

First Person: Lee was my neighbor & my first friend in Moscow is dead

Terri Harber, Moscow-Pullman Daily News

Editor's note: Terri Harber is a reporter at the Moscow-Pullman Daily News.

John Lee, who used to go by the name Kane Grzebielski, was my neighbor. He lived two doors down from me at an apartment building in Moscow owned and managed by David Trail, someone I considered more than just a landlord because he was genuinely kind, interested in others and not just "business friendly" or going through the motions of social contact, as most other people do.

Lee is accused of fatally shooting Trail, his adoptive mother, Terri Grzebielski, and Belinda Niebuhr, a local restaurant manager and family friend. A man in the office with Trail, Michael Chin, was shot and injured.

I watched in anger, sadness and disbelief as Trail was wheeled out of his office on a gurney. He was motionless and there appeared to be a bullet hole on his left side.

Saturday and Sunday nights were sleepless. Law enforcement was at the apartment for hours after the shooting as they were investigating what happened and putting together the case. One officer, then another, had the tedious but important duty of making sure no one entered Lee's front door until a search warrant was secured late Saturday or early Sunday.

Neighbors I know agree Lee suffers from some sort of serious mental illness. He never spoke and rarely made eye contact with others. A hooded jacket hid much of the rest of his face. The portion of it visible was usually expressionless, as if he was otherwise occupied.

He would look down as he passed one of us outside the building. Being an introvert myself, I didn't think much about the guy's behavior.

At least initially. He lived there for several months.

Early Saturday afternoon probably was the second time I'd ever seen him during daylight. He always moved quickly. I'd stop and move out of his way so he could dart past and make his usual wide swath around me. A couple of passbys along the narrow pathway that led to and from the stairway were uncomfortable moments of potential unwanted physical contact. I was the obstacle, and he was working his way over me. More often, if I was outside my front door and he needed to get by, he would simply pull his head back inside and shut the door.

I didn't see what he had been doing early Saturday afternoon, but I heard a lot of erratic slamming noises near where he parked his car and had a storage closet.

Much more slamming than normal, even for him. And I heard him make a couple of trips up and down the stairs. His fast foot-pounding was familiar because I'd heard it frequently around or after midnight.

I was putting some groceries inside my own storage closet Saturday afternoon before going into the laundry room to continue some chores. He didn't look at me, but I noticed he had a small, close-mouthed smile on his face. I found it unusual, but gave him a similar expression in return. He didn't appear to notice.

It was after 3 p.m. and other reporters were beginning to mill around the apartment building. So I went in the other direction and called Moscow Police Chief David Duke to ask if I could find out what had happened. I was worried about what had become of Trail and, at that point, the two other shooting victims.

There, seeing the face of Mrs. Trail and others related to the victims as they came to the police station, has added to my inability to sleep. I don't know if they already knew the fate of their loved ones as they walked through the front door of the police department with sad and anxious expressions to meet with authorities.

It wasn't until later that Duke explained to area media that there was a third shooting scene and another fatality, Lee's mother, for three total.

The most important reason why I'm not sleeping is that I feel guilty. I was only two floors above Trail and Chin when they were shot. I heard a handful of unusual noises but was more concerned with whatever it was I was doing than looking out the window.

A great deal of loud traffic goes by the corner of Third and Jefferson streets, where the apartment building is, during the day.

Chin reportedly had been going into shock as he managed to call 9-1-1 for help. How much time had gone by after Trail and Chin were shot before help finally arrived? If I hadn't been putting away groceries, wandering around my apartment searching for a box of tissues and, perhaps, had bothered to turn down a TV show I wasn't even watching, things might have been different. Maybe the odd sounds would have prompted me to go downstairs to help those men suffering two floors below me, if I had just been paying better attention.

At least I could have called 9-1-1 and authorities could have responded a bit more quickly, I keep imagining.

It was why I kept pestering law enforcement and volunteering information they probably already had. Eventually someone handed me a clipboard to make a report of what I'd heard. I didn't make note of Lee's smile in my report. But, in hindsight, his expression added to my unease.

That someone suspected of killing three people lived two doors down from me hasn't really sunk in yet. Except for asking one of the officers whether there was something in there that might

require us all to make a fast exit, all I continue thinking about were the people who died and their grieving families and friends.

Was Lee getting the mental health care he needed and, if not, would such treatment have prevented these shootings? If he had gotten decent treatment, could he have been as integral to making our community a better place to live as his victims?

And how could someone so troubled get possession of deadly weapons?

My feelings are self-indulgent because all I've lost is a friend, Trail, the first friend I made here in Moscow. There will be time for the wider societal questions that inevitably come with such violent events, because I'm not planning on getting much shut-eye anytime soon.

Terri Harber can be reached at (208) 883-4631, or by email to tharber@dnews.com.