

# Two Flowers in the Sanctuary

**\*The story of how two families in a small Friends Meeting have, through love and courage, coped with a shared tragedy\***

*Note: This article first appeared in the January 1988 issue of Friends Journal. It is reprinted with permission. Since the original publication of this article, Randy Reeves has lost all of his appeals. He is scheduled to be executed in Nebraska's electric chair on January 14, 1999*

by Wilmer Tjossem

Early Saturday morning, March 29, 1980, two Quaker families near Central City, Nebraska, received messages that are perhaps the most devastating in human experience. One family received news that a daughter and sister, Janet Mesner, 30 (and her visiting friend, Victoria Lamm, 28), had been stabbed to death. The other family learned that their son, Randolph Reeves, 24, had been arrested for committing those crimes, crimes that occurred in an upstairs apartment of the Friends meetinghouse in Lincoln, Nebraska, where Janet lived.

On Sunday morning, March 30, the Associated Press and United Press International carried the story coast to coast. I was in Baltimore that day and recall seeing the news report prominently displayed. The story was beyond belief, and I telephoned friends in Central City who confirmed the account and described the stunned agony of the members of the Central City Meeting, as well as countless others who knew the individuals and their families.

Janet Mesner, before she died, was able to give police the identity of her and her friend's assailant. The legal question of guilt had been determined. The assault and stabbings occurred during the early morning hours of March 29. Randolph (Randy) Reeves has been convicted of murder and awaits execution at the state prison in Lincoln pending appeals. The nature of Randy's relationship to Janet and the motive for the murders is still under speculation. No useful purpose is now served to relate here the details of the crime itself.

The overriding aspect of this story is how the two families, the Mesners and the Reeves, and the small monthly meeting of which they are a part, have dealt with their shared tragedy and the issue of capital punishment. (Victoria's parents are on record as being in favor of the death penalty. Her husband said when he attended Janet's memorial service that he is sympathetic to the Mesners' position.)

Perhaps the most poignant event of this episode occurred on that Sunday morning, March 30, at the Friends meetinghouse in Central City. In the words of the local minister, Delano Cunningham (quoted from testimony to the Nebraska Judiciary Committee on February 16, 1983), ". . . There were two flowers in the front of our sanctuary for us to view as we gathered for worship -- one for the victim and one for the accused, put there by the victim's family. . . . This forgiving and loving attitude has continued and has not wavered during the painful months since. . . ."

The parents of Janet -- Kenneth and Mildred Mesner, farmers near Central City (20 miles east of Grand Island) -- have been active members of their local meeting since their marriage. They had five children. The adoptive parents of Randolph Reeves are Don and Barbara Reeves, who also farm near Central City, and they and their family have long been active in the meeting. The victim and the accused had known one another since childhood. The two families shared personal friendship and the community neighborliness found in rural America.

During Randy's trial in Lincoln, the Mesner and Reeves families were together at the trial in mutual support. Barbara and Mildred, however, as witnesses, were excluded from the courtroom much of the time. It is reported by members of the meeting that the prosecutor was bewildered, if not angered, by the friendship of the two families. Behavior such as that is unfamiliar to most attorneys in our traditionally adversarial trial system. Where were the signs of vengeance?

On the day Randy Reeves' trial started in March 1981, the Nebraska Unicameral Legislature's Judiciary Committee began hearings on a bill to repeal the state's death penalty law. Debate on that repeal still continues, and Randy, six-and-a-half years later and just starting his second round of appeals, awaits the outcome of the legislative debate. The Nebraska Supreme Court, in the initial appeal, made modifications in the findings by the sentencing panel regarding both aggravating and mitigating circumstances; these modifications were in Randy's favor. At present, Randy is waiting for the decision of the District Court judge as to whether Randy is entitled to an evidentiary hearing on his application for post-conviction relief.

On that first day of hearings by the Judiciary Committee, one of those testifying against the death penalty was Kenneth Mesner, father of Janet. Not only that, Kenneth Mesner, supported by his wife Mildred, has served for several years on the steering committee of Nebraskans Against the Death Penalty. He has attended many meetings in Lincoln (200 miles round-trip), has repeated formal testimony, and has made special trips to talk to state senators supporting repeal of the death penalty as the father of a victim. When a date was set for Randy's execution (after denial of his appeal to the Supreme Court), Kenneth and Mildred again made the long and lonely trip to Lincoln to ask what he and Central City Friends could do to stop it. As Jean Gilbert, a member of the Lincoln Meeting and an anti-death penalty activist, says, "Always he was very gentle, kind, and shy. It is not easy for him to talk about this part of his life, but he does. . . ."

Kenneth and Mildred presented, on February 5, 1985, formal testimony to the Judiciary Committee that said in part:

". . . I am a member of the Religious Society of Friends. . . . I was born and raised in the belief that violence is not an acceptable method of solving the problems that arise in our daily lives. . . . The fact that my daughter, Janet, was a victim of murder has not changed that belief. . . . I would like to encourage this committee and the full legislature to repeal the death penalty in the interest of a less violent society. . . . The use of the death penalty only lowers the standards of government to the mentality of the murderer himself who may (have thought) at the moment of the murder that his life will benefit by the death of another. . . . For the government deliberately and methodically to execute one of its citizens is to put a black mark on a society that looks to Christianity as a standard to live by. . . ."

But what of the parents of Randy? Don Reeves in the 1983 hearing on the repeal measure gave the following testimony (again in part) to the Nebraska Judiciary Committee:

"I first testified against the death penalty before this committee in 1961, and on two subsequent occasions, little dreaming that we [including his wife Barbara] might be here under the present circumstances. Our son Randy has been convicted of taking two lives. One of them was Janet Mesner, one of our favorite young persons, daughter of lifelong friends, member of our Friends meeting, family babysitter, Randy's good friend, and older sister of fellows he had lived with. . . . The Randy who killed Janet and Vicki was not the same person whom we know and love. . . . Neither we, nor any other person we know of, are aware of any other incident in Randy's life that remotely resembles this one. . . . Still we can't help wondering, what if Randy had been born in different circumstances? Or had been adopted by some other family? Were we too naive in accepting Randy's Indian heritage? What if our whole culture were less violent, or if we did not accept or even encourage the use of alcohol and other drugs? The presence of Nebraska's death penalty did not save Janet and Vicki. Taking Randy's life will not bring them back. It did not deter others in death row, or those who took life but with whom the courts dealt differently. . . . Capital punishment is applied fitfully. . . . In Nebraska, as everywhere, it falls most harshly on the poor and on the minorities.

"[After] nearly three years of hurting, Barbara and I take heart from the continuing efforts of Senator [Ernie] Chambers and many others inside and outside the Legislature to end this barbaric law. . . ."

To paraphrase a familiar statement, the world at large will little note nor long remember what happened in that small Quaker community in Nebraska. But the Religious Society of Friends might well pause at length, prayerfully, to contemplate and remember the significance of the witness here briefly described.

Few Quakers in modern times have had to face the spiritual and emotional tests that have come to the Mesner and Reeves families and the Central City Meeting. With love and

compassion, they have given us a vision of what can be and should be in our world of growing terrorism and violence.

Let us hold these Nebraska Quakers in the Light and have confidence that should such tragedy come our way, we too will have the God-given power to overcome evil with good.