

Mother cares for her son's Amish victims

by [Daniel Burke](#)

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LANCASTER, Pa. (RNS) Terri Roberts was eating outside with a co-worker on a bright October day when an ambulance wailed nearby and a helicopter swooped overhead.

As she often did at a sirens' sound, Roberts said a quick prayer.

"Little did I know what I was praying for," she said.

Walking back to her office, Roberts heard the phone ring. It was her husband, Chuck.

"I need you to come to Charlie's house right away," he said, referring to their 32-year-old son.

Terri jumped into her car. The radio broadcast said there had been a shooting at an Amish schoolhouse in nearby Nickel Mines, Pa., where Charlie sometimes parked his milk truck.

Terri worried: What if Charlie had been shot while trying to rescue the children? What if he had been killed?

As she pulled into her son's driveway, she saw Chuck talking to a state trooper. She clambered out of the car.

"Is Charlie alive?" she asked.

"No."

It was Oct. 2, 2006, and Charles Carl Roberts IV had just shot 10 Amish schoolgirls before turning the gun on himself. Five girls died. Five others were seriously wounded. The shooting shocked this quiet, rural county and horrified countless outsiders glued to the nonstop media coverage.

"Not only was my son not alive, he was the perpetrator of the worst crime anyone could ever imagine," Terri Roberts said.

After the shooting, the world was riveted by the remarkable display of compassion shown by the Amish, as the quiet Christian sect embraced the Roberts family and strove to forgive its troubled sinner.

Five years after the shooting, the other side of the story is not well-known -- that of a grief-torn mother seeking the still, small voice of God in the aftermath of tragedy.

One place where Terri has found peace is at the bedside of her son's most damaged, living victim -- a paralyzed schoolgirl, now 11.

During their weekly visit, Terri bathes and talks to her, brushes her hair and sings hymns.

"As we reach out in ways that bring a touch, we can find great healing," Terri said.

Terri Roberts, now 60, declines most media requests.

But she has shared her story at conferences and churches. In March, Faith Church in Lancaster posted an audio recording of her spiritual testimony on its website; she confirmed its accuracy for this article.

On the day of the shooting, Terri crawled into a fetal position, feeling as if her insides were ripped apart. Chuck, a retired policeman, cried into a tea towel, unable to lift his head. He wore skin off his face wiping away tears.

Family and friends poured into the Roberts' home in Strasburg, Pa., a small town about six miles from Nickel Mines. No one knew what to say.

"What do you say, `At least it's not as bad as so-and-so'? There was nothing that anyone could imagine that would have been worse than that day," she said.

Later that evening, an Amish neighbor named Henry, whom Terri calls

her "angel in black," arrived at their house.

Chuck had begun a second career as an "Amish taxi," driving families to destinations farther away than horses and buggies could carry them. After the shooting, Chuck feared he could never face the Amish again.

"Roberts, we love you," Henry insisted, and continued to comfort Chuck for nearly an hour.

Finally, Chuck looked up. "Thank you, Henry," he said.

"I just looked at that and said, `Oh Lord, my husband will heal through this. I was just so thankful for Henry that day," Terri said.

Later, a local pastor escorted a grief counselor to the Roberts' home. The counselor asked Terri how old her son was, and whether she had any good memories of him.

"I said, `Any good memories? He was a wonderful son. All I had was good memories. He wasn't perfect, but he was a good kid.'"

The grief counselor encouraged Terri to think of the shooting as a sliver of her son's life. She shouldn't ignore it, the counselor advised, but neither should she live in its shadow.

"I can't tell you what that meant to me in the days, weeks and months ahead," Terri said. "I should have permanent gullies in my cheeks from the amount of tears that I have shed, and yet I was able to have joy intermingled in those days. My life was not total darkness and

sorrow."

Three months after the shooting, Chuck and Terri Roberts began visiting the victims and their families.

Terri invited the surviving girls and their mothers to picnics and tea parties at her home.

At one tea, Terri asked the mothers to sit in a circle and share the highest and lowest points of their lives. She yearned to connect with Mary Liz King, the mother of a paralyzed girl named Rosanna.

King explained how her trials were different than the rest of the victims. Their daughters had died or healed, whereas Rosanna, unable to move most of her body, requires constant care.

She cannot walk, talk or eat, yet Rosanna is aware of her surroundings and attends an Amish school, her father, Christ King, said in an interview.

At the tea, Terri approached Mary Liz and offered to help care for Rosanna.

Almost every Thursday evening since, Terri has visited the Kings for several hours, singing to Rosanna, cleaning her bedclothes, bathing her limp body and reading her Bible stories.

After the first few visits, Terri cried all the way home. "Lord, I can't do this," she said. But she went back the next week, and the next.

"She's got to be an awful strong woman to be able to do that," said Christ King. "Some of the evenings that Terri is there, Rosanna has a rough time or cries a lot. You can't help but think about what happened and why she is like she is. I don't know that I'd be that strong."

Terri Roberts wishes her son had reached out to others, or to God, for help in dispelling his dark moods.

"We had a son who did not have peace in his life," she said.

Charlie Roberts said in a suicide note that he hated God after the miscarriage of his first child. Faced with similar suffering -- Charlie was Terri's firstborn -- his mother has taken the opposite path.

Her son cursed God; she trusts in prayer. Her son acted out his rage; she reaches out in reconciliation.

Terri laments that Charlie lacked what she calls "anchor Scriptures," solid, biblical truths that sustained her during a bout

with breast cancer and continue to comfort her now.

She especially wishes Charlie had focused on Paul's letter to the Philippians.

"Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable -- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy -- think about such things," Paul wrote.

"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me -- - put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you."