



A wife's violent death shows how far we still must travel

By Marjie Lundstrom -- Bee Columnist - (Published May 10, 2003)

Today, on the eve of Mother's Day, a woman named Crystal Brame will be mourned in the streets of Tacoma, Wash.

The 35-year-old mother of two, who died a week ago from a bullet to the head, was the victim of a murder so public and, some say, so predictable that some of the city's top leadership is being called to account.

Perhaps you are weary of these kinds of stories and long to look away, to take a break from the heartbreaking details that surround the deaths of women like Brame and Laci Peterson of Modesto and now LaTrenda Mangram of Sacramento. But the cases keep rolling in and the outrage ante keeps rising -- culminating in a domestic violence case so extreme that two days of mourning have been set aside for the people of Tacoma, population 194,000.

Crystal Brame was killed by the town's police chief -- her husband. She was abused and controlled and she told people. She filed for divorce this year from 44-year-old David Brame and spelled out the physical attacks, death threats and choking episodes in legal documents. Two weeks before her death, she called 911.

Oh, but tsk, tsk, said the mayor, days before her murder. This is a "private matter," he told the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. Said the city manager: "I'm not interested in exploring David's personal life at this time."

And so, on April 26, David Brame -- a man once accused of date rape and reportedly declared unfit to be a cop in 1981 by a police psychologist -- met his estranged wife in a parking lot and shot her with his service weapon in front of their two children, 5 and 8. She died a week later; he killed himself there, kids just yards away.

For those of us who honestly believed that domestic violence was now taken seriously -- that the severity of the problem was widely understood -- the case is shattering. How could this happen?

"It's called power," said Los Angeles family lawyer Stacy D. Phillips, who has represented numerous high-profit clients in divorce cases, some of them alleging abuse. "Our system is supposed to be blind in that sense."

But it isn't. In a community like Tacoma, she said, "the police chief is pretty intimidating."

"People want to protect their own," said Phillips, who helped draft a successful 1994 bill in California to extend the time period during which domestic violence victims can sue their abusers in civil court. "They want to protect those who are in power ... And I believe this is more profound in a smaller town."

Across the country in Florida, Renae Griggs is keeping a keen eye on the Tacoma case as it cuts to the very heart of her life's work. A former cop, Griggs recently founded the National Police Family Violence Prevention Project, which aims to help law enforcement deal with domestic violence within its ranks.

Griggs believes the cop culture is unique, in that police face "a constant barrage of death and destruction and see people at their very worst."

"The exposure to continual violence, I think, blurs the boundaries of violence and sometimes erases them altogether," she said.

Meanwhile, cops are expected to "detach from their emotions," she said. Add to that society's expectation that cops be "superhuman" -- stronger, faster, able to deal with any crisis -- and you've created an elite group, whose members may begin seeing the world as Us and Them.

"There's just this constant deluge of all this negativity (for cops), and there's no system in place, no tools, no checks and balances to say, 'How are you handling all this?'" she said. "And we don't give the families of officers any tools to recognize the symptoms of deterioration."

In Tacoma, the investigation and finger-pointing are well under way. The city manager who promoted David Brame despite his history has been placed on paid administrative leave. Today marks the second day of memorials for the tiny, dark-haired woman, who devoted herself full time to being a mom.

On the cusp of Mother's Day, as I quietly count my blessings, I see with deep sadness how far we still must travel. And I grieve for two children in Tacoma, whose long journey has only begun.