

Domestic violence homicide is on the rise in the county

By Linda Oberhaus,
Executive Director The Shelter for Abused Women & Children

On Jan. 7, 2017, Omaidia Garcia was shot to death by her boyfriend in the bedroom closet of her North Naples townhouse. Four months later, Barbara Bitterman's husband shot her in the face in the bedroom of their upscale home in a North Naples gated community. They were two very different women from very different walks of life, who died as if holding each other's hand.

We will never know the terrifying last moments of these women's lives because their killers committed the ultimate act of power and control by turning their guns on themselves following their horrific crimes.

While their deaths made a few local headlines, their stories fell second to news of delayed water hookups to a local Publix and the school board's approval of new text books. If a gunman had shot a stranger in downtown Naples, we would have read about it for days, but when he kills a wife or girlfriend in their home, it becomes little more than a sad fact of life.

The Bitterman murder-suicide originally garnered more media attention. Reports of two people found shot in the face in a secured home in an affluent gated community initially raised shock and awe. After it was revealed that the deaths were not suspicious, there was no follow-up headline on the real story – a woman's life was brutally taken by the very person to whom she once entrusted it and in the very place she should have been the safest – her home.

For those who could read between the lines, the news accounts raised valuable awareness that domestic violence does not discriminate. It crosses all ethnic, economic, and geographic boundaries. Victims and abusers live next door, play bridge at your club, work out at your gym and share your pew in church. Omaidia and Barbara were your neighbors.

Domestic violence homicide is on the rise in Collier County. According to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, there were two murders in 2015, neither associated with domestic violence. That number jumped to 10 murders in 2016, and of those five were the result of domestic violence. In addition to these murders, there

were 22 forcible rapes and 217 aggravated assaults associated with domestic violence. Hundreds more went unreported.

While Collier's statistics may be lower than those of neighboring counties, any act of violence committed within the walls of our homes is one too many. As Americans, we live in an era of heightened security. We are urged to be vigilant and report anything suspicious. Domestic violence is domestic terrorism. It is imperative that we stand as a community to oppose it. By not speaking out, we condone it.

No matter how well their abusers tried to conceal their violence on their victims, there were signs that Omaidia and Barbara were being abused and there were opportunities to intervene. These signs either went unnoticed, were ignored or waived off as "it's not my business," "I could be wrong," or "it can't be too bad if she is staying with him."

Failure to recognize and report domestic violence puts the entire community at risk because violence at home does not stop at the front door. Many mass-murderers had a history of domestic violence prior to committing their violent public attacks.

Today, somewhere in the United States, Omaidia and Barbara will be joined in death by three more women. Outside of their families and immediate communities, few will hear anything about their murders. And when we do learn of it, the news value will somehow be minimized by the fact that the killer was a spouse and not a random stranger. The truth is, no one is safe from domestic violence. It is a crime against all of us, for if we cannot end violence in our homes, we will never end violence in our community.

If you know someone affected by domestic violence, call The Shelter's 24-hour crisis hotline at 239-775-1101. For more information on how to recognize and act on the signs of domestic violence, go online to naplesshelter.org/help

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Obituaries

Willie Hugh Strickland, Sr., 83
IMMOKALEE — Willie Hugh Strickland, Sr. passed away June 22, 2017 in Naples. He was born Aug. 25, 1933 in Glennville, Ga., to the late Arnie Lee Strickland and the late Ida Mae (Waters) Strickland.

Hugh moved to Immokalee in 1953 after serving in the Army during the Korean War. He was the owner of the Immokalee Gulf Service Station and later Strick's Shell Station. He attended the First United Methodist Church in Immokalee for many years.

He is survived by his son: Willie Hugh Strickland, Jr. (Dora), daughter: Paula House (Ken), grandchildren: Jason House (Nicole), Justin Strickland (Holly), Gabby Ayala-Strickland, Se-

bastian Strickland and Rebekah Blue Strickland. He was preceded in death by his wife, Vernell Blue Strickland.

Funeral services were held Monday, June 26, 2017 at 11:00 a.m. at First United Methodist Church of Immokalee with Pastor Thom Street officiating. Visitation was Monday one hour prior to service at First United Methodist Church of Immokalee. Interment was Monday, June 26, 2017 in the Baptist Cemetery, Immokalee.

In lieu of flowers donations in memory of Hugh may be made to the First United Methodist Church of Immokalee, 303 North 9th Street, Immokalee, FL 34142.

Arrangements by Akin-Davis Funeral Home - LaBelle.

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