

## ABOUT FORGIVENESS

During a recent symposium at Vassar College titled "Why Forgive?" Philip Carr-Harris, director of the Dutchess County Interfaith Council, spoke of the school shooting in Pennsylvania earlier this month to illustrate the admirable grace and faith of the Amish people in Paradise, Pa., as the community immediately offered forgiveness to shooter Charles Carl Roberts. According to reports, Roberts had sexually assaulted and then shot and killed five young girls at the West Nickel Mines Elementary School before killing himself.

The panel discussion was sponsored by the Garden of Forgiveness and the Poughkeepsie Forgiveness Project. The Garden of Forgiveness is an international project to spread the word about the benefits of forgiveness on both a personal and global scale. Organizers are working to bring gardens to communities across the U.S. Plans for a Garden of Forgiveness in Poughkeepsie could make it among the first such sites in the country.

The ideal of forgiveness for terrorists who perpetrate heinous acts against our country or for citizens who do so against their neighbors is a fascinating exploration for those of us who are indirectly affected by news coverage. The reality of its execution may seem impossible for those of us who can only imagine what we would do if we were ravaged directly by these sorts of events. This is what made the recent coverage of the unsolicited forgiveness of the Amish community of Paradise so poignant.

People of faith often espouse the tenet, "hate the sin, love the sinner." And at the very core of this principle is a willingness to see the less savory deeds of neighbors in vacuums, while possessing the imagination to see someone worthy of compassion in spite of tragedies performed at their hands.

One of the panelists at the "Why Forgive?" discussion, the Rev. Lyndon Harris, was the priest in charge of the relief operation at St. Paul's Chapel, a church adjacent to the World Trade Center after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Having seen the horrors and aftermath of that day, Harris readily points out that to forgive does not mean to exonerate. To questions regarding forgiveness – even in the face of such evil – he is ready with, "Forgiveness does not mean that we let anybody off the hook ... It doesn't mean we can't defend ourselves. Forgiveness means we let go of that horror and embrace the future," he said.

And therein lies the clarification that we all can comprehend. Sometimes our individual faith or our human instinct draws us to forgive, and thus toward a cleansing for our own good when faced with catastrophes in our lives caused by others. Those involved in the Poughkeepsie Forgiveness Project have been clear that their mission is not about reducing anyone else's accountability, but rather reclaiming one's own peace of mind. And they are banking on the theory that the more people are willing to embrace the concept globally, the quicker the world will be able to begin healing itself.

To the cynics among us, this is a far-fetched global mandate. But we support the movement and hope others will do the same. Go to [www.forgiveforgood.org](http://www.forgiveforgood.org) to learn more about the Poughkeepsie Forgiveness Project.



# Global Forgiveness Movement Gets Local Start

By Cara Patterson

Following the tragic deaths of five Amish schoolgirls earlier this month, the Amish community in Lancaster, Pa., offered forgiveness to murderer Charles Carl Roberts IV, who took his own life during the incident, and his family.

According to published reports, Roberts' wife thanked the Amish for their forgiveness in a letter. "Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need ... Your compassion has reached beyond our fam-

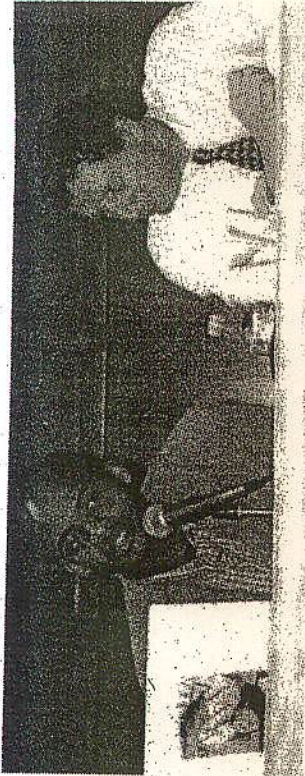
ily, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you," she wrote.

During a recent symposium at Vassar College titled "Why Forgive?" Philip Carr-Harris, director of the Dutchess County Interfaith Council, spoke of the school shooting to illustrate the admirable grace and faith of the Amish. The panel discussion at Vassar College on Oct. 20 was sponsored by the Garden of Forgiveness and the Poughkeepsie Forgiveness Project.

The Garden of Forgiveness is an international project to spread the

word about the benefits of forgiveness on both a personal and global scale. Organizers are working to bring gardens to communities across the U.S. Plans for a Garden of Forgiveness in Poughkeepsie could make it among the first such sites in the country. Another garden is planned for Long Island and -if things go their way- organizers hope to plant a garden at the World Trade Center site, as well.

The original Garden of Forgiveness in Beirut, Lebanon, was the idea of a Lebanese woman named *Continued on page 15*



Symposium panelist Kiese Laymon, professor of English at Vassar College, speaks on the implications of forgiveness in literature, while panelist Philip Carr-Harris, director of the Dutchess County Interfaith Council, looks on. (Photo by C. Patterson)

Alexandra Asseltly. The garden has the support of numerous religious groups. It is built on the site of an ancient Roman city and a modern-day battleground of the Lebanese Civil War.

In 2005, two of the Vassar panelists, Lynn McGinn, a Westchester resident who lost her husband in the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, and the Rev. Lyndon Harris, traveled to Beirut to plant an olive tree for peace with two other families of victims in the Sept. 11 attacks.

Harris was the priest in charge of the relief operation at St. Paul's Chapel, a church adjacent to the World Trade Center.

The proposal for a garden at Ground Zero has not been palatable to all. In fact, Harris said he routinely encounters the question, "You expect me to forgive the terrorists?"

But Harris is not forcing forgiveness on anyone. To such questions, he typically responds, "Forgiveness does not mean that we let anybody off the hook. It doesn't mean we can't defend ourselves. Forgiveness means we let go of that horror and embrace the future," he said.

The panel was moderated by Dr. Frederic Luskin, director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Projects and author of the bestselling book "Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness."

Anger, according to Luskin, is a "complete waste of time." Luskin describes the harmful physical consequences to holding onto anger.

"Your whole body feels stressed, your mind gets clouded," he said. Forgiveness has

been shown to reduce anger, blood pressure, depression and stress.

Town of Poughkeepsie Judge Paul Banner, who is head of the Poughkeepsie Forgiveness Project, often practices forgiveness techniques in his line of work. While presiding over cases, Banner strives to maintain an open mind.

"As human beings, we normally form opinions about people even before they speak," he said. Practicing forgiveness aids Banner's listening skills and helps him reserve judgment.

The Poughkeepsie Forgiveness Project got off the ground with a luncheon in June. Banner aims for a groundbreaking next April. The space, as Banner envisions it, would be a sacred, though religiously neutral, space for reflection.

Various locations have been discussed, but a final site for a Poughkeepsie garden has not been selected. Ideally, the site should be accessible to many, Banner said, and it may be necessary to locate the garden in a space owned by another group so that maintenance will not be a financial burden.

The garden could also host community events, according to Banner, and trainers or educators could help spread the message of forgiveness throughout the community and schools. On a personal level, it could be a place to resolve a family dispute, for example.

"We're trying to un-conceal a tool that has always been there," Banner said of forgiveness. The project is now accepting donations under the umbrella of the Dutchess County Community Foundation.