

What if she were *your* sister?

Jessica Ballard Venable was beaten regularly and severely on several occasions up to and including the day of the incident in which she stabbed her husband and he died

Preface: I had a scheduled visit with Jessica Ballard Venable at the Lusk Women's Center on Thursday morning at 10:00 am. It had taken a few weeks to gain the warden's approval, get Jessica to agree to the visit, and schedule a time with the head of security. On that Thursday morning, snow had been falling and roads were ice covered and very slick. At 6:45 am, I headed north on I-25 to keep my appointment. By the Ridley exit, it was obvious that road conditions were already very bad and could get considerably worse in the 165 miles to Lusk. Not willing to risk so much when the visit could be rescheduled, I turned around and came back to Cheyenne. If the weather stays decent and roads are passable, that visit should occur before the next issue of the Herald is printed on October 26th.

Will it take vigilante justice to stem the frequency of domestic violence in Laramie County and counter the leniency of the District Attorney's office?

Will fathers and brothers and male friends of abused women have to step in to stop the rampant abuse? If the system won't do its job, should male friends of women who are repeatedly and savagely beaten by men stand silently by and allow the abuse to continue, even flourish?

The case of Jessica Ballard Venable is not atypical. I have had the distasteful chore of reviewing other strikingly similar cases of domestic abuse. Over and over and over these men beat smaller, more vulnerable and weaker mates. More often a boyfriend but sometimes a husband, the system gives them "license" to pound on a woman.

In Jessica's case, the guy who wormed his way into her life had a history of physical abuse of women. From what neighbors and another who saw and heard interaction between this guy and this woman and her children have told me, he was also a verbally threatening bully.

His record of domestic violence, based on Laramie County court files:

May 6, 2008 - Family Violence

May 2, 2008 - Misdemeanor - Reckless Endangering

March 25, 2008 - Family Violence

May 26, 2007 - Felony - Battery on a household member, 3rd offense in 10 years

August 6, 2006 - Felony - Battery on a household member - 3rd offense in 10 years.

By mid-2006, he had been charged at least three times with battery on a household member, which is supposed to trigger a felony charge and end the terror.

The first two assaults are freebies under Wyoming law. Misdemeanors with fines.

Worse, the abuser is sent home to the victim, encouraged by the system to continue his destructive behavior. Earlier:

October 10, 2005 - Misdemeanor - Battery

May 25, 2005 - Felony - Battery on a household member - 3rd offense in 10 years

May 25, 2005 - Misdemeanor - Reckless Endangering

July 18, 2004 - Misdemeanor - Reckless Endangering

July 18, 2004 - Misdemeanor - Battery on a household member, 2nd offense within 5 years

April 22, 2004 - Misdemeanor - Battery

All of the preceding involved violence against women (there was at least one other before Jessica Ballard Venable). The guy also had Unlawful Possession arrests in 2004 and 2001 and an Aggravated Assault charge in 1996. In 1998, he was sentenced to Rawlins for 2-4 years for Burglary. FOR BURGLARY!

As was related at her sentencing, Jessica's one and only arrest was for the stabbing incident in which she did what the system would not do for her. She ended the torment and abuse. Not intentionally, but simply by reacting to a situation that presented itself at the time - her husband had continued his physical assaults on her that same day, confident that the District Attorney's office would do nothing to stop his assaults even if his wife called once more for help. They had always found a way to let him off - to combine charges into one so the third violation would never be considered for a felony charge. Or dismiss.

In 1998, Jessica Ballard received a speeding ticket. That was the extent of her "jacket." Her abuser has one that reads like a perp in "Hill Street Blues."

The DA's office could not have facilitated the continued physical assaults had they driven the husband home each time, walked him to the front door of the house his wife rented and unlocked the door for him. They maybe could have stayed around long enough to watch him slap her across the face again. And again. Then they could turn and drive off - knowing that they had once again put the guy in a position where he could beat hell out of this defenseless woman with impunity. Maybe they could have watched him rough up one of Jessica's young sons.

But, you see, the DA's office doesn't have to see these things. They can quickly skim over an arrest report, without knowing whether it's the first or sixth incidence of domestic violence, then begin to figure a way to release the guy back to hurt the woman again and again and find a way to combine charges or dismiss

charges or reduce the charges so the abuser will never have to go to prison.

This tragic ending was preventable. It was easily preventable. But the system couldn't be bothered. To the system, this was just another woman who allowed her attacker back into the household and it was as though the system thought she deserved whatever then came her way.

Jessica Ballard Venable twice, in the 90 days before she had to take a necessary action to end the beatings, sought protective orders against her abuser.

It was no secret he was abusing her. Police could have investigated and gone to any nearby neighbor. They could have reviewed ER admissions records. Jessica was beaten so badly that she spent nearly a week in the hospital. She told a neighbor she "thought he would kill me."

What happened as a result of that beating? Was the abuser arrested and jailed? That question will be asked of Jessica when we meet. He did short stays in the Laramie County Detention Center. Just long enough to fuel his anger against the one who put him there. Then he would go to her home and beat her some more.

The ER probably has a legal responsibility to report obvious domestic abuse. Did they? I will get that answer, too. It just seems that there were so many opportunities to save this poor woman and her children from the tragic outcome.

But, who cares? Is it easier to just ignore the reality that this happens in Cheyenne - that the system seems to protect abusers as though they don't believe the cuts, bruises, black eyes, broken bones and other signs of physical injury? Do those responsible really think extensive injuries were caused by "running into the door," or "tripping over a child's toy?"

The deceased began to beat Jessica in May of 2007. An ADA said in Court, "she had never been hit before but the last two nights the defendant has been hitting her. She had been hit in the face and in the abdomen several times over the course of the evening."

How did the system handle this third "3rd offense within 10 years?" By reducing bond to \$2000 (10%) so he could be released from jail. The third third offense.

Charge after charge after charge for domestic violence was "Dismissed," "Dismissed," "Dismissed," and when he violated probation in 2005 and the probation agent sought revocation, he was "sentenced to supervised probation."

He didn't pay child support. He held jobs for short terms but found a way to live off the same women he abused.

The incident in which Jessica Ballard Venable turned on her quickly approaching and serial abusive husband and she

took a defensive action she thought necessary to avoid yet another beating - she spun and thrust a knife he had handed her at him and it struck him in the most lethal area, the heart, was June 30, 2008.

On March 25, 2008, Jessica had sought a protective order against her husband. At the time, a woman would have to appear in court within 72 hours to make the Order effective. She again sought a protective order on May 6, 2008. Neither time did Jessica return to Court to complete the protective order.

And the words on that Order are laughable. Each was granted but wasn't worth the paper it was printed on. It protected no one but him. It says things like:

"Respondent shall not physically abuse, threaten to physically abuse, verbally abuse or do any act which unreasonably restrains the personal liberty of the Petitioner."

He's not supposed to have any contact with the abused. She was **"granted sole possession of his or her residence during the period this order is in effect."** His violation of the protective order "May" constitute a crime ...

He was to be served with the document. They could have just as well given him cab fare home. Does anyone think such a protective order has effect? Did the police go to her home to see if he was there? No. This is the way the system fulfills its "obligation" to women who are regularly beaten. Do any of those inside the system really believe a guy like this one, a guy who had at least four arrests from July 18, 2004 to May 26, 2007 for "Battery on a household member" and been released back onto the street to return to the victim and do it yet again, takes a piece of paper seriously? His only stint in Rawlins was for a Burglary. Never in his history of physically abusing women was he sent to prison. He had at least three "3rd offenses in 10 years," that are supposed to lead to felony charges.

As bad as this guy was, the system also let him down. Had he been sentenced to Rawlins for any of those multiple felony charges, he would be alive today. His daughter would have had a father, how ever bad he may have been. Jessica's two sons from before she met this guy would have their mother home to shower her care, concern and love on them.

And, Jessica Ballard Venable would be free. She would be without a felony conviction forever hanging over her head.

Should Jessica have taken more? Should she have allowed him to hit her more that day? No. She had every right to finally protect herself against his brutality. She had every right to defend herself and her sons and their daughter from a guy who knew his protection would come from the system. Would you stand by and allow a man to beat your sister?