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Restorative Justice program helps sisters find forgiveness.

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Desiree and Megan Price pose near a memorial sign for their brother James Freestone at the intersection of Columbia Road and 17th Avenue South. Freestone was killed by a drunk driver fleeing the police in 2010. Both sisters sat down with the man who ended their brother's life and now forgive him. Photo by Tess Williams/Grand Forks Herald

It's the little things.

Sometimes Desiree Price will see a science fiction book and she'll buy it even though she knows she won't read it-but James would have liked it. Or it's photos. James was "a camera guy," always trying to capture the beauty in everyday life. Even little electric candles can remind her of June 5, 2010. That night hundreds of people held up the little flickering lights while huddled on the corner of Columbia Road and 17th Avenue South to mourn two young people killed in a crash.

Desiree and her sister Megan took different paths toward grief but both ended in the same place-sitting in the state penitentiary across from the man who took their brother's life. And with time, they've both done something they once thought was impossible-they've forgiven him.

June 5, 2010

Twenty-one year old James Freestone was headed home from the Relay for Life cancer walk with three friends the night he died.

Megan remembers him as a goofball. He was heavily involved in theater and music and studying at Northland Community College to be a music teacher.

When she was 16, she moved in with him. He was her best friend and the ever-protective big brother.

Desiree remembers the chapters James would share with her from the science-fiction trilogy he'd begun to write. She said he was endlessly patient and helped her overcome dyslexia to develop a love for books.

While going to college, James worked at Hugo's, where he quickly became friends with coworkers Katie Olson, Tasha Brenno and Michael Badurek.

The group went to the Relay for Life on June 5 and left University Park around 2 a.m.

About a mile away, police tried to pull over Celso Garza near Columbia Road and University Avenue after he ran a red light. Court documents say he sped away as an officer approached his 1995 Chevrolet Lumina. He reached speeds of around 100 mph. Garza had been drinking that night and also had a warrant for his arrest. He made it only about a mile before he smashed into another car at the intersection of Columbia Road and 17th Avenue South.

James was pronounced dead on scene. Tasha died at the hospital. Katie suffered severe injuries and Michael's arm was broken. Police arrested Garza, who had 11 charges filed against him, including homicide.

'James didn't make it'

It was about 6 a.m. when officers knocked on the door. It was the beginning of summer and then 16-year-old Desiree remembered waking up to commotion.

"I woke up annoyed. I was like, this is the summer and you guys are being really loud," she said. When she walked out of her room, her irritation melted into concern. There was still a police officer standing outside the open doorway, her brother was standing in the doorway of her parents' bedroom, her father was rushing to get dressed, her little brother was under a blanket crying, Megan was crying on the couch with her boyfriend and her mother was on her knees in the bedroom floor.

Desiree asked three times before the news came out. "There was a car accident. James didn't make it," her father told her. Megan said she couldn't accept it at first. She called his phone on repeat. "I just didn't get it. I was like, no, this is a mistake, I'm supposed to get lunch with him today," she said. Desiree said the rest of the day is a blur. She remembers calling family members and people showing up throughout the day. Megan remembers people trying to feed her all day to comfort her. The family headed to the accident scene that morning.

"I hadn't realized how big of a scale it was on, because at that point I'd just knew that a drunk driver hit them," Desiree said. "But it was pretty bad. There were full on skid marks in the grass."

She remembers kicking at sand on the sidewalk and seeing red underneath. She learned later that was the exact spot James died.

Hundreds of people stood on the corner that night enveloping the family with hugs and crying for the lives lost.

And then there was just time and so much waiting-the sisters said it felt like forever.

'A weight off of my heart'

Garza's bond was set at \$105,000 when he appeared in court two days after the crash. He didn't enter a plea until Aug. 18 and it wasn't until April that the family had final answers.

Garza changed his plea to guilty on five charges-two for homicide while fleeing police, two of assault while fleeing police and one for drunken driving.

In total he was sentenced to 20 years in prison. With good time, his expected release date is April 13, 2026.

"I don't think that anyone who has ever lost someone ever thinks that the person gets enough time," Desiree said. "But I was happy that he was going to go away and that he was going to have to face the consequences of his actions."

Megan said she knew she wanted to meet Garza as the court process wrapped up. She'd looked at his Facebook profile and saw pictures of him smiling proudly with his daughter.

"For me, it was never like he was a horrible person. He didn't set out to kill anyone that night," she said. "I knew that he had kids and we're taking their dad away and that's not a happy thing, but at the same time you can't just say 'All right, you can go now.' So for me it was this really weird internal struggle the entire time of really caring about what happened to him, but at the same time not wanting James and Tasha to have died for nothing."

"It's not like it just impacted just our family, it impacted Tasha's and Michael's and Katie's-and his. His kids by the time he gets out are going to be grownups and very likely not have any relationship with him for the remainder of their life. And they have to deal with that and they didn't do anything, they had no part in this."

Desiree's decision was not as instantaneous. She said she held onto more anger than Megan and needed to look Garza in the eyes to understand if he was really sorry for his actions.

"We both wanted to go for different reasons and wanted different things out of it," she said.

A victim advocate from the court connected Megan to Joel Friesz, and she began working up to the meeting. Friesz is the leader of Lutheran Social Services' Restorative Justice Program. The agency collaborates with the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation to offer victim-initiated meetings. Friesz said both parties must agree to meet and are counseled beforehand to prepare them for what might happen. The sisters said their family and friends were conflicted about their decision to visit Garza. "I was OK with him (Garza) when I left and it was hard to find a way to explain that knowing what everyone else was feeling," Megan said. "And not to make him come off as like this really good guy that they needed to get to know, but it was a struggle between knowing how my family felt and knowing that was super-justified and knowing that I couldn't feel that way for the rest of my life."

Megan met Garza first, and Desiree scheduled a meeting about a month later. Both sisters said the meeting was one of the scariest and hardest things they have ever done. Megan said she remembered showing Garza photos of the candlelight vigil and her family and being surprised by how thoughtful and truly sorry he was. "Talking and humanizing him really helped me," she said. "It wasn't this boogeyman in the dark who accidentally killed my brother. It was this human who made a wrong choice and knows that." Desiree said she needed to understand that Garza knew the depth of their loss and was also relieved by his sincerity.

"I think the biggest thing goes back to the hate. You don't realize how much you're carrying until it's gone and you're able to start letting it go. And it's definitely because of the restorative justice program that I was able to move on and continue on with my grieving process and healing process. Obviously it's still hard to talk about some days. You have some days where all you want to do is look at pictures and cry, but it's more days than not now that you're looking back on memories you can smile about, not just that he's not here anymore, but looking back at what a great life he had and what a great person he was and how you got to be a small part of your life."

The process gave them closure and the opportunity to do something bigger than they'd ever planned-forgiveness.

"It definitely took a weight off of my heart," Desiree said.

"It's not something I thought about before I actually sat down across from him and had that conversation. But it's not like he got in the car that night thinking 'I'm going to go kill people' or 'I'm going to go get drunk and get in this car.' And that's not something you think about until you're sitting across from them. And he made mistakes and a lot of people make that mistake and it shouldn't happen, but it's something that does. It is his fault but it's not something he meant to do. So I do forgive him, if not as much for him, but for me."