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Slaying Quickens Push for Med School Checks

By Erik Brady and Robert Davis

Robert Howard looked like an ideal candidate for medical school. His grades were good and his recommendations solid. Plus he had a certain intangible that made him stand out from the crowd: He was an Olympian who was among the finest triple jumpers in the world.

But Howard, 28, also had a violent temper, which officials at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) would not learn until mid-August, when the third-year medical student killed his wife and himself, according to police.

They say he stabbed her about three dozen times at their home before jumping out of a 10th-story window on campus. His wife, Robin Mitchell, 31, was chief neurosurgery resident at the UAMS College of Medicine in Little Rock.

Evidence of Howard's violent streak was available through a criminal background check. He pleaded guilty to first-degree assault in 1998; the conviction on a Class A misdemeanor was part of a plea bargain under which felony charges of residential burglary and terroristic threats were dropped. He was accused of breaking down a door and menacing a man with a .380-caliber semiautomatic pistol.

Richard P. Wheeler, student affairs dean at the medical school, says if the admissions committee had known this, it probably would not have admitted Howard when he applied in 1999. But UAMS, like most of the nation's 125 medical schools, does not run background checks. Its application asks if prospective students have been convicted of a felony or misdemeanor other than minor traffic violations. Howard checked a box that said no.

Many medical schools now are considering mandatory criminal background checks for the men and women who apply to become the nation's future doctors.

The Association of American Medical Colleges and its member schools had been talking about the issue for months before the Howard case. Their interest had been raised by a greater societal concern for security because of terrorism and the pedophile priest scandal in the Roman Catholic Church.

“In an age of uncertainty and anxiety, people want to be certain about the qualifications of the professionals who serve them and their families,” says Robert Sabalis, associate vice president of student affairs and programs for the medical school association.

The Howard case has given the idea of mandatory background checks added urgency, according to the association, which hopes to have proposed national guidelines for schools to consider by the end of the year. UAMS is also studying the issue independently.

The selection process for medical schools is so rigorous that nobody believes criminals are routinely getting accepted. But the Howard case is a grim reminder that relying on an applicant’s word is risky.

“Self-reporting is not very reliable,” Sabalis says. “There is a general concern about whether we are doing enough to protect patients.”

Robin Kelly, a cousin for whom Robin Mitchell was named, is an Illinois state representative who says she is considering sponsoring legislation that would make criminal background checks mandatory for medical schools in Illinois. “If you do something petty at 13 or 14, it shouldn’t keep you from being a doctor,” Kelly says. “But if you are a criminal, if you are violent, you should not be a doctor.”

David Mitchell, the slain woman’s brother, agrees. “Doctors are the ones we depend on for protection and saving lives,” he says. “Shouldn’t society expect its institutions to make sure our future doctors do not have violent pasts? Background checks would be consistent with the Hippocratic Oath. There should be some measure of review of an applicant’s character and their conduct as a citizen.”

Medical school officials, it turns out, are wondering some of the same things. Says Sabalis: “More and more, administrators are asking, ‘Who are these people? What do we know about them?’”

Here is what Howard’s jumping coach at the University of Arkansas knew about Howard. “As a student-athlete, he was as good as it gets,” Dick Booth says. “As for the other part of his life, he managed to keep that from us.”

‘Pretty spectacular people’

By the time they are considered for admission by one of the nation’s medical schools, would-be doctors have passed a thorough preliminary screening. Committees at their undergraduate schools have examined their records and heard from professors and others familiar with them and have decided they are among the most qualified students those colleges have to offer.

“The people who we see are usually pretty spectacular people,” says Edward Curtiss, dean of admissions at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. “Some committees won’t even send a letter of recommendation if there has been a major problem.”

Curtiss says he knows of no felon who has been admitted to Pittsburgh's medical school. He says three have checked boxes over the years to admit convictions; each was rejected. One killed his girlfriend's new lover. Another passed counterfeit bills. The third forged prescriptions.

"If you are going to be a physician, integrity is key," Curtiss says. Accepting a felon when others with clean records want to become doctors "is too much of a risk."

Wheeler, the UAMS medical school's executive associate dean for academic affairs, says he can't speak for the school's admissions committee but "I can't imagine they would have admitted Howard if they had known about his conviction and the circumstances surrounding it." Committee members do not speak publicly about candidates for admission.

Howard was arrested at least once and had three warrants sworn against him during his years as a competitor at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, where he was a star on the Razorbacks' powerful track and field teams from 1995 to 1998. Booth, an assistant coach who tutors the jumpers and worked closely with Howard, says he and Coach John McDonnell were not aware of those cases.

Campus police arrested Howard in March 1995 for throwing a spray paint can at his girlfriend and then threatening to kill her, according to the police report. In a statement to police, the girlfriend said Howard became angry when she would not allow him to come home with her.

"I believe that he will do something to hurt either me or my property," she wrote. "I know his temper, and it is very short."

The charges were dropped when the girlfriend declined to pursue the case. Records also show three warrants against him from February to May 1998 for failure to appear in court, a string that began with a traffic infraction.

None of the warrants turned up in a criminal background check on Howard run last month by USA TODAY. But his misdemeanor conviction and the dropped felony charges did show up in a simple Internet background check, which cost \$100. Police agencies are able to run far more thorough checks.

The conviction stemmed from an incident in September 1998, a few months after Howard completed his athletic eligibility. He was charged with aggravated assault and burglary after he and another man kicked open the door of a girlfriend's apartment and held a man who was there at gunpoint, according to the police report. Kirk Joyce, who was Howard's public defender in the case, says Howard denied having a gun.

Erick Walder, another former jumping star at Arkansas, was the man who was assaulted, according to the report. It says Walder broke free and ran before Howard chased him, punched him and fled in a car. Police arrested Howard that night.

Howard pleaded guilty to first-degree assault in December 1998, according to court documents. He was sentenced to one year of probation and was ordered to pay \$150 in court costs, \$750 in fines and \$150 to the public defender's office, plus collection fees.

But he failed to make payments or report to a probation officer, according to the documents; four warrants for failure to appear were sworn out from December 1999 to March 2000. A motion to revoke parole was dismissed in April 2000 when Howard made the payments.

Nine NCAA championships

Howard was hailed as a model student during his time at Charles E. Shea High School in Pawtucket, R.I. He still holds several state records, according to Bishop Hendricken High track coach Jim Doyle, who calls Howard the best male track and field athlete in Rhode Island history.

Howard applied the same sort of drive to his studies. "I remember thinking he wouldn't be up to snuff" for college-level courses in U.S. history, says athletics director Ray McGee, who taught the courses. "Boy, did he prove me wrong. He got two A's. He was one of those kids who really had to work. . . . He was a hard worker at everything, a real overachiever."

Howard was recruited to jump at Arkansas, where McDonnell's teams have won 39 NCAA team titles – 11 in cross country, 17 in indoor track and field and 11 in outdoor track and field. The foundation of many of the titles has been a succession of national-class long and triple jumpers.

Howard won nine NCAA championships in the long and triple jumps. He finished third in the triple jump in the 1996 U.S. Olympic trials and was eighth in the Atlanta Games. He deferred his acceptance to medical school to train for the 2000 Olympics; he won the triple jump in the trials and finished seventh in Sydney.

Booth calls Howard the greatest student-athlete in Arkansas history. "You might find some student-athletes who had better athletic careers than Howard's nine NCAA titles and two Olympics," Booth says. "And you might find some who had better academic careers than Howard's 3.8 or 3.9 GPA in pre-med. But you won't find anyone who was as accomplished as he was in both."

Booth pauses. "Of course, all that was certainly erased by what eventually happened."

Wife stabbed dozens of times

Nobody knows what apparently drove Howard to kill his wife on the night of the opening ceremonies of the Athens Olympics. Police found her body, stabbed dozens of times in the head and torso, in their Little Rock home Aug. 14. Police are awaiting lab results to determine if the blood seen on Howard's scrubs before he jumped is hers, as they believe. The report is not expected for months.

Mitchell was a top high school track athlete in Newburgh, N.Y., before getting her undergraduate degree in chemistry from Harvard and a medical school degree from Cornell. She began her

residency at Ohio State but transferred to UAMS, where she met Howard in early 2003. They were married in May that year but kept the marriage secret from Howard's family and from many of the people they knew at medical school.

Mitchell's brother David says he does not think his sister knew of Howard's criminal record. "Every indication we have is no, she was not aware," he says. "Our mother lived next door to them, and she knew nothing about it."

The timing of Howard's rampage has led to speculation he was despondent over not making his third Olympic team. Booth helped train him for the Olympic trials and was with him there in July when Howard finished fifth; only the three top finishers made the U.S. team. Howard had taken a year off from medical school to train for the trials but seemed to take the loss in stride.

"He was philosophical about it," Booth says. "He said, 'I enjoyed the year of training. It was a break I probably needed.' Robin was there with him, and I didn't sense any trouble between them. I don't know what happened. I don't think anyone does."

Records recently released by UAMS police say that on the morning Mitchell's body was found, her mother told police "her daughter had been having an affair with a man from Florida" and that she had "told her daughter that Robert would kill her if he found out."

Two weeks later, Eva Mitchell, 58, told police she did not remember saying any of that. According to police records, she told them if she had said these things it was out of distress and in any case none of it was true. She said her daughter dated a man in Florida before she met Howard and that she was faithful throughout her marriage.

Howard left a two-page suicide note in the room from which he jumped. The handwritten note, which becomes increasingly illegible as it goes on, begins: "I have worked so hard in this life time (sic) and to fall short on many occasions has been hard." It is unclear if he meant athletic failures, personal ones or both.

But his next sentence mentions a personal failure – his divorce from a dental student he married in 2000: "I have had real love (Jessica) and have lost it. I really loved her but she was not ready for that."

His second wife is mentioned just once: "Robin really screwed my life. She made me feel like I was worthless and could not speak the English language well. "

Another note was found at the duplex he shared with Mitchell. It reads like a note to her rather than a suicide note and was apparently written before the weekend when they died. "I'm sorry I did not respect your independence and hard work," it says. "I'm a man in fear of losing things."

The records released by UAMS police indicate Howard might have been seeing a mental health counselor. His family, according to the records, asked school officials "about a doctor that he was talking with about his problems." The records also show that in the hours after Howard's death, school officials learned he was married to Mitchell from a psychologist at Student Mental

Health Services. UAMS spokeswoman Leslie Taylor says she is unable to comment on that because of privacy concerns.

Howard was known as a man who kept his private life private. His friends knew not to ask probing questions. The UAMS College of Medicine asked one in its application – and Howard lied.

Wheeler, a dean at the medical school, says he did not learn of Howard's criminal record until USA TODAY told him about it weeks after the deaths. "We didn't have a clue that any of that stuff was in his background," Wheeler says.

Now officials at medical schools are asking themselves if they need to do more to find out.

Contributing: Donna Leinwand and Dick Patrick

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