

A boy is killed and 2 families try to live with it

By Doug Funkh
staff writer

Only a few blocks, shortened more by shared painful memories, separate the Howard home on Woodlawn from the Harless residence on Hickory in south-central Troy.

Two families, each in their own way, go about the business of living. It hasn't been easy.

Michael Harless, now 18, was tried for first-degree murder in the stabbing death last summer of Philip Howard, 18.

Oakland County Circuit Judge Gene Schneiz, who heard the case without a jury April 20, found Harless not guilty by reason of insanity.

Harless currently is undergoing evaluation and treatment in the Center for Forensic Psychiatry in Ypsilanti. He's been in jail or hospitalized since the incident occurred last summer.

A determination must be made by Monday, June 20 — almost a year to

the day of Howard's death — whether Harless will continue to be hospitalized for treatment or released.

He can never be jailed on the charge. Members of both families talked about the situation in interviews with The Observer earlier this week.

"I think about it every day," said Larry Howard, father of the victim, his soft voice occasionally breaking with emotion. "It gets a little easier every day. I don't feel any regrets to my family. What I think about every day is my son isn't here."

"I FEEL if he had died another way, it would be easier to accept," said June Howard, Philip's mother. "It's hard to sleep. Holidays are the worst."

"I wake up in the middle of the night thinking about it," Howard added. "We're different now," Mrs. Howard said. "We're trying to adjust. There are only three people in our family now instead of four."

Sandra Harless, Michael's mother, also must live with painful memories.

"I think about it every day . . . I don't feel any regrets to my family. What I think about every day is my son isn't here."

"I really feel bad about what happened," she said. "I haven't talked to the Howards. I think about it every day, honest to God. I feel if I called her on the telephone, I don't know if she would hang up or what."

"I don't know if he'll ever get released or not," she said. "It depends on if he gets well. At least that's what I'm hoping."

"I think he's still very depressed," she continued. "He's not bearing voices as strong. It's getting easier to talk to him."

ONE TOPIC that doesn't come up is the stabbing incident. "I don't talk about that," she said. "It upsets him."

Sandra Harless said her family also

has been victimized, in a sense, by the incident.

Crank telephone calls have stopped within the last couple of weeks, she said. Her young daughter, though, is still receiving help from a social worker to adjust to the harassment.

"It's been hard on me," Mrs. Harless said. "At times, I don't feel I can take it."

Mrs. Harless said she didn't believe her son Michael was ready to be released from the Clinton Valley Center in Pontiac less than a month before Howard was killed.

Neither Stuart Young, Harless' court-appointed attorney, nor prosecutor James Mitchell said they were surprised by the verdict reached by

Schneiz.

"I BELIEVE all the doctors' testimony swayed the case," Young said. "We had about five (doctors), and there was one on behalf of the prosecution, and they all agreed that he (Harless) was insane at the time of the crime and not responsible for his actions."

"Under the law, the verdict seems appropriate," Mitchell said.

"I would anticipate that the probate court will have him (Harless) committed," Mitchell said in speculation. "But no one can say when or if he would ever be released, he added."

If psychiatrists decide that Harless is still a danger to himself or others, and he is hospitalized, a court order will be necessary for his eventual release, Mitchell said.

State attorneys will be present at hearings to be scheduled periodically on Harless' status.

THE BURDEN of proof for keeping Harless confined lies with the department of mental health, Mitchell said.

Larry Howard said if there is any justice, Harless will never be released.

"If they ever let him out, he could do it to you, his dad or anybody," Howard said. "That's what concerns me. If all these doctors found him insane, I don't see how he should be let out."

"I think he should be punished for what he did," Howard continued. "I think the law should punish him now. God will punish him later."

Mrs. Harless said she doesn't want her son released at this time unless doctors are sure he's cured.

Philip Howard, buried in his native Sparta, Tenn., remains constantly in his parents' thoughts.

"Phil, as far as I'm concerned, is with me everywhere," Mrs. Howard said. "He's with all of us."

Couple's search for granddaughter is now 24 years old and still going on

By Sandra Armbruster
staff writer

Sherry Lynn Howell would be 29 years old by now. That much her grandparents know. What they'd like to learn is a place or a name — something they could use to find her.

"If we just had a name, we could search the records. Maybe we could find someone who had some information," said Sherry's grandmother, Sue Kalbassa.

Sherry's story — and that of her three brothers and sisters — began in October 1959. The four children and their mother lived in what is now the Norway area of Westland. Their father had moved to South Carolina, and their mother decided to place the children for adoption with the Children's Aid Society.

"None of us were aware of it for the first week to 10 days," said Kalbassa. "When we heard about it, we thought it was simple: We'd just go down and pick them up."

"But that's not the way it was."

THE TWO OLDEST children — Terry and Sherry — were transferred to a foster home in Gibraltar. "That's where we picked Terry up. The courts gave us so much trouble. They wouldn't give us the rest of the children," Kalbassa continued.

Eventually, the other three children were adopted, she said, but never forgotten.

"We searched for years for the kids, grasping every straw," she said.

The two youngest children were adopted by the same family, and last October, the Kalbassas were reunited with them.

"We had registered with AIM (an organization that works to unite adoptees with their natural parents), and they (the grandchildren) had registered, too," said Kalbassa, who now lives in Romulus. "It took months for the computer to connect us up, but it did."

The reunion meant a spectacular Thanksgiving celebration for the Kalbassas, with 28 family members flying in from throughout the country.

The reunion has meant "total new life for the little ones," said Kalbassa. "They found a whole new family."

"We had a ball, but the sad part is that we couldn't find Sherry," Kalbassa added.

BUT THE Kalbassas haven't given up hope. In

fact, they think that Sherry, or someone she knew, may be living in or near Livonia.

"About 17 or 18 years ago, I bumped into a lady in the mall who asked if I knew what had happened to Sherry. She said she had seen her and knew she was with a family in the Livonia area."

"But we had no name to go on, and courts wouldn't open the records," she said.

Renewing her search for Sherry, Kalbassa has written to Lansing to see if birth records there may list her granddaughter under a different name. Wayne County records list only the name of Sherry's natural parents.

Kalbassa hopes that events recalled in this story "might jog the memory" of Sherry or someone who

knew her. Kalbassa notes that Terry has had memories of his placement before being returned to the Kalbassas and knows that for a time he and Sherry lived in a house on the water in Gibraltar.

"Terry feels a responsibility to find Sherry," adds Kalbassa. "He was the only one raised within the family realm. Before he left, he told her he would search until he found her."

She hopes that someone with information on Sherry Lynn Howell will write to the Observer at 23352 Farmington Road, Farmington 48024. The information will be forwarded to the Kalbassas.

"We don't want to take anything away from the adoptee's parents," Kalbassa said. "We just want to find her, to let her know that her family loves her."

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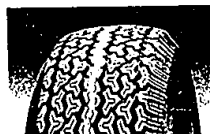
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