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Labyrinth's unlikely friendship takes on murderous foe

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Mary Long practices walking through a labyrinth she helped outline with Ellen Bintz Meuch in Wheaton on Tuesday. The two are coordinating a labyrinth walk in memory of Long's son Eric, who was shot and killed in March, this Sunday from 5 to 8 p.m. at Grand Crossing Park in Chicago. (Keri Wiginton, Chicago Tribune / August 8, 2012)

By Ted Gregory, Chicago Tribune reporter
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After 25 years of drug addiction, theft, forgery and prostitution, Mary Long hardly appeared to be a messenger of peace.

In a DuPage County Jail cell and desperate to escape her existence, she signed up for all 17 programs offered to inmates. At the end of the list was something she'd never heard of: Walking the Labyrinth. Long didn't even know what a labyrinth was.

But when Ellen Bintz Meuch, a Wheaton church member who volunteered at the jail, laid out the concentric path designed to create calm contemplation in those who walk

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it, Long followed along. It changed her life.

That was in 2001. Since then she's become friends with Bintz Meuch, gotten clean and earned an early release from prison. She obtained her GED and carpentry certificate. She became a leader in a Methodist congregation, and after earning associate's and bachelor's degrees, Long now works as a counselor for female addicts.

Then, in March, her son was shot eight times while he sat in a car in a restaurant parking lot. Long prayed over his body in the hospital, searching for what to do with all that heartbreak. She didn't choose anger or bitterness. She didn't choose pity. She called her friend Bintz Meuch and asked a question:

Can you help me bring a labyrinth to the place where my son was murdered?

Could they at least try to bring peace to one of Chicago's most violent, hopeless neighborhoods during the city's murderous year?

Her friend said sure. They'll be setting up a labyrinth in Grand Crossing Park on Sunday.

"That walk," Long said, sipping a cold drink in a West Loop cafe 11 years after she first walked the labyrinth — "I owe a lot to that walk."

The church lady and the inmate

Long is black and was raised on the West Side and in the notorious Robert Taylor public housing development on the South Side. She was single and in prison when her only child, Eric, graduated from eighth grade.

The downward spiral of her life started when she was 17 years old, began using drugs then dropped out of school. At the time of her last arrest on Sept. 19, 2001, she was 43, on probation in two counties, had six outstanding warrants and acknowledged using heroin daily, court documents show.

Bintz Meuch, 52, is white and was raised in Wheaton, where she and her husband also raised four children. She's chief operating officer at a family business started by her father.

In 1999, her pastor at Gary United Methodist Church in Wheaton asked Bintz Meuch to research labyrinths to educate the congregation. Bintz Meuch thought one might help the inmates at DuPage County and brought her first labyrinth to the jail in 2001.

Spread on the concrete floor of the jail gym, the serpentine pattern measured 42 feet in diameter. Inmates joined hands, said a prayer and were directed to focus on important issues in their lives as they silently walked the painted path of a third of a mile.

"When I walked, it was like a connection that I made," said Long, 53. That connection was "to this world, to God and the universe," she said, "that all our lives affected one another.

"God had a line of communication with me now."

She walked the labyrinth six times in the nearly seven months she spent in the county jail and found a sense of direction and value to her life, Long said. She learned meditation, became a Christian.

Although spotty, research suggests walking a labyrinth reduces anxiety and stress while enhancing calm reflection and empowerment. Estimates place the number of labyrinths worldwide at more than 10,000, and interest continues to grow.



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Their calming effects are part of what Dr. Herbert Benson, a Harvard Medical School professor, calls "the relaxation response."

Scientific research, Benson said, shows that evoking that response through a number of practices, including walking a labyrinth, helps reduce pain, blood pressure, anxiety, depression and anger, to name a few.

"It could well have changed her life," Benson said of Long, "because she's learning to control the stressors in her environment. It's totally consistent with what other people have found."

After pleading guilty to forgery in March 2002, Long was sent to a women's prison in Decatur. She received emotional support from her sister, Linda, who took in Long's only son, Eric.

Long and Bintz Meuch stayed in touch, exchanging letters. Bintz Meuch sent her the book "Sacred Contracts," which guides the reader toward a life purpose. She even testified in court on Long's behalf.

In November of that year, after serving about half of her 31/2-year sentence, Long was released.

"The thing that really impresses me about (Long)," Bintz Meuch said, "is that she does what she says she's going to do, but she does it so humbly."

'He's gone'

After her release, Long, Eric and Linda reunited. Money was scarce. A nearby church, Ingleside-Whitfield United Methodist, provided Eric with a coat through the members' gift-buying program.

Long was so touched that she went to Ingleside-Whitfield and thanked the congregation. She soon became a member and established a life-skills class there, then was placed in charge of the church's youth and young adult ministry.

She made and sold ice cream and dinners to raise money for schoolchildren's book bags. She was elected lay leader of the church.

She said she wanted to use her carpentry skills to build a youth center, but two work-related injuries prompted her to shift careers.

She enrolled in an addiction studies program at Kennedy-King College, got an internship, earned her associate's degree in 2009 and became a licensed alcohol and drug abuse counselor. A year later, Long enrolled at National Louis University, where she studied human services and graduated in June.

But her life derailed March 12. Before leaving for school that morning, Long made sure her son got out the door to his carpentry classes. After school at National Louis, she gathered with classmates at a Bannigan's to celebrate completing their course work for their degrees.

About the same time, Eric, 25, was eating dinner in his car in the parking lot of a restaurant at 79th Street and Ellis Avenue, three blocks from the church. A man in a gray hooded sweatshirt approached his car and started firing, police reports state.

The shooter fled north down an alley. An ambulance took Eric to Northwestern Memorial.

While riding in a friend's car home, Long was calling Eric on his cellphone and getting no



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answer. Then her phone rang. A friend of Eric's said her son had been shot.

Then another phone call — this one from Renye Owens, Eric's fiancée, crying, telling Long to get to the hospital right away and refusing to answer questions. When Long arrived in the waiting room, Owens sobbed and uttered two words.

"He's gone."

"At that moment," Long said, "it was like all the breath was sucked out of my body. I was still alive but I was in a state of shock. It didn't seem like I was breathing."

Rumors circulated that the shooting stemmed from a dispute over a woman. No arrests have been made.

In the days before Eric's death, Owens told him she was pregnant with his child — a son. He'll be named Eric, Long said.

Her son's voice

Over the years, Bintz Meuch had visited Long's church. Long spoke at Gary United. Bintz Meuch calls Long "so sweet and kind and wise." Long calls Bintz Meuch "just such a wonderful person."

A few weeks after the shooting, Long called Bintz Meuch to break the news and propose the labyrinth. The two set up a three-hour assembly, march, labyrinth walk and prayer and candlelight vigil for Sunday, starting at Ingleside-Whitfield.

But getting parishioners and residents to embrace the idea is tricky. One of those concerned is Ingleside-Whitfield Pastor Jacqueline P. Ford, who has walked a labyrinth twice.

She fears the event will be like so many others — a momentary stand by outsiders who then scurry off before crime and hopelessness reclaim the neighborhood.

Violence is an outgrowth of broader issues, including unemployment, drug addiction, food shortages and mental illness, Ford said. A solution must be comprehensive and embraced by the entire neighborhood, not just one church on one day, she said.

Long pledges to dig into reasons behind the violence and empower the community to find answers. But she said the community cannot wait for a perfect solution. Action must be taken now.

"It's just the beginning of a long battle," Long said.

She remains steadfast about the labyrinth project, saying the voice of her son — the young man whose violent end she hopes may spark a peace movement — has been speaking to her.

"He's telling me, 'OK, Mom, you know what you're supposed to be doing,'" Long said.

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