

Love and loss: Baltimore violence leaves families leaning on faith

Barbra Swann sat in the kitchen of her Randallstown home, and reflected on the grief that accompanies the loss of loved ones.

“There’s never going be a day as bad as He (Jesus) had, and he did that for you,” she said.

In Locust Point, Alex and Mary Kay Wroblewski process their ongoing mourning.

“I might wake up one morning and it’s worse than the day before,” she said. “Nothing is getting better. But then I read Scripture or a story, it’s like God talking to me, explaining everything. I say that’s got to be the Holy Spirit.”

Swann and Alex Wroblewski are Mass lectors at their home churches, St. Ambrose in Park Heights and Our Lady of Good Counsel in Locust Point, respectively. Mary Kay Wroblewski taught Children’s Liturgy of the Word at the latter for decades.

In addition to a sturdy faith, they share a horror that is all too common in Baltimore, burying an adult child.

Veterans Day will mark 12 years since the second of Swann’s five sons, Brian Christopher Pope, was murdered in Walbrook Junction. That crime remains a cold case.

The Wroblewskis, meanwhile, await the twice-delayed trial of the three people accused of killing their only child, Alex Wroblewski III, outside a convenience store off Fort Avenue last Nov. 14.

Last year was the deadliest per capita in the history of Baltimore City, and 2018 is proving just as tragic, as the toll could exceed 300 victims for the fourth straight year.

The majority of the victims are young men, whose parents work to ensure that they themselves do not become spiritual casualties.

‘Powerful witness’

Swann, 65, finds strength in her 42-year marriage to Harry, her second husband, and the religious men and women from the Catholic Church she first encountered in 1970.

Fresh out of Eastern High School and raised United Methodist, Swann responded to a help wanted ad at St. Ambrose. Citing her inexperience, Father Henry Zerhusen, the pastor, turned her down. She persisted, and offered to take the job on a volunteer basis.

Swann was on the payroll by her second week, and became enthralled with the Catholic faith. On Dec. 18, 1971, she entered the church.

“I’m blessed to have Sister Mary Ann Hartnett as my godmother, and Father Ed Miller as my godfather,” Swann said.

The former is a School Sister of Notre Dame. Newly ordained, the latter would loan Swann money for her undergraduate education and co-sign for her first car.

“If I didn’t have a Father Henry and a Father Ed in my life ...” Swann said, of two deceased priests who earned the honorary title of monsignor. “I’ve had an amazing life, a scary life but a blessed life, because I do not know what I would have been had I not knocked on the door of that rectory.”

Swann saw her oldest brother suffer a fatal drug overdose at age 20; her first husband fall into addiction; and her Pimlico neighborhood decline under the weight of an earlier heroin epidemic. She and her second husband relocated outside the Beltway in 1992.

“It was not soon enough for my two oldest boys,” she said.

Her second, Brian, had a drug problem and criminal record, but had appeared to turn his life around with a GED, a wife, three sons and a repair business – until Nov. 11, 2006, when the 36-year-old was gunned down in his fix-it shop.

Her oldest, Antoine, was born with congenital health issues and experienced the same scourge of illicit drugs.

“He (Antoine) got a kidney transplant, and was off drugs for nine years,” Swann said. “My mom died, Brian died, six months later he (Antoine) was back on drugs. ... Brian’s children, they didn’t do good, either. They’re broken.”

Danny, Harry and Joshua, her three sons from her second marriage, walk the straight and narrow, like their parents.

Swann, a program analyst for the Veterans Administration, sang in the choir at St. Ambrose for 41 years. She ushers and occasionally evangelizes outside the church despite the warnings of her sons.

“Danny said it scared him when I was out in the community handing out flyers,” she said. “He said, ‘They don’t think they’re going to live past 21. They are living in the moment, because any moment they feel like they’re going to be killed for what they do. They have a mother who’s taking it (drugs), a father who’s in jail.’”

“He said these young people don’t see a future. They only see now.”

The license plate on Swann's car reads Corin 13, for a chapter in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians.

"I take Him at his word that I will see my boys again," Swann said. "The guy or whoever killed my son, I forgave them a long time ago, because I know I'm going to see my boy again.

"I can't be angry. I know he (Brian) had an opportunity ... God is love. He doesn't hurt. When I see Him, I'm not going to ask what happened, and why it happened. I don't understand it, but He's always watched out for me."

Capuchin Franciscan Father Paul Zaborowski has been her pastor since before her son's murder.

"Barbra can pray through tragedy, continue her ministry to the poor and remain strong in the faith," he said. "She is a powerful witness to the church, especially for all mothers, that in the face of injustice and violence, she can remain in God's love and not let it harden her heart."

From Oct. 28 through Nov. 2, the Feast of All Souls, St. Ambrose will display wooden crosses with the names of 276 people who have died in acts of violence this year. It will conclude the outreach with a service of remembrance Nov. 2, at 6 p.m., outside its church.

Faith, family and friends

The first 45 years of the Wroblewskis' marriage was fairly idyllic.

Both received all of their sacraments at Our Lady of Good Counsel, and both graduated from its parish school in 1963. Mary Kay went to Seton High School, Alex to Mount St. Joseph, where Xaverian Brother Declan Kane helped him during his

parents' divorce.

"God gave me Brother Declan, I needed that structure," Alex said, "and he gave me this woman."

They began dating in 1967 and married in 1972. A year later they bought a rowhome a five-minute walk from Good Counsel, where they still reside. Alex taught in Baltimore City public schools for four decades, retiring in 2010. Mary Kay retired a year later, after 34 years with the Maryland Transit Administration.

The only break in her employment record came around the birth of their son in January 1976.

His sense of humor was apparent at Mount St. Joseph, where his senior entry in the 1994 yearbook included, "While at the Mount he did nothing except go to school here."

"He loved to talk, and debate sports," said Jody Harris, Mount class of 1979, who has taught social studies there for 34 years. "He was a people person. I'm not surprised that he got into the business he got in."

"Albo" gravitated to the hospitality business, which combined several of his passions: food, travel, people and philanthropy.

"You heard him before you saw him," said Patrick Dahlgren, who hired his friend in 2015 to work at Rowhouse Grille in Federal Hill. "He did everything for us, he was more or less a manager. His work ethic, on top of our being friends. ... This has been one of the longest years of my life."

Last November, Wroblewski, 41, was murdered during a robbery, within walking distance not just of his home, but that of his parents'.

“At the viewing, someone asked how we’re going to get through this,” his father said. “I answered, ‘Faith, family and friends.’”

Artwork with that sentiment arrived at their home soon after, courtesy of Joe Manfre, an old soccer friend.

Dahlgren picked up the mantle of one of Albo’s causes, the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society, which this year instituted the Alexander J. Wroblewski III Community Award. Brenda and Brian McHale, a fellow Knight with Alex II in the Our Lady of Lourdes Council 4606, helped arrange a “Team Albo” fundraiser at the council hall that brought in \$22,000.

Latrobe Park, across Fort Avenue from Good Counsel, added a placque Oct. 20 celebrating Albo as “The Unofficial Mayor of South Baltimore.”

Family includes the children of Mary Kay’s late sister, Betty Lear, who gave her the Pieta that comforted their mother after her daughter, Debbie, died in an auto accident as a 13-year-old in 1964.

A few weeks later, Father Patrick Carrion, the Wroblewskis’ pastor, mentioned the Michelangelo work that depicts Mary cradling Jesus after the cross.

“Can you believe that?” Mary Kay said. “That’s the Holy Spirit.”

Bishop Denis J. Madden officiated at the funeral. Since then, young people he has confirmed hear about the spirit of Alex, and his parents.

(Bishop Madden, who regularly leads prayer walks that stop at specific locations where acts of violence have occurred, will lead one Oct. 29, beginning at 5:30 p.m., from Holy Cross in Federal Hill. Along with Good Counsel, it is part of the Catholic Community of South Baltimore.)

“They’re faith-filled people, present to the community,” Father Carrion said of the Wroblewskis. “One of those pillars.”

On some Sundays, their home parish reminded Mary Kay too much of her son, and Alex would drive his wife to the Baltimore Basilica for worship.

“All I could do is cry there, I wouldn’t have gotten the message,” Mary Kay said of Good Counsel. “You never think that your child will be gone before you. It’s just not the way it’s supposed to be.”

Of coping, her husband added, “I don’t know how anyone can lose a loved one, let alone a child, and not have faith.”

In late September, another murder in their relatively safe neighborhood brought both dismay and empathy.

“In some of these neighborhoods, where you can’t send your kid outside to play, how do people exist?” Mary Kay said. “Good people should not have to live like that.”

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