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Coroner: She shot kids in heart

By Joe Wessels
Post contributor

A Delhi Township woman who shot and killed her two young children Tuesday before she killed herself had thought about the act before she did it.

Mary Ann Wittich, a 44-year-old mother of four known as "Mimi," shot her two youngest children, 10-year-old Jacob and 7-year-old Sydney, in the heart as they lay asleep in her bed, in, what investigators believe, was a drug-induced slumber from a large dose of Benadryl allergy medication.

Final toxicology results could confirm that suspicion in about a week, officials said.

Hamilton County Coroner O'dell Owens said that the two children were killed between 7 and 9 a.m. Tuesday after their mother spent the night with them in her bed. A red "X" was drawn on Sydney's chest over her heart, at the same point a .25-caliber automatic handgun was pressed against her clothes and two shots were fired into her body.

Jacob died from two shots through the heart, although no "X" was found on his body, Owens said.

"When I looked down, it was so disturbing. How could a parent put a gun so close to her child's chest and then mark the spot?" Owens said, adding it was one of the most difficult scenes he had ever encountered since becoming coroner - not for the graphic nature of the scene, but at how calculating Wittich was in killing her two children.

Wittich then turned the gun on herself, firing into her own heart, falling face first to the floor of the master bedroom in the home on Francisridge Drive that she and her husband once shared.

There was no indication that Wittich was under the influence of drugs or alcohol, Owens said, but a more comprehensive toxicology screening is being done.

Some nearby neighbors reported hearing gunshots, and police received a call around 5:30 p.m. about three people being found unresponsive and not breathing.

The Wittichs' 20-year-old daughter, Lindsey Wittich, who no longer lives at the home, discovered the bodies and called 911. Another daughter, Kathryn Wittich, 24, no longer lives at the home.

SUICIDE RATE

Coroner O'dell Owens said 108 people committed suicide in Hamilton County last year and that the acts often go largely unnoticed because of the stigma the act carries.

"We have far more suicides than homicides," Owens said.

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Owens said Wednesday that Wittich was bitter over her recent divorce from John Scott Wittich, finalized June 7, ending a 24-year marriage. Owens based that belief on a suicide note left at the scene, but he would not elaborate.

Owens also said the family members told him that Wittich had foretold her actions to them through threats and other ultimatums, but that no one took further steps to prevent what transpired Tuesday.

A divorce complaint filed Jan. 24 in Hamilton County Common Pleas Domestic Relations court on behalf of Scott Wittich said the couple were "incompatible" and that Mary Ann Wittich was "guilty of extreme cruelty and gross neglect of duty..."

A "shared parenting plan" filed in May - before the divorce was final - gave the couple equal rights to see the two youngest children. The very detailed plan discusses specifics about how Jacob and Sydney were to be disciplined, how much and how often communication should happen between the two and their parents, that each parent should "use their best efforts to enhance the respect, love and affection of the children toward the other parent," and how many hours the children should spend with each parent each week and on holidays.

The plan, approved by Judge Ronald Panioto, also directs the parents not to eavesdrop on conversations between the other parent and the children or tape record them; not to "discuss with the children the actions of the other parent...except in a positive, nurturing fashion;" and not to discuss the specifics of the divorce settlement with the children.

The Wittich family was very active, and both children attended school, at St. Dominic's Catholic Church in Delhi. Wednesday evening friends gathered there to discuss the best ways to deal with the deaths and how to talk to their children about them.

Mary McCutchen, an administrator and program staff person at Montgomery-based Fernside Center for Grieving Children, led the group. She said earlier Wednesday that one of the most difficult parts of a situation like the one in Delhi is how to discuss what happened with children and "explain the unexplainable." The first thing is "being a good listener" and being "truthful about what happened without going into details," she said.

"We want to give parents permission to say, 'I don't know the answer. Maybe we'll never know,'" she said. "But (say) I'm here and you're here and we're going to take care of you."

How parents care for children is simple, but often difficult to do during chaotic circumstances. McCutchen said stability is critical to children coping with death.

"When something like (Tuesday) occurs, a child's world is already chaotic, they feel like they don't have anything to count on," she said. "Make sure there is a routine in the daily life."

Doing things like getting children meals at a regular time and sticking to a nightly bedtime all contribute to better long-term mental health. It's also important to limit a child's exposure media coverage of the tragedy.

"It's not healthy for them to view it over and over," she said.

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