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Woman caught up in Ruby Ridge shows forgiveness

By CALEB SOPTLEAN - Daily Inter Lake

Sara Weaver-Balter has forgiven the federal agents who shot and killed her mother and brother 18 years ago on Idaho's Ruby Ridge.

That's the message she wants to impart to the nation and especially the people who did the shooting.

An interview with Weaver-Balter was broadcast recently on the Biography Channel's "Aftermath with William Shatner."

But for those who didn't see it, Weaver has a story to tell.

"I've prayed that on a national scale I'd be able to effect the healing of Ruby Ridge," she said. "There's a huge sore on our country. (But) there's hope."

Weaver-Balter, who has lived in the Marion area since 1996, was 16 when federal agents swarmed her parents' property west of Bonner's Ferry, Idaho, in August 1992.

What followed was gunfire and a long standoff that left three people dead and prompted a national furor over the use of force by the federal government.

Weaver-Balter's brother Sam, 14, was the first to die, followed by a U.S. marshal and then her mother, Vicki. Weaver-Balter was standing next to her mom when Vicki - holding her 10-month-old baby - was shot in the head.

After the shootings the surviving Weavers were under siege in their house for 11 days.

"This was hell on earth, and we were living it," Weaver-Balter wrote in a book, "The Federal Siege at Ruby Ridge," that she co-authored with her father, Randy Weaver, in 1998.

The standoff was followed by years of investigations and court cases.

Weaver-Balter and her sisters lived in Iowa with relatives after the shootings and moved to Montana when their dad was released after an 18-month prison sentence.

Randy Weaver, who now lives in Kalispell, also lived in Arkansas for a while. Weaver-Balter's sister Rachel lives in Kalispell. Elisheba - the baby Vicki was holding - recently enrolled as a freshman in college in Arkansas.

For 10 years, Weaver-Balter lived in darkness and sadness, she said. "I was afraid to laugh because you're betraying their memory. I lived as a prisoner of depression for a long time."

The Weaver girls eventually got a \$3.2 million settlement from the federal government for the killing of their mother.

Randy Weaver said he has only forgiven those who have admitted the truth, including four or five public officials who testified in court and a few others who later asked for forgiveness. That group, Weaver said, doesn't include FBI sniper Lon Horiuchi or U.S. Marshal Larry Cooper and Art Roderick - the men responsible for the shootings.

"Remember Ruby Ridge" became the rallying cry for numerous groups, including Timothy McVeigh, who later bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

Weaver-Balter regrets this.

"Don't take life in my name and think you're doing something good," she said.

Weaver-Balter said the reason she allowed Shatner to interview her was because she wanted to let the nation know about forgiveness and freedom.

"The anger you hold for someone else imprisons you and keeps you from helping others," she said.

What made the difference for Weaver-Balter? A passage of Scripture that she memorized as a child: "God loved the world so very, very much that he gave his only Son. Because he did that, everyone who believes in Him will not lose

his life, but will live for ever (John 3:16)."

"I hit rock bottom," she said. "I opened up my Bible and read John 3:16. Jesus made himself very real to me. He started healing me of all my pain. No one drug me to a church and started hitting with the Bible. It was more real to me even than Ruby Ridge. I feel like a huge weight's come off my shoulders."

Weaver-Balter said she memorized the verse only because she was given candy at age 7. Her family had been attending a Baptist church at that time.

Her healing took place in 2003.

Weaver-Balter, who attends Kila Country Church with her husband, Marc, and 9-year-old son Dawson, prayed for the opportunity to tell her story ever since then.

Seven years later, she got the chance.

She added one more thing: "I want to reach my generation that's going into the FBI, ATF and Marshal's Service with this story so the mistakes are never repeated."