



Under Siege: Stalking Victims Speak Out

Nancy Morgan and Donna Hurst Bare Deepest Secrets in Hopes of Informing Others

By Joy Victory

June 20, 2006 — As her marriage started to fall apart, Donna Hurst just wanted a divorce and a clean break.

Her husband wouldn't stand for it, though, and when Hurst tried to move herself and her young children away from him, he began stalking her, often with violent results.

"He'd find me, gag me, and sometimes rape me as punishment for trying to leave him," said Hurst of Arizona. "I moved from place to place — just leaving everything behind. He'd always break in. He'd tell me, 'Nobody cares. Nobody's paying attention.'"

He was often right — police would usually let him go. Finally, after three years, he ended up in jail serving a lengthy sentence, although even in lockup, he sent more than 300 letters to her house, she said.

As savage as it may seem, Hurst's story is just one of millions out there, and as new statistics show, the problem is not going away.

About one out of every 22 people in a nationwide survey of nearly 10,000 U.S. residents reported that they had been stalked, according to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, overseen by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Put another way, it means that about 4.5 percent of the entire U.S. population has experienced stalking — a finding similar to another large survey taken about 10 years ago.

The problem clearly isn't going away, and in many instances, lax state laws or uninformed police officers exacerbate the problem.

However, victims' advocates say, there has been a slow but steady change in the public mindset about the seriousness of stalking.

Most people now understand how obsessively possessive or disruptive behavior is often a red flag that a person can turn deadly. As many as three-fourths of female murder victims were being stalked by the perpetrator before they were killed, experts say.

That means more people are reporting stalking, and more police are listening.

“As we educate more people, particularly law enforcement, we’ll see reported incidents increase,” said Mary Lou Leary, executive director of the National Center for Victims of Crime.

Part of this is attributed to the victims who, once nearly driven into isolation by their stalkers, find empowerment by sharing their stories with anyone who will listen, especially police officers.

This is exactly what National Center for Victims of Crime spends a lot of time doing — encouraging women like Hurst to tell their personal and gripping accounts.

A Harrowing 911 Call

Like Hurst, Florida grandmother Nancy Morgan has a chilling tale of stalking. She too tells her story on behalf of the National Center for Victims of Crime, in hopes that it will raise awareness about the seriousness of the crime.

In the months preceding March 2005, her daughter, Julie Hernlen, frequently complained to her about an old friend who wouldn’t leave her and her husband, Aeneas, alone.

The stalker, David Edward Johnson, had become irrationally — and incorrectly — convinced that the couple had ratted out his drug business to the police. Because of that, he relentlessly harassed them.

“He had tried to run them off the road, and threatened them in a parking lot. He told them he had a 9-mm [gun] in the car, that he was going to shoot them,” Morgan said.

He also repeatedly called their home and hung up, and Morgan suspects he may also have filed an anonymous complaint to child protective services, accusing the Hernlens of being bad parents.

Still, no one was prepared for how the story would end in March. Johnson broke into their home at night, shooting and killing the couple. The only person left alive was their 5-year-old daughter who called 911 to report the crime.

The call’s transcript was released to The Associated Press days after the couple’s deaths. During the call, their daughter, Tia, grapples with the sight of her parents covered in blood.

OPERATOR: Hello. Is everything OK?

CHILD: My mommy and daddy ...

OPERATOR: Uh-huh.

CHILD: I think there is a bullet on the floor.

OPERATOR: And the what?

CHILD: And there is blood, coming out of my dad’s mouth and he fell off the bed.

OPERATOR: He did? Where's mommy at?

CHILD: She is, I don't know. I think they're dead.

Johnson went home and shot himself to death, and it was revealed that Julie had contacted law enforcement several times trying to get protection from Johnson — to no avail.

Morgan points out stalking is not only a mere annoyance to the victim, it often leads to brutal acts of crime.

The aftereffects linger for years — she is now raising a 6-year-old child who will grow up knowing her parents were brutally murdered.

Working for Change

Her story is precisely what Leary, of the National Center for Victims of Crime, is working to prevent from happening. She's pushing for more law enforcement officials to receive stalking "threat assessment" training.

Often, taken as individual acts, stalking can seem harmless.

"If someone leaves roses on someone's doorstep, people think that's sweet," Leary said. "But if that's a signal from the stalker, who would always give roses after some horrible thing has happened, it was his message: 'I know where you are. You can't hide from me.'"

So police are taught to take detailed case histories — and to help victims get in touch with crime advocates, who can provide services like finding new shelters. They also attend sessions where they listen to victims speak about their experiences.

"Like most crimes, and most public health issues, you have to have a coordinated response. It can't be just the victim trying to prevent this thing," she said.

"It's a pretty difficult crime to prevent, so the most important tool for prevention is awareness, training and education."

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