

Waiting for the bad guys to do more

By Stacey Dougan

I read with anguish the article describing Donna Kristofak's public pleas for help just two months before being murdered, allegedly by her ex-husband. In court last October, seeking protection from the man who earlier had tried to stab her in a Wal-Mart parking lot, Donna requested that the "record reflect" she feared for her life.

Cobb County Judge Adele Grubbs struck a sympathetic tone, responding that a protection order coupled with the threat of immediate incarceration for any violation thereof was the best protection the system could provide. Two months later, Donna was dead; her ex-husband, who had promised he'd kill her, stands accused of stabbing her to death in the garage of her East Cobb home.

Contacted after the killing, Judge Grubbs invoked the Newtown murders, saying, "You cannot predict human behavior. After Newtown people ask, 'How can we stop someone before they do something?' We don't do that."

As domestic violence advocate Jean Douglas stated in a Dec. 28 AJC article, "red flags" warned of the threats Donna faced. Red flags appeared through the previous attempted murder, explicit threats, humiliating and intimidating posters placed in her front yard, and calls to her workplace using "vile, vulgar language to her and her coworkers." This was not a situation where the system was waiting for the assailant to do something; rather, it was waiting for him to do more.

The judge's attempt to parallel this homicide with the Newtown case is dangerous, as it creates a mystique around domestic violence that simply does not exist. The death of Donna Kristofak was not an unforeseeable, random act of violence. Like many domestic violence homicides, Donna's killing was explicitly predicted — promised — by the alleged assailant himself.

All of these signs were more than enough for the judge or anyone knowledgeable about domestic violence to know that Donna faced extreme peril. We cannot permit a proverbial throwing up of the hands lamenting that some victims simply can't be protected due to the unpredictability of the violence perpetrated against them.

I also find deeply troubling Judge Grubbs' final comment that the "most worrisome cases are the ones where a woman tells the court that her husband didn't mean to threaten her and she wants him back."

Why would that type of case be more worrisome than one like Donna's, where a victim is facing unrelenting violence and threats of murder? These comments raise the specter of victim blaming, putting the focus on women who "won't leave" their abusers rather than the abusers who "won't let" their partners go.

Random violence happens every day. But conflating the horrific murders in Newtown with what happened to Donna Kristofak is neither accurate nor just. The parents of the Newtown children had no way of knowing what would happen when they sent their children to school on Dec. 14. The danger facing Donna Kristofak was not only predictable, it was predicted — by the alleged killer himself.

Let us not compound the tragedy by pretending there was nothing we could have done before it happened.

Stacey Dougan is board chairwoman of Men Stopping Violence, an Atlanta-based organization that engages men in ending violence against women and girls (www.menstoppingviolence.org).

Orders can protect, but help is needed

By Stephen D. Kelley and Peggy H. Walker

The criminal justice system cannot end family violence in isolation. Preventing the epidemic that claimed 123 Georgians' lives in 2012 takes a resolute and sustained effort from the entire community. Every day, police, judges, prosecutors, advocates and probation officers protect many women and children who do not feel safe in their homes.

According to the Georgia Crime Information Center, 23,086 family violence and stalking orders were issued in 2012. Every case is unique, but abusers generally fall into two categories: those who adhere to court orders, and those who blatantly disregard them.

Many victims of family violence are safer with protective orders. A recent National Institute of Justice study found that protective orders worked for half of the victims who obtained them. An overwhelming majority of the other half reported significant decreases in threats, violence, control and fear.

We do not hear from many people who benefit from protective orders. Once victims gain peace from the violence, they move on with their lives.

Highlighting only the failures of the criminal justice system is dangerous. It discourages people in abusive relationships from seeking help. If victims believe that the criminal justice system cannot protect them, they may remain exposed to continuing harm that can be prevented.

Tragically, a protective order did not save Donna Kristofak's life. Her ex-husband disregarded the law. He repeatedly threatened her, violated court orders and stalked her, and now he's charged with killing her. For many like Donna, the law was not enough.

The National Institute of Justice study confirmed experts' suspicions that protective-order violators, like Donna's ex-husband, who stalk victims are extremely dangerous. The increased risk posed by family violence offenders who disregard court orders suggests that victims of stalking need all of the support and protection they can get from the criminal justice system and other agencies.

Stalking is a crime in all 50 states, yet many criminal justice professionals and victims underestimate its seriousness. We must encourage victims to seek refuge through domestic violence agencies (1-800-33-HAVEN) and the criminal justice system; they save lives. Our courts and law enforcement agencies must take family violence and stalking with the utmost seriousness, swiftly and strongly punishing abusers and stalkers and becoming educated about lethality factors.

The Georgia Commission on Family Violence and other groups are endorsing legislation this year that will give law enforcement officers more authority to arrest offenders who willfully violate court orders for the purpose of harassing and stalking victims. We encourage its support.

There is no one solution for victims. But protective orders, along with coordinated community responses, are much more than pieces of paper for many. They're tools to create safety for victims and their children and to provide accountability for the unacceptable behaviors of perpetrators.

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