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Pregnancy and Homicide: Violence Intersects Lives of Promise

*Relatives and Friends Evoke the Women and Their Paths toward
Death*

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Second of three articles

On a Saturday night when her sisters tried to persuade her to go out on the town, Shameka Fludd stayed home. Her workweek had been hectic – tending children at a Laurel day-care center, then staying late on Friday to clean up. She was three months pregnant and lately more tired than usual.

Her suburban apartment in Columbia was comfortable, set on a tree-shrouded slope in a winding complex of similar units – a long way from the troubled District neighborhoods where she grew up. At 23, she had two sweet kids, a good job and a close circle of relatives and friends.

The pregnancy had come as a surprise. Her circumstances were not ideal, not what a single mother would have chosen if life always happened according to wishes and plans. But she could not bear to have an abortion, she told friends. After five years as a day-care teacher, children had become her calling.

“You don’t have to have anything to do with the baby,” she told the father. But Tjane Marshall was already a father of two and said a baby would ruin his life, Fludd later told her sisters. His objections upset her, they said. But she did not change her mind.

The couple’s clash of wills ended unexpectedly for Fludd in the dark morning hours of May 4, 2003.

That night, her children had stayed with relatives. Fludd was alone, lying in her bed, in a nightgown, prosecutors say, when Marshall dropped by her apartment and asked again about the pregnancy. On the floor near her bed was a copy of Lamaze magazine, with a big, bold cover headline that read: BIRTH.

Hours later, when police were summoned, the magazine was spattered with blood.

Only recently, research has begun to show that cases like Shameka Fludd's are far more common than anyone might have guessed. And as public health experts have begun to home in on the phenomenon of homicide during pregnancy, the Washington region has become a focal point.

Here, experts looking into whether maternal deaths were being undercounted in Maryland and the District discovered in separate studies that a surprising number of pregnancies ended in homicide. Independently, Virginia's chief medical examiner began to probe maternal deaths and identified that 12 percent of them are homicides in her state as well.

Expanding on these findings, The Washington Post conducted a year-long survey of state death record data and documented more than 1,367 maternal killings nationwide since 1990. As startling as the findings are, however, they represent only part of the toll, because no national system exists for tracking maternal homicides.

What has been missing from the research has been the collected stories of the women slain – more than 125 in the Washington region alone – who they were, what their relationships were like and how violence intersected their lives at such a pivotal time.

Even in states that track these cases, they are often little more than a checked box on a death-record form – rarely emerging from the data as young women with lives and hopes and families.

Many, like Fludd, never knew they were in danger.

Unplanned but Undaunted

On Sunday, May 4, 2003, the phone rang again and again in Fludd's Columbia apartment. Her sisters called each other and asked: "Have you heard from Shameka?" By Sunday night, her grandmother, Louella Stukes, was worried that she might have become ill.

Maybe her pregnancy had caused medical complications, she remembers thinking.

She drove to Fludd's apartment and immediately noticed Fludd's minivan in the parking lot. But when Stukes knocked, no one answered. She tried her key, but the deadbolt was locked.

Finally she called Howard County police.

When police and firefighters finally got into Fludd's apartment, through a sliding door on the balcony, they found her lying in bed. She was dead – with four bullet wounds.

In the hours that followed, Fludd's grandmother stood in the dark, with Fludd's 7-year-old son and a gathering crowd of shocked relatives and friends. It was difficult for anyone to imagine: Fludd had been shot. She was dead. Who would fire on a pregnant woman in her own bed? There was no sign of a break-in.

Over time, some would think back to the tension about her pregnancy. It still did not make sense, they thought. “I just don’t understand,” Brenda Coleman, Fludd’s sister, said not long after she was killed. Marshall “didn’t have to have anything to do with the baby.”

Shortly after the killing, police interviewed Marshall on videotape for nearly three hours. He did not confess but presented a portrait of his life and hers and how the pregnancy had put them at odds. He said his relationship with Fludd was a friendship that became sexual. “She was never my girlfriend . . .,” he said. “But she was my friend.”

The two had known each other for years, he said – having met in the D.C. neighborhoods that Fludd had moved away from as a teenager. He knew her cousin, her mother, her sisters. They were together once, back in 1999, but then he was sent to prison on drug and weapons charges. When he was released, in fall 2002, they got together again.

Fludd, he said, helped him buy clothes and get back on his feet.

For a number of months, they talked or saw each other daily. Fludd was the stable one – with her own apartment, her job, her kids. Marshall had a job, lost it, fell back into drugs, worked at a basketball gym. He had a number of other girlfriends. By the time Fludd knew she was pregnant, they were still talking but no longer intimate.

On the videotape, he recalled their discussion about the pregnancy. “I told her I didn’t really need a child right now. . . . I said it would hurt your life, and it would hurt mine right now. We both have two kids. . . . And she was like, well, yeah, but she wanted to have the baby.”

Marshall told police that in previous years he had argued against having each of the two children he already had. “I got two kids,” he told the detectives. “I didn’t want the first one. I didn’t want the second one.”

From Fludd’s position, the pregnancy looked very different. She had not intended it, she told her friends, but neither did she want to end it. She confided to one friend that a doctor had advised her of medical problems that might preclude her from ever having children again. When she became pregnant by Marshall, “she felt like it was meant to be,” the friend said.

The weekend she was killed, Marshall had called her to suggest they talk about the pregnancy again, Fludd told her friends.

While Fludd was at home that night in her apartment, Marshall went to a late-night party in the District. Witnesses told police that he slipped away for at least an hour. Police obtained records of his cell phone calls, which showed Marshall making calls as he drove north toward Columbia.

In the back seat of his rented car, prosecutors would later say, Marshall carried a “murder bag” packed that Saturday – an extra pair of Timberland boots, a black hooded sweat shirt, jeans, latex gloves and a .22.

When Marshall – nicknamed “Bird” – returned to the District, he recounted the killing to his roommate. In court, the roommate testified that Marshall said he approached Fludd as she lay in bed. He asked her if she was sure the baby was his. When she said yes, he raised his gun.

“Bird! No!”

He shot her in the face.

In court, a jury listened to a taped recording of Marshall talking about the killing to his roommate, who had been wired by police with a hidden recording device. Marshall boasted of his own “genius” in setting up the crime. “I wasn’t even close enough to . . . get little splashes on me,” he said.

Prosecutor Todd Taylor told a jury of eight men and four women: “He wanted to prevent her from having the child she desperately wanted to have” and “move on with his life without the inconvenience of having another baby, another child to support.”

Two months ago, a jury convicted Marshall of first-degree murder. Sentencing was set for January.

Fludd’s grandmother trembled visibly in the courtroom, surrounded by 11 relatives and friends. She is raising Fludd’s son, now 9; Fludd’s daughter, now 6, is with her father. “We got justice,” she said quietly afterward. “That’s all we wanted, and we got it. Shameka can rest in peace.”

‘With or Without Him’

Two hours from Columbia, Madonna Stewart has had 2½ years to think about her pregnant niece’s killing outside Richmond one bleak night in April 2002. She has come to believe that maternal homicide is not an unusual crime but rather another form of the domestic violence that has harmed millions of women.

Her niece, Ceeatta Stewart-McKinnie, did not intend to get pregnant, Stewart recalled, but grew very attached to the idea of having the baby once she did. She had had abortions and decided not to do it again. But prosecutors say this put her at odds with the baby’s father – a long-standing but on-again, off-again boyfriend.

“She just said she was doing it with or without him,” her aunt remembered.

By then, Stewart-McKinnie was a junior in college, planning on a journalism career and working as a nurse’s assistant to support herself. She liked poetry, once thought of herself as a budding actress and had gone to college determined to make good after a rough childhood. At 23, she felt she could manage motherhood.

On the first day of an advanced journalism class in early 2002, she threw her arms up in the air when her name was called and announced: “I’m pregnant!” Her professor, Wilma Wirt, who was

leading the class that day at Virginia Commonwealth University, recalled, “I’ve never seen anybody that wanted something as much.”

But Wirt and several classmates grew concerned whenever Stewart-McKinnie talked about her boyfriend. Her descriptions seemed to suggest that he had another life. “There was something that just didn’t feel right about it,” Wirt recalled.

Still, Stewart-McKinnie reveled in the pregnancy, sang the baby lullabies and by five months along had chosen a name for the girl she was expecting – Amarea Kimae. She bought dresses and sleepers and diapers. After her second ultrasound, she made it clear that she would be expecting child support, police say.

Her boyfriend, Willis E. Anderson, 27, was married. He had met Stewart-McKinnie years earlier, growing up in the same rough Richmond neighborhood. They had been intimate on and off. But now he had a schoolteacher wife, a young son, a college degree, a comfortable house in the suburbs and a good job as an accountant in state government.

On the evening of April 10, 2002, prosecutors said, Anderson arranged to have Stewart-McKinnie meet him about a mile from her Richmond apartment. She parked her car and climbed into his Chevrolet Suburban. It is unclear where she thought they were going.

In a wooded area, prosecutors said, Stewart-McKinnie understood her peril, jumped out and tried to flee. But it was completely dark, and as she ran -- wearing a sundress and a jean jacket – she lost her shoes and her glasses.

Turkey hunters happened upon her body three days later. She had been struck at least 25 times with a heavy tool or hammer.

“He was worried [the pregnancy] was going to interfere with his lifestyle,” prosecutor Michael V. Gerrard said. “She was going to have this baby. She was going to hit him for child support. It was definitely going to interrupt his way of life.”

After listening to the evidence, a jury voted to convict Anderson, who is serving a 50-year term. In an interview from a prison in southern Virginia, he continued to maintain his innocence – and said Stewart-McKinnie never told him the baby was his. “If it were mine, I would have to own up to it and tell my wife I was cheating . . .,” he said. “I’m going to take care of my responsibilities. I’m not going to kill anybody.”

Stewart-McKinnie’s death came with such horror and pain that her aunt said she has now turned her own life around, opening five homes to help shelter women in need. She calls her program “Ceeatta’s House.”

“People need to know,” Stewart said, reflecting on how violence sometimes gets handed down in a family, repeated and suffered again and again. “I think it’s generational,” she said, “and I believe you need to break the cycle.”

Stewart pointed to a jagged scar on her upper arm. She has more on her abdomen – cruel reminders of the day, 17 years ago, when she was attacked in a domestic clash.

“I was stabbed seven times while I was pregnant,” Stewart said, remembering how she held her own intestine as she was rushed to a hospital. “The only difference between me and my niece is that I lived and she died.”

‘Still a Lot of Hatred’

The killing of Ceeatta Stewart-McKinnie was one of at least 48 maternal homicides in Virginia since 1990, according to The Post’s analysis. Identities of the dead could be pieced together for 45 cases. The cases were then researched in detail to understand more about how and why they happened.

Spread across the state, slightly fewer than half the homicides happened in cities such as Richmond. That’s where Gwendolyn Thomas, 17, grew up. She was killed in 1992 by a youth minister she had admired at her church. He had fathered the child she was expecting and did not want the baby’s paternity to be known, prosecutors said.

A third occurred in rural enclaves like where Tabitha Jo Bell was killed in 1993 when she was seven months pregnant. She and her live-in boyfriend were arguing about how often he was going out when he picked up a shotgun and fired at her as she cooked dinner.

About 20 percent of women were killed in suburbs. Ana Diaz, 28, was shot in her car in Reston as 1998 at four months pregnant. Police said it appeared that her former boyfriend was angry that Diaz had moved on after their breakup, expecting a baby with another man. He killed her, then turned the gun on himself.

In Virginia, 12 of the 45 cases have gone unsolved – among them, the death of Sherry Culp, who lived in Stafford County.

For Culp, pregnancy came both as a surprise and a new source of tension, but not because the baby’s father had objections. Her family said the strain was with her ex-husband, whom she had divorced several years earlier, not long after she had an extramarital affair.

At 36, Culp lived with her fiancé and had been trying to get joint custody of her two daughters, then 7 and 9. The timing of her pregnancy was not what she had planned. Money was tight, and she worked full time, and she was trying to demonstrate her stability for the court. She briefly wondered whether to continue the pregnancy, said her mother, Jane Young.

By the first days of 1998, however, she was several weeks from her due date and excited. She had prepared the baby’s nursery and washed and folded baby clothes. Her green winter parka would no longer zip over her bulging midsection. Early labor pains had started. She expected to deliver early – as she had with her daughters.

Her relationship with her ex-husband, Donald Culp, remained strained. He lived with another woman by then, but “there was still a lot of hatred,” Sherry Culp’s mother said. In court documents, a Brownie troop leader described an argument between the couple when Donald allegedly told Sherry she “would never have custody of the girls, and he would see her dead before she had another child.”

One Friday, Culp spent the day training the worker who would replace her while she was on maternity leave from the Springfield electronics firm where she worked. She left later than usual, with a fellow employee, police said. They chatted at the front entrance to the buildings, then parted ways.

Culp went straight to her car, about 100 feet away.

A sudden snap of gunfire brought her co-workers heading toward her car. They spotted a man in a hooded sweat shirt walking away. When they got to Culp, they found her slumped behind the wheel. She was hit before she could get her key in the ignition – shot twice in the head through the car window in what police suspected was a targeted killing.

Doctors performed an emergency Cesarean section and delivered 6-pound 6-ounce Kelsey Morgan Laughlin. Having gone too long without oxygen, Culp’s daughter showed no brain activity and was disconnected from a respirator two days later.

The little girl was buried in her mother’s arms. “Had she not gotten pregnant, she might be here today,” said Jane Young, her mother. “That’s what I live with every day. I really believe that Kelsey was the driving force behind this murder.”

In 2002, police served a search warrant on Donald Culp’s home outside Cleveland, where he moved after the slaying. Leads in the case – being investigated as a murder-for-hire – are still being pursued, said Detective Steve Milefsky of the Fairfax County Police Department.

Donald Culp’s attorney, Jay Milano, has said that Culp had nothing to do with the homicide and that although relations had once been bitter between the Culpes, they were getting along well at the time of Sherry’s death. “There’s no evidence that he killed his wife, because he didn’t kill his wife,” Milano told *The Post* in 2002. He did not return calls last week.

Embracing a New Life

In a society that issues warnings of every kind to pregnant women – about drinking alcohol, about the side effects of aspirin and cough syrup – the risk of homicide during pregnancy remains unstated and unclear, even as early research may indicate certain groups of women may be more vulnerable – teenagers, for example.

In a 2002 analysis in Massachusetts, women ages 15 to 24 were three times more likely to die of homicide during pregnancy and postpartum months than their older counterparts.

The results were similar to a Maryland study in 2003 that found that black pregnant teenagers were most at risk.

“It’s something we need to look into more,” said author Cara Krulewitch, wondering: “Is there a vulnerability factor we don’t know about? Is there a social factor?”

In a study of postpartum women in Georgia done by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, mothers younger than 20 were almost three times as likely to be killed by homicide as their counterparts who had not recently been pregnant.

Under the most recent public health definitions, deaths up to 12 months postpartum are considered “associated” with pregnancy. Sometimes experts look into cases to determine whether pregnancy was a factor – and if a death might have been prevented.

In the District, Shirlita Colon was just 14 when she found out she was pregnant. Her mother was not happy about it but concluded that it was a young girl’s mistake, an accident. “You do what you feel you can live with,” she told her daughter, known as Shirley.

“I want my baby,” the teenager told her with certainty.

Her older sister had given birth at 15, and Shirley admired the way she had been a mother and still managed to make great things happen in her life, with shelves of trophies in the family’s District apartment and a track scholarship to George Mason University.

Their mother told Shirley she would help with the baby as long Shirley continued her education.

Shirley promised to return to classes after her baby was born. Having just completed ninth grade, she was still unclear about what she wanted in life. Maybe fashion design – she had created her own gown for the eighth-grade prom – maybe something else entirely. Everyone told her she had a gift for comedy, the ability to make even her most reluctant friends laugh.

During her pregnancy, Shirley stayed close to home, in the family’s third-floor apartment in Benning Terrace. She kept her doctor appointments, took her vitamins and watched the movies that the prenatal clinic showed on parenting, her mother said.

The baby’s father did not share her enthusiasm. Donte Allen had been her first boyfriend, back in seventh grade, when she was a cheerleader and both attended Fletcher Johnson Educational Center. He did not seem violent or dangerous in any way, her mother said.

Allen had little to do with Shirley during her pregnancy, and when she delivered her daughter Feb. 28, 2002, he was not around.

Shirley named the infant Destiny, decided to breastfeed her, thinking it was best for her baby, and doted on her “like a baby doll,” her mother said.

“She was changing her clothes three or four times a day,” her mother, Tawana Colon, recalled.

In the weeks after Destiny's birth, Allen dropped by briefly once or twice. "I don't think he believed Destiny was his," her mother said. Then, one Sunday in May, he stopped by again, and he and Shirley talked in a stairwell outside her family's apartment. They began to argue. One neighbor said Shirley asked him for money for Pampers.

Shortly afterward, Shirley asked her sister to watch the baby for five minutes, ran outside and climbed into a car with Allen and a friend.

The three drove behind a church – where Allen pulled out a gun.

At first, Shirley thought he was joking, according to court testimony. Then she ran. As she tried to jump a fence, Allen, 17, shot her in the head. When she fell to the ground, he stood over her and shot her again.

By the time her family arrived, police lights were flashing and yellow tape was strung around the crime scene. Tawana Colon screamed and tried to push through the police barricade to reach her daughter. Finally, she dropped to her knees, she recalled, and prayed: "God, let this not be true."

It was Mother's Day – and Shirley had been a mother just 10½ weeks.

At Allen's trial, prosecutors said the teenager was so deliberate about the killing that he had taken off a favorite football jersey so it wouldn't get bloodstained. One friend testified that Allen had explained the shooting a few days afterward by saying, "I'm too young to be a father."

Shirley's mother said that the family had never asked for child support and that she had not imagined he could pay anything, at 17 years old. Shirley, she said, "trusted this guy. I believe my baby died in shock, not believing he would do something like this to her. That's what hurts me so bad."

The jury came back with a guilty verdict, on a charge of first-degree murder, and in July 2003 Allen was sentenced to 45 years in prison. Shirley's father, Isaac Colon II, stood outside the courthouse, feeling little satisfaction. "It's not enough," he said. "My daughter doesn't have a life. Destiny doesn't have a mother for the rest of her life."

Staff writer David S. Fallis and staff researcher Bobbye Pratt contributed to this report.

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