

Fear of rapist changed area women's lives

By Dave Varga and Jeff Counts staff writers

The terrifying thought of a masked rapist repeatedly stalking women, threatening them with a knife and raping them may have changed women in Oakland County forever.

"I never used to lock my doors, but now I do," said a Franklin woman. "I make sure I am in the garage and the door is closed before I get out of the car."

"Everytime I drive home at night to an empty house, I watch to see that I'm not followed," a West Bloomfield woman reported. "And I keep watching out the back window — even when I drive into the garage."

A Birmingham woman recently came into that city's police station to get a permit to buy a gun, according to Chief Edward Ostin. She lived alone and in the neighborhood of one of the attacks. "She said she was buying a gun because of the rapes," Ostin said.

THESE WOMEN are not alone. Jaye Spiro gave self-defense clinics at The Community House in Birmingham and classes at Seaholm High

School. Women tell her one main reason they took the lessons was because of the area rapes.

"People's feelings have definitely changed," Spiro said. "The whole feeling was that this could never happen here. People have changed their lifestyles. They've changed their habits for good."

Some neighbors in the areas of the rapes bought expensive home security systems. At least four of the 12 victims moved from their homes.

SOME HAVE sensed a feeling of relief in Oakland County, as compared to the beginning of this year. However, it's not the arrest of Steve Szeman, who police say is their prime suspect in the 12 sexual assaults, that has women breathing easier.

More important, the last rape police connected with the series was March 31, more than seven months ago.

When Spiro gave one self-defense clinic at The Community House last January, she said, "There was a huge response. The community was in a crisis last winter. And, then they did another one a few weeks later and we had about half the people."

At an eight-week class in the spring more than 20 people signed up. "We tried to run an eight-week class this fall and only three or four people signed up."

Timing of the sexual attacks and publicly given to them helped women think about protecting themselves, according to Seaholm crisis intervention counselor Dennis Rozema, who set up one community meeting in February.

"It's kind of a shame that it's only when there's this big uproar that people get concerned," Rozema said.

HYATT EBY also set up a residents' rally, back in the spring of 1987 after the first women were attacked. Eby is president of the Bloomfield Township's United Homeowner's Association.

"I feel that we did our part — police departments and the prosecuting attorney's office did their part in driving him from the area," Eby said, regarding the fact that Szeman moved from West Bloomfield to Ohio in April.

Eby and his association offered a \$2,500 reward, which was added to others in the area. He says, if there's a conviction, money should go to those people in

Ohio who helped follow and corner the suspect after the rape there.

"I think it would be a proper thing and encouraging thing to encourage citizen participation," Eby said.

FARMINGTON HILLS police say they've talked to their three rape victims about their feelings after the suspect was caught.

"They are very, very relieved, but they are not letting their guard down," according to Miri Spencer, deputy police chief in Farmington Hills. "Just because we're taking one suspected rapist off the street doesn't mean there won't be another."

Another victim of the sexual assaults who was contacted refused to discuss her feelings about the arrest. "It's history. I know this is my job, but I just don't want anything to do with it," she said.

And, in West Bloomfield, the thought of how close she lived to the suspect renewed Ruth Osterhage's terror. "I was scared to death when I heard about the arrest," said Osterhage, who lives near the West Bloomfield home where Szeman stayed.

"I just about jumped out of my shoes," she said. "You get scared when things like this hit close to home."

Rape suspect called 'pleasant guy'

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The series of Oakland County rapes "ranks right up there with the child killer," said Patterson who is stepping down as prosecutor at the end of this year. He said he wants to be appointed special prosecutor so that he can prosecute the case himself.

Patterson said Szeman wouldn't be offered any deals to plea bargain. "It is my intention Szeman will never breathe a breath of free air again," he said. Szeman faces 33 life-in-prison terms if convicted

on all charges.

More warrants are expected in connection with a March 3 attempted rape in Farmington Hills and a May 1987 rape in West Bloomfield. Investigation of these cases is based on lab tests that may take about six weeks. Blood or semen will be tested to establish a "DNA fingerprint" that can narrow the field of suspects to "one in 100 million," Patterson said.

Small televisions, telephones, answering machines and jewelry boxes and other personal items in the Oakland County cases were discovered in his Rocky River, Ohio, townhouse after police searched there last

week. Later, the items were brought back to Bloomfield Township, where victims identified their property.

MANY OF THOSE victims received their attacks when they identified their property, according to Lt. Jeffrey Werner of Bloomfield Township. Although it was emotional for them, he said, "every victim is prepared to step forward" to testify.

Patterson congratulated area police for their "tenacity and skill" in investigating the attacks.

The big tip, though, came when a North Olmsted officer remem-

bered the Oakland County cases and called police in this area after Szeman's arrest. "If it hadn't been for the officer, we wouldn't be here today," Werner said.

Police in that Cleveland suburb got help from some 40 residents who chased and cornered a man later identified as Szeman following a rape. The victim, who was nude, fled the house after the man armed with a knife and wearing a ski mask forced her to disrobe and raped her.

Published reports said Szeman worked as a clerk for American Way Service Co. in Southfield, although officials there would not

confirm it.

HE ALSO REPORTEDLY worked as a groundskeeper for a Franklin homeowner. The man refused to confirm that, claiming he had a business to run.

A neighbor in Franklin, who requested anonymity, said that a groundskeeper there would be required to rake leaves, clean up the tennis and shuffleboard courts and "vacuum the driveway three times a day."

Now that she knows he was arrested, the woman said she felt "lucky" that she was never attacked when he worked next door.

Rapist profile

This is a profile of the serial rapist who police believe has sexually assaulted 12 women in Oakland County during the past year:

- He wears a ski mask.
- He wields a knife.
- He's soft spoken and apologetic.
- He strikes near the victim's home.
- He stalks potential victims for 2 weeks to 2 months, studying their habits and routines, lying in wait until they're alone at home at night and vulnerable.

Police teamwork clicked in finding suspect

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suburban Cleveland led investigators to Szeman, never considered a suspect in the Oakland County assaults until Friday.

The first connection made with suburban Cleveland police came after personal belongings — a wallet, purse, credit cards and undergarments of the last Farmington Hills victim in March — were found in a K mart dumpster in West Lake, Ohio, two days after the March 31 assault.

Since Szeman's arrest in Ohio Nov. 10, police matched his fingerprints

to those found on the wallet.

They also found in his possession small appliances, jewelry, credit cards and other personal belongings to victims from Farmington Hills and Independence Township, police said.

"WHEN THEY found her belongings in the dumpster and the information in her wallet, they immediately called Farmington Hills. They didn't know whether we had had a rape, whether it (personal belongings) were just stolen or what," Farmington Hills police Chief William Dwyer said.

"This was the key link. This was the main factor in solving the case."

When police in North Olmsted, Ohio, apprehended and charged Szeman in the rape of a 24-year-old woman there Nov. 10, they recalled the March 31 Farmington Hills assault and apparent similarities between the crimes (a ski-masked, knife-wielding man) and called Farmington Hills police at 3 a.m. Nov. 11.

A domino effect began. Farmington Hills police immedi-

ately contacted other task force members. Police from Bloomfield Township and Farmington Hills were sent to Ohio, accompanied by Oakland County assistant prosecutor John Slevin, to execute search warrants on Szeman's Rocky River townhouse and car and to do background investigations, Patterson said.

Similarities between the assaults of two Farmington Hills women last Thanksgiving night and assaults that had occurred in Birmingham,

Bloomfield Township, West Bloomfield and Independence Township opened the door for creation of the task force, Dwyer said.

"They were extremely involved as far as interest, desire, hours, the impact this was having on people's lives and they went above and beyond the call of duty," Dwyer said.

LAW ENFORCEMENT agencies represented on the task force are Farmington Hills, Birmingham, Bloomfield Township, West Bloom-

field Township and the Oakland County Sheriff's Department.

The Michigan State Police also is involved in processing physical evidence. "They made sure the evidence was processed quickly and timely," Dwyer said.

Task force representatives were involved in sifting through the 800 tips received through a special telephone number established by the Farmington Hills police.

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