Introduction

We are a country fascinated by the minutiae of movie stars' glamorous lives and scandals. We are glued to news and TV shows about crime, eager to digest the gory details. Newscasts and magazines understand this fascination, responding with daily stories of mischief, mayhem, and murder. We love to consume other people's troubles and embarrassments, and this makes sense because hearing about other people's problems makes us feel better about our own. Since we do not know these people, we live vicariously and judge them with no strings attached. We become armchair quarterbacks—deciding what people ought to do or ought not to have done. It is common for people to attach blame to strangers—this helps to reinforce the sense that we are not as vulnerable as they are because we are not like them; we would not make similar choices. Believing that we are different, or wiser, provides us with the illusion that we have some control over our own lives.

This attitude changes when something terrible happens to us or to a family member or cherished friend. Becoming a victim of a violent crime is terrifying. Your entire world changes in moments, and events throw you unwillingly into uncharted places that are unscripted, unimaginable, and painful. The immediate circumstances are understandable: when violence is sudden, unpredictable, and horrifying, you might react with shock, denial, anxiety, fear, guilt, anger, and terror. If you are religious or spiritual, you may find solace in your faith or beliefs and use them to help you through the pain, or you might doubt your faith in a God who allows bad things to happen to good people. Whatever your feelings, you find that in order to function, you must compartmentalize your utter despair and grief because there are practical matters to handle or because you need to answer questions from police, detectives, medical personnel, lawyers, and victim services workers or because you have other people looking to you for reassurance. Quite possibly, depending on the crime, you might have to arrange a memorial service or funeral or to find a temporary safe place to live or to deal with Child Protective Services. Even given this array of circumstances, all victims share a common experience: the life they once knew changed instantly, and not only
is the new place in which they find themselves terrifying, but there is no map to guide them in navigating a course back to a “normal” life.

No one asks to be a part of this journey, and no one is aware of the complicated emotions it will unleash or how it might affect other people in his or her life. Unresolved questions can trouble victims—on a good day these questions might feel like the proverbial pebble trapped in a shoe, but on a bad day they are more like a crushing boulder. Many victims feel rage, though they do not necessarily know why. Anger sometimes strikes at the oddest moments and can be (mis)directed at beloved family members or friends. Self-doubt, self-blame, self-hatred, or self-destructive acts are all part and parcel of the aftermath of violent victimization. With them comes fear, which limits victims’ autonomy, and a pain so deep that victims describe feeling as though their hearts are ripped apart. These responses reflect what social psychologists call “shattered assumptions,” a phrase that describes how victims feel when their equilibrium is thrown off balance and nothing they try can fix things. Victims wonder whether they will even survive the incident, asking themselves questions like, “Can I live with this, or will it destroy me?” Kathleen O’Hara, a psychologist whose son was murdered, asks, “Can we, despite our tragedies, in spite of the horror in the world, still believe it is a good place? Can we either maintain our general optimism or learn to develop it, after disaster strikes? . . . An even greater tragedy would be to allow violence to keep us from joy; then truly, it has destroyed us.”

The people whose stories appear in this book have something in common—they could not come to terms with crimes that changed their lives profoundly, despite their various attempts to confront the situations, to grapple with them by talking to people or trying therapy and even by moving on and accomplishing other things such as getting married, having children, earning degrees, or getting new jobs. Something lingered that was unresolved, taking its toll on their daily lives, preventing them from finding peace. Grief, anger, and revenge fantasies can be immobilizing in the short term; they can be devastating in the long term. The victims/survivors portrayed in this book experienced a range of crimes—child sexual abuse (father-daughter incest and grandfather-granddaughter molestation), stranger rape and attempted murder, marital rape and battering, deaths of loved ones killed by drunk drivers, and murder. Although these incidents occurred from six to twenty-eight years ago, the aftermath of the trauma and violence continued on a daily basis, often in baffling ways. Even the people they loved most did not understand their feelings of unease and of being unsettled, and many among their family and friends no doubt wanted to forget about the terrible things that had happened and move on.
But for many victims this is impossible. They may appear on the surface to have emerged “on the other side,” since most are functioning adults who hold down responsible jobs and are actively engaged in parenting and other activities. Inside, however, they are stuck. Being “stuck” is the moment when others’ initial sympathy turns to impatience and victims feel isolated in grief that seems as fresh to them as when the crime first occurred. It is a common enough process: victims initially receive our sympathy; over time, however, we become weary, and compassion fatigue sets in. We wonder why they do not just “get over it” or do not “try harder” to heal. Sometimes we might come to believe they are using their victimization as an excuse or to get attention. We wish that victims would reach some kind of closure and move forward, if only to allay our own impatience or guilt about their pain. We urge them to embrace life again and not to dwell in darkness. But finding this kind of closure is elusive for many victims of violent crime. Kathleen O’Hara writes about this kind of grief, which she calls “a grief like no other”: “There simply is no closure. It is never over—you are never healed. It is more true to say that you are moving on, as an ever-changing process; that you are putting your life back together again in new ways, but that these ways are laced through with tender memories of your loved one, not just the violent act that you have been submerged in for so long.”

Victims commonly talk about being misunderstood, silenced, or stigmatized by people in their families and social or work networks who can not fathom that, after all this time, they are still not “over” it. Thus, victims’ experiences often weigh heavily on others, becoming the proverbial elephant in the room, surrounded by silence and denial. Though family members, friends, and co-workers may see the lingering consequences of the crime, they refuse to openly acknowledge it, or they simply grow tired of talking about it and wish the victim would tire too. Weariness may even give way to silencing, trivializing, or victim blaming, which reinforces the mistreatment many victims have already received in their dealings with the criminal justice system.

Resiliency eludes many victims. When one has experienced the loss of a child or the pain of rape or some other deeply traumatic and severely violent event, it is common to feel a sense of loss or hurt so deep that moving forward with one’s own life seems impossible. Yet some victims of horrific crimes astonish us by their ability to surmount the seemingly insurmountable. For instance, many Holocaust survivors who lost parents, siblings, spouses, and children chose to embrace life and begin again, although they could not have imagined rebuilding their shattered lives at the time. Other
victims speak of how the experience of surviving trauma or violence leads them to want to help others. In fact, this motivation on the part of one victim to turn pain into solace for others is the springboard for this book.

An offender’s act not only affects a victim’s life; it also inevitably affects a host of people in both the victim’s and offender’s lives. Family members and friends of the offender often recoil with horror upon hearing about the brutality of the crimes committed. They may also be overwhelmed by helplessness. Children of offenders are greatly affected by losing a parent to prison, in addition to the financial insecurity and shame that accompany the arrest and incarceration of their parent. Anyone connected to a victim also reels from the initial shock of the crime, as well as the long-term consequences that shape the victim’s life. Even the best case—arrest, a successful prosecution, and a punishment—rarely completely mitigates the effects that crime has on victims’ or offenders’ families, friendship networks, or the community. But importantly, just as bad stuff affects everyone in the victims’ and offenders’ orbits, so too will good stuff. Offenders’ expressions of accountability, for example, may help to heal and restore their victims. And the healing of victims, in turn, may bring peace to their family. What is clear from the stories of both the victims and offenders is that while the devastation is widespread, so too can be the healing.

**Victims’ Voices Heard**

In the chapters that follow, I describe an approach used by a program, Victims’ Voices Heard, to help victims reassemble lives shattered by severe violence. The participants in this particular program—both victims and offenders—based on their positive experiences, were eager to share their insights with a larger audience, with the hope of giving other victims and their loved ones another tool to help in their recovery. In the many, many hours I spent interviewing them, the victims/survivors used words such as “life-saving” and “transformative” to describe the program, and the offenders expressed deep gratitude for the opportunity to be a part of their victims’ healing process.

Victims’ Voices Heard (VVH) is a victim-centered restorative justice program that brings victims into face-to-face contact with their offenders to receive information, to tell offenders about the consequences of their violence, and to help them regain the control over their lives that was taken from them, first by the offender and then by the criminal justice system. It is a therapeutic program designed to help victims with their healing and recovery; it is not designed to affect the outcome of criminal cases. In fact,
the offenders I discuss here were already incarcerated (or, in two cases, had finished a prison and probation term), and offenders received no incentive (such as parole or clemency appeal considerations) for their participation. The real people featured in this book, both victims and offenders, have chosen to use their private experiences and the knowledge and peace achieved through the VVH program to give a gift to others whose lives are affected in similar ways. This sense of purpose was something that developed as they participated in the VVH program; it was not a direction that either victims or offenders ever thought they would take prior to their involvement in the restorative justice process.

My hope is to present the stories of the participants in the VVH program in an accessible way, sidestepping the minefields of academic jargon. Since restorative justice models are relatively new, I do raise conceptual issues and research dilemmas that seem essential to a clear understanding of the goals of programs like these. However, I focus most directly on the motivations, processes, hopes, and outcomes of the victims and offenders who invested so much time, emotion, courage, and effort into the VVH program. Readers seeking a more in-depth discussion of research related to restorative justice should see appendix A. Appendix B provides additional information on the research methodology, and appendix C offers more details of the VVH program itself.

**Restorative Justice**

Victims’ Voices Heard, the program that is the subject of this book, is one of the many creative restorative justice (RJ) programs that have developed around the country and worldwide in response to growing concerns that victims’ needs are unmet by the criminal justice system (see appendix A for a more detailed description of the types and range of RJ programs). Howard Zehr, one of the founders of the RJ movement, contrasts criminal justice and restorative justice. In the traditional criminal justice model, crime is a violation of the law and is committed against the state. Breaking the law means that guilt must be determined through the adversarial system, and punishment must be imposed; the focus is on offenders receiving the penalty deserved for their harmful actions. However, in the contest between the offender and the state, victims’ voices and needs are peripheral to achieving justice for the offender. In contrast, the restorative justice model sees crime as a violation of people and relationships. This violation creates obligations to make things right; the focus is on meeting victims’ needs and facilitating offenders’ responsibility in order to repair the harm.
Most restorative justice programs, including the one explored in this book, involve some kind of encounter between the victim and offender, a meeting that occurs only after extensive preparation. Sometimes letters are exchanged in preparation for a face-to-face meeting, and often victims and offenders select a support person to accompany them to such a meeting. Trained facilitators oversee these dialogues and use their skills to balance the concerns of all parties involved. Face-to-face meetings, letter exchanges, and other practices provide the opportunity for participants to explore what happened, for victims to receive answers to questions and assurances of safety to tell their stories and express their feelings, and for offenders to tell their stories, take responsibility for their actions, and display genuine remorse. Restorative justice provides a context for forgiveness, but there is no pressure to choose this path. The personal journeys related in the chapters to follow show the range of emotions and actions that victims/survivors experience. As they confront their unrelenting grief while working with the dialogue process, the victims choose courage over fear. During these journeys with VVH, they honor themselves and their loved ones while finding a path that provides them with greater peace. Their stories of transformation are inspiring.

In the chapters that follow, I place the VVH program in a context of both its general and specific significance. In chapter 2, I explore the rise in popularity of restorative justice programs in the United States and other countries and draw the contours of some of the debates about using such programs for addressing the needs of victims/survivors of severe violence, particularly for the crimes of child abuse, domestic violence, and sexual assault. Chapter 2 also describes more specific details involving the nuts and bolts of VVH. In chapter 3, I describe the foundation and catalyst for VVH, as it was shaped by the tireless and compassionate efforts of its founder, Kim Book, a mother whose teenage daughter was murdered. I emphasize the power of storytelling and how personal narratives can create life-changing moments for the people involved as well as for the people who hear their stories. Chapters 4 through 12 tell the stories of the victim-offender pairings. Chapter 13 provides an analysis of the themes and patterns that emerged in the multiple data-collection sites—the interviews with participants, the case files, the interviews with the program facilitator(s), and the viewings of the victim-offender face-to-face dialogue videos. The final chapter explores unfinished business related to VVH specifically as well as to therapeutic restorative justice programs more generally. It also offers an update on the victims’ and offenders’ lives since the completion of the VVH program and what transpired since my initial interviews with them.