

*Letter from Allison Tilly Carswell, Diane Tilly's daughter, to San Antonio Express News in response to their series "Pearl's Story", June 25-27.*

June 29, 2006

After finishing Karisa King's three-part series on Pearl Cruz and her involvement in my mother's murder, I am left disappointed in a wasted opportunity. If Ms. King was going to put all of her readers through the trauma of being spectators to this crime, it should have been for a defensible reason.

With the three days and thousands of words given her by the *San Antonio Express-News*, she failed to effectively implicate "the system" that could have better served Pearl. She failed to shed light on the crippling impact of homicide on the hundreds of thousands of friends and families of the more than 10,000 people murdered in this country every year. In fact, Ms. King failed to skillfully do anything other than paint a detailed, revolting picture of Pearl's plight and that of my mother. To what end?

Had Ms. King taken the time to research and present the complex reasons behind the failure of protective agencies to better serve Pearl, her article could have been a call to action. Rather than expend their energy in writing vitriol to the *San Antonio Express-News* in response to Ms. King's series, those same hundreds of readers could have targeted their outrage in letters to their legislators or the administrators of the agencies that are, apparently, so ineffective at serving abused children in Texas. What will happen to Pearl when she reenters society? Will there be a safety net to help her turn her life around? If not, how can Texas address these problems? Ms. King, we could use your help here.

Similarly, Ms. King's articles could have served as a platform to shed light on the real impact of such a crime—the truth of what it means to the surviving family and friends of my mother, her students, and the greater community. The cost of this crime reaches far beyond the dollars required to run the agencies that solved the crime and prosecuted the criminals, and beyond that of housing Ronnie Joe Neal and Pearl Cruz in prison.

For many families, homicide translates directly into lost jobs, marital problems, major depression and isolation for survivors. In strictly financial terms, families can be left to deal with harsh realities ranging from private investigation expenses and crime-scene clean-up fees to lawyer fees for estate probation and civil suits against the murderer.

Often survivors are afflicted with a condition known as traumatic grief—similar to the post-traumatic stress syndrome experienced by war veterans involved in heinous acts of battle. The horrid details of a loved one's murder play over and over in a survivor's mind. Crippling fear and paranoia that something terrible will happen to other family members or friends haunt survivors, as well. Some people struggle with this for years—or a lifetime. In one of the greatest tragedies of all, survivors frequently avoid reminders and memories of their loved one because they have become so intimately linked with the brutality of the murder. In a situation like this, imagine the impact of a series like the one just written by Ms. King.

In cases like my mother's, where the crime and the victim have been frequently in the public eye, it can be extremely difficult to mourn. In our case, photographers with telephoto lenses skirted the outside of her funeral, taking pictures of our family. A private loss becomes the subject of newspapers articles, television news broadcasts and web chat rooms. It sometimes feels impossible to hang onto the truth of who our mother really was, and what our life with her was really like.

There has always been debate about the merit of media coverage of crimes. Its greatest virtue is that it does not permit the amoral acts of criminals to go unmentioned. But in the case of Ronnie Joe Neal and Pearl Cruz, we have far exceeded the airtime required to implicate them in an unspeakable act. For those who continue to use this story as an attention-grabber, ask yourself what attention you seek. Every article and news story about my mother represents a setback to her friends and family and the community members who are trying to coexist with the knowledge of this crime and her loss. If you are going to subject all of us to this burden, do it in the name of helping someone.

Allison Tilly Carswell