

Killer's death stirs flood of emotions

By Allie Seligman

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When residents at Ventana Lakes heard Richard Glassel died last week, some gave a shout of joy, and others showed silent relief.

His death marked the final chapter of a life that members of the Peoria retirement community would like to forget.

Nearly 13 years ago, Glassel, a seething loner who'd lost his home to foreclosure, walked into an afternoon homeowners-association meeting and opened fire, killing two women and wounding three other people.

He was sentenced to death in 2003. Last Tuesday, he died of natural causes after a decade on death row. He was 74.

His death brings closure, but his impact remains, not just in the memories of the people who were there that day, but on victims' rights laws that were changed in the wake of the shooting.

A deadly attack

The afternoon was warm, and about 40 people were in the community's Yacht Club for a 1:30 p.m. HOA meeting.

Kurt Herr, now 81, sat at the back of the room, making an audio recording for residents who couldn't attend. About half an hour into it, he checked to make sure he had enough tape for the rest of the meeting.

Lyle Baade, a heart-transplant recipient, and his wife got up to leave. "As they passed me, they sort of whispered, 'We have a doctor's appointment,'" Herr said.

They walked right back in, ushered by Glassel, armed with four guns and wrapped in dark clothing, "like a mummy, almost," Herr said.

There was a shout for everyone to get on the ground, then the bullets came.

Herr was on the floor when the shooting stopped.

Baade, then 66, tackled Glassel when he stopped to reload. Ray Gonella, then 60, and about a half-dozen other men, including Herr, jumped in. Glassel struggled beneath their weight.

"I was at the legs," Herr said. "He kept saying, 'You're hurting, me you're hurting me.' I told him, 'You're killing people, and you're saying we're hurting you?'" Tom Woods, then 57, was in the club's card room, waiting to start a hand of poker, when he heard the gunshots.

"In my head, I counted seven shots," he said.

He ran outside to the pool, where grandchildren splashed in the water seconds before.

Everyone was rushing to get out, panicking when the pool gate wouldn't budge. They were pulling instead of pushing, but no one thought to check.

Silas Woods, another Ventana Lakes resident and a retired National Football League player, lifted the children over the top of the fence to safety.

When Tom Woods went back inside, Glassel was on the ground, his legs tied with a lamp cord.

Nearby, two women were dead. Esther LaPlante, 58, was serving at her first meeting on the HOA board; Nila Lynn, a popular 69-year-old resident, was shot in the back as she sat in the crowd.

Three others — Charles “Ken” Yankowski, Paul Ettinger and Gil McCurdy — were injured.

“Everything happens in milliseconds — it’s like combat,” Woods said. “You don’t have time to think. You just do.”

‘A strange character’

Glassel had left his Ventana Lakes condo months earlier after lenders foreclosed on the property. The years before were filled with intimidation, strange behavior and anger, neighbors said.

In 1998, Glassel reportedly assaulted a landscaper because he didn’t like the way the company maintained the property. The association took him to court, and he was ordered to pay \$1,000 in attorney’s fees — money he never paid.

That same year, the property-owners association hired an off-duty police officer to stand guard at meetings after Glassel made threats. The guard was dismissed after members decided Glassel was no longer a threat.

Herr knew Glassel — not well, but enough to avoid him. “He seemed to be a bully,” Herr said. “My perception was that he was a strange character.”

Herr had watched Glassel picket outside the developer’s sales office and sit outside his condo with a shotgun, intimidating neighbors who came to collect their mail.

After the bank seized Glassel’s home in 1999, he destroyed everything he could, Herr said.

He cut through the walls, down to the beams, with a chainsaw. He poured concrete down the toilets and the sinks.

Every tile was shattered. “He must have hit each one of them with a hammer,” Herr said.

Neighbors only realized he was gone when bank officers came looking.

In the crazed minutes after the shooting, a few people wondered aloud whether it was Glassel. But he had been gone a while and the shock of the shooting had dulled the memory of his face, Herr said.

The shooter also had a heavy beard, which Glassel didn’t have when he lived there.

Later, when he had been detained by police, confirmation of the shooter’s identity got around.

What remains

Today, signs more concrete than memory remain after Glassel’s rampage.

Duane Lynn, a year short of a 50th wedding anniversary with Nila, sought help from then-U.S. Sen. Jon Kyl to push a federal victims’-rights bill after he was denied the chance to recommend a sentence to the jury that found his wife’s killer guilty. Lynn attended more than 60 court hearings over 2½ years and wanted to recommend a life sentence instead of the death penalty.

In 2004, President George W. Bush signed the Justice for All Act, named after five victims of violent crime, including Nila Lynn.

The law allows victims to file motions in federal court to reopen a plea or sentence in some circumstances and gives victims the right to speak at any court hearing involving the release, plea or sentencing of a defendant.

In the Yacht Club, only a small plaque sitting on the bottom shelf of a wooden bookcase gives an indication that something horrible happened there 13 years before. The tablet honors Baade with a Bible quote, John 15:13.

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

The absence of a larger memorial was intentional, Woods said. “The Yacht Club ought to be a place where you come and not be reminded each time you walk in the door of all the blood,” he said.

Up the road, near one of the many lakes that dot the 1,700-home community, two cement benches and a small bronze sign memorialize LaPlante and Lynn.

At the Yankowski house, Joan Yankowski holds onto newspaper articles, magazine clippings and court documents in a manila folder.

“Someday I’m gonna cut it all up,” said the woman whose husband was shot in the leg. “Now that he’s dead ... no sense keeping it anymore.”

Closure

Ventana Lakes residents don’t dwell on the shooting, but the topic does surface from time to time. A friend will mention it over a cup of coffee, or the all-too-familiar stories of mass shootings will spark memories.

The Newtown, Conn., tragedy in December hit Joan Yankowski particularly hard. “I cried horribly when these kids were killed,” she said.

Herr always sees the similarities in those tragedies and what happened in his neighborhood. “It’s unbelievable how all of the sudden it comes immediately back to your mind,” he said.

On Wednesday, the homeowners association met. Joe McCord, a former board member who moved in a couple of weeks after the shooting, delivered the word of Glassel’s death.

“I said, ‘And right now he’s standing in front of St. Peter asking to get in, and I don’t think he’s going to let him in,’” McCord recounted.

Many in attendance, people who moved to Ventana Lakes well after the shooting, looked confused. Others clapped or smiled or stared in shock.

Woods, who is now 70, heard the news earlier that day and felt relief — not just that Glassel was dead, but that taxpayers wouldn’t have to pay for him to live.

“He died in a prison,” he said. “Maybe that’s punishment enough. I don’t know.”

Glassel lost his freedom, Woods said, but he still got clean sheets, hot meals and health care.

Several said Glassel should have been put to death long ago.

“He’s got his comeuppance, and now he’s going to meet his maker to deal with this. ... It’s over with now and we can go on with our lives,” Gonella said.