

"Everything Will Be OK"

The tragic murder of a Lapeer family law attorney

By Rose Mary Reiz

In the end, family law attorney Lara Herrington-Stutz helped everyone but herself.

"At her funeral, women came up to me saying, 'It was Lara who helped get me out of an abusive marriage,'" said Lara's mother, Mary Jane Herrington, of Mount Clemens. "They said, 'That could have been me if she hadn't gotten me out.'"

Lara, past president of the Lapeer County Bar Association, was shot to death December 6, 2011, by her husband, Marcel, in front of the couple's three children. She was 43.

Her death stunned the rural community where she raised her children, taught Sunday school, and practiced law for 15 years. She had earned her law degree from Wayne State University and had been a judge advocate general officer in the U.S. Air Force.

Lara's death was as dramatic as it was tragic. It was a quiet winter evening when she arrived home from work to Marcel and the couple's children—Logen, 10; Larissa, 8; and Natalia, 5. Marcel had apparently been drinking, and the couple got into an argument that quickly escalated. Lara headed upstairs to pack and take the children, possibly to her parents' home or a motel. Marcel grabbed a knife and followed her.

As the two struggled over the knife, quick-thinking Logen called 911 from a cell phone. Following the dispatcher's instructions, he urged his mom and two young sisters to follow him into the bathroom, locking the door behind them.

Lara had managed to wrest the knife from Marcel, and had a laceration on her hand to show for it. Police were outside the home, the dispatcher reported. Marcel, armed with his hunting rifle, began shooting through the bathroom door.

Lara was hit twice. Logen, still in contact with the dispatcher, was struck by a



Lara Herrington-Stutz

stray bullet as he huddled with his sisters in the bathtub.

Even after Lara was shot, she was more concerned with her son's wound than her own, her mother said.

"You can hear her on the 911 tape giving directions to the girls to wrap Logen's leg. She also begged Marcel, 'Don't kill me.' But he blew the door away and got through."

After murdering Lara, Marcel killed himself. Logen's wound was not life-threatening.

News of the murder-suicide spread quickly. Details of the couple's troubled marriage were slower to surface.

"We had no idea anything was wrong," said Gary Howell, one of Lara's partners at Lapeer's Taylor Butterfield law firm. "She was such a sweet human being, always upbeat, always cheery. She was also very, very competent, and the hardest working member of the firm."

Lara, like many domestic abuse victims, had learned to put up a good front. She was optimistic and energetic by nature, and had over the years convinced herself that she could deal with her husband's increasingly erratic behavior, her parents said.

"We were worried for her," Lara's mother said, "but she'd always say, 'Oh, Mom, Marcel wouldn't hurt us. Everything will be OK.' That's what she always said: 'Everything will be OK.'"

But it wasn't. To outsiders, Marcel may have seemed a devoted husband and father who was content to play the role of house-husband while Lara pursued her career. But for years, his wife and children had borne the brunt of his bizarre behavior.

At times contrite and loving, Marcel was also moody, angry, and controlling. Especially when he drank, he was verbally abusive, Lara's parents said. In one incident, Marcel had wrestled Lara to the floor to get a phone from her. The police were called,

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and Marcel was briefly jailed. He attended anger management sessions. Lara assured her parents that he would never really hurt her.

In fact, Lara considered Marcel a kind of victim. She suspected that his angry fits, in which he ranted and babbled nonsensically, were the result of neurological problems, perhaps caused by a head injury he had suffered as a young man. She fought for him—and with him, her parents said—to get him the help he needed. But Marcel was resistant, and a satisfactory diagnosis eluded them.

Still, Lara was determined to find a solution that would keep her family intact.

“She always wanted them to stay together for the sake of the kids,” said her father, David Herrington. “She’d say, ‘I spend 24/7 in family law. I see how kids suffer through divorce.’”

But Marcel was becoming increasingly verbally abusive to the children, who were afraid to be alone with him. Lara was finally planning to leave, her parents said.

“She even had taken out divorce papers earlier that year, but hadn’t served them,” her dad said. “Instead, she was trying to gradually work her way out of the marriage.”

On the night of her death, Lara perhaps could no longer hide her plans, nor her disappointment and disgust with Marcel.

Domestic abuse experts know that victims are in the most danger when attempting to leave their abusers. Victims are often counseled to plan their escapes carefully and secretly.

“It can be the most dangerous time because the abuser is losing control, and that’s what this is all about,” said Diane M. Baur, director of Support Services for Turning Point, a Macomb County program that provides shelter and services to domestic abuse survivors.

“But each situation is different,” Baur added. “Yes, there are more subtle ways to leave than what it sounds like Lara was doing, but sometimes things escalate to the point where, ‘We have to go, now.’”

Even if Lara and the children had safely escaped when Marcel wasn’t home, her career would have made it difficult to go into hiding for any length of time. There was no guarantee that Marcel wouldn’t have appeared at her parents’ home or at her office, scenarios that could have resulted in even more carnage.

Besides, there are indications that even at the end Lara never felt she was in real peril.

“On the 911 tape, you can hear the amazement in her voice when she says, ‘He shot us,’” her mother said.

Like most abusers, Marcel had probably done an excellent job of convincing Lara he’d never harm her, Baur said.

“Someone who wants that control will use anything to manipulate the other person and keep them engaged. My guess would be that he often said things like, ‘I love you,’ ‘We have the kids to think about,’ and ‘I know I need help.’ These are powerful tools because they give a person hope that things will change.

“If she’d seen him remorseful in the past, it might have given her confidence that it wouldn’t escalate further.”

Lara had the financial resources and family support many domestic abuse victims lack, but she was just as susceptible to the mind games of her perpetrator. And she had the kind of personality that made her vulnerable to Marcel’s manipulations.

“People who want power and control seek out people they can exert their control over,” Baur said. “These usually end up being women who are the nicest and most caring. Those aren’t character flaws; they are wonderful qualities that are used against

them by perpetrators who are masters at hiding their own character.”

Lara’s compassion was no doubt exploited by Marcel. In addition, the very attributes that made her a good family law attorney may have been stumbling blocks in dealing with her own problems, law partner Howell said.

“Lara was uniquely good at what she did because she had so much empathy for her clients. She got very used to dealing with volatile situations and working through them. Maybe that gave her confidence that she could do the same thing at home.”

Lawyers are trained to see situations from many viewpoints and attempt to reach compromises, said Chris Campbell, a staff attorney at Legal Services of Northern Michigan.

“And I think, as lawyers, we’re a little less likely to admit defeat,” Campbell said.

As a female attorney who had worked hard to earn the respect of her predominantly male peers, Lara may have been especially loathe to admit she was a victim, said Jennifer Berry, also a Northern Michigan Legal Services attorney.

“I think we, as women, still live very much in the ‘old boys’ club,” Berry said. “We spend so much time proving ourselves capable, that to admit you’re going through something like this is almost counterintuitive. The question becomes, ‘How do I stick up for myself without sacrificing everything I’ve earned professionally?’”

It’s a valid question, Campbell agreed. While other attorneys would probably have responded with sympathy to Lara’s problems, would potential clients be less likely to hire a domestic relations attorney who was also an abuse victim?

“People have a lot invested in their public image,” Campbell said. The personal problems of a prominent professional “are more likely to end up in the newspaper, especially if the situation is slightly seedy or sordid,” he added.

Even if problems don’t become public, a step like requesting a personal protection order—an action Lara routinely took on behalf of clients—can feel like failure, Campbell said.

“Do you really want to admit to a judge that you’ve failed at something? It feels like

you're saying, 'I can't even keep my own marriage together.'"

Perpetrators are the only ones who should be held responsible for domestic abuse, but people still have a tendency to blame the victim, Baur said.

"The question is still, 'Why doesn't she leave?' instead of, 'Why doesn't he stop being abusive?'"

Shelters like the ones in which Baur works are among the few safe havens where victims can be sheltered and counseled without being judged. Personal protection orders, when enforced, are another valuable resource, although, as Campbell noted, "They don't stop bullets."

Stories like Lara's can have a powerful impact. She would no doubt be proud of her parents, who have become advocates for domestic violence victims. They support their local shelter and publicly share the story of a bright, lively daughter who was taken too soon.

"She was the kind of person anyone would be proud to have as a daughter," her dad said.

Lara's parents have strong faith. They receive comfort from the belief that Lara knows the children she loved so dearly are being raised, and are thriving, under her parents' care, and are growing up in the same home in which Lara and her brother were raised.

The children miss and talk about their mother, Lara's parents said. But they are also busy with school, sports, and extracurricular activities. They are in a safe, happy home.

Lara's dad recounted that shortly after her death one of her young daughters looked around her grandparents' home and said, "I like living here."

"I said to her, 'You do? Why?' and she said, 'Because nobody gets hurt.'" ■

Victims of domestic violence and sexual assault are urged to call a local shelter or the National Domestic Violence hotline at (800) 799-7233. Safety tips and resources are available at <http://www.nnedv.org>. WomensLaw.org provides legal information at <http://www.womenslaw.org>.

Rose Mary Reiz is an award-winning reporter, feature writer, and columnist who worked for The Flint Journal for 23 years.