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Houston boy killed his father, but why?

Family was torn long before 10-year-old fired fatal shot in August

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By BRUCE NICHOLS / The Dallas Morning News

HOUSTON – The problems of a 10-year-old boy, a child of bitterly divorced parents, didn't get much notice until he shot his father. Now, he's in custody facing a murder charge and, if convicted as a juvenile, could spend most of his life in prison.

What went wrong and what might have been done to prevent the tragedy may never be fully known publicly. A judge has imposed a gag order, limiting public discussion of the case by those who know the most about it. Documents are sealed.

Eventually, a judge or jury may have to decide whether the boy is responsible for what he did. Or whether he was used by his mother against his dad or somehow acted in self-defense. After the father's death, the mother renewed charges that the father was a child molester – those accusations had been investigated and rejected.

If found "delinquent" – the technical term in juvenile court – the boy could spend 40 years in Texas Youth Commission facilities and, later, prison.

Some lawyers say the modern family court system may figure in the tragedy, pushing divorcing parents to share children rather than having one parent clearly in charge and the other largely out of the child's life. The courts' ability to foresee and prevent disastrous consequences of such arrangements is limited, lawyers say.

One thing is clear, said David Fassler, a psychiatrist who teaches at the University of Vermont. "We need to get better at recognizing kids who are showing signs and symptoms of problems ... and we need to make sure they get the kind of comprehensive help they need."

It's too late for the father, Rick Lohstroh, an emergency room physician at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston. He was 41 when he died.

Picking up his sons

On Aug. 27, he went to the home of his ex-wife, Deborah Geisler, 45, in the Houston suburb of Katy to get his sons, 8 and 10.

With his brother and mother still in the house, the older boy climbed in the back seat of his dad's Toyota 4-Runner. After Dr. Lohstroh settled into the driver's seat, the 10-year-old took out a pistol and fired five



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PAUL S. HOWELL/Special Contributor
Dr. Russell Miller, a colleague of the boy's father, is convinced that Deborah Geisler turned her sons against Rick Lohstroh.

shots through the front seat, investigators say.

The gun belonged to Ms. Geisler, a nurse at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Hospital. She told investigators she didn't know how the boy got it because it had been locked away unloaded.

It was the last confrontation in a relationship that soured shortly after the couple married in Galveston in 1989, published reports say.

When they met in San Antonio, Dr. Lohstroh, a native of the Pacific Northwest, was a lab technician whose "female-attracting skills ... were marginal," in the words of a friend. Ms. Geisler was older. They kept in touch long-distance after he went to Texas Tech medical school and she joined M.D. Anderson in Houston.

The couple separated in January 2002 and were finally divorced in May 2003. She remarried a month later, but they continued fighting over custody arrangements, and investigators said constables frequently were put on alert when he would come to pick up the kids.

Ms. Geisler has not been charged, but sheriff's deputies say she's still under investigation. "There are some questions to be answered still, and stuff where the DA's going to make a decision," said Sheriff's Sgt. Bruce Williams, referring to the Harris County district attorney's office.

Before being silenced by the gag order, Ms. Geisler blamed her ex-husband for their problems, telling the *Houston Chronicle* that he never wanted children, threatened to leave her when she became pregnant and had outbursts of anger and violence.

She said her son was "very angry" with Dr. Lohstroh but that she had no reason to expect he'd take a gun and shoot him. "My son is not a homicidal maniac," she said.

Meanwhile, a judge has taken custody of the boys temporarily from the mother and put them in the hands of their paternal grandparents, Joanne and Richard Greene, of Columbia, S.C. They have set up housekeeping in their late son's home in suburban Friendswood.

Lawsuit

While holding the ex-wife at least partially responsible, the grandparents have filed a lawsuit blaming Prozac, the antidepressant the boy was taking at the time of the shooting, and naming the manufacturer, Eli Lilly & Co., as a defendant. Lilly declined to comment on the lawsuit.

The action was filed as new concerns surfaced about increased suicidal thoughts among some children on Prozac, the only antidepressant approved for treatment of kids. The FDA recently added warnings to doctors about the issue. A Lilly spokesman said the company welcomes more research but still believes Prozac's benefits far outweigh its risks.

Most mental health professionals discount Prozac as a factor in the shooting of Dr. Lohstroh.

"I think it's ridiculous that they're focusing on Prozac," said Victor Oderinde, a clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Texas Houston School of Medicine.

While Prozac can facilitate impulsive behavior in depressed children, it's unlikely to trigger the kind of planning required for a 10-year-old to get his mother's gun, load it and shoot his father, Dr. Oderinde

said.

"It doesn't work that way," Dr. Oderinde said.

More important than Prozac, some analysts say, may be the child's underlying depression, exposure to violence and the circumstances surrounding the shooting.

The boy clearly witnessed plenty of trouble, before and after his parents divorced in May 2003 after 13 years of marriage. Friends and neighbors recalled numerous, often violent fights. Ms. Geisler's new husband is awaiting trial on assault charges arising from a fight with her six weeks before Dr. Lohstroh was shot.

Ms. Geisler repeatedly accused Dr. Lohstroh of molesting the children. He repeatedly was cleared by investigators and passed lie-detector tests. He accused Ms. Geisler, a diabetic, of threatening to kill him with an injection of insulin while he slept. She said it was a joke.

In a remarkable turn, Ms. Geisler's mother testified against her daughter in the divorce, and the judge in the case – who awarded the parents joint custody – admonished Ms. Geisler for making false charges against Dr. Lohstroh.

"I never saw anything" suggesting he molested his children, said Russell Miller, a UTMB emergency room physician with whom Dr. Lohstroh lived for four months during his estrangement from his wife.

Dr. Lohstroh had failings. "He was an exceptionally good doctor," but he "had some anger management issues from time to time. ... He would get a little testy," Dr. Miller said. But almost anyone would, given the constant disputes with his wife and the financial pressures of the divorce, Dr. Miller said. "He was counseled. ... He had moved to self-correct."

The case took another twist after Dr. Lohstroh died. A woman, who said she was his common-law wife, filed a claim on his estate in probate court. "He called her his girlfriend or a friend. He never called her his wife," Dr. Miller said.

The woman dropped her claim to the estate after her lawyer uncovered evidence that she'd received food stamps while living in Dr. Lohstroh's house. She was forced out of the home when a judge ordered it turned over to the grandparents as they took temporary custody of the children.

Dr. Miller's theory of the shooting is simple, and it parallels claims made in court by Dr. Lohstroh's mother and stepfather: Ms. Geisler turned the boys against him. "I'm convinced that's what was going on. ... She would coach those kids into hating daddy."

Some psychiatrists and lawyers call the phenomenon "parental alienation," and it's gained increasing acceptance in courts, although its validity as a diagnosis is hotly disputed in mental health circles. Some experts say it's overused, particularly by fathers countering their ex-spouse's charges of molestation.

If Ms. Geisler's child abuse charges were false, "this could be an example of ... where the child's love for his father was poisoned to such a degree that he somehow concluded he ought to kill his father," said Dr. Richard Warshak, a Dallas psychiatrist who specializes in the problem.

If so, could the mother be charged as an accessory before the fact in the shooting?

Unlikely, said veteran criminal lawyer Rusty Hardin. "You had to have specific intent," he said. Mere negligence by badmouthing the father would be insufficient.

But the mother's role could become an issue when authorities decide how responsible the child was for what he did, said University of Houston law professor Ellen Marrus. Whether the child was sexually abused and acted in self-defense could also come up in a trial, she said.

The tragedy may be an unintended result of what many consider progress.

Fifty years ago, the impact of divorce on children was less of an issue, veteran divorce lawyer Donn Fullenweider said. Courts commonly awarded children to one parent, and the other largely disappeared from their lives, he said. Whatever else happened, conflict was reduced.

"Psychological research has indicated that children do better if parents are working together, so we've had this movement toward joint parenting," Mr. Fullenweider said. "It works in most of the cases."

When there are problems, however, the court's options are limited.

Judges can enforce child-sharing, order counseling or remove children from contact with a misbehaving parent for a while, said Pat Lasher, a former associate family court judge who practices with Mr. Fullenweider. They also can bar guns from the house, she said.

But the court system is designed mainly to react to bad conduct and assess responsibility, with therapeutic options limited to what divorcing spouses can afford, which often isn't much, Mr. Fullenweider said.

"It's not a therapeutic system, and it's not a social system to change how people raise their children," he said. "It was never designed to do that."

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