

October 7, 2008

Comments to Washoe County Court

I have not looked forward to being here, but I do appreciate the opportunity to tell the court a little about my deceased daughter, Joan Varley. Over the 6 days of testimony, we heard Joan's name referred to 100 times or more, and I was pleased that not one of those times was it spoken in a derogatory way. That speaks volumes. She seemed to be liked by everyone--even by her killer.

But Joan did die at age 38. She had never been married. She was waiting for a knight on a white charger to come carry her off to some Camelot, but he hadn't come yet. She had opportunities for marriage, but she wouldn't allow herself to "settle" for a husband who couldn't or wouldn't make her happy.

She had a 4-year degree from San Jose State University. She liked the Entertainment industry and spent 3 or 4 years in the Los Angeles and Burbank areas and acted in minor movie parts, but the professional competition there is extreme.

She moved to Reno several years ago. I'm not from this area, but Joan grew to like it here very much. One of the 1st groups she joined was the Reno Little Theater (RLT). She liked the people there, and acted in some of the plays there. After Joan's death the Reno Little Theater put a tribute to her on their internet web site. (There are some Reno Little Theater people here today: thank you for all you did for her.)

Joan enjoyed teaching and being with young children in various Reno grade schools. She was often called on by the teachers who knew her abilities to substitute-teach for them.

From her early days she believed that she could make the world a little better, that she could help people on an individual basis. One day years ago she made a sack full of peanut butter sandwiches and she had me drive her to Market Street in San Francisco and she passed out those sandwiches to the down-and-out men on the sidewalk that we'd see. They usually had unkempt hair and beards and an alcohol breath. None of them understood why a young woman would be kind to them, but they thought she must surely be an angel. Peanut butter sandwiches never disappeared faster.

Because of her "helping" nature Joan didn't object when her mother, Mary Varley (my ex-wife), was able to buy the Rivers Edge (RE) apartment project in Reno (where she was eventually killed). Joan believed she could do some work at the apartments for her mother, and perhaps help some of the tenants make a better life for themselves. Several of Joan's tenants had just been released from prison or other state facilities.

Joan told me that one Thanksgiving Day she went to work at Rivers Edge early and prepared small turkey dinners or sandwiches for all the tenants. She wanted to help them in this small way, and for several it was probably their only reason to be thankful.

She was never a real gardener, but she planted many flowers around the facility to improve the looks somewhat. It helped. She tried to do other things to make the tenants feel a little better about their surroundings and themselves. My wife saw what Joan was doing and said she was 'Reno's Mother Theresa'.

For the last couple of years of her life she was sole manager of Rivers Edge. I'd talk to her at least one a week on the phone. One of the person's she'd often mention was Ed Rahn, who testified earlier and is the one who found her body. He gave her invaluable help, but I think she found the management job was bigger than she was. With the bookkeeping, apartment upkeep and seeking of new tenants Joan was on a treadmill. Without her 12-hour days there Rivers Edge would have had worse financial problems. The apartments were quickly put up for sale after they were bought, but there were no buyers.

At the same time she understood the physical danger she was in. She was comparatively small (~5ft 4in. And 115 lbs). She was the only young female around, and the one that tried to collect rent money. But what she lacked in size or strength she made up for in dedication to her mother and determination to make Rivers Edge a success.

A few months before her death she wrote an E-mail that is my last written memento from her. It indicated some of her tribulations, which only worsened with time, trying to keep Rivers Edge solvent. I'd like to quote a part of it. These are Joan's words::

"I'm sorry I haven't given you a call back. I apologize. RE just keeps me going full-blast. I'm doing okay-tired, but knowing God is with me. I've been burning the midnight oil at RE and trying to fit in teaching, as teachers have requested me...I hope things will settle down next week. In the meantime, this week I'll be at RE many hours... Thanks for your prayers and concern. God has a plan in all of this. He's literally giving me the strength to continue each day. Between cleaning, all the maintenance, bookkeeping, dealing with all the tenants issues, etc. I'm amazed I keep up. It's all God. Very rarely will I even sit down until the end of the day, literally. I guess it's good for exercise anyway. I think I'm doing the job of at least 3 people. Adding teaching to the schedule is just an added bonus. When this is said and done, I'm taking a month off. No word on perspective buyers, but I'm keeping the faith. I know God is working on this. One of these days, my life will be much less hectic."

That less hectic time arrived on October 26, 2006 with her murder. In that short note, Joan mentioned God 4 times. She was a true Christian. She prayed hard and others prayed for her, but our prayers weren't answered in the way we hoped. I think she's in a better place now. But if she was still with us she would be busy right now helping someone enjoy a better life. Our family has been devastated by Joan's murder, but in a way, Reno and all society are also poorer because of her loss.

I pray sincerely for Mr. Sims, but I also pray that this court forever segregates and separates him from society and from all the other Joans in the world. May his killing of Joan be his last irrational and non-sensical violent outburst!

Don Varley
Father of Joan Varley