

# Children of all ages

I returned from vacation recently where family and laughing children were in abundance. Like many of us, returning from a much-needed break meant catching up from where I left off – and then some.

Which takes me to two assignments that appeared in the November issue of the Catholic Review.

Barbra Swann and the Wroblewski family caused me to pause, as each **lost an adult child to fatal violence**. My encounters with them were sobering. As I conversed with each family and took photos, their pain was obvious. There was no way I could put myself in their shoes.

Brian Pope was one of five sons to Barbra Swann, who was fatally wounded in a 2006 robbery. She was so proud of her son for fighting against the odds to get his life in order by starting a business, getting married and starting his own family – only to be struck down and murdered.

When I asked about her favorite memory of Brian, she smiled. That was all I needed. Her faith in God and knowing she would see her son again in the next life are unwavering.

The Wroblewskis lost their only child, Alex Wroblewski III, a year ago to senseless violence as well. Their home is filled with many memories of their son. Our conversation started with the usual pleasantries, but quickly turned tearful for Mary Kay. Alex Jr. displayed a rock-hard exterior. His eyes showed otherwise.

The pain of those fateful days was fresh and palpable regardless of the amount of time that has passed for both families. They say time heals all wounds. For them, I'm not sure. Listening to their stories of loss and strength reminded me that my troubles pale in comparison.

Even as a parent of three adult children, there was no way to comprehend their grief. To suggest so would have been insulting. Trying to imagine such a phone call or a door knock with horrific news is haunting. Knowing that grief awakens with

them each morning was numbing.

Compassion and a concerned ear were all I could offer.

The perseverance of these families was amazing. They continue to live their lives despite such devastation.

I found myself days later on the floor of **St. Alphonsus Preschool** in Woodstock taking photos of children who didn't have a care in the world beyond snacks and playtime.

Laughter and silliness bounced off the walls of the parish center as 3-year-olds raced tricycles in the parish center, which I jokingly called the "St. Alphonsus 500."

I sat jammed in a corner, the little ones marking me as a target trying to give me high-fives as they made their turn down the straightaway. I was a novelty that made their riding time interesting.

Walking into a classroom, I find others rolling cobs of corn in paint, so they could make their own versions of a masterpiece. The girls didn't want to get their hands dirty. The boys, meanwhile, proudly raised their hands full of paint in the air full as if they achieved the greatness of Picasso.

Nap time sounded really good to me too. Sadly, I forgot my carpet square.

One student dubbed me the "churchman" when I first arrived taking photos of religion class in the main sanctuary. Others soon followed.

I then became "cameraman," which isn't all that unusual, even with adults.

How wonderful it was to be reminded of the innocence we all once enjoyed.

Colleagues perusing those photos couldn't help but chuckle, as these unabashed kids provided no shortage of uplifting images.

A stretch that began with two grieving families whose lives have been permanently altered ended with a reminder of how rapidly our loved ones grow up. We need to cherish those we love, as you never know when your time with them will end.

The laughter of children at any age – even us adults who never grow up – always make the world a better place.