

## **Domestic violence is never minor**

By Diane Carman  
Denver Post Columnist  
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Every time a woman is killed by an abusive spouse, we say the same things: What was wrong with that woman? What was she thinking? Why didn't she just leave?

Donna Sims says we're asking the wrong questions.

As yet another family tries to find the money to bury a loved one, she wonders why we don't ask other questions, such as: Why doesn't he stop beating her? What was this guy doing with a gun? And how many times do cops have to be called about domestic violence before they take it seriously?

Sims is program director for the Gateway Battered Women's Shelter in Aurora. For privacy reasons, she won't reveal whether Lorraine Johnson ever sought help from the shelter. But there are indications she could have used it.

Johnson died of injuries from gunshot wounds allegedly inflicted by her husband, Eddie Johnson, on Sunday. The shooting followed a visit by Aurora police officers, who responded to a domestic violence call at the address.

It wasn't the first time.

Records show police had been called to the house more than 20 times for a variety of complaints, and Eddie Johnson had been charged with domestic violence on Sept. 8, 2003.

He was allowed to plead guilty to a misdemeanor charge of trespassing and was sent home on a year's probation. Back then officials told him to get rid of his gun, but when the cops came on Sunday night, he told them he still had a gun for a security job.

They didn't do anything about it.

Then, before they could even finish writing their incident report, the call came in that she'd been shot.

"I knew they had problems," said one of Lorraine Johnson's close friends. "I knew she was afraid of him, but I never thought it would come to this."

Lorraine was devoted to her children, her friend said. She worked nights and weekends at two part-time jobs to help support the family, and took care of her grandchildren on weekdays so that her daughter could go to school.

"Everybody came before her," said her friend. "This never should have happened."

Sims said getting women the help they need continues to be a struggle.

"We try to be out in the community as much as possible, but it still boggles my mind that, in 2005, women continue to be so isolated they don't know we exist. But that's part of the dynamic."

Sims said that women often become disconnected from the community and end up staying with abusive husbands because they don't see any alternative.

"She doesn't have access to other resources; she doesn't have any money; she still loves him; he's the father of her kids; he's not always like that," she explained.

But probably the biggest reason women stay is that they are afraid to leave.

As dangerous as it is to stay, Sims said, "it's usually more dangerous when a woman leaves." For some men, the threat of abandonment is such a blow to their egos, they'd rather kill the woman than allow her to go. And they make that clear.

So while the Aurora police say they saw no reason to arrest anyone in what appeared to be just a domestic dispute on Sunday, and the court allowed Eddie Johnson to go free after what was thought to be a minor domestic violence case in 2003, and friends and family members thought Lorraine Johnson's easy smile meant that things weren't really that bad, Sims said the Johnson case should be a lesson to us all.

"There's no such thing as a minor domestic violence case," she said. "And until we systematically get acceptance of that," the tragedies will keep coming.

Lorraine Johnson's friend said she worries about what people will think of Lorraine. She knows what everyone assumes about a woman who's involved with domestic violence.

"She was not a bar-hopper. She wasn't an unkind person. She didn't deserve this. She had a heart of gold," she said.

Lorraine Johnson was not to blame. She was the victim, she said.

No question about it.