

# Abusive partners often won't stay away



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NEWARK, Ohio — Each time he banged on her door, she watched the daylight spill in through the corners. She'd seen him angry, plenty of times, but never in a rage like this.

That door wasn't going to hold.

Inside her Bennington Township home, Angela Sheets lifted a 9 mm handgun and took aim. She squeezed the trigger. A single bullet ripped through the door.

Outside, Keith Disbennett howled in pain.

Most women don't shoot their abusive partners, said Nancy Neylon, executive director of the Ohio Domestic Violence Network, a statewide coalition of domestic-violence programs.

"I would never tell anyone to get a gun," Neylon said. But "that woman may have saved her own life doing that." Sheets, 43, appeared in Licking County Domestic Relations Court yesterday to ask a magistrate for a five-year civil-protection order against Disbennett, 59, of Danville in Knox County. She declined to speak to a reporter, but her testimony and statements in court records tell the story of a woman's attempt to escape a man who seemingly wouldn't go away.

The pair had been living together for a year in Sheets' home when Licking County deputy sheriffs were called there on Oct. 8 on a report of an assault. Sheets and Disbennett were sitting on the front porch, the report says. Sheets had been crying. She told deputies that Disbennett, in a fit of anger, had flipped the couch as she was sitting on it.

“I thought he broke my neck,” she said in court. “I couldn’t move. All he would say is, ‘Why did you make me do this?’”

Disbennett was found guilty of domestic violence and spent two months in jail. Five months later, on May 1, he was back at Sheets’ house, looking for his Social Security check. He banged on the door and shouted threats, Sheets said. She pretended she wasn’t home.

Before he left, she said, he smeared a bloody “X” on her door.

Sheets called 911. The next day, she filed a petition for a domestic-violence civil-protection order against Disbennett, a temporary move until her hearing yesterday.

“I am afraid of Keith and what he might do to me,” she wrote.

About 19,000 such orders are filed each year across the state, Neylon said. The order places an additional criminal penalty on the person who violates it, said Licking County Assistant Prosecutor Brian Waltz, and forbids them from having firearms. In essence, the protection order gives someone a good reason to leave another person alone, he said.

Not that everyone cares.

“Protection orders are a piece of paper for some people,” Neylon said. “It’s meaningless to them.”

Someone had taken a protection order out on Disbennett before. Dana Wilson, 53, of Newark, was with Disbennett for nearly seven years before she left him after he started arguing with her daughter.

Wilson described him as “one of those guys you can’t believe you dated.”

She got a protection order against Disbennett in January 2006, telling the court he had “broken my nose, kicked me in the shins with steel-toe boots and slapped me in the head.”

But Disbennett continued to call, Wilson said. He put a Valentine’s Day card and candy in her mailbox. Finally, she called police. Disbennett later pleaded no contest to violating the protection order and got a year’s probation.

“That’s kind of the way he is,” Wilson said. “It’s very hard to get rid of him.”

When Sheets asked for protection from Disbennett, he wasn’t notified until after she shot him on May 4. While he was recovering that day at Grant Medical Center — the bullet had struck his right arm — a deputy sheriff served him with the order. It forbade him from contacting Sheets.

The next morning, Sheets got a call from the hospital. She played the voicemail for a deputy. It was Disbennett. He told her he loved her.

Disbennett wasn't in court yesterday to answer Sheets' accusations. He's in the Licking County jail, where he has been since May 5 on charges of violating both his probation and the protection order after he allegedly made the call from the hospital. In November, he told a judge that he was a religious man who'd recently had open-heart surgery and played harmonica at his church. He admitted he'd had problems with drugs.

Neither Disbennett nor Sheets has been charged in the shooting, but the Licking County prosecutor's office is reviewing the case, Waltz said.

Similar cases this year have favored the shooter. Last week, the Licking County prosecutor said that a Reynoldsburg woman who claimed self-defense when she shot her boyfriend three times during an argument wouldn't be charged in his death.

And in January, a Franklin County grand jury did not indict a woman who shot and killed her estranged boyfriend at her apartment after she'd filed a protection order against him. Prosecutors said the woman's case fell under Ohio's so-called castle doctrine, which presumes people are acting in self-defense when they use deadly force against someone who illegally enters their occupied home.

Wilson, Disbennett's one-time girlfriend, said she has no doubt Sheets was acting in self-defense that spring morning. Wilson recalled the time she herself drew a butcher knife on the 6-foot-4, 250-pound Disbennett.

"I knew where she was coming from," Wilson said.