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TELL ME A STORY | A FAMILY MOVES TOWARD HEALING

## Forgiving a father

He killed their mom. They hated him. They believe he's different now. So are they.

PAM KELLEY  
Staff Writer

It was a fifth-grade essay, the sort of assignment that elicits stories of vacations, sports victories and beloved pets. John Syriani, age 10, wrote about the day his world blew apart.

*My mom is the most prettyest woman in the world. I hate my stupid dad he killed her ... I was in the car with her.*

That day in Charlotte in July 1990, Elias Syriani stabbed Teresa Syriani 28 times with a screwdriver. The next summer, in a case hailed as a victory against domestic violence, a jury sentenced him to die, the first death penalty verdict in Mecklenburg for killing a spouse.

John and his three sisters -- Rose, Sarah and Janet -- went to live with aunts outside Chicago. They grew up united in their hatred of their father, on death row in Raleigh's Central Prison.

They are adults now. And much has changed since the day John wrote his essay.

Last summer, the four traveled to Raleigh and confronted the man who robbed them of their mother and their childhoods.

They had come for answers, for closure. But that day, they received an unexpected gift.

They believe it came from their mother.

Everything made her father angry, 14-year-old Rose testified during his trial.

The family moved to Charlotte in 1986, leaving Calumet City, outside Chicago, after Elias lost his job as a machinist.

In Calumet City, they lived in an Arab community, among Assyrian Christians like themselves. The marriage was at times rocky. Elias sometimes struck Teresa.

In Charlotte, things got worse. Money was tight, and Teresa's decision to take a job at a gas station deli outraged Elias, who held traditional Arab beliefs that wives belonged in the home.

Once, Elias tried to hit Teresa with a baseball bat. After that, Teresa took the children to the battered women's shelter, then to relatives in New Jersey. But she soon returned to Charlotte.

In 1990, she filed for divorce and got an order requiring Elias to leave their house. Days later, as she drove home from work with 10-year-old John beside her, Elias blocked their path with his van and opened her car door.

Armed with a screwdriver, he stabbed Teresa repeatedly in the head, face, hands and arm, according to court testimony. He struck with such force that he drove the tool into her brain.

At the trial, John testified that he tried to push his father away from his mother, then ran home and screamed for his sister to call police.

"I new that she was going to die," John wrote in his fifth-grade essay. "I didn't sleep for 6 nights. I was so scared that he was going to kill me to."

Teresa died 26 days later. She was 40.

## Raising themselves

For years, the children tried to push memories of their father from their lives. They spoke of Elias Syriani as "him," never "Dad." Sarah took scissors and snipped his face out of family photos. Without parents, they helped raise each other and grew up closer than many siblings.

After their father's arrest, they lived with his two sisters, immigrants from Jordan like their father. The women spoke little English, so Rose, starting at 13, often served as parent, shopping for groceries and attending her siblings' school functions.

With support from teachers, counselors and neighbors, they grew into strong adults. A couple of years ago, Sarah began dating a man seriously. And she realized she was beginning to think more about her father.

"I would find myself driving to and from work, and he's in my mind," she recalled. "Am I feeling sympathy? Am I feeling anger? I don't understand it."

Of the four, only John, at age 18, had ever visited Elias. But he felt too sorry for his dad to ask about the murder, and his father seemed unready to give answers.

By 2004, though, all four children talked of visiting their father together. Their reasons differed. Sarah wanted to rid her heart of anger before she married and had children. Rose wanted to confront her father, to tell him he couldn't hurt her anymore.

Their resolve to visit strengthened when they read a biography prepared for his appeal. Written by a Middle East expert who'd interviewed their father, the affidavit described forces that shaped Elias Syriani. Neither his children nor the jurors who sentenced him had ever heard this.

Born in Jerusalem, Elias was 10 when his community became part of the newly created state of Israel. Israelis imprisoned his father and released him to Jordan two years later. His family joined him there, but after a mental breakdown in prison, the man never worked again.

As the oldest son, Elias struggled to support his family as a mechanic. Home life was grim. Elias said his mother treated his father worse than a dog.

Elias immigrated to the United States following his 1974 arranged marriage to Teresa, 12 years his junior. She'd come to America from Jordan several years earlier.

In Charlotte, when Teresa took a job and made her own friends, Elias saw his authority slipping away. The affidavit describes his desperate efforts to hold onto his wife and children using the violence considered acceptable in the patriarchal culture he was raised in.

Rose, Sarah and Janet read the affidavit and wept. "We had never realized what my father and his family had gone through," Rose says. Their father's past didn't excuse his actions, but it helped explain the tension and violence that plagued their family.

## The visit

Last August, they flew to Charlotte, then drove to Raleigh. By the time they arrived in a visiting booth at Central Prison, Sarah's stomach felt queasy.

I don't know if I can do this, she told her siblings.

Before she could back out, a line of inmates appeared behind the glass. And there, among the tall, muscular young men, they spotted their graying father in a red prison jumpsuit.

John waved. Rose waved.

Elias Syriani waved back. His face broke into a smile.

Even before he spoke, Rose noticed: This is not the angry father whose dark eyes could frighten with a single look.

He has changed, she thought.

At first, they talked about safe things. What did he do every day? What did he eat?

He asked Rose if she flossed daily.

After 45 minutes, Sarah rose to leave so her aunt could take her place.

I love you, baba, her father told her, using an Arabic term of endearment.

He repeated it. Three, four times.

Sarah hesitated. She wanted to respond, but worried it would offend her siblings. She didn't know it, but they were feeling exactly as she was.

Please, Janet thought, even if you don't mean it, just let him hear it.

I love you, too, Sarah told her father.

At that moment, she felt 14 years of hatred leave her.

When they returned to the motel, Sarah worried she had betrayed her dead mother. She tried to remember the bad things her father did. She tried to summon anger.

It wouldn't come. This was forgiveness, she realized, and it was a gift.

"I knew my mother and God were saying, 'We don't want you to feel this way.'"

### **Father admits mistakes**

When they returned to prison the next day, their father attempted to explain his crime. He told them he felt he was losing his children, losing everything. Not until the second before he attacked, he said, did he imagine he was going to hurt their mother.

All my ways were wrong, he told his children. I admit that.

I love your mother, he said. I thank her for bringing my four children into this world.

His daughters cried when it was time for him to go. But Elias beamed. These are my kids, he told the guards. I'm the happiest man in the world.

Since their visit, Elias has received letters from his children. Janet, only 8 when he killed her mother, is his most prolific correspondent. "Now," she says, "I have the father I've always wanted."

This month, the four siblings visited him again. As they become reacquainted, they recognize the traits they share with their father. John, 25, and Sarah, 27, have his sense of humor. Janet, 23, got his aptitude for math.

They love hearing his memories of their mother -- memories they had forgotten. And they marvel at how he has changed. The Arab man who once believed women should be married by 18 shocked Rose, now 28, when he told her not to rush into marriage, not to settle.

### **Fighting another death**

Of 176 people on North Carolina's death row, Elias Syriani, 67, is the third oldest. Only eight inmates have been there longer.

His case has been appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. Syriani deserves a new sentencing hearing, his lawyers argue, because his trial lawyer didn't hire a mental health expert to examine him and present mitigating evidence. A competent defense, they say, would have kept him off death row.

The Supreme Court will likely decide in October whether to hear Syriani's case. Chances are remote, experts say. If the court declines, his execution would be set for this year. His lawyers would file a petition for clemency with Gov. Mike Easley.

This month, Rose, Sarah, John and Janet came to Charlotte to tell their story at a conference on helping children of domestic violence.

Rose now works at a Chicago marketing firm. Janet is an accounting student. They live near Chicago, sharing a house with John, who sells cars. Sarah lives outside San Francisco. She married in February and starts cosmetology school this summer.

At the conference, they talked of forgiveness, and how it has allowed them to heal. They talked about how Teresa Syriani would have wanted this.

They explained why they want the state to spare their father's life, and what they would say if they could speak to Gov. Easley.

"If this execution is carried out, we'll have two parents murdered," Rose told the audience.

Sarah wiped a tear from her eye. "We've suffered enough," she said.

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*Pam Kelley: (704) 358-5271; [pkelley@charlotteobserver.com](mailto:pkelley@charlotteobserver.com).*