

In the six years since her death, Carin Streufert's mother, father and sister have pursued a recovery method that brought them face to face with the men who took her life.

## Family confronts loss, convicted killers in search for answers

By Robert Franklin  
Star Tribune Staff Writer

GRAND RAPIDS, MINN. — It was a crime that horrified the state. Carin Streufert, an 18-year-old college student walking home at night in this small northern Minnesota city, was kidnapped, raped and shot to death by two young men.

Since that happened six years ago, members of her family have visited the two murderers in prison to confront, question and listen. They wanted details that did not come out in court. They wanted to know Carin's last words. They wanted the men to know what their lives are like without Carin.

They didn't get everything they wanted. But they did seek to draw lessons that can help others.

Don and Mary Streufert want people to know that they are not some aberrant couple who could set aside their anger and grief to seek a relationship with the killers of their child. They and their younger daughter,



Carin Streufert, a University of Minnesota student from Grand Rapids, was killed in June 1991.

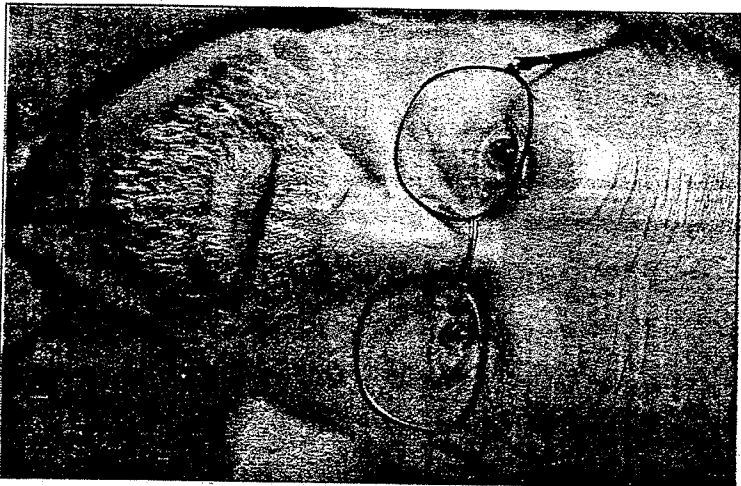
Emily, went through extensive preparation and some gut-wrenching apprehension before the visits. They came away with some answers, some unresolved issues and some differing individual reactions.

The Streuferts are part of a growing worldwide "restorative justice" movement in which crimes are seen as offenses not only against the state but also against the victim and the community.

The idea is to humanize the victim, the offender and the crime, to fix responsibility and let all parties work to heal the harm.

In some programs, as in the Streufert case, victims and offenders agree to meet, with help from a facilitator. Sometimes whole families from both sides are brought in. Sometimes offenders, such as drunken drivers, listen to people who have been hurt by others.

Restorative justice techniques are used extensively in property and juvenile crimes, and increasingly in violent crimes. A Texas



Don and Mary Streufert, Carin's parents, decided to face the violence that took their daughter. They formed a group dedicated to fighting violence in rural areas, became interested in restorative justice and testified at the Legislature against the death penalty.

program has had more than 250 requests for talks between victims and offenders involved in the most violent crimes, some of them on death row.

Face-to-face meetings are not for everyone, criminologists say. But the Streuferts' journey became "a model of what I would strive for," said Kay Pranis, restorative justice planner for the state Corrections Department.

The family allowed the National Film



Star Tribune Photos by David Brewster

Board of Canada to follow them, and it produced a documentary, "Glimmer of Hope," that has been shown on Canadian television and at conferences around the United States.

It shows, Pranis said, "a portrait of a family allowing each other to come through in their own ways while holding each other's hands."

Turn to JUSTICE on A18

## Victim's family seeks answers in meetings with convicted men

Carin Streufert was popular, funny, a high school honor student and homecoming queen. She loved roses, sailing, children and the sport of curling.

"She cracked me up," said Emily, 22, who was 2½ years younger than Carin. "She was so loyal to her friends, so loyal to me." And she was so sensitive that a TV commercial or "Little House on the Prairie" could make her cry.

If Carin did something stupid, she could just laugh it off, her mother said. "That was one of the things I admired about her. I never could take myself so lightly."

Carin, a student at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, had come home for the summer. On June 15, 1991, she had arranged to meet friends at a Perkins restaurant in downtown Grand Rapids. She was walking home late in the evening when two men in a car kidnapped her at gunpoint.

Nearly five days later, two 24-year-old area men, each blaming the other, were arrested and led authorities to her body in a wooded area of nearby Aitkin County. James Swanson, a police-training washout who often carried handguns, and Guy Sullivan, who was on probation for theft, were both convicted of first-degree murder and kidnapping, and sentenced to life in prison.

Carin's parents were so grief-stricken that, at one point, Don said, "I couldn't even pray." But they did pray, even for the killers and their families. And they were buoyed when about 1,250 people came to Carin's funeral.

Don, a psychologist with Lutheran Social Service, and Mary, administrative coordinator of the Itasca Hospice Project, decided to confront the type of violence that had taken their daughter.

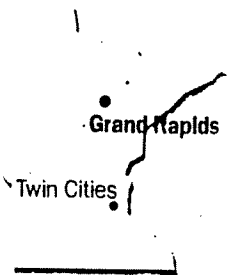
They formed Pathways to Peace and Safety, an organization dedicated to fighting violence in rural areas. They became interested in the restorative justice concept. They spoke around the state and testified at the Legislature against the death penalty.

### The visits

In all, Don Streufert made more than a half-dozen prison visits over 3½ years. Mary and Emily made two each. All the visits except one were with Sullivan.

Don went into the idea using both sides of his brain, Mary said. He was both the grieving father and the psychologist. "I really wasn't eager," his wife said. "I guess that I began to feel that I didn't want to be left out."

They went through 1½ years of preparation with Mark Umbreit, a nationally known restorative justice mediator, author and professor in social work at the University of Minnesota.



The family's first visit was with Sullivan at Minnesota's Oak Park Heights prison in November 1993. The elder Streuferts, Umbreit and Sullivan sat at a table. Emily sat off to the side, observing.

"I went into it totally emotional," Mary recalled. "I remember walking in there [with] just a huge knot in my stomach. . . . This was the guy that hurt my daughter. Part of me didn't want to be that close to him."

The meeting, part of it recorded in the Canadian film, lasted for three hours. Don recalled the laughter and fun the last time Carin was with them. "I was just proud to be her father," he said. He expressed anger about what happened to her.

Sullivan said Carin tried once to run, but Swanson stopped her. "I'd been trying to stop it the whole time," he told them. "You gotta remember, he had the gun."

In a later meeting, Sullivan said he last heard Carin pleading to him for help; but again, he added, Swanson had a gun.

"She asked him to help her, and he didn't," Mary said tearfully after the meeting.

It took longer to arrange the single meeting held with Swanson, who is serving his life sentence in Sante Fe, N.M. After the Streuferts visited Swanson's parents, Mary decided against going to the prison. "I felt that our intentions were misinterpreted," she said.

Don, Emily and Umbreit did go: the meeting, which wasn't filmed, lasted about an hour. Don said Swanson told them he had made a decision and that the decision was wrong. Neither Sullivan nor Swanson agreed to be interviewed for this article.

"What I wanted to know is the truth," Mary said on film. "I am not interested in a relationship with these guys. I don't need that in my life."

But the Streuferts had been prepared to hear something less, the prisoners' differing versions of truth. Neither took their full responsibility for the crime, the family said.

### Lessons they learned

In interviews this summer and fall, family members said they

*"I went into it totally emotional. I remember walking in there [with] just a huge knot in my stomach. . . . This was the guy that hurt my daughter. Part of me didn't want to be that close to him."*

— Mary Streufert, talking about her meeting with Guy Sullivan

learned several things from their restorative justice experience:

- Even murderers have some human qualities of value. "They're not throwaways, these two guys," Don said. "I think each has the capacity to contribute."
- The process was draining, sometimes frustrating, sometimes valuable on both sides. In the end, "Guy seemed to trust us," Mary said. "Maybe he had something to share with other young people." According to Don, "the dialogue with these men helped me to better understand how such crimes happen."
- The process can empower victims. Most victims of severe violence would not consider meeting with offenders, but a growing number are, Umbreit said. "This is driven by victims who are deeply hurting. . . . There's a need to face the source."
- Restorative justice won't provide all the answers. "There still remained different versions of what happened and who was responsible for what actions," Don said. "You have to move beyond that." He added that "I would want more victims to have this as a choice," but there hasn't been enough experience to know if there are adverse effects.
- Emily, who started the process when she was 16, realized that she could talk openly with her parents about the tragedy and not feel they all had to agree.

After their own restorative justice experience, how do they feel about the men who killed their daughter? Is there forgiveness?

The Streuferts said they don't have a common definition of that word.

If it means a diminished animosity, Don said, "I believe I am experiencing it and benefiting from it on a personal level."

But he does not pardon, condone, excuse, rationalize or forget their actions, he said.

Said Mary, "If forgiveness is defined as letting go of the anger and not . . . letting the bitterness and anger and grief define me then indeed I have forgiven them. I don't spend a lot of time thinking about it, or them."

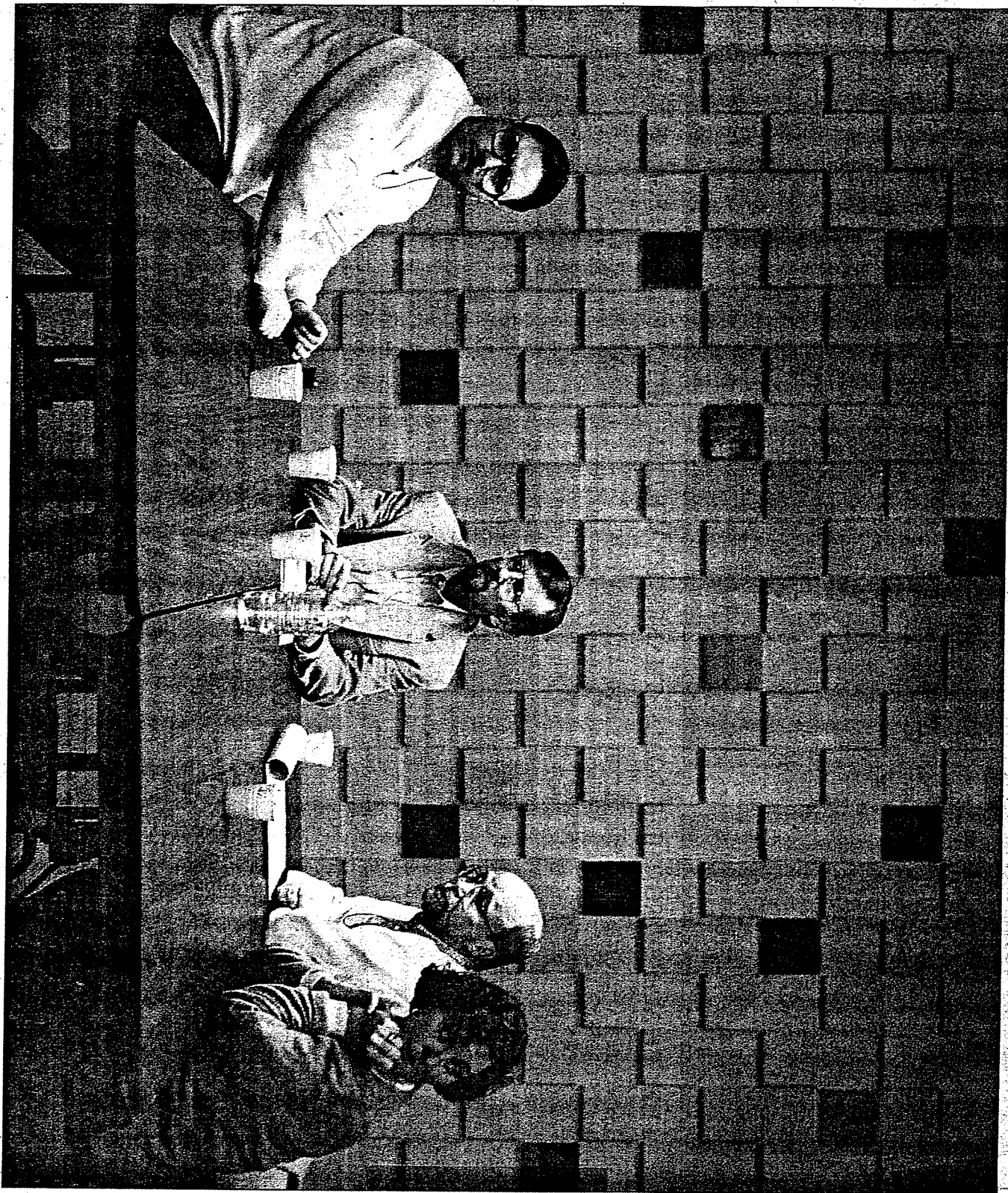
### Memorials to Carin

About \$26,000 in memorials has been sent to the Streuferts. Some was spent on sailboats for kids in the Grand Rapids area and some on curling rocks. But most is in an endowment at the Grand Rapids Community Foundation to support programs for nonviolent conflict resolution among youth. The fund, which is still taking contributions, made its first grant last year, for a peer mediation program.

"Carin's presence remains," Don said. "The memories are always there. Thank God for that."

Mary Streufert continues her hospice and community work, Don is teaching psychology at the University of Minnesota-Duluth, and Emily has graduated from college and is living in Oregon. Don and Mary are active in anti-violence work, and Don has helped train others in facilitating restorative justice meetings.

# THE STREUFERT CASE



**Guy Sullivan, left, sentenced to life in prison for the murder of Carin Streufert, met with mediator Mark Umbreit, center, and Streufert's parents, Don and Mary, at Minnesota's Oak Park Heights Prison in November 1993. Their meeting was the subject of a documentary by the National Film Board of Canada.**



File photo

Guy Sullivan, left, and James Swanson were led away by deputies in June 1991 after their arraignment at the Itasca County courthouse for the murder of Carin Streufert.

## Restorative justice

### *At a glance:*

- **What is it?** A philosophy and programs that view crime as a violation against the victim and the community, not just the state. Thus, justice involves all three in taking responsibility, repairing harm and restoring relationships.
- **How does it work?** Through many types of programs, including face-to-face meetings involving victims, offenders and facilitators; bringing in family members on both sides; "circle sentencing," in which community circles craft a sentence or conditions of probation; victim impact panels, such as those used in drunken driving cases; peer mediation in schools; teen courts, and various community service projects for offenders.
- **How widespread is it?** Since emerging in the 1970s, it has grown worldwide. One study last year found nearly 1,000 victim-offender mediation programs alone, including 282 in the United States.
- **In Minnesota?** The state Corrections Department has a restorative justice unit and programs are developing in more than 20 counties. "There's so much happening I can't keep track of it," said Kay Pranis, a state restorative justice planner. "It's bubbling up at local level, shaped to local conditions."
- **How effective is it?** Studies have shown favorable results in several types of programs, including a study of victim-offender mediation in Minneapolis and three other cities published in 1994 by Mark Umbreit, of the University of Minnesota. Of 3,142 cases in that study, 95 percent resulted in a negotiated restitution agreement. Compared with the normal court process, victims were more satisfied and less likely to be fearful of being victimized again, and offenders were more likely to complete their restitution obligation and less likely to commit new serious crimes.
- **"Glimmer of Hope":** Information on this documentary about the Streufert experience is available from the New York office of the National Film Board of Canada. Call 1-212-629-8890.

Sources: Publications from the Minnesota Corrections Department, some by Pranis and some by Umbreit; "Victim Meets Offender," 1994 book by Umbreit.