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Wrestling Murder Highlights Violence-Suicide Link

By Marie Tessier, WeNews Correspondent

The murder-suicide of a wrestling star, his wife and son outside Atlanta is a case study in domestic homicide and the critical role of violence prevention in stemming murder-suicides. Seventh in our “Dangerous Trends, Innovative Responses” series.

(WOMENSENEWS) – Christopher Benoit was a huge, muscled, friendly and generous man among colleagues and fans in the garish world of professional wrestling. His fame and personality added to the shock this summer when Benoit was found dead with his wife and 7-year-old son in their home in an exclusive neighborhood outside Atlanta.

When the bodies were found, World Wrestling Entertainment in Stamford, Conn., canceled its regular programming to air a three-hour tribute to the dead man.

But the WWE's approach – and public opinion – soon would make a U-turn.

Following the initial investigation Georgia authorities said it appeared that the wrestling personality known as “The Canadian Crippler” had strangled his 43-year-old wife, Nancy, with a cord on a Friday; used a choke hold to kill his son, Daniel, on Saturday; then placed Bibles next to the bodies and hanged himself on exercise equipment on Sunday. Christopher Benoit's two children from a previous marriage live elsewhere, and they survive.

Within days, the entertainment company's chair went on NBC's “Today” show to express horror at the crime and called Benoit a “monster.” The company also pulled a tribute to Benoit off its Web site.

In the weeks since the crime, investigators, law enforcement authorities and advocates for battered women have struggled to clarify to the public that the deaths of Nancy Benoit, herself once a professional wrestler, and Daniel Benoit were just one prominent but representative case of domestic violence homicide. Despite this, most news reports dwell on a steroid connection.

“Domestic violence homicides are the most predictable and preventable of all homicides,” says Sue Else, president of the Washington-based National Network to End Domestic Violence. “These aren’t nice guys who suddenly snap; nice guys don’t abuse or kill their wives and children.”

Little has been said in news reports about the characteristics of domestic homicide, which often involve a man’s suicide as well. Suicidal threats are considered a key indicator of lethal violence at law enforcement and domestic violence agencies around the world. Among men who kill their current or former female partners in the United States, 3 in 10 also commit suicide, according to the National Institute for Injury Prevention and Control, a division of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta.

Nationwide, about 1,200 women are killed each year by current or former intimate partners, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. The Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence says that last year 70 people, mostly women and children, were victims of a domestic homicide in that state.

“The Benoit family tragedy represents what happens when women are assaulted or killed by their partners,” says Regine Cordon, executive director of the Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence in Decatur, Ga. “The focus attempts to blame the cause for violence on drugs, steroids, parenting disagreements or stress rather than the power and control dynamics within a relationship.”



Regine Cordon

Credit: Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Inquiry Spotlight on Steroids

Indeed, news media and two congressional inquiries have put the spotlight on performance-enhancing drugs that were found in the home, and their role in professional wrestling. Benoit’s personal physician has been indicted in federal court on charges related to anabolic steroids that were found during the homicide investigation. World Wrestling Entertainment updated its health policy and named 11 performers suspended last month after the company was notified about wrestlers’ involvement in an unrelated criminal investigation.

On Sept. 5, a Massachusetts sports institute said their study of the wrestler’s brain tissue indicated that a history of concussions in the ring may have contributed to Benoit’s lethal violence. World Wrestling Entertainment CEO Linda McMahon stressed family tension surrounding the child’s possible medical condition in a television appearance shortly after the slayings. Financial news reported sharp drops in the wrestling company’s stock following the homicide and steroid investigations, and the price has not fully recovered.

The Benoit family prompts comparisons to the typical profile of a domestic slaying. The vast majority of perpetrators in data drawn from seven states were white men. The vast majority of slayings took place at home; the most prominent motive was a man’s drive to possess or control a partner, researchers found. White women between the ages of 35 and 44 were the chief targets; Nancy Benoit was 43. Homicide is the No. 2 cause of death for women ages 20 to 24, the No. 3

cause for women ages 15 to 19 and a leading cause of death for all women between the ages of 15 and 44, with Native and African American women the most vulnerable.

Pattern of Abuse and Reconciliation

The coercive family dynamics that are present in abusive homes did appear to have some history with the Benoit family, court records show. In 2003, Nancy Benoit filed for divorce and obtained a protective order against her husband, authorities said. In the protective order petition, she said Christopher Benoit, 5 feet 10 inches tall and 230 muscle-bound pounds, “lost his temper and threatened to strike” her and “cause extensive damage to the house,” according to news reports. Three months later, the couple reconciled.

The autopsy and criminal investigation into the deaths have not revealed a history of violence beyond what was in civil court files, a spokesperson for the Fayette County district attorney told Women’s eNews. She was quick to add that family violence is often well hidden and the investigation has not yet been closed.

Researchers at the CDC wrote in December 2006 that new methods of monitoring murder-suicides serve to “underscore” the importance of violence prevention programs and policies in stemming domestic homicides. The data illustrate the need for accessible shelters, mental health and substance abuse treatment, and the enforcement of existing domestic violence laws, they wrote in Injury Prevention Online, an online public health journal from the CDC.

Meanwhile advocates for battered women continue to explain that domestic violence perpetrators – including murderers – often have charming public faces but dark sides at home.

“The fact that a batterer is seen in the community as a wonderful man is not surprising, because their need for power and control is focused only in the home,” says Cordon, of the Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence. “When it comes to a homicide, it’s a way of regaining control; a final stand in that sense.”

In matters of life and death, says Else of the National Network to End Domestic Violence, “Why focus on excuses?”

Marie Tessier writes frequently about women, criminal justice and legal affairs.

For more information:

Women’s eNews series, Dangerous Trends, Innovative Responses:
<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2906/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Intimate Partner Violence Prevention:
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/ipvprevention.htm>

Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence: <http://www.gcadv.org/>

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