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Naples Daily News

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Florida tops 500K virus cases

But spread of the disease continues to slow

Jane Musgrave
Palm Beach Post

While an additional 225 people were reported dead, the pace of the spread of the disease continued to slow with 5,409 new diagnoses added to the state's growing caseload of 502,739.

In the last week, 51,316 people were diagnosed with the highly contagious respiratory disease, nearly 20,500

fewer than tested positive in the previous week.

It took Florida more than four months to exceed 250,000 cases, a figure reached on July 11. It took less than a month to surpass 500,000.

Only California and five countries, including the United States, have reached that mark.

As the nation's total caseload

See **VIRUS**, Page 6A

Analysis: July was deadliest month for virus

Dan DeLuca
Naples Daily News

USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

July proved to be the deadliest month for Collier County residents since the novel coronavirus pandemic began in Florida in March.

According to a Naples Daily News analysis of data compiled by the state Department of Health, the total number of reported COVID-19 deaths in

Collier grew by 65% during July, from 74 entering the month to 122 last Friday. The 48 deaths reported during July surpassed the county's previous high for reported deaths in a month since the pandemic began in March, which was 30 in May.

Statewide, reported deaths from COVID-19 increased at an even higher rate during July, jumping by 95% from

See **JULY**, Page 6A

SURVIVING THROUGH ART

South Lee woman escapes 17 years of domestic violence

Andrew Atkins

Naples Daily News | USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

Editor's note: The following story contains several difficult subject matters, including domestic violence, rape and suicide.

If you're struggling and need immediate help or assistance, reach the Suicide Hotline at 1-800-273-8255.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline can be reached at 1-800-799-7233.

He had been calling her cell phone all night, but Jessica Torres was celebrating one of her friend's birthdays on Naples' Fifth Avenue South.

It was getting late. The calls became relentless. When Torres answered, her friends could hear the screaming from the cell phone's speaker. She would take a taxi home, Torres told the man on the line. She was drunk.

No, the man said. It was her abusive partner, the man with whom she shared a home and a car and a child. He demanded she get herself and the car home. He didn't care how.

"I gotta go," Torres told her friends.

She remembers most of the ride. There were few people on the road. She was driving in silence, focused

See **SURVIVOR**, Page 4A



ABOVE RIGHT: Jessica Torres, 37, stands outside her fiancé's family home in Golden Gate Estates on July 28. Torres was in an abusive relationship with her high school sweetheart on and off for 17 years, and one of the ways she coped with her situation was through her art. Torres, a self-described "big comic book nerd," would find inspiration in the strong female characters she loved.

ABOVE LEFT: Jessica Torres holds one of her pieces of art. Torres uses her art as an emotional outlet. PHOTOS BY ALEX DRIEHAUS/NAPLES DAILY NEWS

What year is it?

In an upside-down summer, past movies such as 'Jaws' and 'E.T.' are hits again. **1D**

Beirut reeling

With scores still missing after Tuesday's blast, work proceeds. **7A**

Weather

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Survivor

Continued from Page 1A

on the road. Normally, she played music when she drove, but the phone calls kept interrupting her.

Five minutes from home, she got another call. She heard her partner breaking things, trashing the south Lee County home they shared with their daughter. But Torres wasn't thinking about the child.

She wasn't thinking about her art, which had sustained her through years of his abuse. She wasn't thinking about the future, where she might work on dropping the years of tension and hypervigilance that had wound their way into her shoulders.

Her thoughts were dominated by the destruction, the pain, the abuse that waited at her doorstep — that night and every other.

"I didn't want to live anymore," she said. "I didn't want to hear it or see it anymore."

If he wanted to destroy things, fine. She could do one better. She could destroy herself.

On May 19, 2007, at 4:55 a.m., Jessica Torres cut the steering wheel of her car on Three Oaks Parkway, crashing the 2004 gray Toyota Scion in an attempted suicide. Her blood alcohol was .137.

She plowed into a brick post, through a fence and into some shrubbery. She never hurt anybody. She never meant to. Torres remembers waking up in the hospital, scared and in pain. Eventually, her abuser showed up, acting sweet and nice as could be.

She hadn't escaped her abuser nor the life of torment he had created for her.

Domestic violence in Southwest Florida

Every minute in the United States, an average of 24 people are victims of rape, physical violence or stalking by an intimate partner, according to the National Domestic Violence Hotline. That's more than 12 million people a year. Generally speaking, most female victims of domestic violence were previously victimized by the same offender, according to the Hotline.

COVID-19 has exacerbated the risks for those living in domestic violence situations, according to the Hotline.

"For many survivors, staying home may not be the safest option. We know that any external factors that add stress and financial strain can negatively impact survivors and create circumstances where their safety is further compromised," the Hotline's website reads.

Since 1995, Collier County's population has grown by more than 190,000, and Lee County's population has grown by more than 358,000, according to crime reports from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. Despite the population growth, both counties have seen their domestic violence rates decrease.

But a drop in the total number of reported offenses doesn't account for those who did not report their situations, nor does it lessen their individual suffering.

The Collier County Sheriff's Office attributes the decline of domestic violence-related offenses in the FDLE report in part to its partnership with the Shelter for Abused Women and Children to identify victims and connect them to resources, according to Media Relations Bureau Manager Karie Partington.

"In addition, the Collier County Sheriff's Office Domestic Abuse Response Team (D.A.R.T.) advocates can provide transportation to safety, crisis intervention, support, referrals to community agencies, court accompaniment and personal advocacy to victims," Partington wrote in an email. "The CCSO D.A.R.T. program consists of trained victim advocates and detectives who understand the dynamics of family violence."

However, there are several barriers victims may face in reporting their situation, Partington wrote, including fear of the abuser, little family support, supporting children on their own, losing custody or cultural reasons.

Torres, for example, was a stay-at-home mom for parts of her relationship. She relied on her partner's income to pay the bills and keep her and her children fed.

A victim of domestic violence leaves an average of seven times before staying away for good, according to the Hotline. Torres, too, tried to separate from her partner a number of times. It never stuck.

Further, victims of domestic violence may find themselves in a cycle of abuse, a theory first identified by psychologist Lenore Walker in 1979. The cycle follows three main phases: tensions build, there is an incident or violence, and then there is a reconciliation or "honeymoon stage," according to West Virginia State University. Some victims decide to stay in the relationship during that honeymoon period with hopes the abuser will change, according to the university.

The Red Flags

When Torres talks about her 17 years of torment, she cries. She can't help herself. It wasn't always like this with the man she met when they were teenagers at Naples High School.

"Things slowly started to change," she said. "I should have noticed little red flags."

The first outburst happened when she was 18.

She was out with a group of friends, the driver was a man. When he dropped Torres off, her boyfriend was waiting at the front door. When she walked in, he threw her on the floor, spit on her, and called her a slut.

Her friends were shocked by her partner's actions, Torres said, but she was scared. She sided with her boyfriend and eventually cut ties with her friends.

"I don't think all of them knew or understood," she said about what was going on behind closed doors.

The next red flag popped up when she was 20 and six months pregnant with their daughter.

Torres' boyfriend came home early from work. Dinner wasn't ready. He wasn't happy with what she planned to cook. He preferred a home-cooked meal, and she planned to cook one of those meal-in-bag skillet dinners. She still remembers what was in it: chicken, cheese, cauliflower, carrots, broccoli.

His fury was white-hot and quiet.

"It was like a scary calm, almost," Torres said. "He would do these things where he wouldn't even yell and scream, he would give you these looks."

She called him an asshole. He grabbed her by the shoulders and shoved her down the staircase.

Torres called the police, but faced a dilemma. If they locked him away, she'd be safe. If they didn't arrest him, she would be at his mercy. The possibility terrified her.



Jessica Torres, right, and her fiancé, Michael Martinez, left, pose for a portrait at Martinez's family home in Golden Gate Estates on July 28. The couple have been together for less than a year, but Torres says that Martinez has been kind and supportive of her and her children.

ALEX DRIEHAUS /NAPLES DAILY NEWS

She met the cops outside. She said everything was fine.

There were more red flags, of course. Years and years more. Once, Torres asked permission to go to a concert. He gave it to her, only to throw his Xbox controller through the window when she got in her friend's car. Once, he dragged her naked out of the shower, threw her into the front yard, locked her outside for hours and broke her phone in half after he looked through it and didn't like what he saw. There were all the "stupid little things," like calling her dress ugly, makeup was bad.

The day Torres came home from the hospital after she crashed the car in a suicide attempt, he made her clean up the mess he'd made in his fit of rage.

What started as red flags became facts. He had absolute control — financially, emotionally and physically.

The End

The cycle of abuse forced Torres away from friends. She felt isolated. When she tried to tell people what was happening, they ignored her concerns.

"He played it off so well, because so many people loved him," Torres said.

To the outside world, her abuser was a good guy: always there to help out friends, a jokester, a people-person.

"It brought people to him, they were drawn to him," she said.

Managers at Torres' workplaces didn't see it that way. The man would show up to see if Torres was really where she claimed to be, sometimes causing a scene. It cost her more than one job.

Torres got into the habit of asking her daughter to take her little brother, born in 2010, into the closet and shut the door so they wouldn't hear the fighting. It broke Torres' heart — she knew they could hear it, anyway.

Torres knew she was done with the relationship in 2014, when tragedy marred her life once more.

During a night out, she crossed the paths of the wrong people. She said three men drugged her. They proceeded to kidnap her and rape her.

When she returned from the hospital the next day, all she wanted from her partner was comfort. But when she went inside, before she could explain or ask for a hug, her partner called her a slut.

"He didn't care," Torres recalled thinking. "This [expletive] doesn't care about me at all."

She resolved to stay strong despite the horror. "I'm a very strong-willed person," she said. "You just don't let things like that break you, because then they win. I don't want anybody to win. This is my story, this is my life. They're not going to ruin it for me."

His reaction when she walked through the door was the moment Torres realized she had no future with him, though she stayed for a few more years.

"It was a lot of pride," she said. "I didn't want to be on my own, I didn't want to ask for help. I really wanted to believe that I could somehow fix everything and keep my family together."

They mutually separated in early 2018. Even today, it is a struggle for Torres not to make excuses for the abuse. She said she cheated on her partner, that she suffered a period as an alcoholic. She looks back on some of the better days, what she sees as good times, but knows they pale in comparison to all of the bad.

The healing

Over the duration of her time with her abuser, Torres said the worst physical injury he inflicted was a broken nose he gave her during a concert, when they got into an argument.

"Nothing super major broken, except what's inside," she said

Torres has always been an artist. She credits her art as a factor of her survival. When reality was a hell, escaping to her art became a matter of life and death.

"It takes you from your real world," she said.

She's entirely self-taught, exploring mediums like pencil and paper, all kinds of paintings and digital art.

Torres didn't keep a diary, but she wrote notes to herself — poetry, lines of scripture, anything to keep her going through the day. Now that she's out of the abusive relationship, she's making more art than ever.

Laurie Zanelli, a healing arts advocate with the Shelter for Abused Women and Children, said art is an accessible method for healing.

"Art is wonderful, because so often, (survivors are) not able to give words or a voice to what has happened to them," she said. "It's about expression."

Zanelli said even scribbling can be a form of expression.

"When you do that, you're letting go," she said. "For a moment, they're freeing their minds of the thoughts."

She sometimes watches the colors survivors use transition from harsh, dark colors to lighter, softer colors, and that the survivors often become calmer and in a better mood.

"You'll see them just start to become happier," she said "It's not about judgment, it's not about the finished product. It's the process. It's the journey of just being free."

Torres expressed the unthinkable in her art. In a piece she started after her suicide attempt, thick marker shows the shape of a woman's naked body. Her right arm has melted away, and her left hand is falling apart, dripping down in pieces and globs. It took her years to finish, she said.

In articulating her anguish, she started putting herself back together.

The Beginning

Torres' new beginning came after the end. In May, she and her new boyfriend Michael Martinez announced their engagement.

They worked for vending companies and ran into each other at a Publix in October. They immediately connected and planned for a date that Saturday. Torres couldn't wait — she called him back and they met at the movies on Friday instead. His good looks and how he smelled struck her. He adored how lively and bubbly she was.

Martinez, who has a child of his own, said he is always thinking about what kind of man he wants his son to be — a protective and loving partner.

"There is a line I don't want to cross," Martinez said. He makes it a point to let Torres know she will never be touched with anger as long as he's around.

Martinez struggles when he hears Torres talk about the abuse she survived. As she spoke on the lanai at Martinez' parents home in the Golden Gate Estates on a Tuesday in July, he got up from his chair and smoked a cigarette before returning.

Torres doesn't flinch when Martinez puts his arm around her shoulders, pulls her in tight and kisses the crown of her head. As a pair, they are giggles and smiles and tenderness.

On a recent Wednesday evening, Torres is cooking chicken for dinner. She loves broccoli, so she's whipping that up, too, with Swiss cheese. She's looking forward to the meal, to enjoying it, together, with her family.

"How do I put it? I'm at ease, I'm relaxed, I'm not having to look over my shoulder or tiptoe on eggshells," Torres said.

It feels something like relief.

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