

Triple murderer on a mission to atone

33 years behind bars prove life-changing as parolee tells the young how to avoid trouble

By Dan Herbeck

News Staff Reporter

Gerald T. Balone deeply regrets the crime he committed April 24, 1973, and wishes he could turn back the clock and make it go away.

Early that morning, Balone and another man broke into a house on Olga Place on Buffalo's East Side, planning to steal a valuable stamp and coin collection.

They were confronted by the man and woman who lived in the home and by a neighbor. Balone, then 20, shot all three of them to death.

"I make no excuses for my actions," Balone, now free on parole, said in a recent interview. "I wasn't drunk or high. It was a stupid, senseless crime. I didn't care about their lives. I was full of hate."

Balone spent more than 33 years in state prison for the murders.

He now spends much of his time counseling and speaking to young people, trying to persuade them to stay off the path that led him to such a horrible crime.

"I know I can never change what happened in my past, and I can never bring back those three people I killed," Balone said. "What I can do is try to help other people avoid getting into the situation I was in."

Balone, now 57, was released in 2007, after his seventh parole hearing. He spent much of his prison time as a violent troublemaker who was moved from one facility to another 17 times.

But in the late 1980s, he began to turn his life around. He started going to classes, earned a high school equivalency diploma and two college master's degrees. He's now a published author, a motivational speaker and a counselor at a drug and alcoholism clinic.

He pulled no punches during a recent talk to some students from St. Joseph's Collegiate Institute at Harvest House, a human services center on Seneca Street.

He held up a blown-up print of the mug shot taken after his arrest for murder. A long-haired young man glares at the police officer who took the photo.

"My whole life, all I ever wanted to be was a gangster," Balone said. "I was a mean, spiteful person who didn't care about anyone or anything. ... But now I am here to tell you: Miracles can happen."

Abandoned by his parents as a baby, Balone spent most of his youth in orphanages, foster homes and detention centers. He said he had his first run-in with police when he was 8.

A powerfully built weightlifter with a chip on his shoulder, he got into countless fights with other inmates.

In 1988, he was one of 65 inmates transferred to a special lockdown unit for problem inmates at Shawangunk Correctional Facility in Wallkill, Ulster County.

"The state had a camera and listening devices in every cell there. We were the worst of the worst," Balone said. "I was told that the only way I would ever get out of that unit was to get enrolled in some educational programs, so I did it."

At first, Balone said, he enrolled in classes only to get out of his cell and "game the system." But he found out something about himself that shocked him ... he loved studying and learning.

"I'd always been told I was stupid. In fact, as a kid, I was misdiagnosed as being mentally retarded. I always used that as an excuse for not working in school," he said. "But I started taking these classes in prison and got honors in every course."

He left prison with master's degrees in health care management and urban ministry.

Bill Walkowiak, a deacon and campus minister at St. Joe's, calls Balone a classic illustration of how people can turn their lives around, even when they have sunk to the lowest depths of human behavior.

"People need to hear a story like this," Walkowiak said. "The students hung on every word. They watch TV. They hear stories.. But this was an opportunity to hear from a real person who lived through this."

Balone now lives in a rented house on the East Side, works as a counselor and, for the first time in his life, makes friends in the noncriminal world.

Since his release on lifetime parole, Balone has learned to swim and to ride a bicycle and has obtained a driver's license. He also wrote a book, "A Former Insider's Guide to Parole," and established a Web site at gtbspeaks.com. He said he now devotes his life to trying to help others stay out of trouble.

But to say Balone's life is full of joy would be an overstatement. He still feels guilt about his life as a criminal and has nightmares about the three people he killed.

"I realize I can't change what happened in the past, but I can try to help some kids in the future," Balone said.

James Jabcuga, a retired Buffalo police officer, is the nephew of two of Balone's victims, Anthony Jabcuga, 60, and his wife, Emily, 59. Emily Jabcuga's brother, Edward Frydrychowski, 57, who lived nearby, was also slain.

The victims were friendly, law-abiding people, said James Jabcuga, now 70, and he has mixed feelings about Balone's new career as a counselor and motivational speaker.

"I was shocked to hear he was out on parole, and, in some ways, that still doesn't sit well with me. It was a horrible crime," Jabcuga said.

"But if [Balone] is sincere, if he can go out and turn some kids around and point them in a good direction, then I wish him well. This world can use all the help it can get."

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A Former Insider's Guide to Parole:

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