

Tallahassee Democrat.

NEWS

'Lethal assaults': Rural Big Bend sees alarming string of domestic violence homicides

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Published 8:45 a.m. ET Oct. 3, 2020 | Updated 10:35 a.m. ET Oct. 5, 2020

► *If you or someone you know needs help, call Refuge House's 24/7 hotline at 850-681-2111 or email helpdesk@refugehouse.com.*

PERRY, Fla. – At dawn on May 9, Loriann Burns was found dead in the bedroom of her ex-husband's Taylor County home. Lying in a pool of her own blood, her 8-month-old baby boy was on the floor at her feet, crying.

Burns was a mom to two sons and worked at a funeral home in Tallahassee. She was 40.

Two months later, Heather Luther was on her way to the courthouse to file a protection order against her husband when he ambushed her, court records say.

In traffic on Jefferson Street, he rammed into the back of her SUV, sending her crashing into the pine trees off the road. He got out of his pickup truck, pulled out a shotgun, and shot her in the head through the driver's seat window, according to an affidavit for his arrest.

The slaying occurred in broad daylight. The waitress and mom of two little girls was pronounced dead inside her white Ford Expedition that Friday, July 17. Luther was 33.

The next day in Crawfordville, Brittany Steier was shot dead by her children's father, Edward Harris Jr., as she buckled the toddlers in their car seats, court records show. Her 2-year-old son's diaper, face and clothes were stained with blood. Steier was 31.

The back-to-back murders are part of an alarming string of domestic violence-related homicides within the past several months, all occurring in rural Big Bend counties. This year has already seen six deaths. Refuge House shelter director Meg Baldwin counts four deaths in Taylor County alone.

“Last year, there were only two domestic violence homicides, I think, in the entire region, over the course of an entire year,” Baldwin said.

Both Luther and Steier and several others of those killed endured deadly threats long before the coronavirus.

Back story: Crawfordville man charged with murder has a history of domestic violence

But the COVID-19 crisis has aggravated domestic abuse situations with stress and stay-at-home orders to prevent spread of the virus.

While calls to Refuge House’s hotline numbers are down about 30% — from an average of 300 calls from within Leon County to about 200 — the decline signals trouble.

Victims, particularly ones throughout the rural Big Bend, aren’t reaching out as much as they were. Many are afraid to call while they’re in earshot of an abuser during quarantine.

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The shelter launched a crisis email so victims can feel safer reaching out for help. Staff rely on confidential video calls to counsel victims, create a safety plan and file injunctions on the spot.

While clients in Leon County have access to reliable internet for those remote services, many in rural areas are lacking. Some have unreliable internet access or aren’t comfortable receiving counseling by video or phone.

Baldwin says the shelter has seen a significant drop in contact with rural clients, especially Spanish-speaking victims.

“Connecting with the rural counties is our big focus right now,” Baldwin said, pointing to the rash of homicides.

More: Refuge House says decrease in calls amid coronavirus signals domestic abuse increase

“That’s a real bellwether that there’s a great deal going on in the community that’s resulting in this high level of lethal assaults.”

'Too late for forgiveness'

The day before she died, Loriann Burns texted her sister saying Kenneth tore holes in the walls, “looking for cameras.”

Burns texted her sister again just three hours before her death, saying Kenneth had just come home from a party.

Around 5 a.m. that Saturday, May 9, deputies arrived at a home on Foley Cutloff Road in Perry in response to a burglary alarm.

All the lights were on in the house, and deputies heard a sobbing child.

They followed the cries and spots of blood in the living room. In the bedroom, they found a baby boy crying at the feet of his mother and covered in her blood.

Burns, who lay on the floor, was pronounced dead at the scene – her ex-husband’s home.

Deputies found wounds on Burns’ body that showed signs of a struggle, according to an affidavit. Records do not indicate how Kenneth Burns, 44, killed her. He is being held at the Taylor County Jail without bond.

Two months later, another horrific murder would scar the small Taylor County town of about 7,000 people.

The night before she was killed on July 17, Luther showed up to the front door of Amy Sanders, her boss at Flatwoods Café. She was shaking and holding a duffel bag stuffed with clothes.

“I finally did it,” she told Sanders. “I’m free.”

She'd left her husband Joseph Luther after 14 years of abuse, her friends say. Afraid, she stayed the night at Sanders’ home, 22 miles north.

The next day, at the Café, Luther took her lunch break around 2 p.m. to go to the Taylor County Courthouse to finally file an injunction. Her coworker, 31-year-old Kirk Jansky, went with her for support.

“Kirk was just that type of guy who’d help anyone out. He knew she was scared,” Sanders said.

By 3 p.m., Luther and Jansky weren’t returning any of Sanders’ texts.

She began to worry. She was right to.

Joseph Luther had found the two on their way to the courthouse in front of the Buckeye Credit Union on the small town's busy Jefferson Street – just a couple minutes from his house.

He ran up to Heather's car yelling and beating on the window, according to an affidavit for his arrest. Luther quickly drove up to the red light to evade him, but he got in his Dodge pickup and followed, crashing into the rear of Heather's SUV. She fishtailed into the pine trees in front of the post office.

He parked, pulled out a shotgun, and shot Luther and Jansky in their heads through the window.

Deputies chased the 33-year-old man home, where he fired at them and hid in his shed before surrendering.

"It's too late for forgiveness," he told deputies after he exited the shed, when they tried to interview him.

Over the years, Heather would make excuses for bruises, and after he battered her, she'd hide behind a pair of large dark sunglasses and dark makeup. She stayed tanned so it's harder to see the bruises, said her close friend Felicia Farnsworth.

Still, she couldn't hide the damage he was inflicting. There was the time he flung her across the wall, leaving a gaping hole in the bathroom wall, and her back covered in bruises.

Another time, she called Farnsworth sobbing after he held a gun to her head. "If you ever leave, I'm going to kill you," he told her.

"She was scared to death of him," Farnsworth said.

'By 8 p.m., I'll get this done'

In Steier's case, it wasn't the first time she pleaded for her life.

According to a redacted affidavit out of Sarasota County, where Steier had been living around that time, Harris asked Steier to come over with the kids and watch a movie one night in February.

When she came over, Harris became upset after he asked her if "she was ever coming back." Steier replied saying "she was not ready."

She grabbed her kids, holding them in her arms and tried to leave.

But Harris stood up, pulled out a handgun, holding it down to his side. He threatened Steier that he'd kill her that night, "shooting her twice in the head to make sure she was dead," then kill himself, she told police.

He told her he wouldn't do it in front of the kids; he'd "put them in the bounce house."

"By 8 p.m., I'll get this done," he told her.

Steier pleaded with him to let her go. He held her and the kids hostage for three hours.

When Steier went to file an injunction, the officer gave her a brochure on domestic violence.

But records show she dismissed the case three days later.

Five months later, the night of Saturday, July 18, Harris called Steier and asked her to pick the kids up from a house on Hill Greene Road off Crawfordville Highway.

It was almost midnight and Steier was wary to go alone, so a friend came with her. When they got to the apartment, her friend waited in the van.

Harris walked their 2-year-old son Dallas to the van while Steier carried their 1-year-old daughter, Karter.

As she was trying to buckle in her little boy, Harris suddenly pulled a rifle.

"What are you doing!" Steier repeatedly screamed. Within seconds, records say, he shot her in the head. She collapsed onto the driveway.

Frightened and shocked, her friend scrambled to the driver's seat and drove away, the baby girl with her.

Until his aunt was able to pick him up, little Dallas remained at the scene where his mom lay deceased in the driveway.

'If you see or know ... speak up'

The Journal of Women's Health published a study in 2011 that found women in small rural and isolated areas already "reported the highest prevalence of intimate partner violence."

Rural women also reported significantly more severe levels of physical abuse than urban women, according to the same study.

A quarter of the more than 1,400 surveyed women in isolated areas lived more than 40 miles from the closest victim assistance program.

Since then, multiple studies have corroborated that disparity.

The rural, underserved communities where Burns, Luther and Steier lived are no exception.

Simply put, “They don’t have the same degree of resources that you might have in a more urban area,” says Dr. Suzanne Harrison, a rural and family medicine doctor who teaches at the Florida State University College of Medicine.

Harrison, who specializes in domestic violence victim patient care, started the clinic at Refuge House and sits on the Big Bend Domestic Violence Fatality Review Team.

“One of the biggest challenges they’re facing, especially in this pandemic, is a lack of transportation to get to resources,” Harrison said about rural victims, pointing to reports from victim advocates.

That, coupled with a decrease in safe housing and the economic stress amid the coronavirus, has left the situation “even worse than it was before,” said Harrison, who treats patients at health departments throughout the rural counties.

A study on rural victimization and policing during the COVID-19 pandemic found that rural communities are not only further from domestic violence assistance and lack access, but their law enforcement agencies also are less equipped to deal with a greater increase in cases.

Programs “can only effectively help when victims are capable of accessing the resources and the current pandemic has made that virtually impossible by forcing abusers into victims’ daily routines,” the study reads.

On the state department of health’s rural domestic violence page, Refuge House is the only domestic violence assistance organization listed for the Big Bend counties surrounding Leon.

Between 2018 and 2019, the nonprofit received more than 4,000 domestic violence-related hotline calls and 645 sexual assault calls.

The nonprofit recently received federal funding to launch transitional housing and rental assistance programs this fall in each of the rural Big Bend counties it serves.

With limited access to affordable housing, many victims have nowhere safe to flee. It's especially an issue in tight-knit rural communities: if victims move in with family, abusers can easily find them.

"The No.1 reason why victims return to an abuser is because they have no other place to live," Baldwin said. "Having a space that is hers and hers alone is life changing."

Advocates say proactive community reporting of incidents and greater awareness can help prevention.

But contributing to the pervasiveness of the problem is that much is hidden about its breadth amid the pandemic. Teachers have been a main source of child abuse reports. Many referrals of domestic violence situations are associated with child abuse in a home – "very often we will receive a referral for that situation and for that survivor to us from DCF," Baldwin said.

With kids out of school and taking classes online, those numbers have gone down, too.

Baldwin also pointed to obscured information due to Marsy's Law, a constitutional amendment passed by voters that led law enforcement to practice stricter disclosure of victim information.

"There may be more homicides that we don't know about because we don't have the same real-time information about victimization that we used to have since Marsy's Law," Baldwin said. "These are the ones we know about and can identify."

Farnsworth, who is a survivor herself, says friends, neighbors and family shouldn't hesitate to report suspected abuse.

"If you see or know of somebody who's being abused, speak up. Call the authorities. Do it anonymously if you need to – but do it," Farnsworth said. "Don't just sit back and think, 'It's OK' and 'They're going to be OK.' Because – it's not."

'That isolation is not real'

Two weeks ago, Burns would have turned 41. No longer will the quick-witted, bright woman bring doughnuts to her coworkers at the Neptune Society, have bonfires or watch mud-bogging with her family.

Last week, Luther would have turned 34. Diners at Flatwood Cafe won't find her sitting down at the table like an old friend, taking their orders and cracking jokes.

A month before her death, Steier turned 31. The creative woman with the big smile can no longer design colorful T-shirts for fun or plan her next trip abroad.

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At a vigil in Perry this summer honoring the women, friends held each other, crying. They lit candles, bowed their heads in silence and prayer. Ribbons and sunflowers and candles adorned the base of the tree by the area where Luther's car crashed.

Baldwin recited the names of the dead and reminded the community that help is here.

"So many times, victims of domestic violence feel so isolated from other people," she said. "I wish each and every one of these victims could be here tonight to see all of you.

"Each and every one of us is touched, often in dramatic and drastic ways, sometimes for the rest of our lives, by each of those losses," she said. "However alone you're feeling, or however alone someone you know feels in an abusive relationship, that isolation is not real. It's not real. It's something that the victim feels, is captured by. In reality, we're all here to support her. Each and every day."

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HOW TO HELP:

Call Flatwood Cafe at 850-997-1979 to purchase T-shirts for \$20 in memory of Luther. Proceeds go toward her two daughters.

Donate to Steier's memorial fund here. <https://www.gofundme.com/f/brittany-nicole-steier-memorial-fund>

Help Refuge House by donating online at refugehouse.com/support or call 850-922-6062 to arrange drop-off donations of food, cleaning supplies and personal care items.