

City

**Quilt speaks of pain and courage: Stories of horror, loss and compassion are sewn together into talking art**

Don Butler  
The Ottawa Citizen  
1,221 words  
14 November 2005  
Ottawa Citizen  
Final  
C1 / Front  
English  
Copyright © 2005 Ottawa Citizen

He stood over me as I slept and said, "You're not going to leave me, you f---ing bitch. I'm going to kill you." I looked up, had enough time to put my arm up over my face, and he shot me point-blank through the head and left me for dead.

In the disembodied voices of the blameless and the culpable, the Justice Storytelling Quilt tells tales of horrific acts, unimaginable loss and extraordinary compassion.

I put him on the bus and before he left he said, "Mom, I won't get dead. I love you. I'll be OK." That was June 19th and August 19th, the cops come to my door and say that he's dead anyway.

The stories are raw and moving and sometimes hard to endure. A mother talks about surviving an attack by her stepson, who had just murdered her two young children. A wife recounts her empathy for a teen who kicked her husband to death. A husband and wife express tortured feelings about a son who killed their daughter.

In all, about 40 people from five provinces contributed stories and squares to As I unravel small maps of my spirit, a multimedia quilt created by Ottawa-born artist and dancer Meagan O'Shea.

It will be unveiled today at 5 p.m. at the Ottawa Court House.

A touch of the quilt's multicoloured squares, which encircle a stylized tree of life, activates recordings in which victims, offenders and family members talk about the crimes that reshaped their lives.

Some of the most poignant incorporate images of lost loved ones -- a studio portrait of a smiling boy and his infant sister; a young man in an Adidas T-shirt, hands thrust casually in the pockets of his pants; a fragile-looking young woman with cascading blond hair.

One square shows a cracked red heart, partly stitched together, but yet unhealed. On another, the embroidered word "courage" appears below a fiery setting sun. A third portrays a small angel floating above a grieving couple.

The \$20,000 quilt project was commissioned by the **Church Council on Justice** and Corrections, an NGO representing 11 different faiths, for Restorative Justice Week in Ottawa.

It's part of a new strategy to use the arts to encourage people to think about crime and punishment in different ways. "It's our first big attempt at doing that," explains Lorraine Berzins, the council's community chair of justice.

In particular, the council hopes to spread the ideas of restorative justice, which focus on healing the harm caused by crime rather than retribution and punishment.

"We really need to humanize justice," says Ms. Berzins. "I hope people will be struck by the human stories of what people go through."

The quilt's contributors voice volatile and often contradictory emotions. One woman recalls her first meeting with the youth who killed her husband. "It just ripped my heart apart looking at him," she says. "He was somebody's kid."

Two parents talk about the son who killed their daughter. "I never felt anger," says the father, "just bewilderment." Echoes the mother: "I can't be angry at a lost soul."

A victim of sexual abuse recounts her astonishing reaction to the sex offenders she met in prison encounters. "I ended up loving these inmates, even though they'd done horrible things to their own daughters. You see them as people, very wounded people, who want to change."

Ms. Berzins got the idea for the project after hearing about Ms. O'Shea's multimedia show *First Kissed*, which also incorporates an interactive story quilt. "It just immediately struck me that this would be a really good medium," she says.

Mennonite quilters Susannah and David Shantz quilted the textile, and Toronto computer artist Dave Pijuan-Nomura added touch sensors that transmit signals to computers to activate the appropriate message.

Ms. O'Shea, who interviewed each participant and worked with them to create the quilt blocks, says she intimidated at the prospect of sitting down with offenders, victims and their families.

One of her first meetings was with three convicted murderers in a Quebec prison. "I got thrown into the deep end."

The discussions were emotionally draining. "I've interviewed more parents who have lost a child to murder than I would care to know about," she says.

One murderer serving a life sentence broke into tears several times as they talked. "This man was so repentant. I really walked away with such compassion for this guy."

The encounters have radically shifted her perceptions. "Of all the people I met," she says, "no one is a monster. They are all poor, hurt, suffering people."

As part of the project, Ms. O'Shea created a dance, inspired by the stories she collected for the quilt. She will perform it at a dinner on Parliament Hill that closes Restorative Justice Week next Saturday to original music by Toronto composer John Mark Sherlock.

The dance, she says, is really a mediation on the stories she has heard. "I don't want it to be didactic. I'm not preaching."

That's mostly because the issues involved are so complex. "There's no way to say yes or no," she says. "Yes, the crimes are wrong. But there's no simple answer to any of this."

Her main challenge, she says, was to do justice to the people she has met. "I feel a great sense of responsibility to the truth and reality of the stories."

The quilt is one of several new arts and justice initiatives the church council is undertaking. Among other things, it is working with Ottawa interdisciplinary artist c.j. fleury to create artistic tools to educate the public on the human work of justice the conventional justice system often ignores.

The Justice Storytelling Quilt will be on display at various locations in Ottawa this week.

The church council hopes to use it as an educational tool in communities across Canada, though that depends on obtaining funding. "We've done this really by the skin of our teeth," Ms. Berzins says.

#### Follow the Quilt

The Justice Storytelling Quilt will be unveiled today at 5 p.m. in the atrium of the Ottawa Court House, 161 Elgin St. After that, it will be on display at these locations:

Nov. 15: Sparks link entrance of Justice Canada building, 284 Wellington St., 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.; and Saint Paul University amphitheatre, 223 Main St., side entrance, 7 to 9 p.m.

Nov. 16: Main floor, Ottawa City Hall, 110 Laurier Ave. W., 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Nov. 17: Saint Paul University amphitheatre, side entrance, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Nov. 18: Main floor, Ottawa City Hall, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Ran with fact box "Follow the Quilt", which has been appended to the story.

Colour Photo: Ashley Fraser, The Ottawa Citizen / Dave Pijuan-Nomura, left, Lorraine Berzins, and Meagan O'Shea brought together their individual talents and skills to produce an interactive quilt that plays recordings of victims, offenders and family members whose lives were reshaped by violent crime.

Document OTCT000020051114e1be0001r