

# Celebrating Success: One man's journey to forgiveness

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*"The last time I saw my mother alive was June 25, 1978. Somewhere after sunrise, just outside my bedroom door, I heard my father tell her he would kill her.*

*'Kill me!' she dared him. 'Kill me!'*

*I heard two gunshots. Then silence.*

*'Get up,' my father begged. 'Please, get up.' "*

- "Dear Daddy: I Hate You. Letters to My Mother's Killer" by Ulysses "Butch" Slaughter

FOR YEARS, Ulysses "Butch" Slaughter Jr., of Aston, Pa., fantasized about killing his dad to avenge his mother's murder.

On Dec. 19, 2010, he decided that the time had come. Even though he hadn't seen his father in 22 years, hate still gripped his heart like a vise. Just two days earlier, Butch Slaughter had been reading through documents on the case at Chicago's Cook County Courthouse and reliving the awful day in 1978 when his father shot his mother following a violent argument in their Chicago apartment.

He was just 12 when it happened, and now that he was grown, he wanted to understand.

But he found only rage, not understanding, in the court records.

More than ever, Slaughter was convinced it was his "duty to kill" Ulysses Slaughter Sr. He drove to his father's home on the south side of Chicago and sat in his car for nearly an hour, waiting.

But when Slaughter finally spotted his dad outside, something inside him softened.

"I knew I couldn't hate that dude when I saw him," Slaughter, now 47, recalled recently. "When I saw him, he was frail. Time had done so much to him."

"I'm looking at sunken features. I'm looking at this shadow of a man. I knew his face. I knew his eyes. I said, 'This guy's gone.' I felt like, I can't make this worse . . .

"I didn't want to hate him any more."

Slaughter had found a way to forgive, and a message he wanted to share.

He has since founded the Odyssey Project ([odysseyproject.biz](http://odysseyproject.biz)), which aims to help estranged family members reconcile. He wrote a book about his experience and did a pilot for the Oprah Winfrey Network.

Before his father died last year, they had planned a series of father-son anti-domestic-violence workshops.

Butch Slaughter also made a short film that centers on a visit that he and his father made to his mother's grave site, in 2011, on the 33rd anniversary of Clarice Slaughter's murder. "Odyssey to Save Ulysses" will be screened Saturday in Chester at an event Butch Slaughter has organized, called the Faces of Our Fathers Film Festival.

"I thought that this film festival would be a way for us to continue the work we started," Butch Slaughter told me last week, during an interview that was often broken by his sobs.

'Anger destroys you'

As you'd expect, "Odyssey" is a powerful film. Driving to the cemetery, the on-screen tension between father and son is palpable. It feels as if Slaughter might snap and wring his dad's neck.

Instead, in one poignant scene, his father painfully gets down on the ground and tenderly kisses the grave marker of the woman he murdered. Then, together, father and son leave the grave site.

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In honor of Father's Day, which is Sunday, I salute Slaughter, a father himself, because he did the unfathomable. He's an inspiration - a true role model, when you consider that a whole lot of people carry grudges for far less than what he swallowed.

"A lot of people can't do that," said Bilal Qayyum, founder of the Father's Day Rally Committee, which works to reduce violence in minority communities. "I commend him and respect that he did that, and what's more important is that he's sharing it with others. Anger eats you up and destroys you. You have to let it out."

In November, OWN aired a pilot for a TV show called "Reconciled," starring Slaughter, during which he helps an estranged mother and daughter repair their relationship. The show was not picked up, but the daughter, Anna Valendez, a writer and TV host living in Los Angeles, called the experience "life changing."

"He helped me transform my life," said Valendez, who had become estranged from her mom as a teenager. "I thought, if he could have gone through that within himself and forgive his father, I could do this with my mother."

Looking back

Ulysses Slaughter Sr. had a long history of domestic violence against his wife, Clarice. He'd threatened to kill her many times before he did it.

Clarice was a licensed practical nurse, "a free thinker who loved decorating - and Stevie Wonder," Butch Slaughter recalled. But his parents had a rocky relationship. There were good times, but bad times overshadowed them.

After his father was arrested, Butch went to live with his maternal grandmother.

He was the state's chief witness against his dad, leaving school to testify. Slaughter Sr. was convicted of voluntary manslaughter and sentenced to eight years.

"I floundered after high school," Slaughter told me during several conversations. "I did everything from bartending to retail sales. That lasted about three years, and then I started falling flat on my face."

He eventually enlisted in the Navy, which, in 1990, stationed him at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard. There, he worked as a public-relations specialist and edited the base newspaper. After leaving the military in 1995, Slaughter stayed in the area and worked for a number of social-service agencies. He married his wife, Monique, in 1999.

In 2005, Slaughter learned that his sixth child was due to be born on Oct. 13, which would have been his mother's 62nd birthday. The coincidence caused all kinds of feelings to resurface, so he did something he rarely did. He called his dad.

"I had not seen my father in 15 years. It had been more than a year since we talked," Slaughter explained in his self-published book. "Cautiously, strategically, we talked for 20 minutes about nothing."

He never did get the answers he was looking for. After all, what could Ulysses Sr. have said?

"There were always more questions than answers. I had to stop all the damn questions. At some point, I had to move on, because the questions were confounding me," Slaughter said. "I got tired of looking at my mother's picture and feeling sorry for her. Looking at her and feeling like she was a victim, like all she was, was somebody who got murdered."

Not only did Slaughter absolve his father, last year he allowed Ulysses Sr. to come to Pennsylvania to meet his six grandchildren.

Once again, the video camera was rolling. Smart move. Because two months later, Ulysses Sr. was dead.

The Faces of Our Fathers Film Festival begins with a reception at 6 p.m. Friday at the Booker T. Washington Center in Chester. Screenings start at 9 a.m. Saturday. "Odyssey to Save Ulysses" screens at 10 a.m. Festival tickets are \$30; festival and reception, \$60. Info: theodysseyproject.biz.

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