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Pat Byron | VINE: a lifeline for victims of crime

*By Pat Byron
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Dec. 6 is a date that will always loom large in my memory.

It's the day my younger daughter was born, the day she was tragically taken from our family, and the day a service that helps protect crime victims debuted in this community.

Mary was trying to get on with her life after being raped, assaulted, and stalked by her former boyfriend in late 1993. He was arrested and jailed for his crimes, but someone posted his bail and he was released. There was no way for any of us to know.

On the night of Dec. 6, 1993, Mary sat in her car as it warmed up after leaving her job at the J.C. Penney Salon in the Mall St. Matthews. This man approached the vehicle and fired seven bullets at point blank range, killing her. It was her 21st birthday.

Our grief and devastation were overwhelming. To get through it, we prayed and relied on the support of our family, friends, fellow church members, and even strangers who reached out to us.

Before her killer's trial had even begun, Jefferson County officials were collaborating with victim advocates and software developers to create a system that would notify victims when their offenders were released from jail and provide other important custody information.

Exactly one year after Mary's death, VINE® (Victim Information and Notification Everyday) was launched in Jefferson County. This free, confidential service lets crime victims and other concerned citizens track the custody status of offenders in jail or prison and register to be notified by phone and e-mail when an offender is released, transferred, escapes, or appears in court. Ours was the first phone number registered with the system, and we continue to use VINE to stay informed about parole hearings and other critical information.

Now, 15 years later, VINE is available in more than 2,600 counties in 47 states. The system handles 1.5 million phone calls and 1 million e-mails every month.

At every opportunity, I speak to students, victims' groups, and others about my family's tragedy and the warning signs of dating violence. I never fail to mention the importance of VINE. I tell them VINE gives victims and their families empowerment — they can learn when an offender is getting out of jail before the offender shows up at their doorstep.

As I've talked with crime victims across the state and the nation, I've been overwhelmed by their sense of relief and security as a result of VINE. Victims of abuse have said they can once again take control of their lives.

On this Dec. 6, as on every other, I'll remember my beautiful daughter and the joy she brought to our family and to her many friends. I'll also take comfort in knowing that VINE can help prevent others from suffering Mary's fate.

Pat Byron is president emeritus of the Mary Byron Project — Fostering Innovations and Strategies to End Domestic Violence. As a nationally recognized thought leader on domestic violence, the Mary Byron Project cultivates and supports efforts that extend beyond crisis management to attack the root causes of this epidemic and help build safer, healthier communities. Her husband, John, serves as vice president.
