

The Power of Forgiveness

The bare facts of the story are these: Azim Khamisa's son, Tariq, was making a delivery for a San Diego pizza parlor when he was shot and killed in a failed robbery attempt by a gang. The killer was Ples Felix's 14-year-old grandson and ward, Tony Hicks, who was sentenced as an adult for the murder and is now in prison.

That could have been the end of the story. But it was only the beginning, as you might guess from the photo.

Khamisa, a banker whose family had fled violence in East Africa years earlier, was devastated by his son's death, yet he reached out to the killer's family, realizing that they too had lost a boy.

Felix, a former Green Beret who is now a program manager for San Diego County, was devastated by what his grandson had done—on the only night he had ever defied his grandfather and left the house to meet with the gang. Felix went alone to a gathering of the grieving Khamisa family, telling them of his own grief over his grandson's deed.

Khamisa established a foundation in his son's memory, and he and Felix formed an alliance that transforms their losses into a resolve to see that other families do not suffer such tragedies.

"There were victims on both ends of the gun," says Khamisa. "Ples and I have become like brothers."

Together, the two men developed an anti-violence program that they present again and again in schools. They talk to students about Tariq's death and about Tony's imprisonment. They talk about gangs, they help the kids talk about the awful effects of violence on their own



Giraffe Hero's Project

Azim Khamisa (left) and Ples Felix holding their boys' pictures.

lives, and they help them affirm that they will avoid violence themselves.

Kids hearing the two men's story and seeing them working together also get an unforgettable picture of a response to violence that is not more violence and hatred.

Commenting on their work together, Khamisa says, "Every time you talk one youngster out of committing homicide, you save two."

Both Felix and Khamisa are speaking out for "restorative justice," a way of dealing with criminals that helps lawbreakers understand what they have done and make restitution to those they have harmed, rather than just sending them to prisons. "The way we deal now with lawbreakers does nothing for those they have injured, for reforming the criminal, or for repairing society," says Ples Felix.

He and Khamisa are helping Tony Hicks lean and grow while he's in prison. When he's freed, they hope he'll work with them at the Tariq Khamisa Foundation, helping other kids avoid the tragedy of violence.

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