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Trouble on the home front: an explosion of domestic violence

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PATRICK FARRELL / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Tatiana Paul holds a photo of her mother, Coty Paul, who was slain by a boyfriend.

For days, Juan Rengifo had been anxious, obsessively checking his mailbox for a letter with news about foreclosure on his three-bedroom home in Portofino Bay, a sprawling Homestead development once praised as family-friendly but these days dotted with abandoned homes.

A restaurant cook and father of six, Rengifo, 52, had problems keeping jobs, he confessed to a neighbor, because he was constantly leaving work to spy on his wife, Alba. Newly employed as a night waiter at the nearby Big Cheese Pizzeria, Rengifo was upset that Alba, 50, wouldn't answer his hourly calls.

On a recent Saturday afternoon before work, Rengifo picked up his mail, went back inside the house, argued with his wife and shot her dead. Then he shot himself in the head.

"I never could have imagined this," said next-door neighbor Elis Sequera, who rushed to the house after hearing the shots and the screams of the couple's newly married 20-year-old daughter, who lived with them. "They were always together, working on their yard, with their children."

The Homestead couple's murder-suicide was the first in a streak of horrific domestic-violence murders last week in

South Florida. In one day alone, 10 people -- including four children -- were killed in three separate murder-suicides in Riviera Beach in Palm Beach County and in Lauderdale Lakes and Tamarac in Broward.

On Saturday in North Miami Beach, a morning march against domestic violence drew hundreds of survivors and their supporters. It had been previously scheduled to mark Friday's start of Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

Among the marchers: Margi Brezina, 39, who said she had to relocate to South Florida to escape her ex-husband, who abused her and terrified their two children over seven years. After he went to jail, Brezina said his cellmate broke into her home and attacked her with a monkey wrench, leaving her bloodied on the kitchen floor.

YEAR-TO-YEAR TALLY

In 2005 there were 16 domestic-violence homicides in Miami-Dade and eight in Broward, according to

Florida Department of Law Enforcement statistics. In 2009, the numbers rose to 28 in Miami-Dade and 19 in Broward.

“Domestic violence is cyclical and the numbers do change from year to year,” said Capt. Janna Bolinger-Heller, Acting Major of the Special Victims Bureau at the Miami-Dade Police Department. “There is more emphasis on domestic-violence cases because there is so much more public awareness, and so many tragic cases that bring it to the forefront.”

Among the recent cases:

- On June 6, Gerardo Regalado stormed into Yoyito Cafe-Restaurant in Hialeah, where his wife, Liazán Molina, who had recently left him, was on her second day on the job. In 21 seconds, Regalado shot Molina and three of her co-workers dead. He badly injured three other women, but spared the men in his path. The killer had a record of violent behavior against women in Cuba, but his girlfriend followed him here and married him thinking that a new life would change his violent personality.
- On Aug. 26, Lisset Pérez, a 15-year-old Hialeah girl, and her mother, 39-year-old Vivian Albelo, were killed by the teen's jealous ex-boyfriend, who had been living with them for two years. Adalberto Torres, 19, then killed himself.
- On Sept. 10, Juan Adolfo González, 84, obsessed with Celida Hernández, an 87-year-old woman in his elderly-activities group, waited for her at the west Miami-Dade apartment complex where she lived for 25 years and shot her dead in the courtyard. He tried to kill himself but failed. He's charged with first-degree murder.
- On Monday, Patrick Alexander-Dell, 41, forced his way into the Riviera Beach home of his ex-wife, Natasha Whyte-Dell, and started shooting. He killed her and her four children from a previous marriage. A fifth child, 12 years old, survived a gunshot to the neck. The killer spared the two children he fathered. His violent behavior had been amply reported in Palm Beach County court and police records, and the Department of Children & Families had been notified that the family was at risk.
- Also on Monday, 39-year-old Lena Mittlessalines, a mother of two who had moved from Philadelphia to Lauderdale Lakes in an attempt to flee an abusive relationship with her former common law husband, was killed outside the home where she was staying when the man tracked her down. Her ex-lover, who killed himself on the scene, was not immediately identified by authorities.

GETTING THE MESSAGE OUT

In many domestic-violence cases, family and friends know of threats against the victim but think the perpetrator won't follow through, said Lauren Lazarus, chair of the Miami-Dade Domestic Violence Fatality Review Team and director of the county's Unified Family Court Division.

“They're aware that the perpetrator posed a potential lethal threat to the victim, that there have been death threats, the person talked about buying a gun,” Lazarus said. “We're trying to get the message out there that people need to take that seriously. People think it's not going to happen to her, and they don't want to get involved, but they need to report this to police, and the victim has to take safety measures.”

Police and victims' advocates say different factors are at work in each case, but economic problems, the simplicity of tracking ex-spouses on the Internet, the relative ease of getting firearms in the state, and the transient nature of Florida's population contribute to the increase in domestic violence in modern times.

To deal with the transient population, Miami-Dade police established the Domestic Crimes Clearing House two years ago to collect, track and review data about people who are involved in domestic violence.

In one case, a man who was accused of domestic violence in Aventura had similar reports against him in Miami Lakes and Coral Gables.

“We managed to link together the information and that led to better sentencing, better services” to the victim, Heller said. “We are the recipients of all reports and we keep the database.”

In South Florida, many of the victims are immigrants -- legal and illegal -- who lack the resources to move away from the violent person and are unaware of legal and community assistance.

Few illegal immigrants who endure abuse for fear of deportation know that domestic-abuse victims can apply for a special visa to stay here. Few abused women know there is money available to help pay for changing locks and for steps to ensure their safety -- such as relocation and child care -- if they leave a violent husband or boyfriend.

MOST DANGEROUS TIME

The most dangerous time for a battered woman is when she first leaves her partner.

“She's taking control from the abuser in a relationship based on power and control,” Lazarus said. “That spikes the rage in the perpetrator in terms of jealousy and perceived betrayal.”

In an effort to improve prevention and intervention programs, police and prosecutors also review domestic-violence homicides looking for trends in causes and warning signs that an abusive relationship is about to turn murderous.

Often, family members spot trouble early, but the woman stays in the relationship despite their objections.

Tatiana Paul didn't like her mother's boyfriend from the beginning.

Tatiana, then 14, met Abraham Mpaka the day he showed up uninvited when she was supposed to go out with her mother, Coty Paul, “for girl time.”

As the relationship progressed, Tatiana liked him even less. When Tatiana borrowed her mother's cellphone, Mpaka called “every five minutes,” inquiring about her mother's whereabouts, demanding to know why she couldn't come to the phone and asking if there was another man.

“He was very obsessive,” said Paul, now 16 and an 11th grader. “Everywhere my mother went he wanted to go.”

Her mother tried to end the relationship, but Mpaka wouldn't have it.

He rented an apartment nearby to keep an eye on her. He set fire to Paul's car so she would have to rely on him for transportation. When Paul lost her security-guard job, Mpaka paid her rent and gave her spending money.

“She was having a hard time and he made sure she was financially dependent on him,” said North Miami Beach Police Detective Cora Mann. “The person who has the finances controls the relationship.”

‘MISS HER SO MUCH’

On Christmas Day 2008, Mpaka had dinner with Paul, Tatiana and her brother, Otniel Sanon, 4. The next day, Mpaka stabbed Paul to death at her best friend's apartment. The friend called Tatiana, who rushed to her mother's side and tried desperately to stop the bleeding.

Police have since unraveled Mpaka's life and identified the African native as a con man who spun false tales about his life to everyone he met. He's still at large, and was recently spotted in Haiti.

"I miss her so much," Tatiana said of her mother. "There are things I'd like to talk to her about, and I don't want my little brother to forget her. I will never forget her, but he's so young."

Detective Mann has become a mentor to Tatiana, who lives with an aunt, and closely watches over her life. Mann knows the statistics that indicate domestic violence can breed more violence.

"It's an intergenerational cycle that we have to break," said Miami-Dade State Attorney Katherine Fernández Rundle. "The children that grow up in abusive homes have a 78 percent probability that they will commit a crime against a person."

Domestic violence is such a concern at one Hialeah vocational school that a police detective and a victims' advocate hold bimonthly seminars to educate students, who range from age 16 to over 40. The goals: raise awareness and help students in abusive relationships. One academic director realized many students who'd recently dropped out left because of abusive and controlling partners.

Last month more than 200 students attended the first session, which taught skills such as recognizing signs of abuse like bruises and scratches. The session was frighteningly timely: Shortly before, a student was stabbed in the throat and chest by her boyfriend -- who had been arrested before for stalking her at the school.

Sometimes a woman's decision to enroll in school can trigger more domestic abuse, because abusers want to keep their victims isolated from family and friends, said Hialeah Detective July Fernández, who helped lead the seminar.

10 NEW CASES A WEEK

Fernández handles eight to 10 new cases of domestic violence every week, asks every victim the same first question: "What was the first time?"

Then she probes further: "Did it start with the pinching? The cursing? The disrespect? The play fighting with hands? Did it start with the first slap? Did he detach you from your family? Did he separate you from the world around you so he can maintain control over you?"

That's what domestic violence is all about -- an obsessive need to control the other person, said Detective Mann. In many situations, the signs show up right away.

"Early on a relationship a lot of women think it's cute when the man is being possessive," Mann said. "They think it's a sign of love. But it's not. It's a sign of control."

The men kill, she added, to try to regain control.

"Saying 'I'm going to take you all out' is the ultimate power act of control," Mann said. "It's the 'If I can't have you, no one will.'"

Some victims of domestic abuse are innocent bystanders.

Ivet Coronado, 37, is still recovering from the gunshots to her stomach and arm at Yoyito Cafe-Restaurant in Hialeah.

She didn't know Liazán Molina or that she was trying to leave an abusive husband. Both women had just

started working at the popular eatery days before the shooting.

“I feel like another victim of domestic violence *sin comerla ni beberla* -- for no apparent reason,” Coronado said in Spanish.

Coronado is starting physical therapy to build up her left arm -- weak, numb and possibly in need of a second surgery. All she wants is to be able to move and work like she could before the shooting.

She urged women to speak up about domestic violence.

“Seek help. Don't wait until the end,” Coronado said. “There are always places where you can go.”

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