



A MOTHER, A SURVIVOR, A TEACHER

When introducing herself, Mercy sociology professor Dorothy Cali Balancio, Ph.D. explains that she has two sons—Louis, 44, and Jeffrey, 38—both of whom attended Mercy. Jeffrey is now a successful businessman with two young children. And Louis was murdered at age 21.

On February 4, 1994, Louis was attacked and stabbed in the back 13 times in front of a sports bar in Yonkers, NY. Though many people—including the so-called friends he was with that night—saw the murder happen, not a single one helped him or came forward with information for the police, presumably because the murderer was a gang member with ties to the Mafia. After spending several years in hiding,

Anthony DiSimone was convicted of Louis's murder in 2000, sentenced to 25 years to life in prison, and then released on parole in 2010.

"I became obsessed, and nothing made sense in life for me anymore," Balancio explains. "At that point, I had a choice: roll over and bury myself with my son, or use what I had—sociology and teaching."

After graduating from Mercy in 1968 ("when I was three," she says with a chuckle) with a sociology major and an education minor, Balancio earned her Ph.D. in sociology with a focus on urban ethnic families from City University of New York and soon returned to Mercy as a professor. When Louis died, she pursued several postdoctoral certifications—including one in negotiation from Harvard University and another in conflict resolution from Columbia University—which she describes as an effort to maintain her own sanity. By the end, the courses she took were recycling the same content, a signal that it was time to apply what she had learned.

At that point, she asked two Mercy colleagues, Professor Diana D'Amico Juetner—an attorney—and Professor Arthur Lerman—a political scientist—if they would be interested in designing and teaching a course about managing conflict. The result, *Managing Human Conflict*, is an interdisciplinary course that the three professors have taught together at Mercy since 1999, even after Lerman retired.

Managing Human Conflict uses readings, exercises, role-plays and discussions to teach conflict mediation skills. Students learn about themselves, others, and how people behave in conflict while exploring topics such as friendship, grief, and moral judgment. In one memorable exercise—which is included in Balancio's newly published textbook, *Managing Human Conflict: An Introspective Journey to Negotiating Skills*—students analyze two failed friendships, one with a friend of the same sex and another with a friend of the opposite sex. By



Dorothy Cali '68

describing the beginning, middle and end of the friendships, they determine the rules of friendship contracts and analyze whether these rules differ for different types of friends. Exercises like these prompt students to apply theory to real life. Interested students can even take a 35-hour intensive mediation training that prepares them to serve as mediators in the New York State Community Mediation Center and the New York State Unified Court System—an experience that is sponsored by the Louis Balancio Scholarship Fund.

The course draws students from many different majors—sociology, legal

studies, business, education, social work, homeland security and others—and many call it "life-changing." One psychology major reflected, "I will apply this knowledge to my everyday life in more ways than I thought I would before entering this class. I will now have a better understanding of why certain people act the way they do and have more patience for their actions. I now realize that no matter where you go, your life story is going to be different from the person next to you, and I now have the drive to find out those unique stories."

The course was life-changing for Balancio too: "I got a new will to live from my students. They became my Louises."

Twenty-three years after Louis's murder, his legacy lives on in so many ways.

The Balancio family welcomed Louis James III—the son of Louis's brother, Jeffrey—to the world four months ago. In fact, there are seven baby Louises amongst the families of Louis's friends. And with each new semester, Balancio helps equip more students, citizens and leaders with the emotional intelligence and negotiation skills to develop trusting relationships and resolve conflict before it escalates. She considers the course a success if it helps even one person, but there is no question that her success rate is much, much higher.



Pictured at right: Dorothy and her son Louis enjoy a Yankees game together in 1988.