

THOUGHTS & FEELINGS CONCERNING THE MURDER OF RICK TETZLAFF

by Efren Paredes, Jr.

NEWS OF RICK'S DEATH

I first heard about the death of Rick Tetzlaff the morning following his murder at Vineland Foods. I learned about his death from a police officer named Dennis Padgett who was investigating the crime. It was Padgett's job to interview people who worked with Rick at Vineland Foods the evening he was murdered in search of information that may help solve the crime.

I was one of several people who worked with Rick the evening of his unfortunate death, Wednesday, March 15, 1989. I also received a ride home from him that night after work. Rick did this as a favor to my family and me because I stayed longer to work that evening to sort bottles at his request. Business at the store had been very busy that day due to it being double coupon day and I was unable to finish all my job duties at the regular time.

I was not scheduled to work at Vineland Foods that day. The only reason I did work was because Rick called me at home that afternoon and asked me to. One of the other grocery baggers hurt himself and they needed someone to work in his stead. I was the person who Rick asked to work. I was probably the person Rick chose to call because I was always willing to work extra days if I was not going to be participating in school-related activities that afternoon/evening.

The news of Rick's death stunned me. I was initially in disbelief because I had just worked with, spoken to, and received a ride home from Rick the previous evening. I was awakened early by Officer Padgett's call to our home that morning telling me of Rick's death the night before. Minutes after the phone call he arrived at our home to ask me if I saw anything suspicious at the store that evening or knew anything about what may have occurred.

After realizing both the reality and gravity of what Officer Padgett told me regarding Rick's death I remember thinking to myself, *"That could have been me murdered that night. What if the crime had occurred while I was present. I, too, could have been killed."* These were recurring thoughts I had. I recall that thought overwhelming me one night. I cried because it seemed that no one other than me could really relate to this.

I dismissed these thoughts by reasoning that people did not experience the same things I did. They did not work with Rick the evening he was murdered. They did not receive a ride home from him that night. They did not hear him say, "I'll see you tomorrow."

I also did not want to be perceived as acting like a child. I did not receive counseling and no one asked me if I wanted to visit a counselor. I later learned that school officials were asked to watch me and other students from the school who were rumored to be involved in the Vineland Foods crime soon after the crime occurred (i.e., Eric Mui, Alex Mui, Jason Williamson, and Steve Miller). They were also made aware that I worked at Vineland Foods the night of the murder. Despite having this information school officials recklessly and irresponsibly made no effort to offer me counseling or see if I needed any help.

As a consequence of no one being concerned if I received counseling or dealing with the traumatic experience of believing that I had possibly just escaped death the night Rick was murdered, my natural 15-year-old mentality at the time was, "Maybe what I am feeling and thinking is abnormal. Get over it."

THOUGHTS ABOUT RICK

Rick was a genuinely good person. He was always kind and respectful, and I viewed him as a positive role model. He always treated me fairly and did not treat me any differently because I was the only minority employed at Vineland Foods, or the fact that I was the youngest employee there. Of the three managers I interacted with at Vineland Foods, to me Rick was the most professional and easiest to communicate with. When I had questions about my work schedule or complaints I felt most comfortable discussing them with him as opposed to others.

We both played soccer and often joked about playing against each other one day. Rick attended Indiana University. It was my dream to one day attend Notre Dame University to study law. I recall how proud Rick was to wear an Indiana University ring he owned. The reason I remember this particularly well is that the ring served as a constant reminder to me that if I continued to do well in school and sports I, too, could one day proudly wear a similar ring from the college I attended.

I often discussed my school activities with Rick because at times I had to ask for my schedule to be adjusted to accommodate certain school or sports activities. He was always supportive of me and arranged my work schedule so my work and school activities did not conflict with each other. Rick encouraged me to do good in school and strive to be successful.

I remember occasionally talking to Rick about girls I liked at school or was communicating with. I would ask him things that normal teenagers would ask an older male about relationships with girls my age and he would give me feedback to questions I presented. If I had a problem or wanted advice about a subject I could go to Rick for assistance. I can not recall one occasion that Rick ever refused to assist me when I asked, if he was able to do so.

It was these qualities about Rick that frequently made me revisit the question, "Why did someone (or more than one person) murder Rick?" He never told me he was having problems with anyone, nor did he give me any reason to believe that anything in his life had escalated to the point of violence. Rick was not a violent person. He was able to diffuse potentially volatile situations and he was a good communicator. I could not imagine why someone would heinously murder him. Rick had a family and I know he did not do anything to anyone to warrant being robbed of his life and family like he was. It was a senseless, unjustifiable murder.

HEART GOES OUT TO RICK'S FAMILY

I felt terrible for Rick's family about his death and still do. They lost a wonderful son, brother, husband, and father for no reason. I will never be able to fully grasp or imagine the pain they endured at the time of his death, or the pain they continue to suffer as a consequence. I prayed for their family then and I continue to do so regularly. I pray that God bless them with comfort and the strength to cope with Rick's tragic loss.

When I was arrested and accused of Rick's death I was amazed that someone would believe I was guilty of committing his murder. What disturbed me the most was people's eagerness to vilify me and say false and hurtful things about me. It was as if they *wanted* me to be guilty. They sought to transform me from an honor student, athlete, and good worker into the inversion of each. I would be lied about in the media, and then I would subsequently be convicted twice; first in the court of public opinion, next in a court of law.

One of the things that was the subject of much adverse criticism was the fact that I showed little or no emotion during court proceedings. The media wrote about this, my preliminary examination and trial

judges both referenced it, the prosecutor spoke about it, and Rick's family wrote about it in their victim impact statements.

What no one knew at the time was that my trial attorney, Andrew Burch, expressly instructed me not to show emotion during court proceedings. His rationale for this was that if people saw me show emotion it could be mis-perceived and interpreted negatively. It became clear after my conviction that hiding my emotions of fear, mental anguish, anger, and confusion about what was taking place was detrimental to my case.

Unfortunately by then it was too late to correct the damage done.

Sixteen years after my conviction Burch wrote a letter admitting that he instructed me to exhibit no emotion during court proceedings. He also admitted that this strategy had an adverse affect on my trial. That letter is available for viewing upon request.

At the sentencing phase of my trial judge, Zoe Burkholz, read impact statements written by Rick's family. The letters contained harsh statements about me, and they requested I receive the most severe punishment allowed by the law — life in prison.

Despite these letters to the court I never became angry with Rick's family. I knew they were experiencing deep pain and I sympathized with them. I knew they were provided false and misleading information about me by the police and prosecutor. I also knew they were being barraged by incessant adverse media coverage.

THE PRINCIPLES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

I will continue to pray for Rick and his family. I will persist asking that God bless Rick's family with peace of mind and the strength to be well. I will also continue to ask that people respect their privacy and not do anything to cause them discomfort.

Rick's family wanted justice to be done, and they thought justice *was* done. Unfortunately it was not. They were presented a semblance of justice that turned out to be a miscarriage of justice.

Sincere believers in Christ must earnestly seek to live their lives in a manner that is pleasing to God. This implies that we must incorporate God's laws and words into our daily lives. *"For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified."* (Holy Bible, Romans 2:13) I am obliged to strive to become one with God. I endeavor to do that daily and also work to inspire others to do so as well.

To act against the will of God is tantamount to rejecting God. I will not stray from the path of righteousness, nor will I compromise my faith. Although I have lost 17 years of my life as a consequence of an egregious case of injustice, and received an onslaught of vicious verbal attacks, I remain committed to the reality that God will never forsake the faithful. I believe that justice in my case will one day be served.

My faith continues to be tested in great measure. I will, however, remain steadfast in my faith and not be overcome by unrighteousness. The tests I continue to endure continue to draw me closer towards God each day. This will remain constant.

I am a firm believer in God and what the Bible instructs concerning mercy, judging others, and speaking evil against others.

"Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others, for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself[.]" (Holy Bible, Romans 2:1)

"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get." (Holy Bible, Matthew 7:1-2)

"For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment." (Holy Bible, James 2:13)

"Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?" (Holy Bible, James 4:11-12)

I have never, nor will I ever, be angry with, or express ill feelings toward Rick's family. "*[A]nger does not produce God's righteousness.*" (Holy Bible, James 1:20) I forgave them then for their words against me and I continue to forgive them.

"For if you forgive others their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Holy Bible, Matthew 6:14-15)

"Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses." (Holy Bible, Mark 11:25)

The failure to forgive others is a form of self-righteousness. It is a sin itself, and until others are forgiven, we will not be forgiven. We deprive ourselves of blessings from God when we employ a callous, recalcitrant attitude towards other human beings. Jesus said, "*So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you[.]*" (Holy Bible, Matthew 7:12) This is such an important commandment that he added, "*this sums up the Law and the Prophets.*"

(This writing was authored by Efren Paredes, Jr. on Easter Sunday, April 16, 2006.)

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