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Slow Torture of Stalking Can Quickly Turn Deadly

By: Bill Torpy

For a year, Michael Todd Ray haunted his former girlfriend.

Katie Call says she broke off their relationship last year but Ray wouldn't go away. She repeatedly changed the locks to her house, she said, but Ray, who was handy with tools, often broke in and replaced her locks with new ones, forcing her to call him so she could enter her own home.

Inside her house, Ray employed technology to keep tabs on Call. He hid voice-activated recording devices and motion-detecting cameras that transmitted images to him. One of his cameras peered at her from inside her bedroom TV.

Still, Call didn't think the 6-foot-4, 240-pound Ray would turn violent. She knew he had been convicted of stalking his former wife and had even been jailed for stalking, but he had never hit Call.

Then, on Aug. 7, Call found him standing in her basement hallway holding a .45-caliber pistol.

"I saw him standing there in the stairwell," she recalled last week. "I slammed the door and screamed. The door gets kicked down. Then he shot me."

The shot tore through her abdomen, knocking her down. Ray then chased Call's new boyfriend down the hallway. Her boyfriend escaped by diving through a window, breaking his arm. Call ran out the door. Call, a 34-year-old mother of two boys who runs a beauty shop in her basement, was fortunate. The bullet passed through her body under the ribs, collapsing a lung. Had the .45 slug been an inch higher, it could have shattered a rib and inflicted terrible damage.

Outcomes like this are not uncommon. The National Center for Victims of Crime says three-quarters of women killed by intimate partners had been stalked by their attacker. Nancy Grigsby, director of the Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence, said her organization collects newspaper clippings on domestic murders in the state. In 2003 there were reports of 76 women being killed, along with 19 bystanders, 12 of them children. She said 37 of the attackers either committed suicide or were killed by police.

The killings continue. Three days after Call was shot, a Cherokee County deputy shot and killed a man named in an aggravated stalking warrant the deputy was trying to deliver. The following

week, a Macon man with a history of domestic violence shot his former girlfriend before killing himself.

When he showed up at Call's house that August morning, Ray was on probation for a 2000 felony conviction for aggravated stalking. Ray was released from jail just a month before shooting Call. He had served just 2 1/2 months of a one-year jail sentence after his probation was revoked for stalking Call. In the past four years, Ray had been repeatedly scolded by judges, sent to jail and at least once ordered to get therapy. But still he stalked – three different women.

Sometime during a 14-hour standoff with deputies that followed, Ray shot himself under the chin. He remains under heavy guard at Grady Memorial Hospital awaiting numerous charges when he recovers.

An ugly pattern

For every Katie Call whose case explodes into public view, scores of other stalking victims live in quiet terror. Courts are doing better at identifying batterers and stalkers, domestic violence experts say. But it is still a difficult problem to address, said Paulding County Superior Court Judge W.A. Foster, who issued a temporary restraining order against Ray five days before Call was shot.

“We do maybe six, eight, 10 of these a week; often you don't have a clue [as to the circumstances of the case],” said Foster. “You never know when someone will go off the deep end.”

Foster noted that the one-year sentence imposed on Ray by Paulding's other Superior Court judge, Tonney Beavers, was a “pretty good lick.”

Ray was sentenced to a year, to serve six months, but he got out of jail early, Paulding sheriff's Capt. Tom Murphy said, because of a new state law that awards county jail inmates serving as “outdoor trustees” four days' credit for each day served. Violent offenders do not qualify. Although Ray's 2000 aggravated stalking conviction was serious, he said, it was viewed as a nonviolent offense.

Grigsby, the domestic violence director, agrees a year is a fairly serious sentence but wonders why Ray was released after serving less than one-fourth of his sentence. Ray's behavior, she said, was classic “non-overtly violent behavior” that hinted at something darker. “We don't act early enough in such cases,” she said.

Paulding officials knew Ray had established an ugly pattern.

High tech aids stalkers

In January 2000, Ray's ex-wife filed for divorce after he was charged with driving under the influence of methamphetamine. Two months later, Ray was accused of slapping his 2-year-old

son and threatening his ex-wife with a baseball bat. He was put on 10 years' probation after an aggravated stalking conviction.

In 2001 he was arrested for stalking his ex-wife, but his probation was not revoked.

In 2002 he was charged with stalking a second woman and sentenced to six months, to serve three.

In early 2003, Ray started going out with Call, who saw him as a nice guy who had been unlucky in love.

By the summer, she said, she had broken up with him because of his obsessive behavior. He once e-mailed her 800 times in a single month. He seemed to have unlimited time and energy to devote toward Call, even after they broke up.

"He was a computer whiz," Call said. She said he would get in her house and "change the password to my computer and to my cell phone messages. I'd have to call him to get my password."

Rebecca Bukant, executive director of the Georgia Commission on Family Violence, said technological advances had allowed stalkers "to make someone's life a living hell." She said stalkers were attaching global positioning devices to cars and spyware to computers to track where their targets were going, both on the road and on the Internet.

Grigsby said police could fight back with their own technology. They can set up video cameras near a stalking victim's home to prove a stalker has been there.

Call's mother, Marcia Adams, said she had talked to Ray many times during the past year, trying to reason with him. "I never got mad," Adams said. "I'd say, 'Just leave it alone. Get on with your life.' He'd say, 'I know.'"

But he didn't stay away. Police were called to Call's home at least six times because of Ray. On April 19, Paulding deputies patrolling near Call's home arrested Ray when they found him hiding under the back deck at her home. He had drilled a hole in the home's siding and had bottle rockets with him.

Judge had foreboding

During a probation revocation hearing June 1, Judge Beavers expressed concern about Ray, according to a transcript.

"I just don't understand," Beavers said. "When the women tell him to stay away from them, he continues to go on."

Ray had "control issues," his attorney, Jason Shwiller, told the judge. "He doesn't break up well," Shwiller said. "He needs help."

Beavers worried aloud that Ray would do it again. “Somebody’s going to get hurt,” the judge told Ray. “It may very well be you.”

Beavers’ concern about Ray was prophetic. In late July, an hour after getting out of jail, Ray phoned a stunned Call. “He asked if he could come over,” she said.

She called the sheriff’s office. “I showed them the caller ID,” she said. “I thought that was proof enough. But they said they could do nothing without a temporary protection order.”

Call said she had started to get a court order after Ray was arrested in April, but put it off after Ray was sentenced to a year in jail.

Ray’s harassment turned her life upside down, Call said. But she didn’t press for a protection order until the week Ray shot her. Ray had not been violent toward her, she said, and although she had called police to deal with him several times, she didn’t really want him to get in deep trouble.

“I honestly thought he’d quit,” she said. “I didn’t want him to go to jail for eight years [to serve the balance of his probation].”

Grigsby said women – and the judicial system – must get tougher. “There’s no real consequences for these guys,” Grigsby said. “There’s a feeling we’re not being fair to them by locking them up.”

Bukant, from the governor’s commission, said the problem of getting women to push cases against their stalkers was twofold: Victims must negotiate an unfamiliar legal system and often are reluctant to press charges against someone they once were fond of.

She said police, prosecutors, judges and local women’s shelters need to work together to identify stalkers and then punish or treat them. She said the Paulding system “did well” in sentencing Ray to a year for harassing Call. “But he should not have been out in three months,” Bukant said.

After his release in July, Ray seemed more despondent, Call said.

On Aug. 5 he sent Call an e-mail: “Do you know how big a hole a .45 leaves in the head?” Ray wrote. “I’m fixin’ 2 find out.”

Two days later, he did.

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