

Forgiveness for killer after mother attacked at Edmonton's Churchill LRT station in 1988

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[Jackie Carmichael](#)

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Rowan Greeve holds a photo of his mother Catherine Rose Greeve, murder August 3, 1988 in the Churchill LRT, following a candlelight service hosted by the Victims of Homicide Of Edmonton Support Society at Laurier Heights Baptist Church, in Edmonton Wednesday Dec. 13, 2023. The organization is a self-help/support group designed to offer emotional support and information about surviving the loss of a loved one to murder.

Rowan Greeve's earliest memory is the one that derailed his life — and one that started him on a journey through pain and grief to forgiveness.

On Aug. 3, 1988, his mother was murdered, fatally attacked at Edmonton's Churchill LRT station. She didn't pick him up from daycare. There was sadness and shock, and people from a neighbouring church placing lit candles by the family's home near Whyte Avenue. He was four years old.

"When you go through something like that, it's a very traumatic experience," he said.

Catherine Greeve was "your average, kind Edmontonian," Rowan recalls. "She was a really, really bright person. She loved choir, singing and going to church. She had a deep love for people... and she ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time," he said.

It was one of those moments when life turns on a dime: Catherine, 29, stopping at a washroom at the LRT, heading back to her office job after having lunch with her husband downtown. A young man lay in wait for someone to rob.

"She was strangled in the bathroom," Rowan said. "I honestly think he didn't go in wanting to murder somebody. He wanted to rob someone. I don't think his intent was to do what he did to my mom."

"She screamed so I hit her," the robber-turned-killer would later say.

When she was found, she was still alive — barely. She died in hospital later that day. Her family was shattered.

Catherine's father, Anglican minister Martin Hattersley, wrote about his trip to the Edmonton Medical Examiner's office to identify his daughter, in a blog called Martin's Fifth Column.

“But more than anything else, not moving, not laughing as we always knew her, not even breathing as we knew her when asleep, but still — utterly still,” Hattersley wrote in the blog.

There were many repercussions.

“For three months, my father was the prime suspect. He wasn’t able to grieve his murdered wife. It was really hard on him, really terrible. He was traumatized by that,” Rowan said.

Then the Edmonton Police Service caught a break. A man named Ronald Neanhouse was under investigation for bank robbery, and they were able to match prints from the bank robbery to a thumb print on the toilet seat in the LRT washroom where Catherine Greeve was fatally attacked.

Rowan Greeve was the stereotypical troubled youth — with more excuses than most. Anger, loathing, living in a youth shelter. Self-medication with substance abuse led to thoughts of suicide.

“It completely ruined my life ... I burned all my bridges,” he said. “Sometimes back in my early 20s when things looked pretty grim, I didn’t think I’d get here.”

Then, his brother invited him to a faith meeting.

“I learned what the love of God was, and that the love of God can fill your heart, and you can forgive someone who’s done the worst to you,” he said. “The kind of forgiveness that I’ve learned through going through something like this is that I’m not letting what this person did to my loved one, and to me — I’m not letting it control the rest of my life. It was like a darkness fell off of me that I’d been carrying all my life, and I was finally ready to move ahead in my life, with positivity instead of rage,” he said. “It was a way for me to continue my journey forward. It was very personal, the next step in my journey, for my own mental health, for my family, for my faith.”

Martin Hattersley became a founding member of Victims of Homicide Support Society of Edmonton. Rowan eventually went with his granddad, first to drive, and then as a contributing member.

“The group’s really a force and an impact in helping victims navigate through the most awful point in their lives,” Rowan said. “There’s something about when someone’s murdered and another person took the life of your loved one. It becomes a whole other level of trauma,” he said.

The Canadian government defines “restorative justice” as an approach that “seeks to repair harm by providing an opportunity for those harmed and those who take responsibility for the harm to communicate about and address their needs in the aftermath of a crime.” For Rowan Greeve, that meant a journey. Ronald Neanhouse was still serving his sentence in Quebec, past dates where he could have been out on parole.

“After a lot of prayer and self-reflection, I went with my aunt to see him in 2017,” he said. Restorative Justice paid for the trip, providing facilitators to make sure it was a meaningful experience for both offender and victims. “(Neanhouse) was very, very remorseful,” Rowan recalled. “The very first thing he said was, ‘I’m just so sorry. I don’t know what to say to you people, I’m just sorry.’” “‘We’re here to forgive you, and to let you know you’re forgiven,’” Rowan told him.

Neanhouse chooses to turn parole down, year after year, and to remain in prison.

“It’s his choice, he feels safe inside,” Rowan said.

In a stunning about-face, where there was once a heart of chaos and stone, Rowan Greeve now feels compassion for the man who ruined his young life. “I’ve actually come to peace with him,” he said “I actually do care about this man now, quite deeply... I wouldn’t want this holding him back.”

Reports of crimes on and around Edmonton’s transit system are something of a trigger for Rowan Greeve.

“Look at this awesome infrastructure for getting around the city, and people are too scared to use it... . Kids have to go on there and be around people who are unstable,” he said. “How unsafe the LRT system is, it breaks my heart; there’s got to be something we can do to make these platforms safer. My mom was murdered 35 years ago, and we’re still having the same problems.”

He acknowledges ample evidence that many of the crimes are rooted in mental illness and multiple social issues. Heartbreaking social issues are continuing to wreak havoc in an Edmonton he loves, just as his mother loved it: the beauty of the river valley, a social fabric he believes is relatively free of cliques. Now 40, his own burned bridges are far behind Rowan Greeve. He works as a contract carpenter. He has a lovely wife and four children. He describes himself as a believer, and a follower after Jesus, and a Book that says a lot about forgiveness. Each year, Rowan Greeve gets hand-drawn birthday cards and Christmas cards from his mother’s killer.

“It’s the most bizarre thing that’s happened in my life. It’s shown me what the love of God is — not the cliché version, not the religious version. It’s something that can change your life, and that’s something that’s very powerful,” he said.