



J.J. Smith was 10 years old when his father killed his mother before killing himself. Throughout his life, Smith has undergone counseling several times to help him deal with almost overwhelming emotions. (Nathan Hunsinger/The Dallas Morning News)



DEADLY AFFECTION: PART 4

Making sense of the unfathomable

Experts say children who lose a parent at the hands of a loved one struggle with anger, fear and loss

By Diane Jennings | Staff Writer

Every day a half dozen Americans die at the hands of someone they love. Most of them are women. Many are parents.

Kids who have lost a parent to an intimate partner know a peculiar kind of agony. They are hobbled by grief for the victim, bewildered by the killer and terrified of what it means. Where will they live? Who will love them? Are they destined to repeat the pattern and become an abuser or a victim? How do they relate to the killer?

“You’re grieving the loss of the victim, you’re grieving the loss of the person who did it. . .that the world isn’t just, it’s not fair, that bad things can happen to people who don’t deserve it,” said Nicole Holmes, a psychologist with Friends of the Family, which provides services to victims of domestic violence in Denton. “It shakes your whole world view.”

Overcoming such a tragedy at an early age is possible but painful. The bloodstains fade, but the horror lingers. So do the questions. The following stories of three families at different stages of recovery offer a glimpse of the toll taken by domestic violence fatalities.

“Why did they die?”

LITTLE ELM—A little over a year has passed since “the incident.” That’s what David Chomitzky calls his daughter’s murder.

He doesn’t call it an accident because he won’t lie to his grandson. But he hasn’t told the boy his father shot his mother before committing suicide, because that’s impossible for a 7-year-old to fathom.

It’s not much easier for a 63-year-old man. “They say time heals all wounds,” Chomitzky said recently, “But right now it’s still bleeding. It’s hard to get up in the morning.”

He worries about raising his orphaned grandson. And he is haunted by the fact that even though he was just a few feet away when his daughter was killed, “I wasn’t there to stop it.”

His daughter, Bethany, and her husband, Rob, had moved to Texas from Pennsylvania in the summer of 2012 for a fresh start. Bethany asked her father and his longtime girlfriend, Ellen, to join them in Texas. Since Chomitzky was close to his grandson, they agreed.

The boy is being called “John” in this story because Chomitzky asked that he not be identified.

When Rob and Bethany couldn’t work out their differences, the couple separated. Bethany, 33, and John lived with Chomitzky and Ellen.

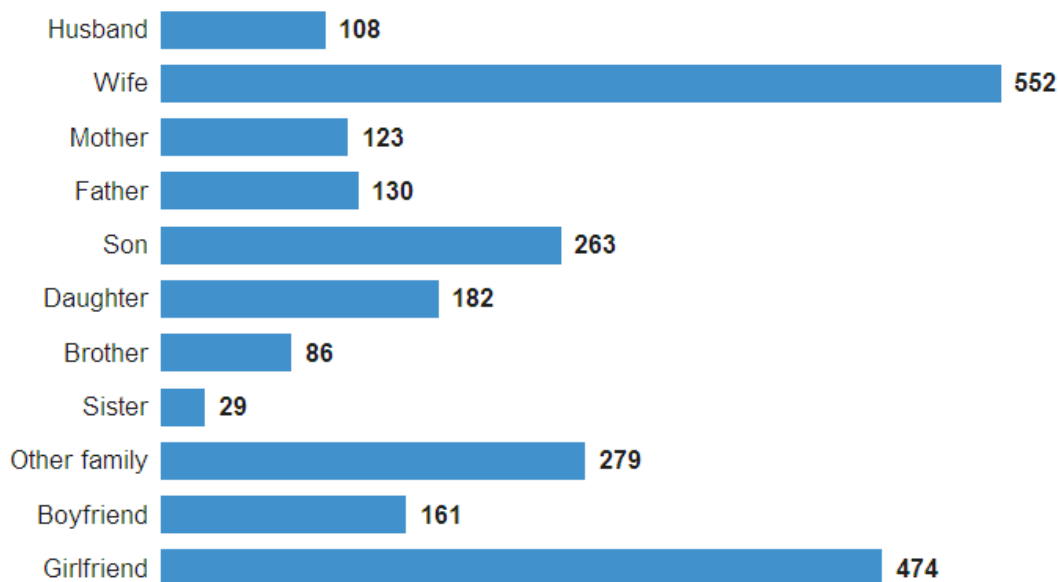
Chomitzky knew the separation had been tense, but didn’t learn until later that Bethany was “deathly afraid” of her estranged husband. After Rob moved out, she wanted the locks changed so he couldn’t drop by unexpectedly. She switched phone companies to avoid Rob’s constant calls, but Chomitzky didn’t know Rob waited for her after work so often that she transferred to another location. Bethany sought a protective order but didn’t tell Chomitzky why.

“I wish she would have told me more,” he said. “I might have been more cautious.”

John was in the backyard playing with a friend when his father came to get his mother’s signature on some legal papers that day.

Relationship of victims to murderers

Of the more than 12,000 U.S. homicides reported to the FBI in 2011, here’s a look at the family or romantic ties of the victims to their killers in cases where that information was available.:



SOURCE: FBI Uniform Crime Reports, 2011

Chomitzky was brooding chicken in the kitchen for dinner when Rob shot Bethany behind the ear, then shot himself.

Blood and brains spattered all over the dining room. As Chomitzky wailed, “No, no, no,” and punched a hole in the wall in anger, the boys ran into the house.

John “saw his mom,” Chomitzky said. “He didn’t see his dad right away.”

Chomitzky sent the boys upstairs.

That night, John stayed with a friend; the next day he went to daycare. “We tried to keep his routine as normal as possible,” Chomitzky said.

Maintaining normalcy is hard. Even though the crime scene was cleaned by a forensic service, John “used to go to the chair where his mom died when he was upset,” Chomitzky said.

Chomitzky says sometimes he still detects a slaughterhouse smell when he passes the room. He would like to move but doesn't know if it's a good idea to take John away from his friends and school.

The past year has drawn the two of them closer, but he's still not sure how his grandson feels. "Outwardly he seems happy," he said. "But most people who see me think I seem happy too. I can't see inside his head."

"They say time heals all wounds. But right now it's still bleeding. It's hard to get up in the morning."

—David Chomitzky on the murder of his daughter Bethany by her husband.

Counseling helps, but Chomitzky struggles with his own grief while trying to be there for John.

He worries because sometimes "I see his dad's behavior in him." John likes to hit him, he said, so his counselor suggested he buy a punching bag.

Not long ago John had been playing "cops and robbers" with other little boys, when he ran to his grandfather and "shot" him in the forehead with his thumb and forefinger.

Two years ago that wouldn't have bothered Chomitzky, who is a gun enthusiast. This time it "really freaked me out," he said. "He has no idea the connection that made for me."

John talks about his mom, Chomitzky said, but rarely mentions his father. Chomitzky suspects John does that because Chomitzky initially responded to such comments with silence.

But counselors told him that "children tend to identify with their parents, so 'if Daddy's bad, that means I'm bad,'" Chomitzky said. So he tries to say something good about Rob when pressed.

"It's really hard," Chomitzky acknowledged. "But I feel I have to."

Chomitzky wonders when and what to tell John about how his parents died.

Not long ago the boy asked, "Why did they die just filling our papers?"

"We will never ever know the real, true reason," Chomitzky replied. "All we know is it's tragic."



Darlene Greene-Barree and her niece Lotteice Greene work to help victims of domestic violence through the Ina Mae Greene Foundation For My Sisters. It's named for Lotteice's mother and Darlene's sister, who was slain by her boyfriend. In the picture they're holding are Ina (left), an aunt, Minnie Lee Curtis and cousin Maggie Curtis, all murdered by abusive partners. (Michael Ainsworth/The Dallas Morning News)

“Mama get up”

Lotteice Greene and her aunt Darlene Greene-Barree share a family legacy—one they refuse to pass on.

Twenty-four years ago Greene's mother, Ina, was killed by her longtime boyfriend in Chicago. Two other relatives also died at the hands of men they were dating, Greene-Barree said.

When she was growing up, aunts and grandmothers often said "the women in our family were cursed, that we would never be in healthy relationships with men," Greene-Barree remembered.

"It was our legacy."

Greene-Barree, 58 and Greene, 32, are trying to break that cycle by raising domestic violence awareness.

But Greene-Barree admits that's a tall order in a clan accustomed to family violence.

At family gatherings for instance, "Uncle Jake and Aunt Sue would get into a fight, I mean physical. She's throwing cans at him and family is holding Sue and they're holding Jake."

"Two weeks later they're holding hands—they're in love again."

That was how relationships worked, Greene-Barree learned. "We didn't recognize it as domestic violence."

In retrospect, it seems "crazy," she said. "We have to change all that thinking."

Relatives knew the couple's relationship was violent, because every Friday Ina would call her siblings, seeking refuge for her and her four children. "We would take turns," Greene-Barree said. "It was like a ritual: 'Ok, whose turn is it to go pick up Ina and the kids?'"

And every week the boyfriend called to apologize, and Ina and the kids went home.

Family members offered Ina refuge but didn't press the issue. "We had no idea it would end with him killing her," Greene-Barree said.

Everyone assumed that "when it gets really bad, she'll leave."

So she was thrilled when Ina told her she was planning to do just that.

"In our mind that was the answer," said Greene-Barree, who didn't know about the need to have a plan to leave the abuser safely. "She's leaving, the abuse will stop, it's over. We didn't know any better."

Several days before her planned departure, Ina told her four children to pack their clothes in plastic bags and hide them in a closet.

But her boyfriend found the bags and confronted her the night she planned to leave.

Greene woke up when her mother's body slammed into the wall, then she watched as he "popped her upside the head," with a bottle.

While Greene ran downstairs for help she heard gunshots.

When she returned, Greene skirted the blood pooling on the floor to hold her mother's hand. "Mama, get up," the 8-year-old pleaded. Even when the body was loaded on a gurney, Greene didn't realize her mother was dead. "We'd seen her take a blow," she said. "So it was, you know, everything's all right."

Her mother's boyfriend, who said the gun discharged accidentally, was eventually convicted of second-degree murder. Green and her siblings were sent to live with different relatives.

Without her mother, Greene felt adrift. She refused to open up to counselors because she feared saying the wrong thing. "You learn how to tell them what they want to hear," she said.

At home, relatives rarely talked about her mom's death. "My family's mentality to us was, 'This happened, you guys aren't the first kids that it happened to, so you gotta suck it up and keep moving.'"

She eventually concluded she'd probably die young but didn't care. When she began skipping school and staying away for days at a time at age 15, relatives sent her to her aunt in Texas. "They knew she would get tough love from me," Greene-Barree said.

She did, and Greene eventually graduated from college. She obtained a teaching certificate and works as a freelance graphic designer. Greene also studied for the ministry because her faith "powered me through" the tough times. Counseling as an adult also helped, she said.

"In our mind that was the answer. She's leaving, the abuse will stop, it's over. We didn't know any better."

— Darlene Greene-Barree on her sister Ina's attempt to escape an abusive relationship.

But the void left by her mother's murder is never filled. "My aunt was an awesome mom, as much as she could be," Greene said softly. "I know she loves me—but she'll never be my mom."

Six years ago Greene-Barree started the Dallas-based Ina Mae Greene Foundation For My Sisters. The best way to honor Ina, Greene-Barree decided, was to help others avoid her fate.

The work has given Greene a badly needed sense of purpose.

"When you have purpose there's no reason to die," she said.



J.J. Smith started the Lillian Smith Family Violence Foundation in honor of his mother, who was killed by his father when Smith was 10 years old. (Nathan Hunsinger/The Dallas Morning News)

“[Leaving his son orphaned] was just collateral damage.
I know my dad didn’t hate me.”

J.J. Smith on his father, who murdered his mother then committed suicide.

“I know my dad didn’t hate me”

ROCKWALL—J.J. Smith smiles, remembering his early childhood—attending horse shows with his mom, playing ball with his dad, turning somersaults on the couch cushions.

“Life was good,” the 65-year-old publisher of the Rockwall News said.

But when his father began drinking heavily, the memories turn terrifying—hiding while his dad beat his mother, fleeing from city to city, and finally of his father shooting his mother and then committing suicide.

Smith was 10 when he was orphaned. More than a half century later, he still struggles to understand the violence.

When Smith was growing up in the 1950s, domestic violence was not widely discussed. Housewives, who usually had little or no outside income, were often advised to avoid angering abusive husbands.

When John Joseph Smith Sr. became violent, Lillian Smith put up with it initially, Smith said. But after a couple of years, “she packed things up and took me and called a cab.”

Smith was sad to leave, “but I didn’t want my mom to be hurt anymore. And I didn’t want to be afraid any more.”

Lillian and her son moved from Los Angeles to Florida. She went to work at a bank and filed for divorce.

But a couple of years later, Smith Sr. tracked his ex-wife and son down.

“I don’t remember how he found her,” Smith said. “I just remember [her] saying, ‘Your dad’s here, and we’re going to go.’”

This time Smith and his mother moved to Denver, where they lived with an adult daughter from Lillian’s first marriage.

When his father found them again, he threatened to throw acid on his ex-wife or “dig a grave and throw her in and bury her alive,” Smith said.

Instead of running again, Lillian persuaded authorities to commit her ex-husband to a mental institution.

Though they were divorced, “I know she still cared for him,” Smith said. “She wished he could get help.”

But after a short time, relatives arranged his release to their custody out of state. Lillian was not notified.

In August 1958, Smith’s father flew to Denver, bought a gun, and broke into the apartment.

Shattering glass awakened Smith.

When he looked up from the living room couch, he saw his father armed with a rifle. He rushed him and “tried to take the gun away,” he said. “But he pushed me down.”

Smith’s sister raced out the back door to get help. His mother ran to the front door to escape.

Twice, his father ordered Lillian to sit down. She refused. “And then he fired three times,” Smith recalled.

Smith Sr. glanced at his son, with “a very, very sad look in his eyes,” Smith said. He put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger.

Smith was a stoic little boy until the funeral. Then he cried profusely. The traumatic experience “was just way beyond my ability to cope,” he said.

On the way to the cemetery, “I kept thinking, ‘Mom, wake up, wake up. They’re going to bury you and put you in the ground. You gotta wake up.’”

Smith moved to a farm with another sister and her husband. The couple, then childless, knew they had a “messed-up 10-year-old,” he said, so they quickly found a counselor.

Smith felt confused and afraid, but after a year, the counselor told him he was going to be all right. “That was very significant,” Smith said, “because I knew he was the professional.”

Smith wasn’t so sure. He retreated into himself for a year or two before beginning to “blend in” to his new home.

Around age 16, Smith began to wonder whether he would see his parents again. He explored various faiths, finally converting to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which he said helped his recovery.

Before Smith married, he told his fiancée about his parents’ violent deaths but didn’t dwell on it. He felt he’d put the tragedy behind him.

But as the responsibilities of work, marriage and fatherhood—eight children in 12 years—piled up, Smith grew increasingly angry.

Once, he was so enraged, he threw a doll against the wall. Another time, “I really spanked one of my daughters excessively.”

He sought counseling several times.

One psychologist said his anger stemmed from his inability to control the chaos around him, the same way he’d been helpless as a child. Another said he suffered from residual fear. He was also advised to formally say goodbye to his parents.

All the counseling helped him deal with almost overwhelming emotions, Smith said.

Today his rage had faded and “I’m very much at peace.”

He forgave his father a long time ago, he said, which was easier when he learned Smith Sr. probably suffered from post traumatic stress from his World War II service.

Leaving his son orphaned “was just collateral damage,” Smith said. “I know my dad didn’t hate me.”

To honor his mother, Smith started the Lillian Smith Family Violence Foundation and a political action committee dedicated to domestic violence issues.

“People don’t think it’s a problem until all of a sudden it affects them,” he said.

“It’s our responsibility to break the cycle.”

How to help a child after a domestic violence homicide

- Place the child with other family members in a stable home. Shuttling a child between relatives or foster care can be traumatic.
- One steady person, not necessarily the caregiver, who stays in touch with the child on a regular basis provides a much-needed anchor.
- If a child wants to talk about what happened to their parent, let him do so. Silence is more traumatic.
- Don't make negative remarks about the killer. He or she is related to the child in some way, and the child may feel the comments pertain to him as well.
- Find a counselor for the child and the caregiver who is trained to deal with trauma cases.
- Counseling as an adult is helpful.

Source: Dallas Morning News research