

Compassion for a Killer

This is the story of André Smith who gave of himself after the greatest loss a parent can suffer. David Machles, who teaches with André at Nash Correctional Institute in North Carolina, tells about their first visit back to the prison after the death of André's son, Daniel.

"I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day; I'd rather one should walk with me than merely tell the way."

-EDGAR GUEST, POET (1881-1959).

In December 2007 a young man was stabbed and killed in a club in Raleigh, NC. The stabbing occurred after the young man accidentally spilled a drink on another person. The young man followed the other person into the men's room to apologize and was fatally stabbed. This story in itself points out how absolutely senseless anger can be. After reading the story in the daily newspaper it would have been easy to sigh and move on to the next senseless story. But the young man's father André was a member of my spiritual community and someone whom I've come to know as a dear friend.

André and I travel together once a week to a prison about an hour away from our center to teach meditation and anger management classes to inmates. After the death of André's son we both knew that the lessons would change dramatically. We have been traveling to Nash Correctional Institute for almost a year, and during that time I have seen André develop a deep connection with the prisoners who attend our classes. We talk about managing anger, practicing patience, and developing compassion. The inmates ask questions that test our understanding and deepen our practice. There have been many discussions of how one deals with anger when faced with a situation where a friend or family member is in danger or harmed. André talked about

how he hoped he would be able to deal with the situation, but recognized that when actually confronted with the circumstances, he might not succeed. He talked about how all he could do was practice patience, compassion and wisdom, and hope that his familiarity with these concepts would serve him well if and when the time ever came. The time came the night of December 28, 2007.

We generally teach for two months, then take a few weeks off before beginning again. We had taught our last class of the series in mid-December the week before Christmas. The last class is always a celebration. André has established the custom of bringing in cheesecake and soft drinks and showing a movie relevant to the class. At the end of the evening, well-wishes were shared with all, and we left, promising we'd be back soon. It was during this break that André's son Daniel was killed.

Typical of most prisons, the news of Daniel's death spread quickly at Nash CI. Connie, the psychologist at Nash, called to let me know the inmates were expressing deep sympathy for André, and that emotions were deep at the camp. All the inmates from the class were asking about André and concerned about his well-being. A special memorial service was even conducted for Daniel. The inmates were

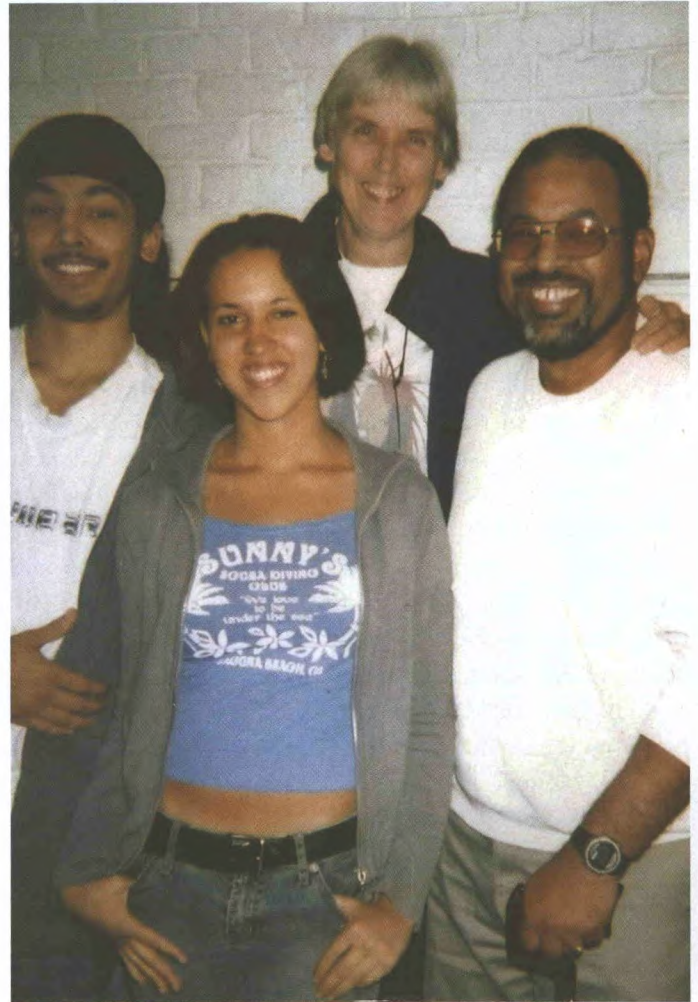
anxious to see André so they could share their feelings. A number of the inmates made cards and one drew a beautiful picture of André's son on the back of which many of the inmates wrote their condolences.

I talked to André a number of times during the break, and despite the tragedy he expressed his desire to get back to the prison. He said that his son's death inspired even more passion to continue his prison work. A local TV news station interviewed André regarding the stabbing. In the interview André said he had nothing but compassion for his son's murderer and hoped that he would be able to teach this young man about compassion some day. He knew that this person was now suffering tremendously and he wished that he could help. A few of the inmates saw this news clip, and were amazed at André's ability to forgive. They were now very anxious for André to return.

On January 30 we returned to Nash to begin our new session. We knew that we would not be able to just walk in and begin class as we always had. André wanted to give the inmates an opportunity to ask questions and discuss what had happened. He was very concerned about how difficult it would be for them. Connie asked if she could join the session, something she usually doesn't do out of concern for hindering the discussion. She also asked if one of the officers, who had lost his 17-year-old son two years earlier in a car accident, could attend.

As André and I entered the classroom inmates lined up to express their sympathy and offer hugs. They presented André with their cards and the drawing they had made. Unlike our usual visits, as André took his seat the room was silent. He began explaining his loss and his compassion towards the man who killed his son. Soon there wasn't a dry eye in the room. Some prisoners looked at André intensely as he spoke, while others averted their reddened eyes, choosing instead to look at the ceiling or floor. He talked of compassion, of forgiveness and of how he now understood the difference between pain and suffering. André gave the inmates an opportunity to speak, and those who wished to spoke of their feelings. They spoke of compassion, forgiveness and patience. They spoke of their admiration for him and how important this lesson was.

André told them that although his son hadn't known any of them personally, it was his son's wish to make a difference



André Smith (right) with his son Daniel, daughter Jessica and wife Gabi.

in the world. In seeing how the inmates responded to his loss, André said he knew that his son had now made a huge difference by providing a lesson in compassion. Before them sat their teacher providing the most powerful lesson of compassion they may ever learn. They saw a man, a friend and a teacher forgive. They saw the relative of a victim who was forgiving a criminal, and for many I suspect they saw the face of a victim they themselves may have produced in the past. Connie said in André's forgiveness many of the inmates might have allowed their own hearts open to forgiving themselves.

As I observed this interaction I realized that it was truly an amazing lesson; one that will always be remembered by everyone in the room. I am honored to have known André and to have been able to bear witness to this tremendous teaching. 🌟