Gardens of Reflection at Angel House

Wiregrass Angel House, in Dothan, dedicated their new garden on May 17th to their late counsellor Joyce Nottingham Miller. Joyce was a long time victim’s advocate and friend to those families who had suffered the loss of a loved one. This was a project that Joyce had longed to build for families in the Wiregrass area. She always felt victims were continually forgotten and she wanted to make a place that was tranquil and peaceful they could be proud of. A special thank you to District Attorneys’ Douglas Valeska and Kirke Adams for speaking at the dedication honouring Joyce. There were over 100 friends, family, and co-workers that came to pay tribute to garden dedication.

A special thank you to Mike and Sandy Schmitz for their generous donation to continue our work at Angel House.

The garden was built for families of homicide victims to come and "Remember, Reflect, and Rebuild". As the stone at the top of the waterfall so eloquently states. The gate to the garden is open 24 hours a day for families to enjoy at their leisure. The waterfall and swings are just the first phase of the garden.

We are currently raising funds for an arbour and memory bricks for loved ones names to be inscribed on.
Garden Dedication Pictures

Joyce’s daughters with Mayor Schmitz
Director’s Note

On June 25th, the US Supreme Court, in their infinite wisdom, decided that an offender, under the age of 18, could not be sentenced to life without parole. They state in their briefs, that it constituted Cruel and Unusual Punishment and it violated the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution.

As I read the Justice’s arguments:

“In the Alabama case, Evan Miller, now age 23 and an inmate at the St. Clair Correctional Facility, will return to a courtroom in Lawrence County where he was originally convicted and sentenced nine years ago in the death of his neighbor, Cole Cannon.

The majority opinion from the Supreme Court, which was endorsed by Justices Elena Kagan, Anthony Kennedy, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sonia Sotomayor and Stephen Breyer, included some horrific details of Miller’s case and a suggestion that he is a prime candidate for a lesser punishment. The justices noted that Miller was high on drugs and alcohol consumed with the adult victim at the time of the murder, and that his childhood was brutal.”

So? How is it society’s responsibility to bear the burden of those that had a bad childhood?

What about justice for Cole Cannon? What about the cruel and unusual punishment this victim endured at the hands of Evan Miller?

When are the courts in this country going to stop making excuses for those who choose to hurt other people by giving them another chance to re-offend? How many more innocent people have to die before those in authority realize enough is enough and when you choose to do the crime you must do the time!

Suffice to say, none of those that voted to strike down this law on the US Supreme Court, has ever had a loved one murdered! If just one had ever suffered the injustices that families of homicide victims had endured, I can assure you the voting would have been unanimous to continue with the justice that is already in place for those “juveniles” that have murdered.

It is not only a sad day in Alabama for those families who will have to relive their cases at re-sentencing but also they will now have to continue the fight to keep the offenders in prison when they are eligible for parole.

The only bright side for victims in Alabama - the present parole board is made up of very bright men and they know when an inmate needs to stay incarcerated, no matter their age.

Shelly Linderman
Director
Angel House
29th Annual National Night Out

August 4th is National Night Out in Houston County for all the citizens to come and enjoy the sounds of blue grass music, to check out the latest gadgets from the fire department, to watch the Special Response Team put on an awesome show with their maneuvers, and to check out the inside booths of all the organizations that help each day. This will be the 29th Annual National Night out campaign to involve citizens, law enforcement agencies, and local agencies to take a stand against drugs and crime. This event will be held at the Dothan Civic Center and is free and open to the public. Angel House will have a booth set up and giveaways for the kids. There will be a variety of activities for children and teenagers. We encourage everyone to come and be a part of this worthwhile event!

Prosecutors Continue to Learn to Better Assist

Each year, the Houston and Henry County District Attorney’s Office holds a week long in-service for their prosecutors to continue to learn from various professionals across the State of Alabama. This year, the Dale and Geneva County DA’s office also participated. Various agencies such as the Department of Forensic Sciences, the Alabama Pardons and Parole Board, as well as victim’s organizations received the opportunity to share their knowledge with the prosecutors to further their understanding in blood spatter, new laws that affect parole notifications, as well as “victimology” and how best to assist victims that are going through the court to make their experience less traumatic. The in-service is a great opportunity for the participants to learn more and to be able to regain focus on why they are in the careers they have chosen. This is a worthwhile seminar in which all DA’s could have their office personnel benefit.

Tragedy in Auburn

Three young men, two of them with ties to Auburn University’s football team, were killed and three others were wounded during a pool party on Saturday night, June 9th at an apartment complex near the campus. The suspect, Desmonte D. Leonard, apparently had no connection to the university, has been charged with three counts of capital murder. The police found his abandoned car near the scene of the shooting, which occurred at the University Heights apartment complex.

Chief Tommy Dawson of the City of Auburn Police Department did not release many details of the shooting. But people who were at the party said the fight began in the apartments’ clubhouse area after Mr. Leonard saw a man dancing with a woman he had spent time with earlier.

The victims were: Ladarius K. Phillips, 20, Edward Christian, 20, an Auburn offensive lineman whose career was curtailed by a back injury, and Demario Pitts, 20, who lived in nearby Opelika, Ala., and was not affiliated with the team.

“The only connection that the Auburn football team has to this is that they are victims of a brutal shooting,” “Sometimes the young men get a bad rap, I feel like. But they’re the victims today,” said Chief Dawson.

Please lift up all three of these families as they begin the process of dealing with their own personal trauma losing their sons.
Support Group Meeting

The Southeast Alabama VOCAL Chapter meets for a monthly support group at Wiregrass Angel House the 3rd Tuesday of each month at 6 p.m.

We would like to welcome Janette Grantham as the new Assistant State Director for VOCAL in Montgomery. We know she will do a great job.

DONATIONS

Thank you to the following for donating to our organization. Without you our job would not be possible...

Crown Trophy
Houston County DA’s Office
Houston County Pre-Trial Program
Henry County Pre-Trial Program
IBM Employees
Peggy Eiland
Lori Grubbs
Mike and Sandy Schmitz
Myron Williams

Words of Wisdom

WWJD

So many of you have heard the acronym WWJD. Your first thought is- What Would Jesus Do? Well- in our case at Angel House it has a different meaning.

What Would Joyce Do?

Each case that we encounter... Each injustice that we see... Each time a family member or victim comes to our agency... we first think and ask the question What would Joyce do?

It seemed she always had the correct answer or the appropriate response.

She had a unique way of knowing when to say something; when to keep quiet and just listen, and when to get mad and express her opinion of displeasure for the way the victims or their families were being treated. It didn’t matter whether it was to the prosecutors, judges, or anyone in the justice system that mistreated a victim.

Some feel this might be an impractical way to approach situations, but we think it’s perfect.
Houston/Henry County News

Houston County Case Overturned
It’s been three and a half years since Byron Belser was gunned down at night club in downtown Dothan. Sitting at a bar, minding his own business and he was shot to death by Kenneth McKinnis. Byron’s mother, Veronica, has just begun to try and put her life back together and now she has to deal with this tragedy once again. The Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals has dealt a blow to justice for the family of Byron Belser, as they reversed the conviction of Kenneth McKinnis. Because of a technical error in the judge’s charge to the jury, the family of Byron will have to endure another 4 to 5 days of trial. They will suffer through this ordeal once again to assure Mckinnis receives his just punishment for what he did to their son. But once again, the victim’s family has to suffer at the hands of the defendant and his rights. How unfair the system is to the families of homicide victims.

Judge Anderson Denies Youthful Offender
Houston County Circuit Judge Larry Anderson denied Antwain Wingard’s request to be tried as a youthful offender, in the killing of Jarvis Daffin. Mr. Daffin was murdered in February of this year. Wingard faces charges of capital murder, robbery and kidnapping. Good job Judge Anderson!

The Death of Shawn Aldridge
Stephanie Coogle, mother of Shawn Aldridge, pleaded guilty to Manslaughter, in the death of her son. On June 28th of 2011, the Dothan Police Department responded to a call where a 4 year old was not breathing. Shawn Aldridge was found dead in his parent’s vehicle. Shawn had crawled in the back of the vehicle and could not get out. He died from the heat. He had been trapped for an estimated 4 hours. The mother was sentenced to four years in prison. A Probation hearing for Coogle is scheduled for July 24th in front of Judge Moulton.
The Retirement of Lt. Tony Luker

Lt. Tony Luker’s last official day of work was June 29, 2012. Over 28 years with the Dothan Police Department came to an end as Lt. Luker decided to retire and spend time with his family.

Lt. Luker has reached so many victims over the past three decades assisting them whether it was a burglary, rape, robbery, or a family when it was a homicide.

One regret he leaves behind is not being able to bring a resolution in the Perry Griffin case. Lt. Luker, said, “You know you talk about leaving your work at work but that is one case where it was the last thing I thought about when I went to bed and the first thing I thought about when I woke up. There isn’t a day that goes by that I still don’t think about it.”

We will miss you Tony. You brought so much compassion and empathy to your job. That is something that is hard to replace.