



PHOTOS BY JOHN D. SIMMONS — jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

Therese Bartholomew and her brother, Steve Leone, often sat together and talked on the front porch of his yellow bungalow, where Therese and her husband now live.

thy brother's killer

Therese Bartholomew was ready to hate forever the man who shot Steve dead. Why doesn't she?

BY ELIZABETH LELAND
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Therese Bartholomew thought that when she saw the man who killed her brother Steve, she would want to kill him.

She arrived at the courthouse for a sentencing hearing, wearing a photograph of Steve pinned to her lapel, and hoping the defendant would be locked away in prison for a long, long time.

But before the hearing began, a young woman with a pretty face noticed the photo and asked Therese who it was.

That's my brother, Therese remembers telling her. He was killed in Greenville last year.

What the woman said next shattered Therese's notions of right and wrong, of crime and punishment, of good people and bad:

I'm Karl's sister, she said. I'm so sorry for what he did.

In the courtroom a few minutes later, Therese saw Karl Staton for the first time as more than a killer:

He was somebody's brother, too.

What Therese remembers most about the night her brother was killed, Feb. 12, 2003, is that she didn't cry. It didn't seem real. She might have believed it if her older brother had been killed; he had been in trouble before.

But not Steve.

Steve was her best friend, her confidante. She was 2 1/2 when he was born. Three weeks later their mother found Therese in Steve's bassinet, her arms wrapped around him, both asleep.

Therese got married in November 2002, three months before Steve was killed. She's holding a photo of her and Steve at the wedding.

"He was a defining part of my life," she says. "He was my soul mate."



Mercy for her brother's killer

THERESE

■ from IE

Therese, who is now 41, watched out for Steve when he was little. As they grew older, Steve watched out for Therese.

He was the person she turned to through all the blunders of her life, the first to hold her daughter after Jessica was born in 1984. Therese was 16 then and dropped out of Charlotte Catholic High School.

Steve was 14 and promised to always be there for her.

Therese imagined he always would.

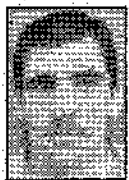
"Now imagine opening a black binder and seeing photographs of that person sprawled out naked on a silver gurney," she wrote in her blog. "Now put a small dark hole in that person's chest. Imagine this image running through your mind.

"You will never be hugged by this person again; you will never get a phone call from this person or laugh at a stupid movie or talk about kids and vacations and relationships.

"Never."

A deadly business trip

Steve Leone was in Greenville, S.C., on business the night he was killed. He was 33, divorced with two teenagers, and working as a sales rep. for a trucking company.



Staton

He went to happy hour at a strip club near his motel where, according to police reports, he got into a disagreement with a dancer, and later with the dancer's boyfriend, Karl Staton.

Outside in the parking lot, police said, Steve punched Staton in the face.

Staton pointed a gun at Steve's chest and fired.

How, Therese wondered, could she survive without him?

Her husband, Doug, wondered, too. They had been married only three months.

"I have no question that she would have traded me for

him," Doug said. "Not that she didn't love me, and doesn't love me, but their bond was stronger. They had been through so much. They understood each other so well."

At the sentencing hearing, in April 2004, Therese expected to feel angry at Staton, and she did. She hated him for killing her little brother.

But she was surprised to find herself also feeling sorry for him. He was a young guy, 22, not much older than the high school students she taught in Union County, the ones she reached out to, trying to see beyond their tough image.

"When I saw him, I realized he could have been one of my babies that I really loved on," Therese said, "that I gave a second chance to."

Did Karl Staton deserve a second chance?

Dealing with depression

Therese felt driven to understand why her brother was dead.

She was working on a master's in fine arts at Queens University. She eventually dropped out and enrolled in the master's program in criminal justice at UNC Charlotte.

"I want to understand why people do what they do, and how the system treats them," she said. "In all lives, there are explanations for what we do. These are not excuses, and I'm not saying I don't think people should be punished."

After Steve died, Therese did things she would never have thought herself capable of. She retreated within herself, depressed. "I abandoned my kids," she said. "I showed up, but I was going through the motions of parenting. My son and I have always been close, but I deserted him and he really needed me.

"We're all capable of horrific things," she said, "even if we're decent human beings."

What, she wondered, made Staton capable of killing?

"I want to know what Karl's deal is," she said, "what story brought him here."

Therese began writing a book about the killing and decided she wanted to film a doc-

umentary, too.

Writing comes naturally to Therese, who teaches developmental English at Central Piedmont Community College. But she knew nothing about filmmaking. One chance encounter led to another until nine volunteers are now working with her. They include Charlotte filmmaker Erik Murphy, who won a grant last year that helped pay for start-up costs. They're holding a fundraiser next Sunday at The Evening Muse in NoDa to raise money to complete the project.

Writing 'The Final Gift'

Therese's book, "Coffee Shop God," which CPCC Press will publish, begins when she gets the phone call in the middle of the night.

The documentary takes up where the book leaves off, at the sentencing hearing. It is called "The Final Gift," a title both literal and figurative - literal because of unopened Valentine's Day gifts Steve bought for his girlfriend; figurative because of Therese's transformation from feeling anger to feeling compassion for the man who took Steve away from her.

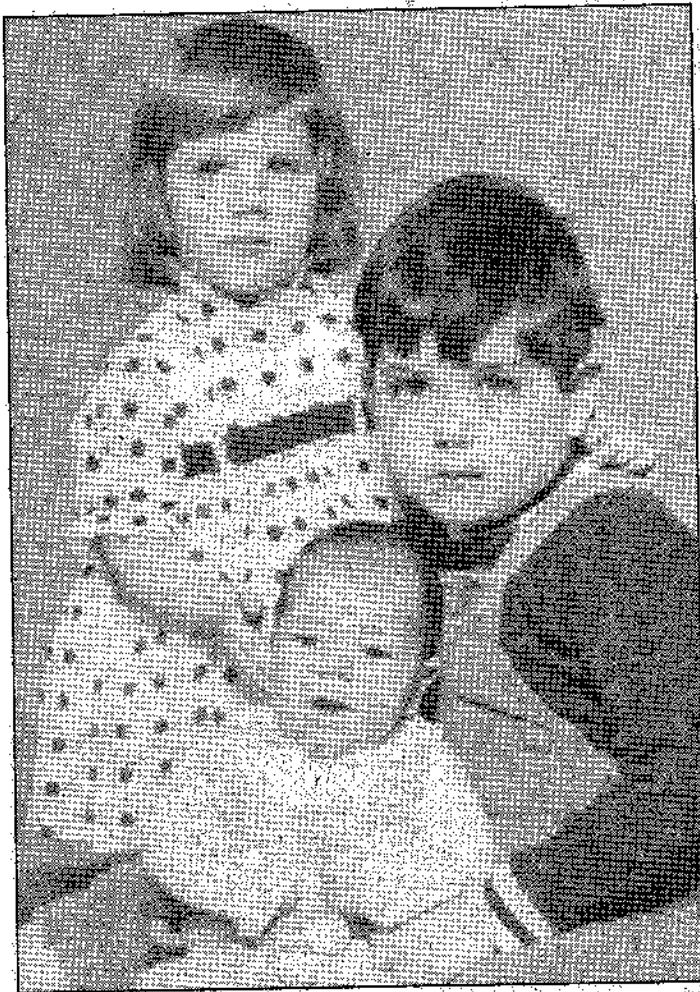
Filming until now has focused on Therese and her family, but she hopes next year to interview Staton and his family. He is in prison in Kershaw, serving a 10-year sentence for voluntary manslaughter.

"I want," Therese said, "to get his side of the story."

A single mistake

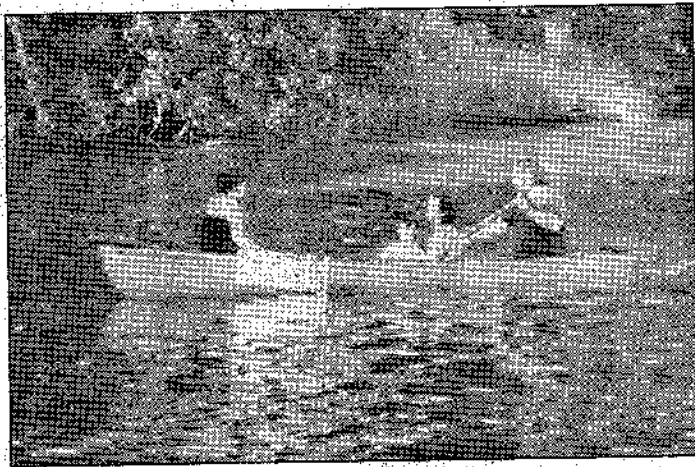
One mistake, she believes, should not define a person forever.

"My brother's whereabouts when he was murdered can hardly 'undo' the compassionate, loving, supportive father, son, brother, person he was," she said. "This is precisely one of the reasons for this project and for my book. It's one of my motivating factors. I pray that no one will ever judge me for all the poor choices, wrong places, mistakes and downright stupid things I've done. ... I am not the sum total of these wrongs - nor was my brother, and nor was the young man who killed him."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THERESE BARTHOLOMEW

Therese had two brothers – Joe, who was older, and Steve. “From the minute Steve was born, my mom said that was my baby. This photo is symbolic of our relationship.”



Erik Murphy, director of photography for the documentary, films Therese while Christian Domarus, the editor, paddles.

She hopes the documentary will help answer questions raised by Steve’s death: Do we have any responsibility for offenders? What happens when they’re allowed back into the community? Wouldn’t it be better if they became productive members of society?

Some people tell Therese

they don’t understand why she’s writing the book, filming a documentary and asking so many questions. Some days, she said, she doesn’t understand, either. The only person who would really “get it” is buried in a cemetery a few miles from her house.

Bruce Arrigo, a criminal jus-

‘The Final Gift’

■ To learn more about the documentary, and to see a trailer: www.thefinalgiftfilm.com.

■ A fundraiser is 6:30-8:30 p.m. Nov. 9 at The Evening Muse, 3227 N. Davidson St. The Near Misses will perform. Tickets \$25 in advance: www.theeveningmuse.com, or at the door.

■ To hear a song by Cindy Bullens that Therese said captures the way she feels, and which she shares with others who are grieving: www.rhapsody.com/cindybullens. Click on “Better Than I’ve Ever Been.”

tice professor at UNCC who advises Therese, said she’s courageous to do it.

“In a sense,” he said, “it seems to me she’s saying, ‘I will use my story, my experience, as a medium to anyone to explore the possibility of recovery and redemption and forgiveness and mercy – regardless of the circumstances.’”

A heart for offenders

When Therese is finished filming, her next plan might surprise you:

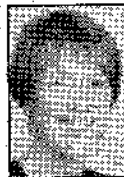
She wants to work with criminal offenders.

That may seem strange coming from someone who lost her brother to violence and has been twice held up at gunpoint in Charlotte.

“I have a heart for offenders,” she said. “I certainly have a heart for victims, too. In the world, people’s hearts are mostly with the victims. But we can’t ignore the offenders because we’ll have a whole lot more victims if we do.”

She can’t save her brother.

But maybe, Therese hopes, she can help save someone else.



STORY BEHIND THE STORY

A mutual friend suggested I write about Therese. I watched the trailer for her

documentary and was captivated. Hers is a story of pain and heartbreak – but most important, of survival and hope.