

New coroner reaching out to survivors

Gorniak's office to offer counseling after deaths

Saturday, February 14, 2009 2:59 AM

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH



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The murder of a friend inspired Franklin County Coroner Jan Gorniak to begin offering counseling to survivors and witnesses of loved ones' sudden deaths.

Dr. Jan Gorniak is fascinated with forensics. Give her a body and she's not squeamish as she probes diseased organs or traces the path of a bullet.

Inside a tiny silver frame on her desk, a card reads, "To the living we owe respect, to the dead we owe the truth."

But the true weight of what would become her new job hit last summer, when Gorniak still was campaigning for Franklin County coroner. A girlhood friend in Maryland was murdered.

That tragedy inspired Gorniak to begin offering a grief-counseling program to survivors and witnesses. Every body that ends up on her table, she said, was an unexpected death: suicide, murder, accident.

"It still amazes me what people can do to themselves and to each other," she said.

The counselor, whose salary would be paid using a grant from the National Institutes of Health, also would be available to coroner's office employees. Gorniak hopes to have the service in place by summer.

An invitation to meet with the grief counselor will be extended with sympathy letters already sent to those who claim bodies.

"So you know you're not forgotten," Gorniak said. "It's after the funeral and every one has gone home" that the death sinks in.

She speaks from experience that is still raw.

Catherine Brown, a first-grade teacher and a cousin of Maryland's lieutenant governor, was fatally shot in August by her ex-boyfriend, a former police officer.

"We were in kindergarten together. I had just talked with her. She had just bought a new house," Gorniak said.

After her friend's murder, Gorniak gained a new understanding of what relatives and friends go through after they leave her office.

Seeing death daily doesn't distance the pain, she said. When a new family dog killed her 17-year-old cat, Ralph, the coroner traced the blood to her family den -- then left and phoned the police because she couldn't face finding her pet's body.

Franklin County Commissioner Paula Brooks said she's impressed with Gorniak's handling of the office and called adding a grief counselor "an excellent idea."

Cuyahoga County's coroner's office has offered grief counseling for survivors for 15 years, said Powell Caesar, spokesman for the office.

"It helps so that people can talk things out," Caesar said. "Death is very, very powerful."

In the case of suicides, said coroner's office Director Cynthia L. Coleman, "the surviving family members are often at risk for suicide themselves."

Gorniak, elected to replace Dr. Brad Lewis when he ran for an Ohio House seat, is working with Suicide Prevention Services to increase community education so people don't end up needing her services. She also is restructuring her office. Gorniak said she wants her technicians to be able to focus on critical jobs with fewer interruptions.

Other changes will take longer: She wants a computer database to replace the office's hodgepodge of paper and computer files. And commissioners are aware that the office, which rents space on King Avenue from Ohio State University, needs more room as the county grows and new high-tech equipment becomes standard.

Only two employees left with Lewis -- office insiders say Gorniak didn't chase them away -- but everyone else stayed.

"We're pushing teamwork," she said. Unlike Lewis, who opted to be a part-time coroner, she works full time. Eleven-hour days are common, she said, pointing to files stacked on her desk and tables.

"For some, death is the end," Gorniak said. "For me, it's just the beginning of the story."

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