

The most senseless murder strikes at home

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[The most senseless murder strikes at home](#) Marty Trillhaase The Lewiston Tribune | [3 comments](#)

Any time a homicide occurs in Idaho, chances are domestic violence is at its core.

Staffers at the Women's and Children's Alliance in Boise cross-tabulated murders with domestic violence reports during the past decade. It found 119 deaths - homicides, suicides and child abuse.

Of those, 104 involved violence in the home. Among the dozen cases so far this year, eight involved domestic violence. Add two more names to that list.

Before he took his own life at a Moscow motel Aug. 22, former University of Idaho assistant Professor Ernesto Bustamante fatally shot graduate student Katy Benoit outside her Moscow home. The two had been romantically involved, but Benoit broke it off after Bustamante threatened her with a gun on three occasions beginning in January and ending in May.

Such senselessness begs for a ray of reason. A glimmer that but for a missed opportunity here, a failure to take precautions there, this tragedy could have been prevented. Some, such as Rep. Marv Hagedorn, R-Meridian, reach for the ridiculous - he argued gun safety training would have helped. Others question whether the two institutions involved - the UI and law enforcement - could have done more.

From the time Benoit contacted the UI on June 10 with her concerns, the university appeared fully engaged. It investigated. It contacted police. It prodded Benoit to take precautions. It severed ties with Bustamante six weeks after Benoit made her complaint - virtually the speed of sound in a government bureaucracy.

Moscow police should have been brought in sooner and more aggressively. Focusing the investigation more firmly upon Bustamante - such as bringing him in for an interview and checking his background - might have yielded results. Nonetheless, would an irrational person respond to rational appeals? It suggests cops have more discretion than they otherwise might when no restraining order was sought or issued.

Given Bustamante's apparent mental illness - after the shooting, students noted his self-disclosed multiple personalities and that he referred to himself as the "psychopathic killer" and "the beast" - you have to wonder why he was teaching in any classroom. But mental illness in and of itself is no firing offense. To act otherwise invites discrimination and capriciousness. If the UI ignored real and compelling evidence that Bustamante was a threat to himself or others, let that be shown.

Left behind is only the frustratingly painful lessons of every domestic violence case:

- Recognize the cycle of violence. It begins with a controlling personality. The victim learns to walk on eggshells. Next comes an escalation into an emotional or physical outburst, followed by an act of contrition and promises to repent.
- Look for the clues. Dropped friendships and alienation. Bruises. Public acts of humiliation. Pressure to use alcohol or drugs. Spreading rumors. Harassing phone calls or texting. Frightening behavior.
- Understand it doesn't end here. Within a family, abusive behavior becomes the frame of reference for the children, who may succumb to it as adults.
- Find the best defense. Contact the law enforcement and domestic violence advocates. Resources - safe houses, financial help, telephone hotlines and security - are available. But for people whose self-esteem has been eroded by years of abuse, crossing that first hurdle may seem like a Catch-22.
- Know the most dangerous time. When an abuser is stripped of his control, he's prone to overreact. In those hours, a victim needs a secure sanctuary.

How do we prevent more Katy Benoit and the dozens of domestic violence victims Idaho has lost in the last decade?

Gun safety lessons won't solve it. Neither will satisfying political slogans.

Not until victims find empowerment will this ugly syndrome end. Not until this culture delivers a firm, resolute commitment toward preventing domestic violence will we be delivered from this scourge. - M.T.