

Forgiving the Unforgivable: When a Child is Killed

Sally Lancaster lost one child in a tragic accident and another was murdered. Both times she found the strength to forgive.

by Women of Grace Staff



Wake up, Sally! The police are downstairs.”

In the early morning hours of August 4, 2008, Sally Lancaster woke to

a mother’s worst nightmare. Her 19 year-old son, Troy, had just been shot. Within hours, he would be dead.

In just 55 years of life, this would be the second time Sally suffered the unspeakable pain of losing a child. Twenty-nine years earlier, her 18 month-old daughter was accidentally run over and killed in her own driveway.

But this article isn’t about Sally’s terrible misfortune. It’s about a woman who found the strength to forgive the

people who killed her children not once, but twice in a lifetime.

And she found that strength in the Eucharist.

“The Eucharist is what keeps me grounded”, said Sally from the home she shares in Alameda, California with her husband, Clifford, and their six surviving children. “Sometimes we can just really lose it but the Eucharist helps to keep us focused, and keeps us doing things the right way. It’s more powerful than we think.”

Sally became a daily communicant at the age of seven when her mother began taking her to 5:30 a.m. Mass every morning. One of 12 children, Sally

initially wanted to go for the one-on-one attention she received from her mother but it soon became a part of her life.

As a result, she grew up on the Eucharist. By the age of 18, she was ready to accept her vocation in life as a wife and mother when she married her high school sweet heart. Soon after her daughter Rebecca was born, however, the marriage dissolved. She decided to move back to Alameda to be near her parents who became frequent visitors out of concern for her welfare while living alone with a child and enduring a divorce.

One night, while she and her parents were unloading a car full of groceries, little Rebecca wandered out the door and was bending down to pick something up when Sally’s father began pulling the car down the driveway. He never saw the child until it was too late.

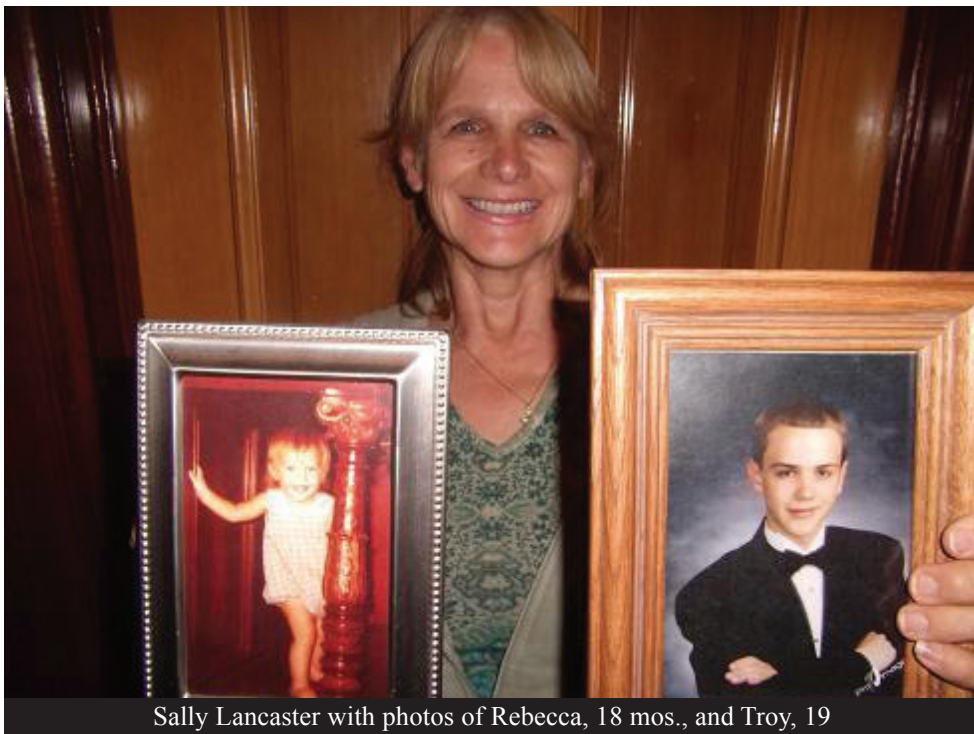
He never forgave himself, Sally said.

But she did.

And God used her merciful heart to help her father endure his own guilt. “My sister told me recently that it was good that I was able to forgive him because that made it easier for him to live with himself,” Sally said.

Shortly after Rebecca’s death, a local woman she barely knew expressed her grief to Sally over the child’s tragic death. She introduced herself as Esperanza a name that means hope.

Little did Sally know at the time, but this woman would show up once again at another dark moment in her life.



Sally Lancaster with photos of Rebecca, 18 mos., and Troy, 19

But for now, with Rebecca gone, Sally decided to enter religious life. She joined the Mission San Jose Dominican sisters and threw herself into serving the Lord in the poor. Within six months, however, she began to have doubts about her vocation, and a wise superior suggested she leave for a while. If her vocation was real, she could always come back.

It was a providential move because God did indeed have another plan for her. Not long after leaving the convent, she met her soul-mate, a young attorney named Clifford.

“We just hit it off,” Sally said. “He mentioned that he wanted six kids and I thought this was the man for me because I always wanted a big family. He worked hard, came up from nothing, was very smart, and worked his way through college and law school. This man was everything I always wanted.”

They were married on George Washington’s birthday, February 22, 1980. “He told me it was the one day he couldn’t tell a lie,” Sally remembers with a laugh.

God blessed their marriage with seven beautiful children. Through it all, Sally continued to attend daily Mass and instilled the same faith and values in her children, even homeschooling them to keep them safe from negative influences.

But teens have a knack for finding trouble and her son, Troy, was no different than most. At the age of 19, he began hanging around with an ex-con named Michael Edgar who was out on parole after doing time for armed robbery.

Troy and Michael took an interest in the same girl, Karen, who pretended to like them both. Because Troy knew Michael was seeing other girls, he didn’t think much of continuing his friendship with Karen.

Little did he know, the girl was trying to make Michael jealous, telling him things like, “Troy called me today. He’s texting me,” Sally said.

Michael fell for her bait and became jealous. One day, when the girl showed Michael some of the messages Troy had texted her, Michael blew up. He told her to invite Troy to her apartment and to let him know when he arrived.

“I don’t know if he was just intending to teach him a lesson, to fight him, or to yell at him, but it all led up to him eventually killing Troy,” Sally said.

Troy showed up alone at the apartments where Karen lived - which were called the Esperanza apartments - and Michael was there waiting.

The two got into an argument and Michael pulled out a gun and shot Troy twice. The first bullet grazed his ear; the second pierced his skull.

By the time Sally and Cliff arrived at the hospital, doctors knew Troy would not survive.

“They said he was brain dead because one bullet went through the brain and caused irreparable damage,” Sally said. “I remember rubbing his forehead and his whole head came forward. I felt like he was trying to tell me he was there and that he felt me and knew I was there but the doctors said no, it was just a knee-jerk reaction. But I really felt Troy was trying to communicate with me.”

A few days later, she buried her son. At the funeral, a vaguely familiar woman walked up to her and said, “Don’t you remember me? I’m Esperanza.”

Yes, she did remember, and knew the woman’s presence was no accident. Nor was it a coincidence that her son had been murdered at an apartment complex that bore the same name - Esperanza.

“I think God wanted to show me there’s still hope even though these tragedies happened and we think all is lost,” Sally said.

“God sees the bigger picture and I know that everything that happens no matter how bad God permits for a reason. He could have allowed Troy to live, but there’s always a reason. And

Jesus teaches that He will bring good from everything if we accept it.”

Michael Edgar was eventually convicted of first degree murder and was sentenced to 51 years to life in prison.

For Sally, there was only one thing left to do - forgive.

“Some people have a bad shake in life and I know it causes them to do things they wouldn’t do if they had different opportunities,” she said about Michael, whose father left the family when he was a child and whose mother eventually kicked him out of the house.

“I don’t justify what he did, but when people aren’t treated right in life it always leads to things like this. And I think it’s got to end there. Forgiveness is the first thing we need to do so that it doesn’t keep going on.”

But how does a mother forgive the man who murdered her son in cold blood?

Through the grace of God, Sally says.

“Sometimes I get it on big things like this, but when it comes to little things, I fall short,” Sally admits. “That’s how I know this is God’s grace, because I’m not normally like this.”

God is truly working miracles inside her. “It’s just an on-going faith that has grown in me. God works in us in a certain way. I don’t know what it’s all about but I feel great peace. I miss Troy, but in a way I feel like God was protecting Troy by taking him away. Maybe Troy would have gone down a worse path. This is something we just don’t know.”

Clinging to her faith, especially the Eucharist, has been her saving grace. “God teaches us forgiveness. There are things that we do and actions we perform that we can’t explain because they run so deep inside of us. It’s Christ’s presence in us that helps us through and the more we share in the Eucharist the more Christ-like we become.”