

Victim's daughter meets IRA bomber: An interview with Jo Berry

By Lisa Rea

On October 12, 1984 an IRA bomb planted by Patrick Magee demolished Brighton's Grand Hotel in Brighton killing 5 people including Sir Anthony Berry, MP for Southgate and a member of the Thatcher government. The bomb hit on the last day of the conservative party conference held at the hotel. The IRA bomber Magee was sentenced to 35 years in prison. He was released after 14 years under the negotiated Good Friday agreement.

The following is an interview Lisa Rea conducted with Jo Berry, daughter of Sir Anthony Berry. She did this interview from her home in Macclesfield UK. Jo Berry chose to meet with Pat Magee in November 2000. Today the two work together on many initiatives including addressing peace conferences, giving workshops in prisons, and speaking at universities.

Q. Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview, Jo. Can you explain what drove you to meet with Pat Magee, the man who killed your father?

I need to begin my story two days after the bomb went off that killed my father. I remember being overwhelmed with feelings of shock and trauma as well as awareness that now I was part of a war. Two days after my father was killed I made a silent vow to bring something positive out of the destruction to try and understand those that killed him. I was without a map and support but knew I could trust that life would bring me the opportunities that I needed.



Three months later I was going home on the tube and I had a strong sense to leave before my destination. I then waited at a busy area looking for a taxi and there were none. I started talking to someone and we decide to share a taxi as we were going the same way. In the taxi I asked him where he is from and he says

Belfast. I tell him about my dad and he tells me that his brother had been in the IRA and had been killed by a British soldier. We could have been enemies but we share our vision of a world where peace is possible and where no one uses violence. As I leave the taxi a phrase comes to me, "Ah, this is one way I can help by building a bridge across the divide."

A few months later I had an opportunity to travel to Northern Ireland and I welcomed it. I attended a workshop by Elizabeth Kubler Ross on finishing "unfinished" business which affected my thinking. I shared my story about my dad being killed and my wish to understand and find something positive from it. After that I was asked to stay in Belfast and visit with individuals and groups promoting peace and reconciliation. I wrote down my thoughts which were shared with many in Ireland resulting in letters and invitations from many individuals and groups to share my story. I also corresponded with a prisoner who was in the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) and met a politician in Sinn Fein.

I met many who described to me life with the soldiers living on their streets. I met those who understood my experience and wanted to listen. I spoke to hundred people at a reconciliation meeting. There I began to understand the reasons why someone may choose to join a paramilitary organization. I went several times to Northern Ireland I but found in the end it was too emotionally challenging as I had yet to deal with my trauma. I was asked to take part in a Sunday

religious programme in 1986. During the programme I was asked, "Would I meet those that were responsible?" I answered that maybe one day if it was right I would do so. After that I got death threats for saying this and some negative reaction, but for me a seed was sown.

Q. When did you first have contact with Pat? Was there contact when he Pat was in prison?

I got in contact with Pat when he was out of prison. I met him in November 2000

Q. Why do you think it took this many years before you met him or had contact?

Though I said in 1986 that I might one day want to meet the man who killed my dad, there were many reasons that I did not contact him until 2000. I only had the emotional support that I needed in 1999/2000. It was essential that I had this time to grieve, to rage and to feel. This happened at Glenree Reconciliation Center in Ireland. During that year I also met other men who had and been in the IRA and this was essential preparation for me. It was easier to contact him after a peace process occurred between the UK and Northern Ireland.

Q. How did the meetings happen? What was the process? Were you, and Pat, adequately prepared to meet? Walk us through what happened.

I think the answer is a yes and a no! We had no formal preparation at all. But I did become prepared on my own with the experiences that I had the year before which did help me a little. But then I wonder if anyone can be completely prepared. I will give you a sense of this with the events leading up to meeting him.

It was only after the peace process in 1999 that I got involved in Northern Ireland again. I started talking to some friends about my dad and suddenly I found myself reliving Brighton as if it was that day again. I was going through all the same feelings and it was scary. I knew it was time to look for ways to heal and get

support. I had put my trauma in a box and now the box was open.

Miraculously I heard about a project at Glenree Reconciliation Centre, which was offering support for victims who lived in England as well as from Northern Ireland. I knew this was exactly what I needed. I remember walking into the room the first time and looking at the faces of all who were there: mothers and fathers of dead soldiers, people injured in bombs, father of dead son. I knew it was safe for me to open up and feel my pain. No one there would be scared of my pain; they would understand. And the next few months I did grieve, rage, cry and laugh with others. I knew how important it was as I was beginning to trust myself again as I felt and let go of each piece of the pain.

I also met ex-combatants and found that by seeing them as human beings, discovering their humanity, I was discovering my own humanity. After a particularly intense weekend where I had spent all my time with four ex-IRA guys, I woke up overcome with feelings of betrayal. These men could have killed my dad and I had walked in the hills with them. I felt the feelings of betrayal and discovered a wall of pain. I cried for hours and hours, and afterwards I knew that the saddest thing was they were my brothers not my enemies. I concluded that the truth was that there is no us and them but only you and me. The idea we cannot be friends with the other side is a myth that keeps us from realizing that we are all brothers and sisters.

Later that year I met people who knew Pat Magee the man who had been charged and sentenced for planting the bomb that killed my dad. I had first talked about meeting him in 1986 and now the opportunity was there. He had been released from prison as part of the Good Friday peace agreement. Three times different individuals said they could arrange the meeting. But each time I heard that he didn't want to meet me. I remember feeling disappointed but also trusted that it just wasn't right. Then at a peace conference I read out my poem, "Bridges Can be Built." Someone there

said they could arrange the meeting, and this time it happened. Apparently, Pat was always saying he would meet me!

I received a phone call on Friday, November 22nd that Pat would meet me that evening at my friend Anne Gallagher's house. I was going to Ireland anyway and I would just arrive later at Glenree. My first thought was, "Oh, I am not in the mood. I am not ready," But then I thought, no, I can trust this is the day I have been working towards. I got the ferry to Ireland and to take my mind of the enormity on the meeting I played cards with two businessmen sitting next to me. I lost each time but it got me to Ireland. I was scared but thought Pat might be more scared.

Q. Can you walk us through the first encounter with Pat Magee? What exactly happened?

Yes, I remember the door opening and Pat Magee walks in. I reach out and shake his hand.

"Thank you for coming," I hear myself say.

"No. It is you I should thank". He speaks in a quiet voice

He sits down at the table and we start talking. After two minutes we move into the quiet back room. We talked for three hours. Then exhausted, elated, we say goodbye. Much of what we said at that first meeting I can't remember. For me it was so intense, every feeling amplified, every word he spoke so important. I felt compelled to listen to his story, to hear his thoughts to experience his humanity. I remember feeling shocked at myself, unable to believe that I was talking to him. I am entering madness. I take a few deep breaths and say to myself, "Jo, this is for your healing. This will be ok."

I remember sharing with him how wonderful my dad was and how painful it was to lose him. I explained how we had got very close the summer before he was killed. Pat told me his history leading up to the planting of the bomb and the reasons why he joined the IRA. He was

very clear he couldn't talk about the mechanical details of the 'operation' and that suited me, too. He is giving me the political justification, somewhat detached from the reality of his actions. This is familiar through talking to other men from the IRA and it was what I expected but it's painful to hear of my dad's death as a strategy.

I remember looking at him and having to remind myself: He Killed My Father. I want to listen to him. I need to understand what made this man in front of me, a man who seemed sensitive and caring, choose violence.

After an hour and a half he stops talking, takes off his glasses and there is a silence. He then says, "I have never met anyone with so much dignity and so open. I want to hear your anger; I want to hear your pain. What can I do to help?"

Q. This must have been quite a key moment for you. Can you tell us more?

Yes, it was. At that moment I can sense this is the beginning of a new journey, one that we will travel together. I am scared, out of my depth, wanting to run away and also embracing the opportunity. I know his need to engage with me is the same as my need to engage with him. I feel like I am being pushed by a huge wave to a new place where the old ways no longer exist. I thought we would meet just once but now Pat has taken off his political hat and has opened up. I know it is safe and important for my healing to meet again.

Our conversation changes now. Pat has opened up and there is a vulnerability there. He is becoming aware of the results of his actions. I remember meeting an ex-IRA man before and I asked him if he ever thinks of the impact of what he did. He seemed surprised and shocked at my questions. He answered that it never occurred to him to think about that. Now I understand those comments as Pat arrived taking that same position. Yet now Pat is becoming aware of the emotional cost, and how he has lost some of his humanity through choosing violence.

I have so many questions to ask him, so much I want to share. There is an emotional intensity between us of a sort I have never experienced before. I need to understand. I need to comprehend how Patrick could have killed my father.

As he is finally leaving, he says, "I am sorry I killed your dad."

I find myself saying, "I am glad it is you".

The words pop out before I have thought about them. But it is true, as he could have been someone with a closed mind and no desire to engage with me. I know that my need to meet him matches his need to meet me.

We are starting on a journey together and I have no idea where it will take me. I just know that I want to embark on this voyage with all the challenges it will bring. I am glad it is him because I know he is prepared to go on the journey too.

Afterwards I felt disoriented as if I had broken a taboo. I doubted myself. I felt confused, with feelings of betrayal, yet also elated and energized. I had no one to talk to and did want to see him again to ask him more questions and share more. Two weeks later I was back at Anne's house and this time there was a camera there with the purpose of filming for reconciliation purposes only but to be made public.

This time I had a message from my middle daughter, who was seven years old. She would give two more messages and her voice became an important part of the documentary "Everyman". My daughter Iona wanted me to tell him he was a bad man for killing her granddad. Pat is very shocked and takes it very seriously; he is visibly moved by her words.

The next message is that Iona wants to know if he is sorry. When I say, "Yes," she asks, "Does that mean Granddad can come back now?" And the third question she asked was "Didn't Pat see Granddad was in the hotel?" And Pat answered sadly that he didn't. He explains that

he was not seeing human beings in the hotel, just a means to an end.

Pat says he was guilty of dehumanizing the other. He now knows through meeting me that he killed a wonderful human being. He finds that hard and says he never deserves to be forgiven.

Q. Thank you for sharing such a personal account of your story. Was it your idea to meet? How did Pat view it?

Yes, it was my idea. Pat was willing to meet anyone who wanted to meet him—as part of the peace process. He wanted to be able to give his reasons for planting the bomb.

Q. How many meetings did you have?

Too many to remember! Probably over a hundred.

Q. Has healing occurred in your life since the meetings? If so why? Would you say this is true in Pat's life? Do you call what has occurred "reconciliation"?

For me healing is a journey. There may be moments of insights and clarity but it's an ongoing journey.

I was in an emotional strong place before the bomb had gone off. At 26 years of age, I had recognized that I had self-esteem issues and had been working on them. I had an abusive relationship between 17 and 23, and had spent three years living in the Himalayas and working on my negative core beliefs. I took responsibility for my lack of love for myself and I was clear that I needed time before I entered in a relationship again. I also studied Gandhi's concepts on non-violence and meditated every day. After the bomb went off I was in a very emotionally damaged place. I did not know where to get help; I couldn't cope with the enormity of my feelings.

During the year 2000 I became stronger after each weekend. My marriage was very difficult and I had very low esteem, but meeting Pat was a strong step in my trusting myself again, and

after the Everyman documentary went out in 2001, I found the strength to leave my husband. Since then I have been growing in strength, and now reached a place in me where I trust myself, where I can deal with my insecurities, can transform my pain. There have been many challenges, which have helped me learn about myself and also to be able to take care of myself. This means for example when I am with Pat if I am starting to feel distress, I can share my feelings and do whatever I need to feel better again.

One reason that I keep on meeting Pat is that he always listens to me, acknowledges my feelings. I remember once we were giving a workshop in Spain and the talk had become very political. I wanted to leave the room but instead I shared my difficulty, and Pat straight away said to the others, we need to listen to Jo. And the conversation changed, moving from political justification of violence to the cost of our actions. This preparedness from Pat to acknowledge my feelings makes it emotionally safe for me to continue to meet him. I also know that if at any time I wish to stop meeting Pat I will do so.

I have learned so much about the power of non-violence including the need in me to blame. Also I learned how I can choose a nonviolent response after violence. What I said to Pat disarmed him at the first meeting through my listening and empathy.

I have known in me the pain that wants to blame another, to make another suffer, but I am learning to transform this natural need to hurt another. For I wish to end the cycle in me of violence and revenge.

I have learned that in the conflict in Northern Ireland there are many sides. I could have been any of those players: their sister, their mother. For if I had lived their lives I may have made the same choices. And in that moment of knowing there is nothing to forgive, only a moment of understanding.

What is reconciliation, I wonder? Pat and I still have areas of disagreement and maybe we

always will. But we listen to each other with respect. I am learning to challenge him while knowing he has his truth.

Q. How many other victims were there of this bombing? How many family members of yours? How do they view your meeting Pat and the relationship that has been formed?

Five people died and 35 taken to hospital. I prefer to not talk about my family members as they deserve their privacy. I can say that we are all very close and give each other support. I did agonize before I went public with the "Everyman" documentary as to whether I was going to re-traumatize them, whether I would regret it, whether it was worth doing it for peace if it hurt my family. I decided to go ahead, trusting that it would help others and that was important.

Q. Do you think your experience has planted a seed in the lives of the other victims' family members to participate in some kind of dialogue as well?

I am not sure. I do know that the example that I give, of following my own inner guidance, has empowered other victims to take their next steps. And those next steps can be completely different. I do believe that every victim can go on a journey – that everyone can heal. That journey begins with taking the first step and then the next. It did take me a long time to trust my inner knowing but by taking notice of it and seeing that it worked for me I learned to trust it more and more. I do get asked if I think all victims should forgive and reconcile and my answer is always the same. For someone to take the step that I have they need to know its right for them. It is a challenging step and I could never persuade anyone to follow my example. In fact, I could never even give advice to other victims. I can support, listen and witness their journey but no more.

Recently I was asked after our Bloody Sunday enquiry whether I thought the families should forgive and reconcile. I think it would be very arrogant and conceited of me to suggest this.

They are on their journey. They know what they need. I could never presume. I am sometimes asked to be there while other victims meet their offenders. I know my example has inspired others to do the same but it's always their decision.

Q. Had you heard of restorative justice before you met Pat? Do you support it now formally? What you have experienced to me is the definition of restorative justice.

I first heard about restorative justice at Corrymeela Summer School. I did two courses in it and found I resonated deeply with the whole concept. I would like to support it more formally. The work we have done in prisons is some of the most meaningful work I do. The feedback I have gotten shows me it is worthwhile. The prisoners have said they appreciate that I have no agenda. They feel listened to. It has helped them see their victim differently and occasionally helped them to start a journey of restorative justice-- wanting to see their victim.

Q. Tell us about the new organization *Building Bridges for Peace* which you formed with Pat. Why did you decide to form this organization?

I started *Building Bridges for Peace* (www.buildingbridgesforpeace.org) as a vehicle for bringing more peace into the world. I see it eventually as an international charity with its own resources helping to develop conflict transformation around the world and helping to understand the roots of violence and of conflict.

Q. Thank you so much, Jo, for doing this interview and giving us such a personal account of your story and your journey of healing and your efforts to promote peace. Do you have any final words for us?

Thank you, Lisa. I am left with a deep gratitude that I have an opportunity to work for peace and to end the cycle of violence and revenge in me. I know the importance of looking at the complex roots of violence and to understand

that from the deepest individual level right through to whole communities. We are all responsible for creating the conditions that support violence as a way of meeting needs. It's so easy to blame and to project our violence onto others and demonize other communities. Yet I believe there is always a reason, if we look beyond the label of enemy, for someone to choose violence in order to meet their needs-- to be heard.

My question is always "Can we listen to those that are feeling isolated, oppressed, angry before they turn to violence?" so we can prevent more suffering, Can we understand the roots of violence and then heal those roots? I know this is not a short-term solution and it will take much time and effort but it may help bring real peace to our children and their children. When we respond with 'War' on terrorism we are creating more victims who may become victimizers. I am interested in breaking this cycle.

I have learned by listening to Pat that for him the choice to take up violence was after a time of experiencing great suffering in his community and thinking he had no other choice but to use violence. We need to make sure everyone has choices to be heard so that this step is not taken, as everyone loses in war and terrorism.

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Lisa Rea is the president of Rea Consulting, an advocacy and consulting firm in the field of victims-driven restorative justice and government relations based in the U.S. You can reach her at lrea@wavecable.com.

Jo Berry is currently serving on the board of directors of *Journey of Hope; From Violence to Healing*. Ms. Berry sits on the Journey's newly formed Restorative Justice Committee.