

It appears our city's criminals are not taking the stay-at-home COVID lifestyle seriously. Last year Duval County saw the highest murder rate in two decades. Our city's criminals might be wearing masks, but I think this has more to do with eluding the police than "stopping the spread."

Here's another COVID contemplation for a city that has one of the highest crime rates in America. If you happen to live in a majority of the thirty-three zip codes that comprise Duval County, then you're probably more concerned that COVID will take your life than a stranger breaking into your home. But if you live in say, 32209, you might need to watch for stray bullets while rummaging your car for a mask. Or if you live in 32208, where my family grew up, watch out for men who will break into your home in the light of day. It happened twice to my mother when she was minding her own business in her own home. The first break-in was when I was a kid in 1993. A man out on probation (after more than thirty arrests) broke into our home and beat my mother badly. It happened again on March 23rd of 2017. This time, a different man out on probation broke in, and this time when he beat her, he beat her to death, and not just with his fists; he beat her with my father's golf club and a frying pan. You may recall the local news story. Then again, I have to painfully consider that you may have forgotten her as she was just another body in a city plagued by murder, another sad statistic. If you have forgotten her, her name is Deborah Liles, and rest assured, I will never forget her.

Here's my fear: if you live in Jacksonville, you probably know the places to avoid, right? Stay away from about five zip codes and the crime problem is nothing more than a nuisance, an annoying blight on an otherwise great place to live. Have you seen our beautiful beaches?

But Jacksonville is more than the sum of its zip codes. It's our city and our home and some of our neighbors are literally bleeding to death.

My father was the one who found my mother. He came home for lunch and found her lifeless on the kitchen floor. From the moment my father was sobbing on the phone with the 911 operator screaming my mother's name, he was so brave. After she died, he left the only career he'd ever known to take over as executive director of the Justice Coalition, a local non-profit, devoted to victim advocacy. For a year and a half he worked tirelessly with victims. Back in October of 2018 when Hurricane Michael, a storm that shared my father's name, was about to hit our state, I couldn't reach Dad on the phone for a few days. I was worried but also a little miffed and jealous, thinking Dad was probably busy with other victims. Victims weren't simply Justice Coalition clients to him. They were a family, united by grief and pain. But Dad was not with his Justice Coalition family when I couldn't reach him on the phone. He was dead on the family room couch, one room away from the room where my mother had died alone. The medical report stated my dad died of broken heart syndrome. I think his death was another casualty of mom's murderer and our broken criminal justice system.

The old adage that *time heals all wounds* does not necessarily apply to those whose lives have been wrecked by violence. For victims, healing is going to take so much more than merely the passage of time.

The reason for this letter is two-fold. First and foremost, I want our entire city to care about our abysmal crime statistics. I want us to join together to do something about it. I've grown fairly cynical, but maybe change can begin with a conversation. If conversations are hard, then honest conversations are harder still. There are two

men my family did not know before they broke into our lives and shattered them. Today, these two strangers serve life sentences. Many victims never get an arrest. It is unthinkable.

Since my mother's death in 2017 there have been over five hundred more senseless deaths in Duval county— five hundred and seven to be exact, and many of those homicides remain unsolved.

My secondary motivation in writing to you is more personal: I want to see the Justice Coalition funded adequately to support its mission.

The Justice Coalition gave deep meaning to what turned out to be the last year of my father's bravely-led life. Like so many other businesses and nonprofits, they are facing an extreme strain on their resources. I came on board back in October to help them with their newsletter, but due to financial constraints we haven't been able to print it.

I don't enjoy asking for help, but as a victim I've learned the painful lesson that sometimes help is necessary for survival.

I wish the Justice Coalition didn't need to exist, but as long as there are victims, it needs to be here for people who face the incredible pain and burden of trying to accept the unacceptable. And sadly, from the looks of the new year, Jacksonville's crime rate doesn't appear to be slowing down.

I'd like to share another inspiration for this letter. In December I attended the Justice Coalition's Christmas events. I was nervous about COVID and unsure I was emotionally ready to attend an event since my father's death, but if I came into the weekend with an unsettled mind, I left it encouraged and determined.

Each Christmas, the Justice Coalition holds an event called "Seasons to Remember" for their clients. Teddy bears are made out of victim's clothing to give to surviving family members. It is hard to see a little girl, all dressed up, clinging to a teddy bear made of her big brother's basketball jersey, but it is also a beautiful gift of love and care. It is sometimes hard to believe people really care about victims until they become one. My own children have bears made out of their granny's old shirts and they cherish them.

The morning after the "Seasons to Remember" event, I went to an incredible Christmas party in the parking lot of the Justice Coalition. For the past nine years a spunky group of women on motorcycles who call themselves the "Chrome Divas" have teamed up with the Justice Coalition to provide Christmas for families of murder victims. A large motivation behind this letter came about after seeing a bewildered little boy ask with such excitement and hope, "*That bike is mine?*"

If you have the means and ability, please reach out to another inspiration of mine, Jo Lee Manning, and let her know how you can help. Jo Lee took over as executive director of the Justice Coalition after my father's death. She and two other incredible women, Aida and Mo', advocate for victims each day in Jacksonville. They don't do it simply because it's their job, they do it because— like my dad, my brothers and sisters, and me— they are part of a family united by grief and pain. Yes, we are united in tears but also in love and care for each other. Sadly, this family will continue to grow until we decide that crime is not a political issue that plagues only a few

of our zipcodes; it's a deep problem that must be faced together as one city. Like the story of the good Samaritan, some of us are wounded in a ditch.

Don't look the other way; help us.

In honor of my parents and all the survivors of violent crime in Jacksonville, I appeal to you to support the Justice Coalition in whatever way you can. Until Jacksonville is a much safer city, I hope we can come together to support this non-profit's loving mission because sadly, our family of victims will grow larger this year, in our otherwise beautiful city.

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