Healing terror's wounds: Two teens who lost dads to terrorists bond over shared loss

Joanna Molloy, Columnist
New York Daily News
212 210-2374

Two 19-year-olds embraced in a bear hug with the bravado of brothers. Despite growing up in countries 4,500 miles apart, C.J. Quackenbush and George Tarr share a profound loss: Their fathers were killed by terrorists.

C.J.'s father, Christopher, a 44-year-old founder of the investment banking firm of Sandler O'Neill & Partners, died on 9/11.

George's father and grandfather were murdered by warlord Charles Taylor 's rebels in Liberia , and his mother died later. His grandmother fled with George and his two brothers to a Liberian refugee enclave in
Staten Island
.

Growing up, they kept their feelings to themselves.

"I was always very quiet in school," said George, a student at Bridgeport University . "I didn't

talk to people much."

"You can try telling someone what you've been through, but if they haven't experienced something similar, it's pointless," explained C.J., a sophomore at the University of North Carolina .

His mother grew concerned. "She would ask me every year if I wanted to do stuff, like go to camp, and I wouldn't want to go. And then four years ago, she asked me about Project Common Bond and I suddenly decided, 'Why not?'"

The boys met at the eight-day camp, run by Tuesday's Children, a nonprofit serving the 3,000 children who lost a parent on 9/11.

Executive Director Terry Sears also offers it to teens from countries like Northern Ireland , Palestine , Israel , Russia , Spain , England and Sri Lanka .

"He's quiet and I'm quiet, but we both played soccer," George ventured, his usual solemn face breaking a smile. "Sports brings people together."

Their dads loved sports, too. C.J.'s father used to bring him to Madison Square Garden to watch the Knicks , and to

Shea Stadium
, where the dad bought 600
Mets
tickets a season for disadvantaged kids. George said his dad "played and loved" soccer.

If love of sports started their friendship, the camp's seminars on healing and conflict resolution cemented it.

"There was one morning when we had a good session," C.J. recalled. "I wouldn't call it therapy. It was just talking; and it was supposed to be an hour, and it opened up into four or five.

"George told his story about Liberia; he lost both parents. I couldn't imagine that.

"That was the first time I really talked about my father. That really bridged the gap. After that, we started hanging out."

George is a great kid, C.J. said. "He collects coats for people who need them on Staten Island."

C.J. has come into the city to see George's "amazing" memoir video, "Out of the Fire."

"I've learned a lot about Liberia and other countries," C.J. said. "It showed me how much I have to brush up on my history, but also, how glad I am to be in this country. I'm very lucky."

In the conflict resolution workshop, designed at Harvard , "we'd pretend to have two sides of a problem, like a fight over water," George explained. "We'd figure out how are we going to solve it in nonviolent ways."

C.J. didn't rejoice the night Osama Bin Laden was killed: "It wasn't really a celebration to me.

All the people I know who lost parents were not celebrating that night. It was some relief, I guess ... but it doesn't change anything. He lived 10 years longer than my father."

Neither young man believes the world will ever be rid of terrorism.

"I don't think you can eliminate it," C.J. said. "There will always be small groups of extremists, but you can limit it, one place at a time."

They're trying. George is studying diplomacy; C.J., political science. Among their fathers' last thoughts were probably ones of hope their children would be all right.

They're better than all right. These young friends, who have every excuse to continue the anger, may just lead a new generation of peacebuilders.