Victims of Omaha mall shootings remembered at wakes

OMAHA, Neb. – They came from different backgrounds, varied in age and had different strengths, but the victims of the Dec. 5 mall shooting shared a joy for life and a love of others, said family members of the eight people who were murdered at the Von Maur department store.

Relatives of Gary Joy, Janet Jorgensen, Dianne Trent, Angie Schuster, Maggie Webb, John McDonald, Beverly Flynn and Gary Scharf spoke at wake services and funerals at churches in the Omaha area.

Icy roads and wintry weather couldn't stop thousands of mourners from gathering to remember those who lost their lives.

At funeral services of the four Catholics buried in Omaha – Jorgensen, McDonald, Trent and Schuster – the message was one of hope and of God's power over death.

Trent, who had worked in customer service at Von Maur for about eight years, died as she had lived her life: putting others first.

The 53-year-old widow was shot while calling for help from a phone behind the customer service counter on the store's third floor. Trent spent her last 38 seconds talking to a 911 dispatcher about the shooting at Westroads Mall.

"She always put others before herself. She could've run back to the storage area for safety, but she sat behind the counter to make the 911 call to get help for others," said Trent's niece, Jennifer Clark, during a vigil service Dec. 9 at St. Leo the Great Church in Omaha.

Eleven priests and nearly 750 people attended Trent's funeral the next day.

In his homily, Father Harry Buse, pastor of St. Leo Parish, reminded her brother and four sisters that the shooting tragedy captured the attention of the world.

"The whole world holds us in their hearts," he said. "It's as if millions of hearts beat

as one, sharing a sense of loss."

Schuster, 36, was going to be an engaged woman this Christmas. Her boyfriend, Greg O'Neil, was planning to give her a ring for Christmas.

Those plans came to an abrupt halt when Schuster was killed while working at Von Maur.

During a wake service Dec. 10 at St. Robert Bellarmine Church in Omaha, O'Neil read a letter to his sweetheart. In it, he said they loved being together so much that they hated talking on the phone with each other because it meant they were apart.

Father Donald Shane, pastor at St. Robert Bellarmine, described the love Schuster and O'Neil had as "the real thing."

As he looked at the crowd of about 600 who attended Schuster's Dec. 11 funeral, Father Shane described the mall shooting as a "horrible act that has affected all of us."

"There were nine worlds shattered" on that terrible day, said Father Shane, who was a classmate of shooting victim McDonald.

He said the shooter, Robert Hawkins, "literally stole the life and future" of Schuster and the other victims, but the priest reminded the crowd that as Catholics they believe in the Resurrection.

"Remember what Jesus told us: 'I will be with you always,'" Father Shane said. "We must now allow Jesus into our hearts to heal us."

A crowd of more than 730 people filled St. John's Church on the campus of Jesuit-run Creighton University in Omaha Dec. 10 to attend the funeral of McDonald, a Creighton graduate.

The 65-year-old grandfather of seven girls was shot while shopping with his wife, Kathy. McDonald is considered a hero because he confronted the gunman and may have saved the lives of dozens of people who were hiding in a room nearby.

About 20 priests concelebrated the funeral Mass; they included McDonald's first

cousin, Jesuit Father Dan McDonald, who lives in Rome.

In his homily, Father McDonald said he believed his cousin couldn't just stand by and do nothing as the shootings were happening. He had to intervene. His was an act of courage and responsibility to save the lives of people, he said.

"Taking responsibility, ordering our emotions, directing our lives to peace and standing up for the consequences of this courage – all important things we have learned from John's life," the priest said.

Father McDonald said he has been able to forgive Hawkins, because that is what his cousin would have wanted and done.

Jorgensen gave the gift of life to those who knew her, said Father Richard Reiser, pastor at St. James Church in Omaha, where nearly 1,000 people gathered for her Dec. 10 funeral.

She opened her life to her husband Ron in marriage, to her children when she carried them in her womb and to her eight grandchildren – her "precious sunshine gifts," he said.

The memories of Jorgensen, 67, and the love she left behind are her ongoing gifts, the priest said.

Although the gifts are difficult to see because of the brokenness in the world, "seeing the gifts and allowing the gifts to be open is a remedy for healing" during this season of Christmas, Father Reiser said.

Jorgensen, who had worked at Von Maur for 12 years, and her husband had just marked their 50th wedding anniversary.

"The gift of love is stronger than death, stronger than destruction, stronger than despair, stronger than life," Father Reiser said. "Love is greater than all the evil around us."