

4 families mark 1 year since killings

Larimer County saw 4 homicide victims within a 5-day period

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The Gendernalik family on Monday became the first of four families who will confront the emotions that accompany the one-year anniversary of a loved one's tragic death.

It was a year ago Monday that 25-year-old Valerie Gendernalik became the first of four homicide victims in Larimer County during a five-day span.

And on Monday, while the country memorialized American war veterans, the Gendernalik family became the first to remember their slain loved one by constructing a small memorial and placing it along Prospect Road just yards away from where Valerie was killed.

"This is very hard," said Valerie's mother, Larisa, after memorializing her daughter. "I never thought I would live to see this day a year later."

Larisa and Larry Gendernalik traveled from Colorado Springs to meet

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their son, Alex, a Colorado State University student, and two of Valerie's closest friends, Holly Pratz and Tiana Rose, to share fond memories of their daughter, sister and friend.

They remembered Valerie's time with AmeriCorps in California and her uncanny ability to get others to gravitate to her.

They even shared a story of Valerie's 15 minutes of fame on the MTV dating show "Ex Factor."

The family and friends said they've each dealt with the pain of a life taken too soon and too viciously in different ways during the past year, but being able to spend the anniversary of her death together and in Fort Collins was important.

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Three other families will also confront the anniversary of their loved one's death this week.

Tragedy strikes again and again and again

Valerie Gendernalik, Gertrude Carter, Stephen Allen, Linnea Dick. Those are the four people murdered in Larimer County during the five-day span last May.

Three died in domestic disputes, and one during a home burglary gone bad.

Gendernalik died in the early morning hours of May 25 when she was shot in the head at close range and killed, according to the Larimer County Coroner's Office.

Her then-boyfriend, Justin Levi Moore, was arrested later that day in Windsor on suspicion of murder and is still being held at the Larimer County jail awaiting an Oct. 26 trial. He faces first-degree murder charges.

Later that day in Masonville, 77-year-old Calvin Carter Jr. shot and killed his wife, Gertrude, 85, before turning the weapon on himself in what authorities deemed a murder/suicide.

Three days later, Fort Collins process server Stephen Allen, 57, was brutally beaten with a T-ball bat and stabbed to death when he delivered divorce papers and a restraining order to James Whitler, who was convicted of first-degree murder earlier this month. He faces a sentence of life in prison without parole.

And May 30, 20-year-old Linnea Dick was sexually assaulted and strangled to death at her Fort Collins home by Joseph Curl, who later admitted killing Dick and setting her home on fire in an attempt to destroy evidence.

Curl pleaded guilty to first-degree murder two months after Dick died and is serving

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Alex Gendernalik, brother of murder victim Valerie Gendernalik

a life sentence without parole through the Colorado Department of Corrections. By pleading guilty, he avoided facing the death penalty.

Trying to heal, find closure

"I haven't gone anywhere as far as healing goes," said Valerie Gendernalik's father, Larry. "I've really just survived for a year."

Despite counseling and efforts to keep their minds occupied, Larry Gendernalik and his family are still searching for answers.

Larisa Gendernalik said she has spent more time painting in an attempt to keep busy, while her son, Alex, said he has immersed himself in his studies. And the entire family built a bird house to keep eight white pigeons given to the family by the man who released similar birds at Valerie's funeral last year.

Despite those efforts, the emotional wounds still run deep.

"There's really nothing you can do that takes your mind off of it," Alex said. "It always comes back just as strong as the first day after it happened."

The Gendernalik family also is trying to heal without the benefit of getting at least some closure through the courts. While Moore has been arrested and charges have been filed, they'll still have to wait another five months before a jury decides Moore's fate.

The families of Allen and Dick have already had justice served through the courts, although in different ways. The Dick family watched as prosecutors agreed to a plea agreement that will put their daughter's killer in jail for life,

while the Allen family attended the five-day trial that led to Whitler's conviction.

In an interview the day before the jury of 12 found Whitler guilty of first-degree murder, the Allen family said attending the trial was difficult but necessary. Ryan Allen, Stephen Allen's son, described the process as therapeutic.

"There's light at the end of the tunnel, but sometimes, it's just a really long tunnel," he said.

The Gendernaliks said they hope the trial keeps their daughter's memory alive for the public and serves as a reminder of the problems that domestic violence can lead to.

Linnea Dick's family has not only found some closure through justice, but also through efforts to memorialize her through a pet walk and animal adoption.

"Being able to put your energy into something positive has really helped," Linnea's sister, Andrea Gilva, said in an interview last week.

Larisa Gendernalik said she, too, hopes to heal through efforts to help women who are victims of domestic violence. She said she specifically wants to work to establish a law that doesn't require women to appear in court when pressing charges against a domestic partner.

Moore had an extensive criminal history, which included a conviction for fighting in public. The Gendernalik family said there was also a domestic violence incident where charges were not filed against Moore because a woman did not show up in court to press charges against him.

"I think lots of times women just get bullied, and that's really scary."