

Multi-Agency Parent Abuse Prevention Programs Urgently Needed, According to Former Orange County Commissioner Homer Hartage

ORLANDO, Fla., Oct. 9, 2013 /PRNewswire/ -- Rosemary Pate did what she thought were all the right things: She earned an undergraduate degree from the University of Central Florida and a master's degree from the Florida Institute of Technology. She had a promising 30-year career at Lockheed Martin, working as a senior contracts manager. She had a palatial home in the suburbs of Ocoee, a winning smile, loving siblings and parents, and the best schools for her only son.

Rosemary was committed to community service, mentoring underprivileged children and raising money for causes like Junior Achievement. She loved road biking and rode three times a week, once cycling 70 miles in a Tour de Cure to raise funds and awareness for diabetes.

On July 11, she left home for a four-day vacation in Hilton Head, S.C. That Saturday Homer Hartage texted her, saying how much she had been missed at the Saturday morning ride. She replied, "It's good to be missed."

Rosemary returned home on July 14 and retired to her bedroom, which she had tried to secure with heavy-duty locks to protect herself from her abusive son. Waking early the next morning she was brutally attacked and killed. Her 19-year old son was charged with first-degree murder and grand theft.

Rosemary was a victim of a form of domestic violence called parent abuse.

Much of what we know about parent abuse is capsulized by Amanda Holt in her book "Adolescent-to-Parent Abuse." Parent abuse typically escalates from verbal and emotional abuse, followed by threats of violence that may include financial abuse, which includes demanding money or stealing from parents.

Abusers typically threaten violence against parents, siblings and pets if the parents refuse to give in to their demands. Eventually, threats turn into violence, which sometimes leads to murder.

Statistics show the beginning age for abuse is between 15 and 16 years of age. In cases of male abusers, fathers are often missing from the home. Data are mixed on gender, finding that male and female abusers act out at about the same rate. In violent cases, males are more likely perpetrators against single mothers. Parent abuse is almost evenly perpetrated against mothers and fathers.

Abusers are more likely than the general population to have been diagnosed with mental-health problems, experienced psychiatric hospitalizations and attempted suicide. There can be evidence of gang involvement or a history of classroom violence. There may be attendance problems in school and learning difficulties, and more than half of abusers use drugs before their offense, significantly cocaine.

Parent abuse is reflective of a pattern of behavior by an adolescent with the effect of changing the parent-child power and authority roles, and should not be confused with occasional outbursts of teens. Compared with other adolescents, those who commit parent abuse show far more behavioral problems over extended periods of time than their peers who have criminal or behavioral

problems.

Crafting an appropriate response to parent abuse requires a multi-agency approach, as demonstrated in Santa Clara County, Calif. Superior Court Judge Eugene M. Hyman established a Juvenile Domestic and Family Violence Court involving prosecutors, probation officers, public defenders, judges and the community. The goal of any parent-abuse program is the prevention of harm to the parent by breaking the cycle of abuse by the youth offender.

Santa Clara County offers a definitive model, but it can be improved by the addition of early-intervention procedures, including directives for schools, health-care professionals, community-service agencies and law enforcement to identify parent abuse.

The criminal-justice infrastructure should establish a category of parent abuse to track incidents. Judicial systems should act in the spirit of Hyman, now retired, and create a system within the judiciary to address parent abuse.

Florida Sen. Geraldine Thompson has said she will examine legislative action on parent abuse and is seeking input from the Florida Department of Children and Families.

There are no guarantees that such programs would have saved the life of Rosemary Pate, but the use of such programs may have provided her a better chance at survival.

Homer Hartage is a former Orange County commissioner.

