impact of this crime had far reaching effects for not just us as a family, but the community

in which we lived. I wanted to be involved in the Sycamore Tree Project because I felt I wanted to make something positive out of something so destructive. In the past, I have worked with secondary victims of crime and have shared their pain and related to their stories. Working with offenders I felt was a unique experience and offered a chance for me to share my pain and bring home to them the reality of how violent crime impacts on families and on communities. It also allowed me to see things from another perspective and perhaps find common ground.

After spending these last weeks with offenders, I can see common ground. I can see that we all want a life where we are loved for who we are, and where there is respect and a feeling of being part of and not separate from our community – local or in a broader sense, the global community that we share. It has shown me that within all of us is the capacity to connect with our fellow human



beings and to come to a place of understanding and of letting go and allowing a shared experience (the sharing of our stories) to bring us closer as a community.

I hope that all participants on this course have felt as I do, that we have achieved that, within our small community of 15, in this chapel, over these past weeks. The challenge is to take that with us when we integrate back into the wider community and hope that in some way, what we have learned and achieved will have a ripple effect...that it will help change how we interact and live in that community and have a positive influence on those we connect with.

I only wish that other secondary victims of crime could experience what I have and see that we don't need to be prisoners of pain and hate... and fear. There is a better way to experience life in the aftermath of violent crime.... and it is really the only way we will ever be free. Forgiveness is not a word to be bandied about lightly and it is almost always difficult to achieve, and indeed sometimes impossible, but when you experience forgiveness, either as a recipient, or as someone who forgives another... it sets you free. Often it is harder to forgive ourselves, than it is to forgive others.

This course has helped me to forgive myself for past transgressions and has helped me to move to a place where I can see that forgiving the person who killed my daughter is possible.

I came into this course fearful that I would be an outsider. As the only “non Christian”, I felt I may be treated differently. How wrong I was. I was welcomed into the group and accepted for who I am, regardless of my belief. This was a great relief for me and by the end of the course I felt I had made life-long friends. During the past few months, I have also come a long way in healing my relationship with God. I am now much more at ease with Christianity. At one stage, I mentioned that I felt like the lion being thrown to the Christians – but this is no longer true.

I will always treasure my time with the boys from Acacia who were brave enough to take part in this course and trust us enough to open up to us and share their pain and their stories. They have given me so much and I will always hold them close to my heart.

Karen Lang
11th May 2006

Postscript: Karen has now completed three courses and her husband John, two.

Part of the response to Karen's story (and the impact of the graduation upon her husband) is to be found in this letter from a 21 year old prisoner (a Sudanese refugee) who himself witnessed the murder and torture of family members and friends in the Sudanese civil war.

Peter's story

Thank you very much for your support and compassionate leadership throughout the program. Doing the Sycamore Tree Project was by far one of the best personal decisions I have made in a long time. At first I was very sceptical about the course and whether there was anything to gain from doing it.

In doing the course I was challenged highly in what I initially thought I knew about compassion and forgiveness. Prior to doing this course, I thought that I was justified in my hatred I had for those that had caused me pain in the past and I had little understanding about the impact of my actions on others, in particular, the victims.

Seeing the pain that most of the Sycamore Tree Project participants had overcome, and in turn, witnessing first hand their desire to spread compassion, was in fact the very first time in many years that I have witnessed the testimony of Christ in practice and this was an experience that rocked me.

Today I have released a lot of my hatred and am free from a prison that I had no idea held me captive. It was not apparent to me that my hate and anger towards many people in my life held me captive. Seeing other people deal with their pain in a compassionate and selfless way truly inspired me to re-examine my anger.

Seeing the participants in the Sycamore Tree Project and the pain they carried also gave me a chance to review some of the pain that I had caused my victims. It was like looking into a mirror but instead of seeing my pain, I saw others'. What I was told about Jess's father came as a shock to me. In the re-union meeting we had on June 12th, where I learned that I contributed somehow to changes in Jess's father's life, I was almost speechless. It played with me emotionally for days to come. Tell Jess's dad that all I said came from the heart and I wish him and Karen all the best in all they do.

Thank every participant of the Sycamore Tree Project for me. Meeting with you guys has had a positive influence on my life. God bless you.

Also on the same course, a long term prisoner read the following

Jeremy's Story

Seven weeks ago, I started this programme not knowing what to expect. I definitely had apprehension and fear of the “unknown”. After a settling in period, we split into small groups and talked about our lives. One person talked about what had happened to them, then to my absolute astonishment, the path of forgiveness of this person’s perpetrator. You have few profound moments in your life. This was certainly one for me!



I sat there in silent awkwardness for this person. I felt I needed to say something but what does one say? My thoughts were scattered but two words kept coming up “Courage and Strength”. The courage and strength to endure; the courage and strength to forgive. I told this person “ you are far stronger than I could ever be”.

That night was a restless one for me. I thought about this person’s journey. It affected me deeply. It makes you want to strive to be a better human being. For me personally, it was life affirming stuff. I went to sleep that night wanting to change my life’s direction. I woke up the next morning knowing I had started to change my life’s direction.

In the last 15 years, I have spent 13 ½ years within the system. I have done countless courses – some good, some bad. Without a shadow of a doubt the Sycamore Tree Project is the best thing that could ever have happened to me.

The sheer rawness of emotions it delivers and the understanding and compassion it releases within people gives you a sense of hope for the future for everyone involved.

Thank you.

On another course, a woman recalled how 26 years before, when she was 17, she tried to put down in writing how it felt to be abused as a child by a family acquaintance and then to be told by her mother that she would have to keep it a secret because if he knew, her father might “kill the man”. This is what she wrote.....

Elaine's response

closed lips

28th May 1981

i ought to allow myself to indulge in tears,
i've learned if i open my heart and cry,
i would wash away the thorns.

I learned by keeping myself closed,
letting the thorns grow, infest,
bleeding unseen by me too,
'till it's too late.

i ought to indulge in laughter,
ringing loud, clear and long.
i'd feel happy, elusive,
warm in my heart.

i learned that by keeping silent,
my laughter and happy words hurl themselves,
relentlessly.
against the brick wall of my closed lips.

i ought to indulge in suicide,
but the commanders of my army,
calmly reason.
above the hysteria, i wish to be free.

if i batter the body,
the child will have no legs to run on.
the writer will have no hand to hold the pen,
i know it is my cue
to rally up my strength like Joan,
and plunge in the battle against
the closed lips and the others.

but somehow
i don't feel up to it
just now.

During her second Sycamore Tree Project, Elaine wrote.....

This is the second Sycamore Tree Project course I have attended. The first was at Acacia Prison earlier this year. In that course I found a safe place in the middle of a prison with a group of prisoners – ironic. I was able to grieve not only for the act of crime which happened a long time ago but for its legacy which was with me daily.

This legacy told me; my world and the people in it are not trustworthy and I am not safe. No, I could not 'get over it' and no, I could not 'forgive and forget' and no, 'I am not a weak person'.

I found I had to say it out loud, 'I have been damaged by other men's actions and I am very angry'. Only this group could acknowledge this because prisoners are the 'missing link' for victims of crimes. These men also wanted to be allowed to make restitution though they couldn't undo the past and this was healing for me too.

I received justice from these men because they took (symbolic) responsibility for impacting my life this way and I did forgive them though I hadn't meant to and finally – finally received peace. This peace gives me the freedom to forgive.

**Partly in response to Elaine's story on one of her two courses,
Robert, (convicted of murder), wrote this letter.....**

Robert's story

Dear friends

I write this letter as a means of acknowledging the pleasure and honour I had of meeting you all. The experience we shared and the special bond we formed will carry me through to the rest of my days; an awakening for me that I will try and explain to you in this letter.

The Sycamore Tree Project is such a great thing for both the victims and perpetrators. The issues we faced dealing with learning, healing and feelings and how we all encountered and dealt with them personally, goes beyond all expectations. I felt for all concerned who attended these meetings. Please correct me if I am wrong in feeling this way.

Having been incarcerated for the past eleven years and after seeing many, many doctors and psych's and having taken countless amounts of medication, I can honestly say that you Elaine have especially helped me move on some. I now find I can carry my burden with much more ease than I have done since that most tragic day that still seems and feels like yesterday.

The strength and courage you displayed in coming to this prison, willingly, to participate with us crims and then to face your demons whilst doing so, was a life changing experience for you to say the least. That you have left here with hope and the determination to get your life back on track, is something I fervently wish holds you in good stead and that any remaining pain diminishes over time.

The unforgiveable happenings I heard from all of you beautiful people, tore at my heart strings. Sharing them with total strangers took a great deal of deep inner strength and I admire you all very much for it. You gave me back something that has been missing far too long; that is hope and light at

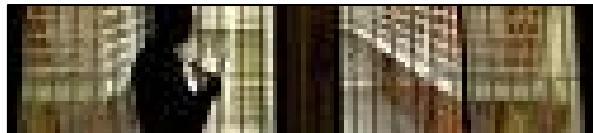
the end of this nightmare. My heartfelt thanks goes to each and every one of you.

I undertook the Sycamore Tree Project as a means of seeing if I could help myself, as well as others, in alleviating in some small way the feelings of pain, loss of dignity and invasion of self rights and self degradation you have all had to carry these past years. I didn't believe it would or could help me in any way in coping better with my sins. How very wrong I was! I feel awful knowing I probably got more out of it than most others did.

I feel the song, *Amazing Grace*, sung by Judy Collins (which is the best version) is one that describes my story as well as the slave trader who wrote it. Music is a way of life for me; it is the main comfort that gets me through each day. *One Day at a Time*, as the song says, is all I can look forward to at the present time, but now I have more Hope and Light to get me to the gate.

This One Man Will Make a World of Difference.

I am only a grain of sand in this big universe, but I truly believe our Lord has shown me the way to assist and aid others in seeing the error of their ways, before it is too late and they end up in jail. My experiences both good and bad may just help some others from going down that same path of self destruction as I did.



At the end of a course in 2008, a lady who had suffered profoundly as a result of a monstrous attack on her widowed mother and who had taken two years to summon up the courage to participate, read out the following letter

Elizabeth's story

I have thought long and hard about what I want to say today and thought the best way would be to write a letter to you all.

When I decided to participate in this program, I really did not know what to expect, or more to the point, if I would actually complete the program. There had been many highs and lows but for some reason you just can't wait to get back here each week. For most of us it truly became the highlight of our week.

In my mind we are all equal. Survivors – just a group of people throwing each other a life-line. We commenced this course just eight weeks ago and it feels like we have known each other for a life-time. We have shared so much, some of us sharing things we have never told a soul before... so what does that say about the Sycamore Tree Project? It says that the course is unique and each group is unique.

The Sycamore Tree Project is like nothing I have participated in before. Although the course has a structure, I feel that it is the participants that take the course on its journey. It tests the edge and pushes the boundaries. It truly is based on honesty, trust and respect. There is no judgement and definitely no 'BS'.

The way the course chips away at the wall we have built around ourselves is quite amazing. The support that we have shown each other has been heart warming. This is a group of real people; not many of those left! It's a faith based program but it does not align its participants with any specific orientation. The role-plays showed us in a really simple way just what we needed to know about the scriptures to "get it". Everything

So where to now? For me personally, there has been a huge amount of healing. I had created my own personal hell and thought I was quite happy the way things were. But I needed some closure. I can't change what has happened but I can certainly change what happens next. I have learnt some coping mechanisms that I will use from time to time when I feel the need. I know at times I will look back but I guess if I can look back, it means that I have moved on. I am definitely on the road to shalom and I look forward to seeing you all there.... but I might be a bit late.

I sincerely hope that you have all gained something from the program. I know I have seen huge changes in all of you. Many of you have grown beyond belief. It has truly been an honour to listen to your stories and to get to know you all so deeply. I will remember you all as you have left footprints on my soul. Thank you so much for just being you.

When you think the world has turned its back on you.... take another look.

Shalom.



Nineteen years after the devastating attack upon her, which cast Freda into unrelieved depression compounded by legal and financial issues, at her Sycamore Tree graduation, this primary victim read the following

Freda's story

On Wednesday, November 19th 2008 - I read my Life Story ...

There was Silence - I heard the deafening sound of Silence -

I wanted to run, run forever, away from the pain. I was not prepared for the emotions which crowded in - worthlessness, frustration, stupidity ...

I stood up, saying words to the effect "Why can't somebody .. say something?"

Words spoken into my ear, I heard "You are a very strong, gutsy lady..." Arms held me... hands shook mine I was outside, the Guys reassuring me - "I don't know what to say", more hands in mine .. I was safe. Had nineteen years ended in overwhelming empathy and compassion - The Gift of Seven Strong Men

In the circle - The space before me was suddenly filled with flowers of perfumed beauty, short stemmed and rare, at Karnet I reached up to feel another Guy behind my chair, never wanting to let the moment go - "We all had the idea" he said "To give you something ... it's only ..."

"It's only" ... is for me ... Life Story The Only ... the only way to deafen the Sound of Silence..

And if I feel sorrow start to steal upon Me, Be still, close my eyes, breathe and listen to my heart, where I will find Them - those Tall Guys I will never forget ...

Sam was one of the original six prisoners who took part in the pilot Sycamore Tree Project mentioned at the beginning of this book. Three years later in mid 2008, he published in the prison magazine the following article.....

Sam's story

This is a first-hand account of the first time the Sycamore Tree Project was ever run in Australia. It was at Acacia Prison in September 2005.

When another prisoner first suggested to me that I should think about being part of the Sycamore Tree Project, I reluctantly came aboard with a bucket load of trepidation. This was far too early for me.

My trepidation gave way to curiosity and I was, at last, sort of looking forward to meeting a group of people who, I was sure, would beat up on me and make me feel even worse about myself than I already did - which wasn't really possible anyway!

The great morning came and I nervously shook hands with a group of people who were smiling and looking like they were actually pleased to see me. Great – I thought – no knives or baseball bats were visible! I did notice however, that as the first session was about to start, the door was left open and the officers hovered as only an elephant can do when he tries to hide surreptitiously behind a rose bush. I thought they must have expected trouble. The cold sweat started again and then Mike Cockram and John White got it under way.

I'd always thought that victims of crime should carry hatred – as I did for the boys who stole two valuable bikes from our garage. I felt blind hatred for the guy who stole my wife's engagement ring whilst he was a guest in our home. I've felt hatred for the people who had stolen goods from my business. I've felt hatred all my life for the boy who accidentally blinded my left eye when I was seven years old.

That's a half century of anger, resentment and loathing, built up layer, by layer, by layer.

I was no longer obsessed with those feelings – time had healed them – and I had forgiven those who had offended me so long ago, but I fear greatly that my victims hold, and will continue to hold, similar contempt for me. That is another burden I had laden them with through my selfishness, arrogance and lovelessness, they do not deserve to have thoughts of hatred burning away inside them for decades, eating away at them. I long for the day, sometime soon perhaps, that they will encounter the Sycamore Tree Program, so that they may begin the immensely difficult task of being healed through love, compassion and forgiveness – that they may, above all, live useful, happy and productive lives.

At the conclusion of one of our sessions, as everyone was politely shaking hands, I received an almighty shock.... one of the victims hugged me! I think she surprised herself more than me because she said '*I shouldn't do this... ahh, who cares!*' or something like that. Well I cared for one! It was the most amazing spontaneous action and I deeply felt U.....'s pain as I'm certain, she had felt mine. Even more so, I felt her deep compassion and understanding of my profound sorrow. I felt loved.

This program has been a wonderful opportunity for both the perpetrators of crime and the victims of crime to look into each other's souls and hearts and to find that there is very little difference between us. That sorrow is much more than a simple placating gesture and that forgiveness slowly grows from compassion, nurtured by love and that repentance is firstly fully owning and admitting what happened in the past, so that we can accept responsibility for our future behaviours – that we can only know total freedom when we have known truth.

I am extremely proud and honoured to have been a member of, as Mike has coined, "*The Noble Six*" the first such group in an Australian

prison to participate. Personally, I feel more humble than noble as I'm sure this group has planted a seed that will grow into a tall, lush, ever-green tree, a tree that will offer a platform of branches which will give a sweeping view of the many difficult issues before us and at the same time, will afford a stable brace lest we fall.

With the other five offenders who took part, I felt bonded in a wonderful spirit of hope for our collective futures. If I, a pagan by any other name, may quote from scriptures without being struck dead – Hebrews 12: 5-13 states, *“My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves, He chastens and scourges every son whom He receives. No chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterwards it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore – strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed.”*

I am honoured to have met and to have been accepted by my new and special friends – I might call them *“The Phenomenal Five”*, who despite my faults and grievous history, have seen that I am a person who has some worth who *can* be found again, even though I was well and truly lost.

I am grateful beyond words, and a far better person, for having met them. I am grateful too for the future fruit that will be born from this Project.

May the Sycamore Tree and all who rest under it, grow and prosper.



**The exquisite agony of a survivor is reflected in this poem.
One thing learned on the Sycamore Tree Project is that the pain
can only be transformed – it never goes away.**

Anthony's poem

A WALL FILLED WITH TEARDROPS

I built a wall of teardrops in my dreams again last night.
Through all the years and countless tears I thought I'd won the fight.
But my mind keeps slipping backwards as it seeks the dreadful past
and sets the solid footing on which this wall will last.

The first brick wall was the argument that we should
never have commenced
Just a couple of words in anger and the quarrel was entrenched.
On bended knees I pleaded and begged for her to stay
But the second brick was laid as she turned and walked away.

This wall was growing larger each time I apologised
But she just kept walking and I failed to realise
That she needed time to ponder the words that had been spoken
Not knowing that in the distance lay her body, torn and broken.

When I stumbled on her body, as it lay there in the sand
I fell down there beside her and gently took her hand
I whispered that I loved her as I carried her in my arms
And the crimson flowing liquid dripped from her open palms.

I was innocent of the charges for her life was now no more
But they threw me in a prison slamming shut the heavy door
For five long years I suffered before they set me free
And I wandered in a timeless land in permanent agony.

But God blessed me with another who in marriage took my hand
Who vowed to love and honour, but more, to understand.
She took upon an awesome task where others would have failed
To nurse me back to sanity, along the narrow trail.

She toiled and battled valiantly as she worked daily by my side
Joining in my laughter and weeping when I cried.
Trying hard to lift my spirits to give purpose for my life
Having the talents of a mother and the compassion of a wife.

Well our union has flourished and has stood the test of time
And we have raised two lovely children with the help of the Divine.
And I would not change the purpose for you're truly my delight
But I built a wall with teardrops in my dreams again last night.

The following was written by Gerald who was convicted of murder, following his graduation from the Sycamore Tree Project

Gerald's story

I just received your letter regarding STP and felt like expressing myself in regard to what the course meant to me.

First of all I would like to thank you all for giving me the opportunity to participate and many thanks to you guys for all your effort and time that you gave.

One major thing that has hit me since doing the course is, over the years, one has contemplated the suffering and pain that victims go through. But being locked up and somewhat detached from that, one can only image their grief. From my perspective, I read papers and see the news and am touched with the constant violence and division that our society goes through. 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 life long 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.

The ripple effect is sometimes passed from one generation to the next and our separation in society only fuels more suffering. The course has given me a better understanding of one's actions. The Sycamore Tree Project is a unique way of healing peoples' emotions and allowing us to bridge the gap of hate and negativity.

One person in our group said she felt safe after the visit and I felt protective of these people I'd just met.

Prisoners need to be involved with restoring what they have damaged whether through work, education or other means. We are too far removed from the reality of our actions. Punishment is only a small part of rehabilitation and courses such as the Sycamore Tree Project go a long way to connecting the perpetrators to his role in the suffering he has caused.



One could continue but I think you get the picture. I would love to see many other victims from all walks of life come forward and embrace the course. As mentioned before about the ripple effect, this may become a wave in the future.

Please keep me involved with any further activities and you have my permission to use any of these words in regards to publishing.

May we all learn to connect one and another's role in this life. That role I believe is that we are never separate from anything or anyone.



On the same course an indigenous prisoner read this response out.....

Adam's story

When I came along to the Sycamore Tree Project I didn't really know what I was getting into. I was a bit shy. I was surprised that ladies were going to be involved. I just looked at the other boys and felt that they were looking at me. After the introductions it felt better.

It was hard meeting our visitors and my heart just fell when I learned what they had been through. I'd never seen or felt such emotions before. After we all opened up to each other, it felt much better.

During the course, my heart really went out to Leanne, my ex-wife and it took me right back to when we first got married and the good years with the children. I have nothing against her anymore. Leanne is the mother of my children. I respect her. I regret my bad behaviour and wish her all the best for the future.

I grew up during this project. Jail is not for me. The Sycamore Tree Project showed me that the past is behind me. I have people to care about who care about me and a son to raise in a law-abiding atmosphere. I have a new life ahead of me with a loving, caring lady.

The Sycamore Tree Project tore me apart... in a good way. I had been too afraid to talk about my past, but found that talking about where I went wrong helped me to look at myself. I know I am a better person for doing the project.

I felt that a very special bond has grown between the men who took part in the program. My heart goes out to them and to our very special visitors for a wonderful, happy future.

I have to say thank you to Mike. Your mind is like a computer, Mike. You must be a mind reader you wicked man. Thank you for caring the way you do.

This was read by one of the participants in the first Sycamore Tree Project, at her graduation.

Susan's story

The newsletter from Prison Fellowship arrived along with all the other mundane pieces of mail and I opened it with little anticipation of how the content was going to impact the course of the rest of my life.

I had been involved with a course for inmates a few months previously and had subsequently been put on the mailing list. I was glad about this because I had always had a passion for prison ministry and had recently gone through a pretty messy divorce and had reached an all time low in my spiritual and personal life. I needed a reason to go on and couldn't seem to find any meaning in my life at all.

The article immediately grabbed my attention as I read the leading question; Are you a victim of crime? We need you! PFWA is embarking on the Sycamore Tree Project which offers opportunities for volunteer offenders and victims of crime to participate. Crime victims are given the opportunity to tell offenders how they have been adversely affected and the hurt they feel. Offenders are given similar opportunity to consider how they can make things right with their victims. When the project comes to a close, both offenders and victims are given the chance to express and explain – in public celebration – what they have learned about the meaning and importance of healing the hurt and making things right. We are inviting victims of crime (not direct to the offence) to participate in this project. Offenders participating will also be volunteers.

I read it again. Someone needed me. That was new! I have not felt needed in a very long time. The loneliness and self-imposed isolation that I have experienced in my life had been my companion for such a long time that I found the idea of being needed quite preposterous. I did not allow anybody in my life anymore. I had stopped doing so a long time ago because

I was so used to being hurt and left by all the people that I had loved and trusted most. Now, I merely went to bed with three trusted teddy bears every night. One was given to me as a present by my son the last Christmas I had spent with him and the other two were presents from people who once loved me.

I thought about the question again. Are you a victim of crime? Well, I wasn't quite sure whether I was or not, but I certainly knew that I was living with the consequences of a crime that was committed against me and my whole family. *[At this point, Robin describes the abuse which devastated her life, the details of which are not repeated to protect the family].*

It happened years ago, yet the consequences for me and my whole life had been devastating and it was not going to go away until I dealt with this deep wound. I had never before even thought about what had happened but I had a feeling that the time had come for dealing with it so that healing could take place.

When I started the course, all I wanted to do was simply start dealing with the pain. I had not come to a point where I had allowed anybody into my life again and I knew that I would have to start dealing with it at some point in time.



I felt right from the start that I was the weak link in the chain. Everybody else seemed so in charge of their feelings but I was hurting and weeping and falling apart every time we met after the meetings in prison. What are these people thinking of me? I went home at night and I didn't want to call the children. I felt so resentful and unholy through all of this.

Suddenly I was angry, sad and revengeful. I woke up some mornings in the pit of deepest despair in the knowledge of the futility of the wasted years that can never be taken back. Yet somehow, I want to believe that

there must be a reason behind the madness of it all because the God I serve is a God of purpose and not of chaos. What Satan meant to harm me, God works out for our good.

One day I realised how I had opened my heart to a few people. I had only intended to take a small step outside but instead, a huge crowd entered my life. I looked at the people who were sitting around me and realised in amazement that they were all trying to come to grips with the puzzle of circumstances that have put all of us together in one room. In that moment I made a huge discovery - they had all become my friends. I had bonded with them in a way that you can only bond with someone that you share deep wounds and pain with. We have been tied together in the most amazing way and I have found love again. I have found that people are God's human extension to love us when we are hurting so bad that we can do nothing but love lifeless teddy bears in the hope that we will never hurt again.



I have found healing, understanding and acceptance in the deepest part of this prison because you were willing to listen and affirm me and my feelings and not mock or ridicule me. Thank you for that. I have felt that this program has made a difference in a lot of people's lives because it forced people to look at the way that they behave in a situation and where it was wrong, change it, if it is possible. That is what I am going to do, if that is at all possible for me, because I have let a lot of people down and I am sincerely sorry about that. I am so glad that we can always ask God for second chances!

The Sycamore Tree Project has changed my life. Now I have friends coming and going from my house all the time. I am excited about the next project and I have cut back my work hours to be part of it. I have a reason to go on with my life. My thoughts have stopped taking me down the dark alley and mugging me. Life is definitely worth living.

Thank you for being my friends. Thank you for needing me.

Read by Gordon (also convicted of murder), at his graduation.

Gordon's story

Throughout my incarceration, I have had a lot of time to think about the way I used to behave and interact with people. I have also had a lot of time to think about the way I used to live.

Before I came to prison I never really thought about the damage or the pain I was inflicting on the people closest to me. I was also blind to the fact that through my actions with the drug taking, violence and general disregard for the people around me, I was devastating so many people both directly and indirectly.

During the last eight years, I have also had a lot of time to reflect on the consequences of my actions and I am thankful to have so many of the people that I previously hurt/damaged both physically and emotionally through these actions, continually supporting and encouraging me. I have only been able to achieve this by doing as much as I can through available courses and by talking and listening to the people that are closest to me.

Though I have done many courses, stayed drug free and obtained a trade in the last eight years, I have learnt more in the last eight weeks through the Sycamore Tree Project that I have just completed.

The Sycamore Tree project gave me the opportunity to come face to face with actual victims of crime and for the first time in my life when people show complete disregard for others, actually see the damage that is caused. It was also a great privilege to be able to participate in this project.

To be able to sit among complete strangers who had been direct victims of crimes and hear their stories and see the pain in their eyes was truly

confronting and gave me the determination never to be the person I was before. It also showed me through the passage of time the path to forgiveness could be reached.

I hope my participation in the project helped heal some of the wounds for all and can assure everyone that when the time comes to when I am released back into the community, I will become a useful member of society and that I will achieve every goal I set, use every skill that I have learnt through this project.

Thank you to everyone who participated.



Experience the beauty of language used by this aboriginal prisoner at his graduation.

Henry's Story – Painting with words

The future is like a misty morning. The fog hangs in air like a curtain. Across the land there are hidden valleys, hills, rocks you cannot see until the sun rises and the veil is taken away. You can't see what is there.

We Nyungars, as a people, live from day to day. Year in, year out, trying to survive and we deal with things as they arise. Not much is discussed in the way of planning for the future.

Since being in prison I have had time to reflect on life and I think about birth, life, death and the future. How and what is my place in how I fit into these things. In our Nyungar culture our people are connected in our spiritual links and I know that all other people are also connected. The people that have gone before and the people that are living now and the people that are yet to be born, are one people. Without a past you have no present. Without those you have no future.



When I am released from prison I would try to return to a normal life and be more patient and compassionate to my fellow man. Especially to the victims of crime, the elderly, the young. I believe I have changed in the way I think and look at things. I know it is going to cost me a lot to pay restitution. Maybe that Australian dream of owning my own house for my kids will have to wait. I will work towards fixing things so I will have a clear conscience and I'll hold my head up high and walk straight. Walk into the future as a proud Australian and a benefit to the wider community.

I have never been rich. I don't know what it is like to live in a mansion. I don't know what it is like to never miss out on a meal, to never be short of money or material possessions, but I know this, if my house was destroyed or I lost everything I owned, it wouldn't worry me because I am rich in culture. My children, my brothers and sisters and things that are worth more like freedom, man, you can't put a dollar sign on those things.

My freedom, my little daughter, my life, if I have anything good in me still, let me share it with those who are still imprisoned in their own world. You don't have to be in a cell to be in prison. So free yourselves today. I am going to try to free myself and use my strength and power to help others who are victims.

The course has been a good experience. The course changed me and I see the world in a different way. I now can relate to people, victims of crime and even toward my fellow prisoners.



VICTIM RELIEF FUND

In 2006, prisoners who had participated in the Sycamore Tree Project decided by way of recognition of their need to make reparation to the community, to set up a fund for the relief of victims of crime. It is not generally realised that victimisation often has severe financial consequences and the prisoners wanted to do something about this.

Prisoners earn very little during the period of incarceration, so it was always going to be difficult to raise sufficient funds to do a great deal of good.

Members of the community are accordingly able to back this fund with their own donations which may not exceed in any single donation, the amount given by prisoners.

So far (December 2008), \$6,700 has been raised in this way and \$5,700 has been given away.

The following is a Media Release provided by Graham Bond, the Assistant Superintendent at one of the prisons where the Sycamore Tree Project operates.....

Victims Relief Fund: Media release from the DCS media.

**Prisoners Dig Deep For Abused Children
21st May 2008**

A **PROJECT** that brings victims of crime into prisons, has had such a profound effect on a group of prisoners that they've raised more than \$1,000 for abused children.

Nine prisoners participated in the Sycamore Tree Project run by Prison Fellowship for the first time at Karnet Prison Farm this year.

"The project helps prisoners see the consequences of their crimes and feel remorse for their actions by showing offenders the impact crime has on victims," Assistant Superintendent Graham Bond said.

Victims of crime visited the prison one day a week for seven weeks to meet the nine prisoners. The prisoners' crimes did not involve the victims who participated in the program.

"They talked about the effects of crime, the harms it causes, and how to make things right," Graham said.

"As a consequence, the prisoners came to me and asked if they could raise money for abused children being treated at Princess Margaret Hospital," he said *"I thought it was a great idea".*

The nine prisoners then asked other prisoners for donations. About 100 prisoners obliged with donations ranging from \$2 to \$50.

"It shows the weight that this program carried, and the influence it had on their lives," Graham said. *"We are looking forward to the next program in two or three months time."*

A prisoner presented a money order of \$1,072 to the Sycamore Tree Group Facilitator, Michael Cockram.

Ann has not been involved as yet in the Sycamore Tree Project but is the beneficiary of a donation from the Victim Relief Fund. Ann is the survivor of one of the worst crimes in the history of WA. Her two babies were shot dead by her estranged husband who also shot her in the leg, causing an amputation below the knee, then he suicided. Ann has become the leader of “Angel Hands”, a group that assists people affected by serious personal violence and the money from the Victim Relief Fund was used to help her attend a conference on Victimisation in the USA.

This was her letter of thanks.....

Dear Sycamore Tree Project Graduates

I am writing to express my sincere thanks for the funds that you helped raise and to express how grateful I am to be receiving them. The money will be put toward helping me to present two papers at an international conference in the United States of America. The learning from these presentations will in turn see that many more professionals around the world are better placed to understand the experiences and the needs of people affected by the murder of a loved one.

I think that you should all be proud of the fact that in some way your contributions will be going towards healing the hearts of so many families affected by crime from all over the world.

I commend you all on having had the courage to participate in such a project; you have contributed toward making the world a better place. I also extend to you a challenge, not to let your efforts stop here, please continue to find positive ways to bring about helpful changes to the lives of others so that harm and hurt is less likely to affect you, your loved ones or your fellow human beings.

Finally, I offer to you one of my favourite quotes. I am not sure who said it but it has helped me find an alternative view of many situations in my life, it might help you or someone you know one day. *“A problem is an opportunity in drag!”*

Gratefully yours
Ann O’Neill

Finally

Making this book has involved a process of choice from a lot of useful and moving material. For the most part, the names chosen are not the true names of the authors whose identity has been protected.

Over and over again we hear survivors of crime speak of experiencing something of value in their encounters with people who are, in a way, the precise mirror of their own problem. Sometimes it answers a deep need for the utter devastation to be described and received by someone accountable in some symbolic way for that. Often the story has been buried for years and uncovering it amounts to a supreme act of courage. They talk of “finding their anger” or “being able to let go of fear” or simply experiencing a new sense of empowerment.

For the prisoners there seems to be a similar need to be given the opportunity to tell “the whole story” (often the story of a very damaged life), to let go of bitterness and make the sometimes almost impossible decision to make amends to their victims and society itself. Hope arises in the midst of despair.

As David, one of the prisoners on the first Sycamore Tree Project, expressed in a letter - *“A cloud that once hovered over me has been lifted”*. To the survivors on the visiting team he said - *“I know God shall always whisper in your ear”*.



**EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST
ARE WELCOMED**



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***"A bruised reed he will not break"* Isaiah 42 v 3**