

The Oregonian



Ignoring signs of abuse can be deadly mistake

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The Damascus neighbors of 51-year-old Lisa McMurtrey admit they overheard the heated private arguments between her and her husband.

They noticed how the florist owner would keep her eyes downcast as she sat on the front porch of her vintage, five-bedroom ranch home. They also recognized that her estranged husband, Bill, had an explosive temper, was having financial problems and was recently cited for drunken driving.

And after Lisa McMurtrey was gunned down Tuesday afternoon by Bill McMurtrey, who then killed himself, we -- who ignored the telltale signs of domestic violence -- cluck our tongues and call it a tragedy.

But the McMurtrey murder-suicide, just 20 feet from the West Linn police station, was more than that. Her public execution at the hands of a man who vowed three decades ago to love and cherish her should be viewed as a beacon for the emancipation of domestic violence victims all over this region.

On average in this country, about 1,400 deaths a year -- nearly four women a day -- are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends, the FBI reports. And yet, we keep forgetting how familiar the details sound.

Certainly, we have a number of agencies in the area that offer valuable services to domestic violence survivors -- most of whom are women. But, the process can be daunting and the issue so unfamiliar that many don't even ask for help.

When they do, usually with children in tow, these scared, wounded and emotionally exhausted victims are handed about seven dozen phone numbers, or are expected to relocate into a shelter, with little hope for a family-wage job, child care, affordable housing and other resources necessary to create a life.

"You'd have to have a lot of internal fortitude to go through it," says Shannon Callahan, social policy director for city Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who championed a proposed Domestic Violence One Stop Center. "We don't make it easy when you're in crisis."

Saltzman's project, included in Mayor Tom Potter's still-to-be-approved budget, would be similar to the family justice centers in Alameda County, Calif.; Brooklyn; and Knoxville, Tenn. But it's less focused on finding a law enforcement solution to the issue and more centered on giving victims options.

Clients could choose which services they want, including counseling, housing, job resources and legal information. The center, on East Burnside and 102nd, would also have access to community, social-service and government organizations. Representatives from the criminal justice system would have offices nearby but would get involved only when victims made the request.

"Some people don't want to deal with police or district attorneys, they just want help," notes Saltzman. "This will be a gateway to all of that."

This center is just another attempt to plug the gap in services. By Feb. 1, state agencies were required to start doing more to make their workplaces safe from stalking, harassment and domestic violence. More public employees are being trained to recognize abuse even when the victims are too afraid to admit it.

Each of us has to take an active role in interrupting the violence, which affects all races, incomes and religions. We all have a responsibility to stop closing our eyes and ears, crossing our fingers and hoping everything turns out OK.

As a domestic violence survivor, I can imagine how isolated Lisa McMurtrey must have felt. Victims like her need your voice when theirs has been silenced. They need you to pay attention to obvious signs of their suffering. And, most important, they need you to find a way to intervene before the evidence of a love gone wrong ends in violence.

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