

Healing the Broken: A Profile of Melissa Glaser

By Jane M. Bailey

As a child, Melissa Glaser sat with her family around the holiday table and heard stories about relatives who didn't survive the Holocaust; she saw tattooed evidence on those who did. What left an indelible impression was seeing that life went on for those survivors. They ate and laughed during family dinners, leaving Glaser to wonder how recovery after such horror can happen. How do people cross the chasm of trauma that has broken them? Glaser saw that there is such a thing as hope—that people can and do return to a life of peace. If her relatives could survive, then so could others. These experiences were the seedbed for Glaser's lifelong mission to heal the broken in spirit—to help people survive and regain the resilience to help others.

When she was an undergraduate at Clark University, Glaser sought out volunteer opportunities that gave her experience in the complicated world of tragedy, trauma, and mental health. She became big sister to a young child who had witnessed her brother kill himself with a gun he had accidentally accessed. Glaser volunteered in Worcester, Massachusetts, group homes, serving those with severe mental illness, and did her junior year abroad in a London psychiatric hospital. As a psychology major with a double minor in criminal justice and education, she wanted to experience as many facets of the psychology field as she could.

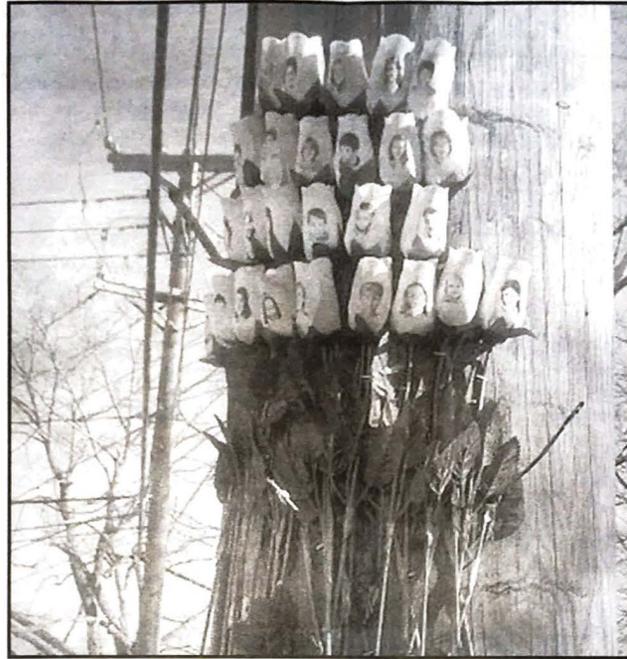
It is not surprising that she was easily employable after college. She was happy to jump into the fray of full-time nonprofit work. She directed a counseling program for clients dealing with brain injury, worked nights as a crisis clinician in an emergency room, ran a school-based health center in Waterbury, Connecticut, and was director of Child and Family Services in the nearby city of Torrington.

Glaser saw each experience, both professional and voluntary, as an opportunity. She was fueled by love of her work, the type of love that 1 Corinthians 16:14 exhorts us to fulfill: *Let all that you do be done in love.*

Glaser completed her master's degree in counseling at Western Connecticut State University and became a licensed professional counselor. Full-time nonprofit work continued to be her focus while she counseled private patients on evenings and weekends. Her varied leadership experiences in the nonprofit world gave her the depth to undertake large-scale operations, while private counseling practice developed her into a seasoned clinician.

When Catholic Charities of Connecticut's Fairfield County was looking for a director of behavioral health, Glaser applied. Catholic Charities needed a leader to streamline operations and make program changes to increase efficiency—a good match for her skills. Glaser interviewed with the bishop, who knew of her Jewish background and embraced her different perspective. He understood their common values and saw that she was well prepared to be director of behavioral health.

Glaser appreciated her job at Catholic Charities. She acknowledges the amazing work they do raising



Rose memorial for victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. Alexisrael/Wikimedia Commons

funds, identifying people in need, and responding to those needs. Each diocese has its own Catholic Charities administration. They depend on both grants and private donations. Glaser views the bishop's leadership as instrumental to fundraising. His support is also important to the functions of diocesan Catholic Charities.

After the tragic mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012, Glaser became part of the Catholic

More important, there was no guide for how to manage and direct community resources to heal not only individuals, but whole groups of people—parents, teachers, friends, neighbors, responders, and even churches where parishioners' faith was shattered. There were many lessons to be learned about the role of the media, the length of healing time needed, and complicated politics.

Glaser walked a fragile tightrope as she built collaborative teams under

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Charities response team helping the Newtown community. This included writing a grant to Catholic Charities USA to provide counselors to the Catholic schools and clinical coverage for the community.

In the meantime, a reeling Newtown applied for a Department of Justice grant for funds to help their massive recovery effort. Eighteen months later Newtown received \$7 million to assess needs, provide trauma care to individuals, implement large-scale programming, and create a model for recovery.

The Newtown Recovery and Resiliency Team (NRRT) was formed, and needed a community outreach liaison to serve as the de facto NRRT director. Hesitant to apply, Glaser succumbed to the urging of her colleagues and submitted her application just before the deadline. Her calming, understated presence and strong operational skills matched the short but hefty job description, with its charge to "anticipate and respond to ever-changing community issues." It seems she was the ideal person to piece together a plan to help an entire community heal from unspeakable trauma.

This was no textbook case for even the most seasoned counselor.

As Catholics, what can we do to support someone in pain? We often want to help but turn away in fear of our own pain. Glaser offers several suggestions:

- Do not turn away; lean in rather than lean away from someone struggling.
- Approach with a listening ear to help those in need find support, including spiritual support.
- Do not put money into material toys or trinkets; rather, find an organization that funds direct treatment for people who need help.
- Do not be deterred by or take personally anger, fear, and mistrust; they are all symptoms of pain.
- Remember that healing trauma is a long-term process—much longer than once thought.

Newtown showed the world the best side of parish support, but during the long walk to recovery there were lessons learned. The town's interfaith community came together for a workshop on how to continue to lead people whose faith is broken. The dialogue was rich across denominational and sectarian boundaries—a lesson for clergy to embrace training, mentoring, and collaboration. The support of a single church or faith group can become insular, and healing trauma is a cause for inclusiveness and collaboration.

These are lessons that Glaser now offers to others through her book *Healing a Community: Lessons for Recovery after a Large-Scale Trauma* (Central Recovery Press, 2018), which she wrote after her work at Newtown ended. *Healing a Community* is a gift not only to Newtown but to communities across the country. It is a practical roadmap for collective survival and healing that was developed in the crucible of tragedy. In addition to advice for building community-response operations, there is a crash course on strategies for healing individual trauma.

There is hard work yet to be done. Glaser continues her private counseling practice while she transitions into consulting and mentoring grieving communities. She helps communities prepare plans that, she hopes, will never need to be used.

Glaser gently notes with assurance, "I was meant to do this." Those six words evoke a picture of a child sitting at a table with survivors of the Holocaust and the ghosts of those who didn't survive the atrocity. Glaser's work honors their memory better than any plaque, as she provides the tools to help others heal. It is hard not to see God's hand in this beautiful and messy vocation, and to hear the psalmist's cry: *He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.* There is a place for each of us to join this effort—if only we look.

Jane M. Bailey is a writer from Litchfield, Connecticut. You can find more of her work at JaneMBAiley.com. Melissa Glaser, MS, LPC, maintains a web site at MelissaGlaser.com.