

Experience

I forgave the man who killed my daughter

It was 11.30pm on a Friday, and my daughter Meagan was back from university for the holidays. She called to tell me she was with her best friend Lisa at the beach near our home and would not be home that night. "Talk to you tomorrow," I told her. "I love you."

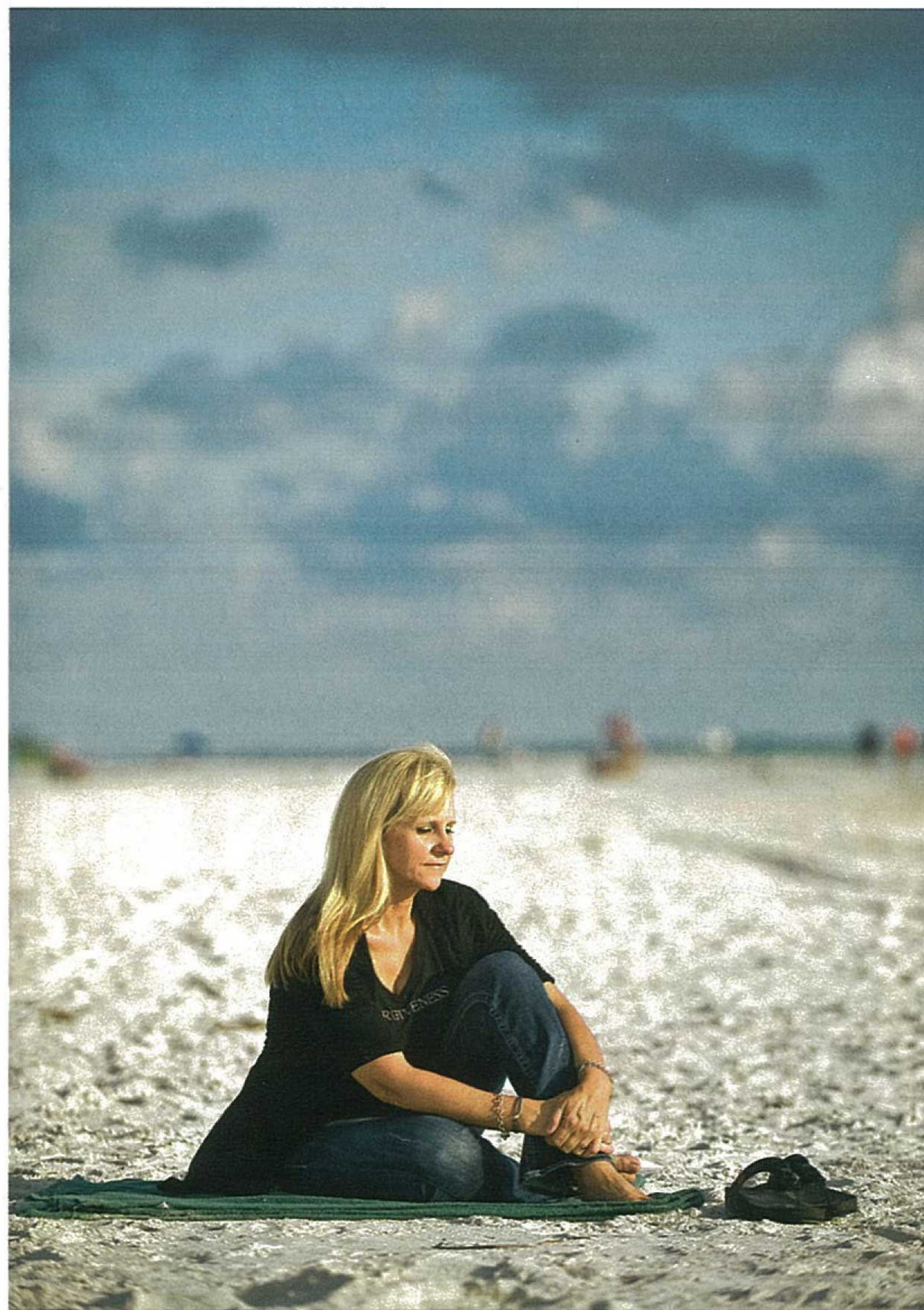
"Love you, too," she replied.

The next morning, I was surprised to see my brother's wife at the door. I knew immediately something was wrong. "There's been an accident," she told me calmly. "It's Meagan - she didn't make it." I screamed, a terrible wail of grief, and my legs folded beneath me.

Meagan and Lisa, both 20, had been hit by a Jeep as they drove home. Their car had been shunted across the road before smashing into a tree. They were killed instantly. The arresting officers had smelled alcohol on the other driver, a 24-year-old university student, and tests showed he was over twice the legal limit. The next day was Mother's Day. I should have been sitting down to lunch with my four children. Instead, we were in a funeral home, viewing Meagan's body.

It was 14 months before the driver, Eric, appeared in court charged with two counts of manslaughter. I was furious when he pleaded not guilty. He seemed cold and unrepentant, and I wanted him to receive the maximum possible sentence. When a jury found him guilty on both counts, it was a huge relief.

After the trial, he wrote to me, saying how sorry he was, and how he thought of Meagan and Lisa every day. He explained that he'd desperately wanted to apologise during the trial, but was under legal advice not to say a word. It gave me comfort finally to see some remorse. For months I'd been considering the idea of forgiving Eric. I wasn't letting



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him off easily, or betraying Meagan. I was doing it for myself: I didn't want to go through the rest of my life consumed by bitterness. But I couldn't truly contemplate the idea until I knew that he was truly sorry for what he had done.

At the sentencing, all the family members had a chance to read their own statements. Eric's mother said he'd been suicidal after the crash, and I realised he had been deeply affected by the deaths, too. He wasn't a heartless sociopath. He was

an intelligent young man from a loving family. He hadn't planned to hurt anyone that night; he'd simply made a stupid, devastating decision. In a way, he'd lost his life, too. So, at the end of my statement, I turned to the man who'd killed my daughter. "Eric," I said, "I forgive you."

I could see the shock and confusion on his face, and I felt the knot in my stomach unravel and my anger ebb away. Finally, Eric spoke. "I would honestly give my life if I could bring them back." It was what I'd been

waiting to hear, but I still wanted him punished.

The judge handed down 11 years for each count, a total of 22 years, and Eric was sent to a maximum-security prison. It was the outcome I'd hoped for, but I didn't feel the peace I'd expected; just sadness that so many lives had been ruined.

Eric started writing to me from prison, telling me how he planned to devote the rest of his life to making amends.

Four years after the accident, I visited Eric with my daughters. It was the first time we'd really come face to face. As we spoke through the thick glass, he thanked us all for our forgiveness. Later that day, I stood alongside Lisa's parents and successfully appealed to have Eric's sentence halved. Afterwards, I walked up to Eric in his shackles and red prison jumpsuit, and hugged him. He broke down in tears, sobbing on my shoulder.

I knew some people wouldn't understand, but I'd always wanted justice, not revenge. Nothing could bring Meagan or Lisa back, but there was time for Eric to salvage his life. "I want you to use your experience to help other people," I told him.

Two years ago, we got permission for Eric to join me on my anti-drink-driving talks. To have him standing alongside me in chains and handcuffs made the presentation so much more powerful. He's accompanied me on nearly every talk since, and I've grown close to him and his family.

In November Eric is due to be released. I genuinely hope he rebuilds his life and finds happiness. I no longer see him as my daughter's killer. I see him as my friend.

Renee Napier

Do you have an experience to share?
Email experience@guardian.co.uk