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Marjean Fichtenberg, I am so proud of your advocating my friend.

Survivors (not victims) of crime share struggles at special forum

By Rochelle Baker
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Marjean Fichtenberg, member of National Parole Board's victim advisory committee, Rob Davies, of Correctional Services Canada, Jean Cusworth, and former inmate Glenn Flett, of LINC, share stories and solutions Thursday at a UCFV forum for National Victims of Crime Week.



Fichtenberg was sharing the story of her 2 1/2-year struggle for the truth about the death of her 25-year-old son, Dennis, who was murdered in 1991 by a violent offender in Prince George.

As a result of her unrelenting quest for information, it would emerge that the offender, out on parole, was an RCMP informant and the police had used their influence with Corrections Canada to have him released.

Fichtenberg was speaking Thursday night at a public forum at UCFV, organized to mark National Victims of Crime Awareness Week which runs April 22 through 28.

At the forum, survivors, criminal justice professionals, and convicted offenders came together to discuss the impact of violent crime on its survivors and the

community at large, and to discuss possible solutions.

Fichtenberg told the audience that society's notion of justice needs to shift.

"Right now, the only measure of justice is what happens to offenders," she said.

"Society says to offenders, we're going to hold you, offer you programs and help you become a productive member of society. There is no such societal response to victims."

During her struggle, Fichtenberg would find herself furthering victims' rights.

She succeeded in getting the province to call a public inquest, and would win an out-of-court settlement with the Correctional Service of Canada, the >>

National Parole Board and the RCMP.

But more importantly, the board followed the inquest's recommendation to set up a victims' ombudsman, and formed the Victims Advisory Committee in the Pacific region, and Fichtenberg is a member.

Jean Cusworth, and her husband Terry, do not like to refer to themselves of victims of crime.

They refer to themselves as survivors.

Their 19-year-old daughter Jennifer was murdered Oct. 16, 1993 and the case remains unsolved.

"We now know we're going to get through this, but we'll never get over it," says Cusworth.

"A young woman might toss her hair a certain way, and it will trigger that pain, and knock us to our knees. We know that."

At the forum she read out letters she wrote to her daughter's murderer which ran in papers province wide.

"I truly believe you have to depersonalize that person or you can't live with it," she said.

Although she doesn't know if the offender ever read the letters, and they were painful to write, some good came out of them.

They brought other estranged families together, and on one occasion police read them to a offender who then confessed to the murder of a 16-year-old girl and led investigators to the body.

Cusworth said survivors of crime need to be their own advocates.

As the result of active involvement in their daughter's case, the Cusworths went onto work with the RCMP to provide a victim/survivor perspective to their work and to assist other victims of crime.

While reading her letters, when the grief overwhelmed her, Cusworth had panelist Glenn Flett continue reading them for her.

Flett, is an offender who spent 25 years behind bars after shooting a manager to death during a robbery at Hudson's Bay in Toronto.

In 1982 he became a Christian and began to work with other offenders while in jail.

Committed to the concept of restorative justice with it's goals of empowering both victims, rehabilitating offenders and a safer community, Flett went on to found LINC, Long-Term Inmates Now in the Community.

Flett said it's important for survivors and offenders to work together because homicide impacts the whole community.

"LINC wasn't created just for prisoners, but to connect people. I really believe offenders like myself want to be included and want to change given the opportunity. I'm not unique, but I was given unique opportunities."

Panelist Rob Davies, regional administrator for aboriginal initiatives and acting director of Kwikwëxwel'hp Healing Village, a minimum security institution for First Nations offenders, spoke on behalf

of Corrections Services Canada.

He also spoke of the importance of restorative justice and the possibilities it offers to help victims and provide meaningful accountability for offenders.

The forum's final panelist was Val Hughes, sister of Kerry Koski one of the 67 missing women from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

Executive director of the Missing Women's Legacy Society, Hughes said everyone in society has to be accountable for violent crime.

"Not just offenders, but all of us," she said.

"We contribute to the increasing violence in our world, because we don't contribute to its solution.

There are other women just around the corner from us being brutalized. Justice is what you and I are going to do about it."

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