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Mom's Slaying Highlights Repeated Domestic Abuse

By Valerie Kalfrin, vkalfrin@tampatrib.com

[TAMPA] – The first time Kervin Alexander landed on probation, for a grand theft conviction, he violated his restrictions within nine months and served 90 days in jail, court records show.

The second time, after he acknowledged yanking his girlfriend's braids out of her head, he violated his probation within six months by slashing the woman's tires.

His third stint on probation began in May 2004, after being convicted of stalking the same woman, Elizabeth Cochran. He violated his restrictions three times, police say, before he fatally shot Cochran, a mother of two teenage daughters, in the back this month.

Alexander's disregard for the law and authorities' inability to corral him highlights a systemic flaw, said Henry Hower, a lawyer for Bay Area Legal Services and advocate for domestic-violence victims. Hower often represents clients of The Spring of Tampa Bay, a domestic-violence shelter.

This case should be a lesson for the Department of Corrections and other agencies who monitor cases of domestic and repeat violence, Hower said.

Alexander "was out of control," Hower said.

He hopes the case inspires reform. "It emboldens abusers when nothing happens to them," he said.

Alexander is being held without bail at Orient Road Jail, charged with felony first-degree murder.

The Florida Department of Corrections said through a spokeswoman that Alexander's most recent community control officer did everything possible to find him: visiting his home several times, talking to him by phone at work and obtaining an arrest warrant.

The officer, John Claude Lovett, did not know Alexander's precise location, even when talking to him at his workplace over a cell phone on Sept. 21, said the spokeswoman, Debbie Buchanan.

Lovett has the authority to arrest someone but cannot transport him to jail because his personal car is not secure; he has to call law enforcement for help, Buchanan said.

“If [Alexander] came into the office like he was supposed to, we could’ve arrested him,” Buchanan said. “We don’t go out and search for them.”

Hower wondered why. “It’s not whether [Lovett] did anything wrong,” Hower said. “It’s what can we do better?”

He plans to ask the county’s Domestic Violence Task Force similar questions.

“A woman is dead,” he said. “There’s nothing we can do for Elizabeth, but maybe in the future we can do something more.”

No System Foolproof

The task force is a collaboration among social service agencies, law enforcement, victims’ groups, prosecutors and probation officers to address domestic abuse and intervention. One of its committees knew about the situation between Alexander and Cochran, confirmed Pat Kolanko-Brown, a licensed clinical social worker on the committee.

Known as Project LAURA (an acronym for Lethal Assailant Urgent Response Action), the committee meets monthly to follow cases of domestic and repeat violence through the courts. It also tells victims about resources.

Kolanko-Brown declined to discuss Alexander and Cochran, citing the pending criminal case. If a victim died, however, the group would review its actions, she said.

“You’re not always going to prevent everything,” she said. “You could do all the right things – and the victim could do all the right things – and a murder still happens.”

The committee focuses on offenders with a history of violence or substance abuse, previous violations of court orders, threats and obsession.

It recommends “safety planning,” said Margaret Laing, coordinator of the domestic violence unit of Hillsborough County’s Victim Assistance Program. This includes changing phone numbers and locks, or moving.

Hower said he encourages safety planning when authorities’ actions are limited. He thinks Cochran’s situation was different. “The system should have protected this woman,” he said. “There were enough red flags out there.”

Cochran received a court injunction for protection against Alexander in March 2004. A Tampa police report shows that roughly nine months before her death, she and Alexander resumed living together in the same Robles Park Village apartment where she lived for at least two years.

Cochran worked as a motel maid to support herself and two daughters, ages 13 and 17. Her family could not be reached for comment.

History of Violence

In September 2003, when Cochran asked Alexander to move out, he grabbed her hair, yanking out several braids, a Tampa police report states.

Alexander pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor domestic battery charge the next month; he received probation, court records show.

On March 22, 2004, he went to the Fowler Avenue motel where Cochran worked, waving a butcher knife and asking to see her, a police report states. Cochran locked the door of the room she was cleaning, police said. The motel's maintenance man told police Alexander slashed the tires on Cochran's car.

Cochran hid at her sister's home, but Alexander found her. Shortly after midnight on March 23, Cochran called police, saying Alexander had banged on the door with a knife, threatening to kill her. Police charged him with felony aggravated stalking.

Alexander pleaded guilty in May 2004 and received a year's probation. Within weeks, he failed to remain at his registered address, skipped a mental health evaluation and ignored his community service hours, Department of Corrections reports show.

In July, he appeared in court to admit to these violations. A judge reinstated his probation. But by Sept. 2, Lovett noted that Alexander again violated his probation by failing to pay for his supervision and meet weekly with him. He recommended Alexander receive four years in prison.

Hard to Find

Locating Alexander to apply that punishment proved problematic. Lovett visited Alexander's new address on South Dale Mabry Highway three times between Sept. 8 and Sept. 19, before a roommate told Lovett he had not seen Alexander since Sept. 1.

At that point, Lovett considered Alexander an "absconder" because his whereabouts was unknown. But in a Sept. 21 report, he wrote that he had spoken to Alexander by phone that day after calling the construction company where Alexander worked. Alexander told him he would not cooperate and authorities "would just have to do what we had to do," Lovett wrote.

An arrest warrant for Alexander was issued Sept. 23.

On Nov. 21, Tampa police responded to Cochran's apartment, where a report notes they had been living together for three months. Cochran said in the report Alexander grabbed her hair, pulled her down the stairs and punched her. When her older daughter intervened, he pushed them into a glass table, police said.

Detective Yolanda Cox noted in the report on Dec. 2 she had spoken to Lovett, who said Alexander previously had failed to meet his probation requirements.

Efforts to locate Alexander were unsuccessful, Cox wrote, because he had no known address and no known relatives in Florida.

Cochran told Cox on Jan. 7 she had not seen or heard from Alexander, the report states.

On Feb. 2, the state attorney's office filed a misdemeanor battery charge against Alexander regarding the November incident. A warrant was issued March 29 for his arrest.

On May 1, Alexander went to Cochran's home and argued with her. Her older daughter heard one gunshot and her mother say, "Kervin," according to police and corrections reports. Cochran was fatally shot in the back.

The next day, police arrested Alexander. He had called 911, reports state, saying he wanted to turn himself in.

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