

Forgiving the Unthinkable

Li case brings up memories for Morden man who lost wife, son

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MORDEN -- George Penner, then a young high-school teacher in Gimli, had just returned from an end-of-term lunch with colleagues when he spotted two police officers walking through the school halls with his principal.

Those officers delivered news that shattered Penner's life. That afternoon, June 25, 1980, Penner's neighbour and former student, in the grip of a psychotic episode, shot and killed Penner's young wife, Margaret, and their toddler son, Karl. The couple's oldest son suffered a gunshot wound to the head and was rushed to hospital in Winnipeg. What followed for Penner was a blur of bitterness and anger.



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George Penner with his current wife, Peg. His first wife and two-year-old son were killed by a man with paranoid psychosis.

"That was the worst summer of my life," said Penner, now the retired assistant superintendent of the Garden Valley School Division. "Even to this day, you think back, you have feelings. It doesn't go away."

Despite that, Penner says it's pointless and cruel to lock up people, including Vince Li, who commit violent acts caused by psychosis. Instead, he said people such as Li ought to be afforded forgiveness, high-quality treatment and the chance to reclaim some kind of life, even if there are no iron-clad guarantees the person won't slide back into violence.

'Under certain conditions of stress we're all capable of doing the unthinkable. But for the grace of God, I could have gone over the deep end, too'

— George Penner, whose wife and two-year-old son were killed in 1980 by a neighbour during a psychotic episode

"But then, there are no guarantees for any of us," said Penner, who thinks back to the turmoil he suffered in the years following the death of his wife and son. "Under certain conditions of stress

we're all capable of doing the unthinkable. But for the grace of God, I could have gone over the deep end, too."

Late Friday, a provincial review board ruled Vince Li could be granted more freedoms, including unsupervised visits to Winnipeg and perhaps an eventual move from a hospital psychiatric unit to a high-security group home.

Li was found not criminally responsible for stabbing, mutilating and beheading 22-year-old Tim McLean on a Greyhound bus to Winnipeg in July 2008. Since then, Li has been confined to the Selkirk Mental Health Centre but has been gradually reintegrating into society as his symptoms abated. News of his increased freedoms sparked a new round of controversy last week, as many Winnipeggers, including Shelly Glover, Manitoba's senior federal cabinet minister, said Li poses too great a risk to public safety and ought to be locked up indefinitely.

The Penner family's case sparked the same kind of public outrage 35 years ago. Arnold Charles Franz, the young man who killed Penner's wife and son, was diagnosed with paranoid psychosis, a mental illness that worsened in the months leading up to the shooting, in part because he stopped taking his medication. Penner said the young man was often seen yelling to himself in his yard, and confronted Margaret on at least one occasion, leaving her fearful.

The young man seemed fixated on women he suspected of wearing skimpy attire to sexually persecute him, including Penner's wife, who would weed the garden in shorts and a halter-top in the summer. The man, 24 at the time, also suffered from auditory hallucinations and tried and failed to shoot himself with the same gun he'd used to kill Margaret and Karl. He was later found not-guilty of two counts of first-degree murder by reason of insanity.

In the years following the shooting, Penner met and married his second wife, Peg, then a young widow with children of her own. Together, they raised five kids, including Mark, who was left with left-side paralysis and who is now a computer engineer and father of three.

In the months after the incident, thanks to his burgeoning friendship with Peg, Penner attended a church seminar about coping with tragic events and then had a life-changing encounter with the seminar's leader.

"He simplified it for me. He said you make a choice to forgive. And when you make a choice, you act on it," said Penner. "Many of us are people of faith. What does it say when we cannot forgive?"

After the shooting, Penner left teaching for several years, working instead as an employment counsellor at the Eden Mental Health Centre in Winkler, where he studied client files, spent mornings in intake meetings with psychiatrists and social workers and helped find clients jobs.

He said, with the proper treatment and careful monitoring, there is no reason someone like Li can't work.

"I'm sure, with a sympathetic employer, that can happen," said Penner.

Penner believes the man who killed Margaret and Karl spent several years at the institution in Selkirk, receiving treatment and being slowly reintegrated into society, much as Li has been. Penner said, through family and friends, he occasionally gets word about the man's status. It's believed he is living a solitary life in Winnipeg, but visits his large family in Gimli and Selkirk.

"As far as we know, he's never been in trouble," said Penner.

About eight years ago, Peg was dropping off some items at a nursing home in Selkirk when a friend there mentioned seeing the man occasionally come in to visit his father. On a later trip, the same friend pointed out the man, sitting down the hall.

"He looked like a very lonely, sad guy," said Peg.

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