

The Conversation: A woman is killed, a cause is born

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Have laws to protect the severely mentally ill compromised our safety? To comment, please use our comments section at the end of the story or go our facebook page at www.facebook.com/sacramentobee. One in an occasional series

Scott Thorpe turned his house into a fortress in preparation for the FBI assault that was a figment of his ever-more paranoid delusions.

He draped tarps over his windows so no one could spy on him, stowed guns in each room, kept gas masks and night-vision binoculars at the ready and hesitated to talk by phone for fear the FBI was listening.

Laura Wilcox, the 1999 valedictorian at Nevada Union High School, was home for winter break from Haverford College, where she was a sophomore and running for co-president of the student body.

She hoped to spend spring break in Paris and was earning extra money by filling in for a week as a receptionist at the Nevada County Department of Behavioral Health, where she had worked the summer before.

On Jan. 10, 2001, Thorpe arrived for an appointment at the county agency, which was housed in an old morgue and hospital on the outskirts of Nevada City, produced a 9 mm handgun and began firing.

By the time he finished, three people were dead and dozens of lives were changed forever.

Variations on that day have been repeated countless times since, at a strip mall in Tucson, an intersection in Chico, in front of a Fullerton bus depot, in the forest outside Fort Bragg, where a father's plea for help for his mentally ill son was not heeded.

The theme is common: severe mental illness, combined with laws that are written to protect civil liberties and ignore the reality that nobody chooses to be psychotic. Too often, those laws permit authorities and the rest of us to abdicate responsibility to help people who are incapable of helping themselves.

The department that purported to offer care to Thorpe was frayed and underfunded. The psychiatrist who treated him failed to respond to warnings. But the response in the aftermath of the killings was extraordinary.

Nick and Amanda Wilcox, Laura's parents, became a force for change. Because of their prodding, Nevada County leaders, mortified by multiple failures, transformed their mental health care system. In the process, this rural county is providing a path that others might follow, though none has done so yet.

"You can wallow in grief, or you can get involved," Amanda Wilcox told me recently, sitting with her husband of 33 years in the living room of their Penn Valley home.

Depression, panic disorder

Thorpe was 40 in 2001, and hadn't worked since 1993, when he hurt his back and quit his job as a deliveryman. He lived in a small home up a rural road 15 miles from Grass Valley and tended to his chickens, geese, pig, steer, dog and marijuana plants.

His grandfather killed himself in 1989, and his father, who was an air traffic controller at Mather Field, committed suicide in December 1995. In 1996, Thorpe's mother, a nurse, called the Department of Behavioral Health, worried about her son's depression.

In October 1996, Thorpe became a patient of Dr. George Heitzman, who had a contract with Nevada County to provide care. Heitzman described Thorpe as "pleasant, likable" and having major depression, panic disorder and agoraphobia.

During the next four years, Thorpe worsened, becoming reclusive, amassing an arsenal and believing the FBI was conspiring to poison him, his animals and his marijuana. Thorpe's family members implored Heitzman to intervene, to no avail, according to interviews and records that came to light when the Wilcox family sued Nevada County. Heitzman didn't return my calls.

Scott Thorpe's older brother, Kent Thorpe, understood the impact of mental illness. He worked 27 years as a Sacramento police officer, including 14 years as a hostage negotiator.

Over the years, Sgt. Kent Thorpe transported many mentally ill people to be held in psych wards for 72-hour evaluations. Welfare & Institutions Code 5150 authorizes such holds, but some counties try to avoid using it because of costs.

Kent Thorpe and his wife, Sharon, never were able to convince Heitzman that his brother was a danger to himself or others, the standard required by 5150. The step would have been significant.

If Thorpe had been held, law enforcement would have had the authority to take away his arsenal, which included a dozen shotguns, rifles, an SKS assault weapon and handguns.

Dr. Captane Thomson, former Yolo County mental health director, analyzed Heitzman's actions for the Nevada County Superior Court in Thorpe's criminal case. He was harsh in his assessment, writing that while Heitzman may have followed the law, he "failed to behave as one would expect a physician to behave with a patient who has lost the power of reason."

Thomson, husband of former Assemblywoman Helen Thomson, told me that in his view, the county was trying to save the thousands of dollars it would have cost to 5150 Thorpe.

"They were trying hard to avoid hospitalization," he said.

Mental health deteriorated

Thorpe's downward spiral accelerated in April 2000 when he met a mental health worker, Pamela Chase, and became fixated, later describing a bizarre image in which he saw Cupid and Chase's dead parents.

Convinced that Chase had promised to marry him, Thorpe excitedly called Kent and Sharon Thorpe to say the woman of his dreams had agreed to have his child. On April 21, Kent and Sharon Thorpe called Chase to warn her.

"Sister-in-law believes (Scott Thorpe) would use his guns, if pressed," Chase wrote in an internal document at the Department of Behavioral Health to show his deterioration.

Sharon Thorpe reached Heitzman five days later and urged that Scott Thorpe be "forcefully taken to a psychiatric hospital and treated against his will." Heitzman wouldn't discuss the matter because of patient-doctor confidentiality. He took no action.

By May, Chase had become frightened and asked Heitzman about seeking a restraining order against Thorpe and having sheriff's deputies check on him at his home. Heitzman refused, citing confidentiality again, court records show.

Thorpe fell deeper into his delusions in June when he sent Chase a letter by certified mail. Laura Wilcox, working in the department that summer, signed for the letter.

Barely literate, the rambling letter read: "Are you steal coming to my funeral? ... I feel like I have no friends. Dr. H made me feel sucital. ... FBI has been faulsafying evadens. ... I have some preperations to do be for I depart. ... Love, Scott."

Thorpe kept an appointment with Heitzman in September. At the time, Heitzman wrote that he "essentially has developed an acute paranoid psychosis which is now developed into a chronic psychosis." Heitzman also wrote that Thorpe was refusing medication and hospitalization, and that Thorpe's prognosis was poor unless he took anti-psychotic drugs.

Kent Thorpe called Heitzman six times over a two-week period in December 2000. Heitzman didn't return the calls.

"I don't have time for that," Chase recalled Heitzman saying, when a Nevada County sheriff's detective interviewed her after the shootings.

A one-week job

Laura Wilcox had planned to work at the Behavioral Health Department for one week in January 2001 before returning to Haverford in Pennsylvania.

After her first day back on the job, she told her father how badly the place had deteriorated since summer: Morale was terrible; vacancies went unfilled; the heat was out in the decrepit building; patients weren't treated with respect.

Two days later, Wilcox was filling in for the receptionist and saw that Thorpe had an 11:30 appointment. She called Chase to alert her.

"Be safe," she told Chase.

Thorpe arrived a few minutes early, saw Wilcox sitting behind a pane of glass at the front desk and fired four times.

Wilcox, not yet 20, had brought a Haverford course catalogue that day, perhaps planning to spend her lunch hour picking classes for the coming semester, and a novel, "Catching Heaven," which had been a Christmas gift.

Thorpe wounded Laura's supervisor, Judith Edzards, then walked down a hallway and killed Perlie Mae Feldman, 68. Thorpe tugged on Heitzman's door. It was locked.

As police sped to the scene, Thorpe drove to a diner three miles away in Grass Valley. Convinced that a manager poisoned his coffee, he killed Michael Markle, 24, though Markle wasn't the employee he was hunting.

By about noon, Thorpe was driving back to his house. Once there, he took a nap.

Kent Thorpe never was able to reach Heitzman to warn him about his brother's troubled mind. But on the night of the rampage, Kent Thorpe got right through to Nevada County deputies. They welcomed his help, and he put his negotiating skills to work, talking his brother out of his barricaded house and into custody.

Thorpe admitted killing Wilcox, Feldman and Markle, and was judged not guilty by reason of insanity in May 2003. He arrived at Napa State Hospital on June 3, 2003.

"It's a verdict with which we totally agree," Nick Wilcox said.

"So long as he never gets out," Amanda Wilcox said.

Family pushed for legislation

Before all this happened, Nick Wilcox directed the Water Resources Control Board's Bay-Delta unit. Amanda Wilcox was a stay-at-home mom of Laura and her two younger brothers. She now serves on the Ready Springs Union Elementary school board, the school her kids attended and where the family held Laura's funeral.

The Wilcoxes are Quakers. In keeping with their activist faith, they opposed the death penalty before their daughter was killed, and hold that view still.

They donated money to gun control groups before and now are volunteer lobbyists for the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence.

They spent the morning of the day we met at the district office of Rep. Dan Lungren, urging that he vote against National Rifle Association-backed legislation that would vastly expand concealed weapons permits.

Lungren was one of seven House Republicans who voted against the bill last month. As it happens, he has a mentally ill nephew who is housed at Napa State Hospital.

Nick Wilcox's sister, Caren Wilcox, knows the political process well, having served as Department of Agriculture deputy undersecretary during the Clinton administration.

After Laura's funeral, Caren Wilcox met with then-Assemblywoman Thomson at the Capitol and offered the family's help on legislation authorizing counties to be more assertive in the treatment of extremely mentally ill people.

Thomson carried a similar bill the year before, which died. This time, however, the bill had a name, Laura's Law, and the face of a once-promising young woman.

Opposition was fierce. Some protesters wore black triangles, the symbol for mentally ill people in Nazi death camps. Sen. John Burton, then the most powerful lawmaker in

town, opposed it, believing government should not be permitted to detain people who have committed no crime.

"We understood the nature of that argument," Amanda Wilcox said. "But a person's civil liberty should not trump public safety."

The final bill, approved in August 2002, was a greatly pared-back version of the original. Counties could adopt Laura's Law, but if they did, they'd have to pay for it on their own.

The Wilcox family settled its lawsuit against Nevada County in May 2004. The payment was a relative pittance, \$44,694.

But as part of the settlement, the county pledged to implement Laura's Law, using money from Proposition 63, the 2004 initiative that raised income taxes on millionaires to pay for mental health care. The Wilcoxes donated \$15,000 from their settlement to the Yes-on-63 campaign.

"Best \$15,000 we ever spent," Amanda Wilcox said.

To this day, Nevada County is the only California county to fully embrace the law. A new group of Nevada County caseworkers invokes the law to intervene before people deteriorate so badly that they must be held against their will in locked wards or jail cells.

Heitzman no longer works for Nevada County. Now he's a psychiatrist for Butte County.

At Napa State Hospital

In 2006, Nick and Amanda Wilcox drove to Napa State Hospital to see Thorpe. As Thorpe walked toward them, a worker told him who was there to see him. He turned and left.

He wrote them a letter three years later: "I am truly sorry. I don't know what else I can say." The Wilcoxes may try again to visit.

"I have so many questions. Did he look at her? Did she look at him?" Amanda Wilcox said.

Four months after the killings, Kent Thorpe had a heart attack. He retired from the police department in 2002. Like the Wilcoxes, he and his wife hope Scott Thorpe is never released. They regularly visit him. To talk to him now, they say, you wouldn't imagine what he had done.

"This wasn't Scott. Mental illness took over," Kent Thorpe said.

Scott Thorpe functions within the confines of Napa State Hospital. Napa named him Client of the Quarter in October 2010. But he still thinks the FBI is after him. On a recent visit, Sharon Thorpe asked him if he thinks he is mentally ill. He said he isn't.

Read more here: http://www.sacbee.com/2011/12/11/4112773/after-a-rampage-by-a-mentally.html#disqus_thread#storylink=cpy