

## **The Changes that Maggie's Killing Brought**

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By Susan M. Omilian

It has been more than a year now since my niece, Maggie, died and still it is hard for me to tell her story

On October 18, 1999, Maggie, a 19-year-old college sophomore at Kalamazoo College in Michigan, was shot and killed by her ex-boyfriend, a 20-year-old junior who then killed himself.

Maggie's killer was a jealous, possessive and controlling man who wouldn't let her go even after she had broken up with him several months earlier. Ten days before the slaying, he legally purchased a hunting rifle at a local gun store using his dormitory address, although the college campus had a no-gun policy. He was upset, police found out later from his friends, about seeing Maggie with another man at a school dance the night before.

There are so many things I can't explain about Maggie's death. Why did she go to his dorm room that night? Why wasn't she more afraid of him? Why couldn't she see that he was violent and vengeful and capable of murder?

I can only speculate that she went to see him hoping that he would finally leave her alone. That she was a kind person and he had never threatened her physically makes her behavior toward him more understandable. But obviously, she misjudged him horribly.

The killing set off a wave of shock, disbelief and grief in the small southwest Michigan community where Maggie lived, especially among her circle of close friends and the many college teachers and classmates who admired her.

But Maggie's death also touched many people in Connecticut, as I have told her story over and over again here to anyone who would listen.

Sometimes I tell her story to ease my own grief and incredible sense of loss. But Maggie's death is more than my personal tragedy.

Everyone loses when a person with so much potential is taken at such an early age. She was an amazing young woman, whose beauty and academic, athletic and

musical accomplishments were matched only by her uncanny ability to engage others in the wondrous dance of love, life, friendship and hope. Perhaps we lost the first female president or the greatest advocate for the poor and the downtrodden. Maggie's legacy must be drawn that broadly.

Maggie would have been outraged by the way she died. If it had happened to any one of her family or friends, she would be advocating tirelessly right now in their memory, fighting against violence against women, the unnecessary proliferation of guns in our society and the lack of proper treatment for mental illness. She would have made us see that a killing at the hands of an angry, suicidal man with easy access to a gun was a needless consequence of our failure to take the action necessary to save the lives of our children.

I certainly have been inspired to action by Maggie's death. I have spent most of the past year in Michigan with my brother and sister-in-law, Maggie's stepfather and mother, working on changes at the college where she was killed. Now women students will be given information and guidance about the cycle of violence and how to get help. Like Maggie, many young women have relationships for the first time in college and may not be aware of the dangers. Maggie was smart and feisty, but she didn't know the words for what was happening to her, and she thought she could solve the problem by herself.

In addition, the college is educating male students about the dynamics of violence against women and encouraging them to exert peer pressure on other men to stop such behavior. More counseling is also available for students suffering from depression and other emotional problems to get them help before they take more drastic steps.

With Maggie as my guide, I will continue working, particularly with young people, to prevent domestic violence, and heal those who have been abused. I call upon Maggie everyday to help me to put down my mantle of grief, dream my wildest dreams and not let my fears hold me back from doing what is right.

For me, this is Maggie's legacy.