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### Brotman: 'Silent Witness' exhibit tells victims' stories

#### Memorial a powerful and, possibly, personal reminder of domestic violence

Barbara Brotman

April 8, 2013

Cindy Bischof was gunned down by her ex-boyfriend in 2008. But she was there, in a way, at an exhibit last week at Northeastern Illinois University.

So was Kimberly Vaughn, shot to death with her three children by her husband in 2007 in the family SUV.

And Vida McCree, strangled and stuffed into a suitcase in 2004. Magdalena Kwasnik, stabbed to death in 2003. Nailah Franklin, abducted and murdered in 2007.

Well-known victims and little-known ones, victims of murders that played out in public and those mourned in private — they were all there, their names attached to life-size silhouettes in a haunting memorial to victims of domestic violence.

"Silent Witness," an exhibit produced by the Chicago North Shore Section of the National Council of Jewish Women, was on display at Northeastern through Friday.

Nineteen red figures representing women killed in domestic violence — and one blue figure representing a male victim — were propped up in two lines, each bearing a victim's name and story.

In a busy lobby in the student union, it stopped passers-by and drew them into silent contemplation.

Some of the victims were women you may have read about in the newspaper.

It was with a start that I read the name on one of the figures: Kimberly Garnett.

I knew the story of how her boyfriend beat her to death with a 2-by-4; I had written a three-part account of it in the Tribune in 2008.

Now there she was, a 30-year-old mother of three, her heartbreaking story in front of everyone who stopped to read it.

And people did stop.

Distractedly holding a sucker in one hand and tracing the words with the fingers of her other hand, student Margo Atkins, 20, stood in front of a figure, reading.

"It's kind of shocking," she said.

Mark Beranek, 23, looked stunned. Unfamiliar with the "Silent Witness" exhibit, he had started reading Shahpara Sayeed's story with no idea how it would end.

"I thought it was going to be a nice story about a marriage," he said. "It took a pretty quick turn."

*Her husband, a cab driver, poured gasoline on her while she sat in the cab, screaming for help. She was burned alive in broad daylight in front of horrified high school students on Glenwood Avenue.*

"Holy cow," he said. "I don't even know the last time I heard something as horrifying as this."

I wasn't the only one who knew someone in one of the stories. Heather Chilson's eyes widened as she read about Neal Golub, a Northbrook man shot to death in 2004 by his ex-wife at her parents' house while their 6-year-old child was inside.

"I recognized the child in the story," said Chilson, 26, a student. "I was her camp counselor the summer it happened."

It is not uncommon for someone viewing the exhibit to know a victim represented in it. "Silent Witness" exhibits are designed to honor local victims to bring the message powerfully home.

"Silent Witness" was created in 1990 in Minnesota by a group of female writers and artists. They went on to establish the Silent Witness National Initiative to encourage the creation of such exhibits nationwide. There are now exhibits in all 50 states and in 35 countries.

The National Council of Jewish Women's Chicago North Shore Section created Illinois' first exhibit in 1996 and has been sending it out for exhibits ever since.

Cindy Wolfson, a member of the Chicago North Shore Section, maintains and updates the exhibit, storing the figures in her Highland Park garage. Using newspaper reports and suggestions from domestic violence agencies and police departments, she adds the names of new victims who could be included in an exhibit — she has about 100 now — and writes the narratives.

They are a numbing, overwhelming account of brutality.

*... He shot her while she was on the phone with the 911 operator ... he murdered her and stuffed her body into a suitcase ... her mother found her body slumped against the wall while her babies were wailing in the next room ... (he) killed her, disposing of her naked body in a shallow grave in Calumet City ...*

But Wolfson gives a sense of her subjects as people, not just victims:

Magdalena Kwasnik: "A popular waitress with a vibrant personality who also contributed articles to 'Ameryka,' the Polish-language newspaper."

Anne Treonis-Bowen: "A lawyer with the Illinois Liquor Control Commission and the mother of 2 daughters, ages 4 and 6."

Anita Underwood, 21: "An intelligent girl who loved to play basketball."

*And Kimberly Garnett: "A dynamic woman with a 'megawatt smile' and a loving, close family."*

Garnett's sister, Tonia Butler, has seen "Silent Witness." A few years ago she got a call from a girlfriend. "She said, 'Do you know there's an exhibit, and your sister is in it?'" Butler recalled.

She was glad her sister had been included. Now working against domestic violence herself — she is a violence prevention program manager — she brought the exhibit, including her sister's figure, to her church.

"It's hard to see, but good to see," Butler said. "It's one of those things where she's not forgotten.

"It's someone's life. You look at it, you read the story ... and it's a person."

Faceless and identical, the figures become both specific and universal, actual individual women and potentially every woman.

When Jessica Lettow, Northeastern's assistant director of student health and counseling services, brings "Silent Witness" to the campus twice a year, she feels no need to add explanatory material.

"You don't have to advertise it; you don't have to explain it," she said as another student stopped in front of the figures. "You just leave them here and let them speak for themselves."

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