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Victims gain protection, State strengthens stalker laws

By Jim Collar, The Northwestern

Robin Banker-Keepers last winter finally found a way to break free from an abusive relationship.

But breaking up with her boyfriend didn't bring an end to her two-year turmoil.

Ex-boyfriend Ronnie Thums often told her not to leave him.

When she did, he continued his attempts to see her.

Thums regularly showed up at the restaurant where she worked. He sat at the bar with drink in hand, and verbally degraded her to any customer within earshot.

Harassment turned to violence on Feb. 20.

Banker-Keepers showed up for work, and Thums followed in just a few minutes behind. Employees made him leave as they did so many times before. This time was different.

Banker-Keepers eventually left work, slid into her car seat and wondered whether a spring had poked through the cushion.

She reached down and became frantic. Thums had positioned a knife in the driver's side seat with its blade pointing up. She avoided injury, but feared the worst was to come.

"I told them to call the police, because he was out to kill me now," Banker-Keepers said last week.

While Banker-Keepers endured months of sleepless nights and constant anxiety, advocates say she and many others finally can take some degree of solace: The legal system finally recognizes stalking as a serious crime and has made justice much easier to come by.

Experts in violence against women are applauding Wisconsin's efforts in the last two years to strengthen its statutes on stalking.

Changes to Wisconsin law provide greater sentences for offenders and easier opportunities for state prosecutors to prove guilt.

Wisconsin in 2002 upgraded stalking from a misdemeanor charge to a felony.

This spring, Gov. Jim Doyle signed a bill into law reducing the number of criminal elements a prosecutor must prove to achieve conviction in a stalking case.

The legal process worked for Banker-Keepers. Thums remains in the Winnebago County Jail after pleading no contest last month to charges including stalking.

Maggie Thurs with the Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault said Wisconsin made an important distinction when changing how stalking is treated in the court system.

Prior to changes, stalking only could be proved by showing the perpetrator meant to instill terror and fear in the victim.

Stalking laws now allow for conviction based on how the victim felt, whether or not fear was the intention of the perpetrator.

Strengthening the laws also recognized that stalking isn't an isolated behavior.

Federal statistics show that 75 percent of women murdered by intimate partners experienced stalking behavior prior to their deaths. Among all stalking victims pursued by current or former partners, 81 percent also were victims of physical assault.

"It's part of the scheme to get someone vulnerable," Thurs said. "Stalking can provide a prediction of future violence and further abuse."

Stalking only has been considered a crime in Wisconsin since 1993, and it remains a challenge to bring stalkers to justice, prosecutors said.

Doran Viste, assistant district attorney in Winnebago County, has handled all stalking cases locally since the crime was upgraded to the felony level. Lawmakers have taken notice of the serious nature of the crime, though it is still a difficult crime to pursue due to a number of factors, he said.

Often, victims themselves don't view certain behaviors as stalking until a violent or disturbing action takes place. It often takes weeks to months of investigating past events to have enough evidence to support a charge.

And because stalking involves more than one specific incident, police aren't often prepared to see the larger picture when they're preparing official reports, Viste said.

Viste believes more education is needed among the public to make people understand the crime and encourage victims to report.

“It’s been an on-going process in dealing with domestic violence in general,” Viste said. “It’s been a slow movement, but I think we’ve progressed.”

That progression still is taking place.

Stalking isn’t a frequent charge in Winnebago County.

Viste said he’s tried six or seven cases during his tenure at the Winnebago County District Attorney’s Office.

Three of those cases still are pending in the local courts.

Jeffrey Warbelton of Neenah is jailed awaiting trial on a number of criminal charges including stalking.

The criminal complaint states that Warbelton called a woman’s telephone up to 60 times per day, showed up at her home and several times used his vehicle to block her from leaving. On one occasion, Warbelton followed the woman’s vehicle and struck her at a stoplight, according to the complaint.

William Wegener was charged in Winnebago County in August with stalking and 49 counts of violating a restraining order. The woman who reported Wegener’s behavior gave police investigators several compact discs of telephone messages, the complaint states. Wegener’s case has been put on hiatus until he’s ruled competent to proceed.

Thums will be sentenced for stalking, reckless endangerment and fleeing police on Dec. 16.

Banker-Keepers plans to watch from the courtroom gallery.

She hopes it’ll provide some light after a long, difficult year.

Police sought to interview Thums on the night of the knife incident. Instead of talking, he led officers on a chase and damaged several squad cars in the process, according to his criminal complaint. He was found, jailed and charged. The stalking charge only was added to his caseload after Thums posted a \$5,000 cash bond and gained release from jail.

Within 36 hours of his release, Banker-Keepers peered out the window of a local restaurant and noticed Thums peering in.

She expected she’d see him at some point.

Her family was terrified after learning that Thums was free.

“My daughter locked all the windows, and locked the doors, then she went to the bathroom and got sick,” Banker-Keepers said. “She was scared to death.”

Today, her fear finally is subsiding. Banker-Keepers is working on a book about her experiences. Sitting down and writing has been like therapy, she said.

She also hopes to speak out and put a face on the crime. She supports education for children and teens on the topic of relationships.

While sexual education is important, teens also need to learn the other dynamics of romantic relationships from the role of communication to that of stopping violence, she said.

Banker-Keepers looks to Thums' December sentencing as her opportunity to finally put the situation behind her.

Banker-Keepers said she still has nightmares from time to time, but a certain sense of comfort has returned.

"I can breathe a little easier," she said. "He can't come after me or my family and I know that there isn't another woman that he can victimize."

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