



Interview with Howard “Sam” Pruett, Father of death row inmate Robert Pruett in Texas

By Ines Aubert, June 2015

(Robert) Pruett, a juvenile at the time of Yarbrough’s murder, was certified as an adult and sentenced to 99 years for his involvement in the murder of Yarbrough, which occurred in the 200 block of Dell Dale outside of Yarbrough’s residence on Aug. 9, 1995. ... Pruett was convicted along with two family members, Howard Steven “Sam” Pruett, Sr., who received a life sentence for his participation in the murder, and Howard Steven Pruett, Jr., who received a 40-year sentence. Source: Article in YourHoustonnews.com, Val Zuniga, July 10, 2002

Years ago, your son Robert asked me to correspond with you and to support you so that you wouldn’t ever be abandoned and left alone in prison. He did that because he loves you and because he is in a position to experience care and support. Since then, you and I have been corresponding and have met several times, as well.

Sam, many people think that you are responsible for all of the misery in your family and especially in your son Robert’s life. What do you think about that?

Yes, it’s true. I’m responsible for all the misery in my family’s lives. That’s because of the criminal mindset I’ve had since I was a youth.

You are serving a life sentence for the murder of Ray Yarbrough. Right when I was visiting Robert on his first all-day visit on April 24, he was told he would be talking to you on the phone in a couple of minutes. That was a big surprise for him. You and Robert hadn’t spoken with each other in 18 years!

How was it to speak to your son, Robert, on the phone after such a long time, and so shortly before his scheduled execution?

I, too, was surprised to get a phone call with Robert. I was suddenly called to the Major’s Office and was told I’m getting a phone call with my son. It was great to be able to talk to Robert after 18 years. It was hard for me to talk to him and I feel it was for him, too. Then the “I love you” came from both of us toward the end of the 10-minute phone call. I told my son I’m sorry for ruining his life. And he said: „Dad, it wasn’t all your fault”.

After the conversation, Robert told me that the last time you heard him speak, he had a boy’s voice, while this time your father heard a man’s voice on the phone. Did you recognize his voice?

No, I didn’t recognize his voice at first; the last time we talked was in the county jail when he was only 16.

In his journal of June 2014, Robert wrote that he had forgiven you. How is that for you?

Maybe I don't show my feelings, but it made me feel good to know that Robert forgave me, as my other son, Steven, did as well. It shows that we all still have love for each other.

Robert has been an inspiration for many people all over the world who consider him a teacher. Are you able to understand this?

Yes, I think so. He teaches forgiveness and to live life to the fullest.

I suppose that you will find the next questions to be difficult, but I still want to ask them. How do you feel about the night of August 9, 1995, the night which tore apart your whole family and left Ray Yarbrough dead and created a huge hole in his family?

I've felt bad about August 9, 1995 since right after it happened. I was asleep that night in my bed with my wife when my oldest came in and woke us up and said: "They're arguing about the guns Robert stole." My wife said: "Get up now." So I got Robert in the house, and that was my intention, but then things escalated after I got up and went outside.

Remorse: I've felt it for years and still do. And yes, I have felt sorry for Ray's family all these years, and still do.

As far as I could see, you had a lot of anger inside of you for a long time. Would you agree with that?

Yes, I have had anger issues my whole life, which I'm trying to keep under control, and have for the last few years since I completed an anger management class.

You used to handle problems in an aggressive way prior to August 1995. Why didn't you use other means of solving disagreements?

Where we lived in Houston, disagreements were always settled by violence, especially in prison, and in reform school when I was a juvenile. To be honest, I can't tell you why I didn't try to solve disagreements in a peaceful way. But now, yes I do, even here in prison.

Your own father died in 1968. Is there anything you would like to tell him if he could hear you?

"Why didn't you ever tell me you loved me?"

Hearing that makes me sad. I know that you were abused by your father. To me, it looks like a row of fathers not teaching their sons how to live a good life. So, your father – although already dead – is probably someone who needs to be forgiven, too. To forgive sets the forgiving person free.

What would you like to tell Ray Yarbrough's family?

That I'm really sorry about what happened between me and him. I wish with all my heart by saying this that it would bring him back. This was an incident that should have never happened. We were friends and neighbors. We ate together. I'd sent him parts for his truck. I'm sorry.

You used to defend your attack on Ray. I wish you would only regret and not be defensive. Am I wrong in this?

I think the whole situation should be told. I do regret what happened, so no, you're not wrong to feel this way. I don't feel I've been defensive as much, only wanting the truth to come out.

Personally, I feel very sorry for Ray's family. Ray was a young man with a family and he also left children behind. That must have affected all of them in a very damaging way. Do you think of them sometimes?

First off, I never knew Ray had a son, Jake. But yes, I think about them all the time. And I've prayed over the years for them to find forgiveness in their hearts, if they can't or won't, I still pray for them and pray they are okay.

I know you have fond memories of Ray's father Jerry Yarbrough. Can you tell us why?

I feel really bad for Ray's dad, because I'm a dad too! When, at the trial, he heard my wife tell me she had no money for bus fare and that she had to walk over 10 miles to make it to the court, Jerry Yarbrough gave her the money. And as he sat in the courtroom, I looked at him and said thank you. And yes, I should have told him right then that I'm sorry for taking his son from him, which I did say to his wife, Ray's mom, in the hallway where she stood next to my wife, Marcia.

I personally have recently perceived you as more open and more empathic. I wonder, is it because you came so close to losing your son, Robert, that you now understand better what Ray's family went through?

Yes, it hurts very much to lose a child. I know how Ray's father feels and I only wish and pray that God will give him and all of Ray's family peace.

All of Robert's family and friends hope he will go on living. We don't know whether that will be the case though. How will you feel if they execute Robert? And what are you going to do with your feelings of guilt?

I don't know if I can really tell you how I'll feel if they execute Robert.

And I'm confused about your question – My feeling of guilt: that's for our original case, or for Robert's case as to why he's on Death Row?

Robert has said over and over to me to forgive myself, and I guess that's what I'll do – or try to do – if they execute him.

I was talking about the guilt for “messaging his life up” as you named it in the phone conversation with Robert. It was you who stabbed Ray Yarbrough to death, which act took you and your two sons, Steven and Robert, to prison. What do you think will help you to forgive yourself?

I think with the help of prayer, and the help from God, and my own self that I'm on the road to forgiving myself. The Bible says ask and you shall receive, and I believe this now with all my heart.

You wrote to me that in your prison you are now shown love and care by other prisoners and that you hadn't known that was possible. I consider this to be a positive result among so many negative ones. What does it mean to you?

It has shown me that there is such a thing as compassion in the world, not only from those on the outside, but from those who are incarcerated as well.

I have never entered the church here on the Ellis Unit, but a lot of guys here came up to me and told me that the whole church was praying for my son's life, and it's made me look at my life and way I've been, that makes me want to change my life, as well.

I'm not an educated person, I have never been able to obtain a G.E.D., and I don't know a lot of big words or understand some things, but I do know that I'm not perfect, and my life has been one mistake after another. I look around at all the younger inmates around me, and when one of them comes up to me and says he is fixing to go home, I'll talk to him and say: "You know this life is no good, get out and stay out, and do the right thing." So maybe before I die, I can convince a lot of the younger guys to stay out, and control their anger. And to love their selves.

That seems to be a very valuable goal to me. Is there also something you want to teach inmates about relationships with their sons?

Yes, I can and will teach them to love and respect their sons,, tell them you love them on a daily basis and share with them to do right things. And if your son shows signs of depression, or having any kind of problems talk to them. And I just want to say that I pray for Jake, and I'm sorry I took that from you...

What do you wish for your son Robert Pruett?

My wish/prayer is for Robert to get exonerated and off Death Row. Then for the lawyers to get the case dropped regarding him and Steven, for neither caused the death of Ray Yarbrough. That was only me. And to someday see Robert free and also my son, Steven. And I pray it happens soon.

Thank you very much, Sam, for your honest answers. I wish you and your family all the best.