

CATHY FAMILATHE

My name is Cathy Familathe. I am a lifelong resident of LA County, born and raised in the Harbor area (Wilmington). Been here my entire life, other than about a year I lived in San Francisco. I'm 66 years old and my family has been here about 110 years.

'You feel broken.'

I got married when I was 20-21 and in my marriage I became a domestic violence victim. My husband would do drugs and alcohol and hit me. The lifesaver for me was the hotline for domestic violence. I remember sitting at my desk at lunchtime and then I called. I got through to somebody and she worked with me and ended up getting me in therapy. Little by little I worked through it, and we eventually split up. I could see it wasn't going to change.

But afterward, you feel like it's your fault. You feel like, *what was wrong with me? Why didn't he love me?* You feel broken. Coming from a traditionally Mexican family, they didn't want me to marry him because my father knew he was not a good guy. I didn't want to prove him right. Little by little, I started drinking more after the divorce. It escalated for five or six years. I was knee deep in alcoholism up until I was 30 years old, and it escalated after my 18-year-old nephew Anthony was murdered 37 years ago.

'He pulled out a gun.'

In 1988 the worst tragedy that can happen to any one family happened to ours. I got the call about 9:30 PM that one of my nephews had been shot. My first thought was okay, one of them got shot but they are going to be okay. I ran to the hospital and unbeknownst to the doctors I was kneeling down on the floor on the other side of the bed holding my nephew Anthony's hand praying and crying. The doctors were looking at the X-rays and talking amongst themselves and saying that since it went into his temple on one side and lodged on the other there was no way there was going to be any brain activity or that he was going to make it. I think I knew it before anyone else. I had to go outside and try to figure out how to tell my brother what I had just heard, but I couldn't do it. I waited for the doctor's to tell my brother and my sister-in-law that it didn't look good and that their precious son had just been murdered. It was so unfathomable that Anthony had been shot. He was such a good kid, who would do this to him? He was shot on Friday night about 8 o'clock and about 4:00 pm on Sunday my brother and sister-in-law made the

heart wrenching decision after several brain scans to take him off life support. They did this so that his organs could be donated, because that is what Anthony would have wanted. That was the kind of young man he was, selfless. He was only 18 years old!

On the night of his wake we found out that it was an acquaintance who we believe was trying to get into a gang who shot him. Because he pleaded guilty we were spared a long trial but it didn't take away any of the pain of losing Anthony away. Thirty-seven years later the pain is still here, it will NEVER GO AWAY! The murderer was sentenced to 25 years to life because the judge said, "this was his first offense." I screamed, "first offense, what more could he do, he didn't steal his money or his truck, he stole his life." He ended up doing 33 years after us attending 6 paroles hearings over a ten-year period and now he has since been released. Released to live his life, get married, have children, live and breathe another day.

Our hands were tied, we did all we could do, we needed to just accept it. It was really hard for us to accept and I think we have accepted it more for our own sanity than anything else. You know it is hard for me to talk about this even now, it brings up such tremendous pain and sorrow and anger that someone thinks they can take someone's life.

'I am throwing my life away and Anthony's was ripped out of his hands.'

I lived with my brother for a little while and my alcoholism was really bad. [Before Anthony died,] when I was living with my brother, Anthony was 18 and I was almost 30. He would tell me, "What are you doing Auntie Cathy? Why are you drinking so much? What's going on? Why are you doing this?" Here's this 18-year-old kid telling me about my alcoholism. Fast forward, Anthony gets murdered, and it was '88 February. I drank from February to June 1, 1989. It progressively got worse because now I had the trauma of my nephew being murdered. I had no children at the time. I wasn't married, all my nieces and nephews were my kids. I watched them. I changed their diapers. I fed them. I went to their school events. They were my babies. My drinking escalated. But in the back of my mind, I can hear Anthony's voice, "Why are you doing this?" On June 1, I woke up and I said to myself, *here I am throwing my life away and Anthony's was ripped out of his hands. I can't do it anymore.* I went into rehab, and it's been 36 years. I've never relapsed. I could no longer drink and not honor him.

'Never in our wildest dreams did we think that it would happen again in our family.'

Never in our wildest dreams did we think that it would happen again in our family. In 2010, my cousin Brandon was murdered. It was a love triangle. He was murdered by a gang member who got something like 93 years because of the murder and his priors. My cousin was not a gang member and did not deserve to be murdered.

I have a very large extended family. I had not met my cousin Tesha. She is a second or third cousin. My parents grew up with her grandparents. Going through my genealogy with my family, I realized that we were related and called her mom and her sister, and we happened to go to the same church. Sure enough, she is a distant relative. I was not involved in her murder, in the case or anything, didn't know her, but talking to my family, her husband murdered her. This was a domestic violence case. He shot her and killed her. He was prosecuted.

Then another one is my dad's cousins' grandson who was murdered. He was not part of a gang. He'd had his issues with drugs, not really hanging out in the best places, but he wasn't bothering anybody. Once again a gang member decided it was okay to kill someone over a stupid disagreement and he is spending the rest of his life in prison.

'You do not have the right to murder anybody.'

This is a systemic problem. I don't care what life you're brought up in, I don't care what your circumstances are at home, you still do not have the right to murder anybody. But we do need to understand that there are factors out there. We as a community need to address them, like the drug use, like the domestic violence that occurs. When we begin to see these problems, [we need] to help these kids before they murder someone. But I'm going to say it again: You do not have the right to murder anybody and if you do, I am always going to advocate that you stay in prison for the rest of your life since you took a life or at least as long as possible. Because I do not believe once you've taken a life that you have a right to come out here and have a life.

When Anthony was murdered, my sister-in-law needed some support. That's how I encountered Parents Of Murdered Children for the first time (a group that supports all homicides survivors, not just parents). When my three cousins got murdered and there was a lot of homicide in the Harbor area at the time, we were thinking to ourselves, *we need a support group for these families*. We petitioned to our national organization, and we asked to open the Los Angeles Chapter of Parents Of Murdered Children.

Our chapter has been instrumental to helping me heal. We have meetings monthly. You don't have to speak if you don't want to, but you can talk about it. When you're sitting in the room with other people that have lost a loved one, you can talk about the murder itself, no matter how traumatic or how many times you need to talk about it. Nobody's going to tell you to stop talking. We're here to provide that platform for you to come together and not be judged.

We get together and memorialize our loved ones and remember them. We provide a Christmas event; the holidays are the hardest. They have some food. They talk to each other. They hug. They cry. They tell stories. They hang an ornament on the Christmas tree in memory of their loved one.

We do court accompaniments. We go to court with them for the hearings, to hug them, hold their hand, give them support. We have a lot of knowledge now from sitting in court and relationships with the right professionals to help them. A lot of times the survivors, their mind is all over the place and they're traumatized. They're in the courtroom, they're seeing that person, and they don't hear everything. They don't understand what questions to ask and we're there to bridge that gap, along with the victim advocates.

This is something that the County has struggled to do because of short staffing of the Victim Advocates (trained personnel) in the courts. This new DA is looking to correct that by hiring more advocates. The County needs the funding though.. That gap has to be filled. Because not only are the [victim advocates] in court with them, but they also tell them the resources that are [available]. They're there to explain things. All the support groups are saying the same thing. We got to get victim advocates staffed up.

We fundraise; all of us volunteer. We have to find ways constantly to keep the doors open and pay for parking, and for traveling because LA County's big. We have about 400 families in our organization and we get about 2-3 new families weekly. Out of our 400, a quarter of them are unsolved. I've been told there are 10,000+ unsolved murders in LA County. I know that is because [police are] underfunded, understaffed, overworked and people are afraid to come forward with information. It's hard for them, with a minimal amount of staffing, to work the cold cases, let alone the ones that are occurring every day, every week. Now there's DNA and we don't have the funding to test or re-test things. It takes months and months to do DNA testing. It takes months and months to do fingerprinting. The resources are out there that could solve these cases, but we don't have the money and we don't have the personnel.

The main thing right now is working to keep it in the forefront. You never know when somebody hears or sees the face. Circumstances change, marriages fall apart and, all of a sudden, the wife's willing to

talk. Somebody's going to jail for a long time and they're willing to talk. Somebody's heart is touched and they're like, "I can't deal with it anymore." You just never know. But without keeping the [victims] out in the forefront, they get forgotten. Families are re-victimized every day that goes by because they don't know who, why, what. They're not given their day in court. We stand by these families and help them with resources to help them solve their cases.

I wish I didn't have to go through all that.'

Am I sorry I went through all of this domestic violence, alcoholism, murder? Of course. But I would never hide it. I can't help somebody if they don't know what I've experienced. If they know I'm a recovering alcoholic, then I can talk to them about that. If they know that I'm a domestic violence survivor, if they know I've experienced murder, I can talk to them about that. I wish I didn't have to go through all of that, but I did.

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I understand the pain and sorrow and I know that it will never ever go away. But I do know, it gets a little easier. I believe it gets easier when you don't isolate yourself, when you get in support groups, when you talk about it. There's going to be pockets of moments where it's devastating and you're overwhelmed. But there are going to be times of joy when you can share with other people your joy and your pain. It does get easier. Don't isolate. Don't give up. Let us help you!

