

FIGHTING *for Justice*

Andy Kahan opened the Crime Victims Assistance office for the City of Houston under Mayor Bob Lanier in 1992, and has been the voice of Houston victims and their families for 23 years

Crime victim advocate for the City of Houston and Katy father Andy Kahan helps keep convicted murderers behind bars

Written by Kennan Buckner | Photo by Diana Romero

In 2006, victims' families could have watched Carl Eugene Watts, the man responsible for the gruesome murder of dozens of women, be released from prison despite his 60-year sentence. If not for the actions of crime victim advocate Andy Kahan.

In Texas between 1979 and 1987 aggravated and violent offenders were eligible for automatic, mandatory release as long as they maintained good behavior. This included Watts, also known as the Sunday Morning Slasher. Watts had been sentenced to 60 years in prison in 1982, though he was believed to have been responsible for over 40 murders across the nation. He was scheduled for automatic release in 2006. Kahan couldn't let that happen without a fight.

Going Out Fighting

In 1992, one of the victim's mothers contacted Kahan because Watts was up for parole. Kahan contacted the victims' families letting them know parole was the least of their concerns. He told them under Texas law, Watts would be legally released. The group decided to fight. Kahan says, "if they were going to legally release a serial killer, we were going to go down kicking, screaming, and fighting - and the entire world was going to know."

The group fast-tracked legislation to abolish the mandatory release law, and the Supreme Court ruled in favor for future cases. The only catch was that they couldn't act retroactively. Then came what Kahan calls divine intervention. A Michigan

man named Joseph Foy saw a rerun of the *Today Show* on MSNBC where authorities were asking for help in Watt's case. Foy had been an eyewitness to an unsolved murder in 1979. When he saw the sketch of Watts on TV, he knew he had been the killer all those years ago.

According to Kahan, Michigan authorities thought Watts was doing a life sentence in Texas, so the sketch from the '79 murder had been tucked away in a file. Due to the media coverage and swift actions of Kahan and others, Watts was convicted of the murders of Helen Dutcher and Gloria Steele and sentenced to two life sentences without parole in Michigan.

Helping Victims

Kahan previously worked as a parole and probation officer in Houston. In 1992, he became Houston's first-ever crime victim advocate under then Mayor Bob Lanier's office. "My staff consists of me, which means we get along real well," laughs Kahan. "I was given a unique opportunity to pretty much build something from scratch, from the ground floor, and mold it."

Without much of an example to follow, Kahan set out to help victims' families navigate the system. One of the areas he concentrated on was creating public policies. "During my tenure, I am now up to 26 pieces of legislation that I've either crafted or pushed."

"For the victims, the system is like trying to learn a foreign language," says Kahan. "I am here to look out for your rights and your well-being and to make sure the system treats you with dignity and respect." While he can't change what happened to them, he aims to make it better for others. "Anybody can yell and scream about the injustices of the world, but I would much prefer to find the solution and remedy," says Kahan.

A practical way he does this is to meet with parole boards on behalf of, or with victims' families. This requires travel all over the state. Kahan preps families for hearings, telling them what to expect. "I do very thorough research, and I bring a lot of documents with me," he says.

Throughout it all, Kahan reminds others that crime victims are the only unwilling participants in the criminal justice system. "Everyone else chose their role," says Kahan. "The least we can do in government is to make sure the victim's rights, well-being, and due process are looked after."

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Black Market Murderabilia

Beyond the fight to keep criminals behind bars, Kahan also tries to keep them from making a profit from their crimes. He noticed convicted criminals pedaling their personal items to third-party dealers for money on eBay. Kahan became an avid buyer of "murderabilia," a term he coined, to track the sale of items and learn how the dealers operate.

After a two-year battle with eBay, the company finally backed down sending a news release stating they would no longer allow the sale of murderabilia. Kahan believes there are about seven murderabilia dealers throughout the country that operate personal sites. "It dawned on me that the only way to put a serious dent in this insidious, despicable industry is through federal legislation." With the Stop the Sale of Murderabilia Act, Kahan hopes to crack down on the industry. "From a victim's perspective there is nothing more nauseating or disgusting than to find out the person who murdered one of your loved ones now has personal items being hawked by third parties for pure profit." **KM**

KENNAN BUCKNER is an avid 20/20 watcher who is grateful there are crime victim advocates like Andy Kahan.

The Crime Victims Office has been featured on shows like...

48 Hours
60 Minutes
America's Most Wanted
The O'Reilly Factor

Andy's award-winning record of victim advocacy

- OUTSTANDING LEADERSHIP, 1995 - Governor's Senator Ralh Yarborough Allied Professional Award
- CONTRIBUTIONS TO CRIMINAL JUSTICE, 1996 - Award-Winner, Foundation for Improvement of Justice
- ENACTING SOCIAL CHANGE TO IMPROVE VICTIMS' RIGHTS, 2003 - National Council of Jewish Women, Hannah G. Solomon Award
- PUBLIC POLICY LEADERSHIP AND INNOVATION, 2006 - Ronald Wilson Reagan Public Policy Award, U.S. Dept. of Justice
- CONTRIBUTIONS TO PUBLIC POLICY, 2013 - Houston Crime-Stoppers Leiv Platou Award
- TIRELESS EFFORTS ON BEHALF OF HOMICIDE VICTIMS, 2013 - Becky Reed Memorial Award, National Organization of Parents of Murdered Children