

A VICTIM OF ABUSE FROM THE BEGINNING

'Loved him too much', Family says Karina Reyna, slain along with her mother, feared for her safety, and they say they often urged her to leave her husband

Newsday - Long Island, N.Y.

Author: BART JONES. STAFF WRITER

Date: Apr 14, 2004

Copyright Newsday Inc., 2004

It was Good Friday, and Karina Reyna seemed to sense something might happen. Talking casually with relatives about a range of topics, she added one ominous note.

"She told us that if anything happens to her, she wanted us to take care of the kids," said a relative who asked not to be identified.

Two days later, Reyna's estranged husband kicked a door off the hinges of their house in North Bay Shore, grabbed a kitchen knife and stabbed Reyna and her mother to death, Suffolk County police said.

It was the culmination of a tumultuous 10-year marriage in which Reyna was beaten so badly she once stayed out of work for a week because she was embarrassed that co-workers would see her bruised face, according to the relative. She and her two sons moved in with relatives for a month.

Another time, in January, she landed in the hospital, with 16 stitches in her head, teeth knocked loose and a left eye that twitched for months after he beat her with a computer cable wrapped around his fist. She couldn't get out of bed for three days, said her older brother, Jose Villegas, of Florida.

Yet despite the repeated beatings, she would not leave her husband, Christopher Reynart, and she did not seek counseling until it was already too late, according to relatives. "She loved him so much. She loved him too much," Villegas said.

Other relatives said they urged Reyna, 30, to leave Reynart over the years, but never imagined the violence would escalate to murder. "We didn't see it coming," said the family member.

Yesterday, Reyna's shocked relatives gathered to comfort one another and try to make sense of the attack that also took the life of Azucena Villegas, 63. Family members said they were told by police that Villegas wrapped herself around Reyna as Reynart started to stab her, trying to save her daughter's life.

They also said that after committing the murders, Reynart appeared in the bedroom of the couple's sons, Christopher, 10, and Kevin, 8. "The oldest son said, 'We saw our father with blood on his face,'" the relative said. The boys then "just covered their faces with their blankets because they were scared" they might be hurt. It was what they did when violence broke out in the house, he added.

Reynart, 34, was charged with two counts of second-degree murder and is being held without bail at the Suffolk County jail in Riverhead. Though he pleaded not guilty to the murders at his arraignment, he admitted yesterday in a telephone interview that he killed the two women, saying he was saving his children.

But relatives dismissed his account as self-serving, and said Reyna had gone out of her way to make sure he could visit their sons. "He can say whatever he wants, but he's the one who killed her," said the relative, who did not want to be named for fear of repercussions from Reynart or associates.

Family members said the murders came as Reyna's relationship with her husband was at a tipping point and she was on the verge of breaking free. After he beat her in January, she and the boys entered counseling. Reyna later decided to divorce Reynart and sell the family's house.

"The therapy gave her a lot of strength," the relative said. "She was happy. She was smiling ... She told me she was tired of getting beat up." On Good Friday, she and Reynart signed a contract making the house sale official. Reynart "knew it was over," the relative said.

Family members were worried how Reynart might react to the break-up of the relationship and the discovery of what he claimed was an amorous relationship she was having with an e-mail friend. Relatives said that was false, and that Reyna simply received moral support from the friend. "He's the only guy I can talk to that listens to me," the relative said Reyna told him.

Villegas said he got an agitated and deranged phone call from Reynart on Thursday claiming Reyna was going to take the boys away and move to New Jersey with the Internet friend. Villegas called his mother, saying, "I'm afraid he's going to kill her."

The mother was not overly concerned. "My mom insisted he has an order of protection" issued after the January beating, Villegas said. Still, the mother and another woman whom relatives would not identify were worried enough by Saturday night to spend the night with Reyna at her house.

Reynart called Reyna early Sunday before driving to the house from Brooklyn, prompting her to wake up the two other women. Reyna sat with them, staring out her bedroom window, the relative said. "She said she was afraid of something, but she didn't say why." Reynart, it turned out, had parked two blocks away, and soon was at the door.

Relatives said Reyna and Reynart met in the early 1990s as students at Brentwood High School. Reyna's family had emigrated from Ecuador a decade earlier. Reynart was of Dominican heritage.

After she graduated, Reyna became pregnant and a year after Christopher's birth, the couple married. A few years later, and after the birth of Kevin, Reyna went to work at Boundless Technologies in Hauppauge, where she helped assemble computers.

Reynart had jobs on and off, including some in printing. But in recent months Reyna had become the main breadwinner. Some days she worked from 7:15 a.m. to 6 p.m., putting in overtime to pay the bills, the relative said.

"She always worked. She never took a day off," the relative said. "The only thing she worried about was that her kids had food and clothes."

On Sundays, Reyna, her sons and other relatives would regularly attend the 9 a.m. Spanish Mass at St. Anne's Roman Catholic Church in Brentwood, followed by a family breakfast at her parents' house.

Relatives said Reynart's physical abuse of Reyna was part of their relationship almost from the beginning, and only got worse in recent years. Occasionally after some beatings she would flee overnight with her boys to her parents' house in Brentwood. The children were deeply affected by the beatings, too, the relative said.

As the violence escalated, some relatives said they often urged Reyna to leave Reynart, but she refused.

The other relative said that when he asked her why she was returning to Reynart after each beating, she would say, "He's going to change."

Reynart promised he would seek counseling, the relative said, but he never did.

The relative said cultural values also might have played a role in Reyna's refusal for years to leave her husband because in Ecuadorean society divorce is taboo. "They always believe in keeping the family together," he said, adding, "This was going to be the first divorce in the family."

For now, beyond grieving, the family is focusing on Reyna's two children, who are in protective custody. A Family Court hearing is scheduled today to possibly determine who will take custody of them.

The boys, who thought their mother was in the hospital, were told yesterday she died. Christopher cried, the relative said. Kevin did not seem to completely comprehend.

"He has a hamster," the relative said. "He asked if someone could get his hamster [from the house] so it didn't die."