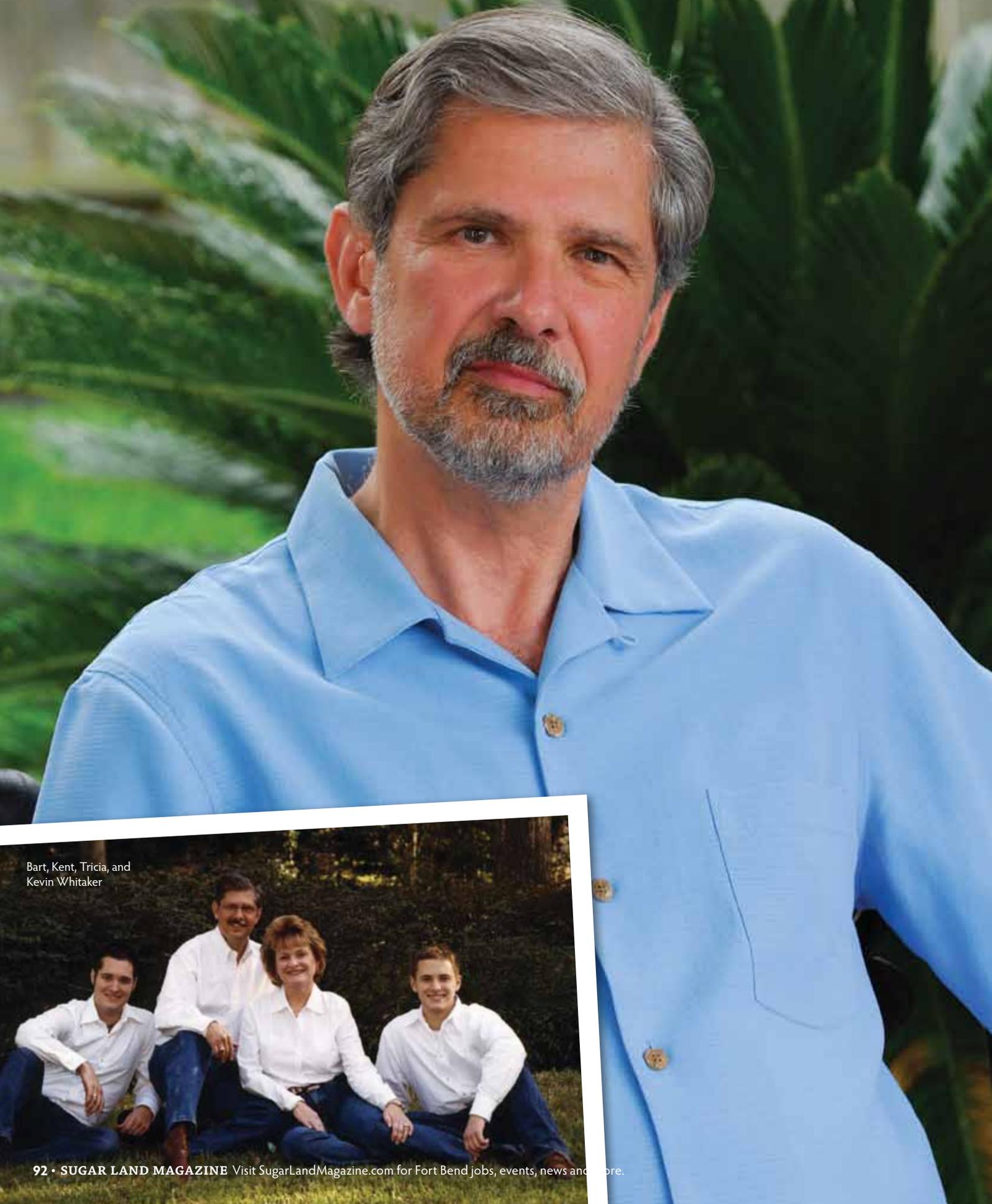


Kent Whitaker believes in the healing power of forgiveness



Bart, Kent, Tricia, and Kevin Whitaker



Living On *Faith & Forgiveness*

How One Sugar Land Man Overcame a Family Tragedy by Living Each Day with Hope

Written by Jen Petty & Select Photography by Suzi Issa

Almost seven years after his wife and son were murdered in an elaborate plot designed by his older son, Kent Whitaker talks about forgiveness, healing, and the future. Before December 2003, the Whitakers would have seemed to be the model Sugar Land family. Kent and Tricia were happily married with two sons, Kevin and Bart. Kent worked as an accountant and Tricia as an elementary school teacher. But on Dec. 10, in an event that shocked Sugar Land's quiet streets and caught the attention of the nation, Tricia and Kevin were murdered and Kent and Bart were shot by a gunman. Later, the gunman turned out to have been hired by the Whitaker's eldest son, Bart.

Relying on Faith

Besides the horrific reality of the murders, the thing that shocked people most was Kent Whitaker's ability to forgive Bart. Whitaker says that immediately after the event, as he was recovering in the hospital, he was wrestling with his faith. He never supposed that God "caused" the murder, but he felt angry that God had "allowed" such a horrible thing to happen. "I was at a crossroads and I had to decide if I was going to abandon my faith or trust God anyway," he says.

"It's strange, and I don't understand it, but once I chose to trust Him, I immediately felt peace," says Whitaker. "My desire for revenge was completely gone." He remembers thinking that whoever was responsible for the crime needed to know that God has unconditional love. Thinking retrospectively, Whitaker says he feels God wanted him to get beyond revenge before finding out that his son, Bart, was a suspect.

Rebuilding Hope and Family

Throughout the whole aftermath of the tragedy and even now as Bart is on death row awaiting an execution date, Whitaker still maintains contact with his son. "Here's the tragedy: Bart

was ill," says Whitaker. "His illness forced him to create these masks that he hid behind and he didn't believe anyone could love him. He hated himself, but he was smart enough to fool everyone for a long time."

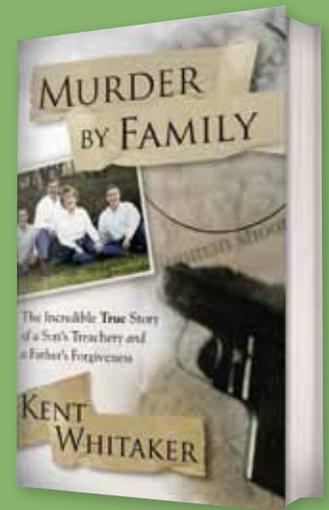
Whitaker admits that there will always be skeptics who think Bart is just continuing to fool him, and while admitting that may be the case, Whitaker says he's seen huge examples of real change in his son and he will always love him. "Bad things happen to everyone," says Whitaker. "The pain from these situations will never fully go away, but the raw hurt fades. If you hold on to the hurts that other people have done to you, you grow bitter, but if you release them, you can grow and enjoy life. Forgiveness is necessary for your own healing."

Living with Optimism

Now, almost seven years later, Whitaker's outlook on life is one of hope and optimism. A little over a year ago, he married Tanya Youngling, founder of Bigger Picture Ministries. Tanya moved to Sugar Land, the two merged their ministries, and they are now co-authoring a book. Their message, and the idea behind the book, is about finishing life well and taking advantage of all that is offered - both the good and the painful. The Whitakers' philosophy is, "don't waste the pain."

"Some people are unhappy because they realize that life could be more than what they are experiencing," says Kent Whitaker. Tanya adds, "If we want to finish our life well, we have to embrace life. We can't box out adventure and pain." SLM

JEN PETTY is the editor of Sugar Land Magazine and hopes she will make the most of her life's story.



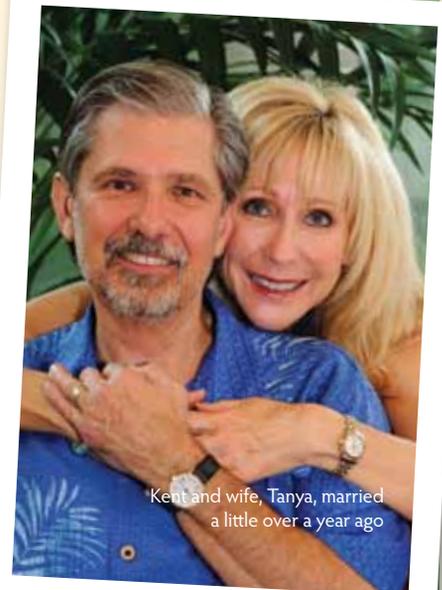
A Story of Forgiveness

Kent Whitaker's book, *Murder by Family*, chronicles his journey of forgiveness and hope. All royalties from the book are donated to charity.

About the Author

A former comptroller of a major construction company before he retired, Kent Whitaker now devotes his time to his ministry, where he shares his message of hope with others, and various community organizations.

-Adapted from amazon.com



Kent and wife, Tanya, married a little over a year ago