

EDITORIAL OPINION

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Let's unite against domestic violence



LINDA OBERHAUS

Morgan Damas would have been 9 years old, a beautiful budding ballerina.

But there will be no dancing for Morgan. There will be no proms, graduations or weddings for her or any of

her siblings.

Her mother will never hold a grandchild in her arms.

On Sept. 18, 2009, officers found the body of Morgan's mother, Guerline Dieu-Damas, inside the stairwell closet of their North Naples townhome. She was bound with a white electrical cord, her throat cut and a black plastic bag pulled over her head. Upstairs they found the bodies of 19-month-old Morgan and her brothers and sisters, Michzach, 9, Marven, 6, Maven, 5, and Megan, 3, all of whom died from knife wounds.

For the past eight years, their confessed killer and husband/father Mesac Damas has managed to manipulate the justice system as skillfully as he manipulated his victims. It is fitting that his sentencing will come at the end of October — National Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

As I write this, the heartache of these brutal, inexplicable murders is as tangible today as it was eight years ago. We do not know what will take place at the sentencing on Oct. 27, but we do know that six beautiful, innocent lives were violently torn from our community and no amount of justice will ever bring them back.

This month, and throughout the year, the Shelter for Abused Women & Children calls on every Collier County resident to take a stand for countless victims like Guerline and her children, as well as survivors, fam-

Guest commentaries

A guest commentary can be 675 words or less on a topical subject. Authors must have considerable experience, public involvement or expertise in the subject matter. A guest commentary may be returned to the author with a recommendation to resubmit it as a Letter to the Editor within the guidelines for letters. It is recommended that authors receive preclearance before submission; call 239-435-3457.

ilies, friends and communities impacted by domestic violence.

Last year in Collier County, there were 1,607 reports of domestic violence, including five murders, 22 forcible rapes and 217 aggravated assaults. Chances are likely you know at least one of these victims because domestic violence crosses all ethnic, economic and geographic boundaries. Victims and abusers live next door to you, play bridge at your club, work out at your gym and share your pew in church.

We cannot remain silent. We must take a stand to ensure the safety of all members of our community and hold perpetrators accountable for their crimes. Here's how you can help:

» Recognize abuse: Domestic violence isn't always as obvious as black eyes and split lips. The signs can be more ambiguous, such as lapses in communication or changes in valued routines. Regular churchgoers, the Damas family stopped attending nine months prior to their murders. This seemingly small lifestyle change could have signaled an issue and started a conversa-

tion. If you notice such a change in a friend, relative or co-worker, don't assume it means nothing. Call to see why you haven't heard from them. Tell them you miss seeing them in church or at the gym. The response or lack of response may signal a concern and possibly save a life. You can learn more about the signs of domestic violence at naplesshelter.org/signs.

» Report abuse: When you notice something suspicious, it may be easy to tell yourself that it is none of your business. This response can have disastrous and far-reaching results. Across the country, the mass murder in Las Vegas is on nearly everyone's mind, lips and social media feed. As I write this, we know very little about the killer, but we do know that many mass murderers have had a history of domestic violence prior to committing their violent public attacks. Failure to recognize and report domestic violence can put the entire community at risk because violence at home doesn't stop at the front door.

There is no amount of justice that can restore the lives of Guerline and her children, but we can honor their memory by collaborating to end domestic violence and human trafficking in our community so that no other family will ever bear this kind of pain.

If you suspect or observe domestic violence, call the Collier County Sheriff's Office tips line at 239-252-9300 or go to colliersheriff.org/how-do-i-tip-us-off (you may remain anonymous). If you are a victim of abuse or feel unsafe due to a violent relationship, call the shelter's 24-hour crisis line at 239-775-1101.

Oberhaus is CEO of the Shelter for Abused Women & Children in Collier County.