

Her forgiving heart brings freedom to her, assailant



Debbie Baigrie and Ian Manuel shared pizza after his release from prison. Manuel, as a 13-year-old, shot Baigrie in a bungled robbery attempt nearly 27 years ago in Tampa. But she found the power to forgive Manuel and become an advocate.

By **Joey Johnston, Times Correspondent**

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TAMPA — To Debbie Baigrie, Christmas Day isn't so much about opening presents, sipping eggnog and singing carols.

To her, the holiday season needs more of an important quality. She believes it's severely lacking in today's world.

It's forgiveness.

"Just look at how the lack of forgiveness separates families and separates friends," she said. "Look at how many problems could be solved. We all need forgiveness. It sets you free."

Baigrie, a South Tampa resident who publishes a fitness magazine, has authored an incredible tale of forgiveness, one that has been featured in the *New York Times*, *USA Today* and NBC's *Today Show*.

Nearly 27 years ago in downtown Tampa, she was shot in the

mouth during a robbery attempt by Ian Manuel, a 13-year-old who was sent to an adult prison. In time, she not only forgave the assailant, but frequently corresponded with him and advocated to reduce his life sentence.

When he was released in November, after a decade of work by a non-profit legal team, Manuel was greeted at a gas station by Baigrie, who gave him a lengthy embrace. They went to a restaurant, sharing pizza and soda, just a few blocks from where the shooting occurred on July 27, 1990.

"It was like a reunion with my long-lost son," said Baigrie, 54, the mother of two adult daughters. "So many people say they don't understand me. They call me crazy. They say, 'How can you do these things for a guy who shot you?' I remember officers in the courtroom telling me I was delusional.

"But I forgave him as a mother. I saw a child. He was just a child. I didn't want his life to be thrown away. I believed in the potential of what his life could become. Even after what happened, I believed in that. So I forgave."

In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, Baigrie first tried to piece together her own life.

She grew up in Montreal "without a trace of racism." On the fateful evening, she was at happy hour with friends at a hopping place called Cold Storage, which catered to young professionals. It was her first outing since giving birth to her second daughter, so her mood was happy.

A friend walked her to the car, which was parked near the corner of Florida Avenue and Kennedy Boulevard. That's where two lives intersected.

Three teenagers approached. They wanted some change Baigrie thought they wanted money for snacks. She was shocked to see a gun. Manuel, youngest in the group, had the

shocked to see a gun. Manuel, youngest in the group, had the weapon as part of a gang initiation.

He demanded her to "give it up!" He fired and one .32-caliber bullet entered Baigrie's mouth, ripped through her jaw and teeth and went out her cheek. She ran away, even in high heels, blood pouring everywhere, and the teenagers dispersed.

Manuel, who already had a lengthy police record, was arrested on another charge a few days later and admitted to shooting Baigrie. He was charged as an adult. The judge said he "wanted to make an example of him" and he got a life sentence without parole.

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Baigrie, meanwhile, was beginning nearly a decade of surgeries to repair her gums and reconstruct her jaw.

More than a year after the shooting, Baigrie was stunned to receive a collect call from Manuel in prison. He apologized for his actions, then wished a Merry Christmas to Baigrie and her family.

She simply asked why he shot her.

Manuel said it was a mistake.

Baigrie was working through her physical pain, unable to eat, anticipating her next procedure. She learned Manuel never really knew his father. His mother was a drug addict. He lived in one of Tampa's most impoverished and violent public-housing projects. He mostly ran the streets as he pleased.

She was taken by Manuel's remorse and intelligence. He kept writing her and she wrote back. She sensed an introspective young man who clearly expressed himself. He set a goal of his high-school diploma equivalency.

"This wasn't a thug," Baigrie said. "There were times I went back and forth (emotionally). But this was a kid. This was a

person who could make a good life with a second chance."


Manuel was initially placed in isolation because of his age and size as a protective measure, but he continually acted out and spent nearly 20 years in solitary confinement. Baigrie said his treatment was "inhumane."

In 2010, the Supreme Court threw out life sentences for juveniles. Baigrie pleaded for Manuel's early release, arguing he had served sufficient time. The life sentence was thrown out, then twice reduced. On Nov. 10, based on time already served, Manuel was freed from prison.

Ben Schaefer, an attorney with the Equal Justice Initiative, an Alabama non-profit organization, said Baigrie served as a lifeline for Manuel.

"What does it mean to a traumatized kid, racked with guilt and stuck in solitary confinement, to have the person he hurt recognize his humanity?" Schaefer said in an interview with the Today Show. "Ian would not be where he is today without her."

At their reunion, Manuel said he delighted in kissing Baigrie on the cheek, approximately where the bullet struck nearly 27 years ago.



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With the help of EJI, Manuel is working on assimilating back into society. Arrested at 13 and released at 39, he has plenty to learn.

Baigrie said she predicts success. She plans on checking in with the caring dedication of a concerned mother.

She said the shooting changed her for the better. She volunteers at a dog rescue center and the Trinity Cafe, which serves meals to the homeless. Her next goal is to develop a mobile shower apparatus for Tampa's homeless, so they can get clean with dignity.

"I view the world differently," she said. "I decided to become an active participant in making lives better.

"I'm grateful that my life was spared and I'm grateful that Ian has his life back. Forgiveness is a wonderful thing. It will truly set you free."