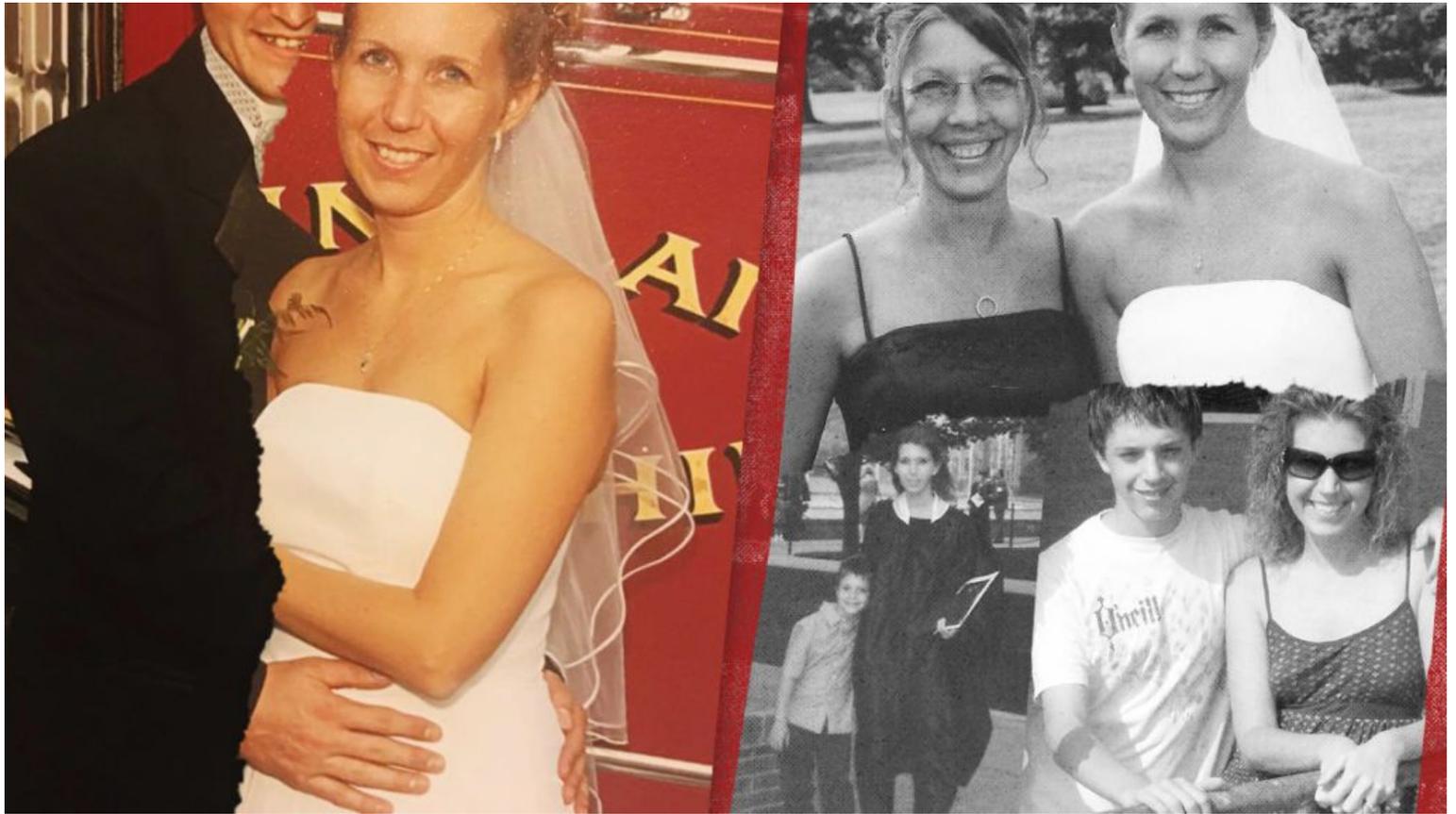




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I Knew My Sister Wouldn't Get Out of Her Marriage Alive

When Pam Aukerman's husband turned violent at home, his police training and community connections made her fear she had nowhere to turn. What resulted was an unimaginable tragedy.

By [Ann Hinga Klein](#) Dec 9, 2016

1.8k



When she woke to a knock in the early morning hours on Monday, November 5, 2007, Jennifer Drake thought it was her sister, Pam, finally leaving her husband.

Jen had been asleep at her parents' house near Mattawan, Michigan. She'd moved back home a few months earlier with her 6-year-old son and 5-year-old daughter after leaving a difficult marriage of her own. Now, she was exhausted after a weekend of fielding calls from Pam's husband, Kevin Brainard.

Pam, a nurse, first called on Friday. She told Jen, 30, that while she was working at the hospital, Kevin had called every number on her phone, telling people he was updating her contacts list. It wasn't the first time he'd taken or monitored her phone. "He's crazy," Pam had wept. "I can't do it any more."

Over the next two days, Kevin, 31, called Jen a half-dozen times to ask for help saving the marriage: "I love her," he insisted. "I don't want to hurt her ... I can't be a failure."

Jen was worried, but she'd always believed Pam, 33, could handle anything. And Pam assured her that when she left Kevin, a police officer, she was taking their 23-month-old daughter to stay with a fellow law enforcement family, where they would be safe.

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David Aukerman with Jen (left), David Jr., and Pam at home in 1981.

COURTESY OF THE AUKERMAN FAMILY

On Sunday evening, Jen let a few of Kevin's calls go to voicemail. Later, when she listened, his tone and words left her shaken. "He thanked me for being a good sister-in-law and said he was sorry," she says. "I could barely understand what he was saying."

From 25 miles away, it was hard to know what to do. She dialed Pam's number and left a message on her voicemail. "Kevin doesn't sound right," Jen said. "Just get out of there, Pam. Get your daughter and go."

So, on the morning of November 5, Jen hurried to the door, expecting to see her sister on the porch with her little girl, just a week shy of her second birthday, in her arms.

Instead, Jen winced through the glare of headlights and saw two uniformed men. She let them in and went to wake her parents. They sat in the living room, terrified to imagine why two Michigan State Police troopers had come to their door in the middle of the night.

One of the officers turned to Jen's father: "I'm sorry to inform you of the death of your daughter, Pamela Aukerman Brainard."

Jen couldn't breathe. She stood, then collapsed.

"Kevin did it," she said to the officers. "It was Kevin."

Seeing the Signs

Growing up, Jen saw Pam as fearless. "And she was smart," Jen says, "smarter than anyone else I knew." After becoming pregnant with her son, Kyle, in high school, Pam worked hard to graduate on time and then moved to Kalamazoo, working as a restaurant server and starting a nursing program at Kalamazoo

Valley Community College.

Pam Aukerman, with her son Kyle, at her graduation from Kalamazoo Valley Community College in 2000.

COURTESY OF THE AUKERMAN FAMILY

She started dating Ed Straub in 1994. The co-owner of a skydiving company and a small construction company, Ed shared Pam's taste for adventure. The couple purchased a house in Kalamazoo and married, but after a bumpy patch, they eventually divorced.

As a single mom, Pam seemed happy to her family and friends. She continued her education, earning an R.N. while juggling jobs in labor and delivery as well

as emergency room nursing to provide for Kyle.

Then in 2004, while working in the emergency room at the hospital in Plainwell, Michigan, Pam met Kevin Brainard. As an officer with the Plainwell Department of Public Safety, he sometimes stopped there on police business.

Looking back, Jen thinks it was the uniform that attracted her sister. And early in the relationship, Kevin doted on Pam. "The cooking, the cleaning, the shopping — he did all that," Jen recalls. Shortly after they began dating, he purchased a house not far from his parents' home in Otsego. Eventually, Pam and 12-year-old Kyle moved in with him.

Two of Pam and Kevin's close friends were Don Roberts, a sheriff's deputy, and his wife, Jenni. A purchasing manager for an electrical company, Jenni was known for getting things done. On weekends, the two couples often camped with their kids at a local RV resort. And while Pam rarely mentioned problems with Kevin, Jenni began noticing troubling signs.

One evening, she recalls, Kevin left the park and didn't come back, even though he was scheduled to help Don with a children's safety program the next morning. Later, Don heard rumors that Kevin had gone bar hopping and clashed with another officer.

When Pam learned she was pregnant again in 2005, family members thought the couple seemed thrilled. Kevin proposed, and they announced a wedding date. But a few months later, Pam postponed it with little explanation.

After their daughter was born, Kevin picked a new date and started working with a wedding planner on the details. But to Pam's friends and family, something felt off. While she didn't say there was a problem, she just didn't seem into it, Jen

recalls. "For her first wedding, she tried on a million dresses, and she was excited and happy. With this one, she just didn't have that in her."

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Kevin Brainard and Pam Auckerman at their 2006 wedding.

COURTESY OF JENNIFER AUKERMAN DRAKE

Sitting at the table in the Roberts' home one night, Pam confided to Jenni that she didn't want to get married. "Just don't do it," Jenni told her. Pam reasoned that she didn't want her bridesmaids to lose the money they'd spent on their dresses.

Pam's sister also tried to give her a way out, right before the wedding. "All she had to do was go pick out her dress," Jen recalls telling Pam. "We went to David's Bridal together, and she chose a simple dress, and she was beautiful in it. But I could see it in her face. She didn't even want to do that."

Jen was shocked to see her confident sister looking so defeated. "Why are you doing this?" she asked. "You can raise your daughter on your own. You've done it before, and you can do it again."

But the wedding went on as planned. "I think maybe she thought it would get better after the wedding," Jen says.

A few weeks later, Pam called her friend Jenni. The conversation seemed casual at first, but Jenni could hear in her Pam's voice that something was wrong.

When she pressed a bit, Pam said that Kevin had gotten angry on the way home from their wedding and jumped out of the car, which she was driving, and headed home on foot. After Pam pulled into the driveway, she said, Kevin had used his truck to block in her car. Once inside, his aggression escalated. "She told me he was holding her down on the bed so she couldn't leave," Jenni says.

Pam and her son playing miniature golf in 2007.

COURTESY OF RICH KLEMMER

In the year that followed, Pam mentioned other ominous incidents. She said, for example, that Kevin was taking her car keys and her cell phone from her purse after they'd argued, leaving her with no way to communicate. And personal items started disappearing from Kyle's room: a shoe, a favorite shirt or homework he'd completed the night before.

Kyle remembers the harrowing time too. "Kevin would get into my online accounts and read everything," he says. "He'd send things to my friends and delete them, thinking I would never know."

Kyle says he went through 10 cell phones that year. "I'd leave my phone on the desk in my bedroom, and when I'd go to grab it the next time, the screen would be shattered," he says.

Finally, Pam arranged for Kyle to move in with his dad. "My mom and I had been really close," Kyle says. "But those last few years, it turned to nothing. I just thought, *They don't like me any more.*"

Over and over, Jenni urged Pam to leave the relationship. "She would say she would like to, 'but he's just going to find me,'" Jenni says. "Or, 'He's a cop, so it's going to be hard for me to get a divorce from him.' She truly believed Kevin would get away with everything. She truly believed that she had no choice but to stay with him."

Planning Her Escape

In October 2007, Jenni asked Pam to go with her on a client-sponsored bus trip to a professional hockey game in Detroit. But Kevin "was not going leave it alone," Jenni says. "He was constantly ragging on Pam: 'Why do you need to go?' And, 'You're cheating on me.'"

A few weeks before the trip, Pam asked Jenni and Don if she and her daughter could stay overnight at their house. Jenni had been hoping for awhile to get Pam to open up about her marriage. That evening, she and Don exchanged stunned glances as Pam sat on a stool at their kitchen island, answering call after call from Kevin.

"It went on for an hour," Jenni says. "I could hear him screaming. Then he'd call back and he'd be nice, and she would say, 'No, I'm staying here. I'll talk to you tomorrow.' Then he'd call back and be screaming at her again."

Jenni's fears were confirmed: Her friend was in serious danger. As Pam wept, Jenni spoke up: "You shouldn't have to put up with that. You've got to get out of there."

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Don spoke too, dropping a few choice words to describe what he'd just witnessed. Jenni watched as relief crossed Pam's face. "When she heard what Don said, I think she knew that Don was not on Kevin's side," she says.

The three agreed that for Pam's safety, they wouldn't discuss her situation with anyone until Pam felt confident that she had a plan and could put it in place.

But that week, word of the couple's struggles reached Kevin's boss, Plainwell Chief of Public Safety Bill Bomar. Looking back, he doesn't recall who told him, just that he'd heard a rumor, possibly Plainwell officers who volunteered in the Otsego Fire Department, where Kevin was also a volunteer.

Chief Bomar decided to ask Kevin about it. "He was walking in the station," he recalled recently, "and I grabbed him and said, 'Come on in here a minute.'"

In that conversation, he says, Kevin told him "everything was good" and that he and Pam were planning to take their daughter trick-or-treating later that day.

The Warning

The period right before and after a domestic violence victim leaves is very high risk. Friends and family attempting to help a victim can face danger as well. In a [2009 analysis of intimate-partner homicide](#) in the U.S., 20% of those killed were victims' family members, new intimate partners, friends, acquaintances and police officers.

Jen, left, with Pam Aukerman Brainard on her wedding day.

COURTESY OF JENNIFER AUKERMAN DRAKE

As Pam anticipated leaving her marriage, she prepared a plan to protect her

daughter, and her son was safely with his father, but she appeared to have also worried about her ex-husband, Ed Straub. Ed says he had seen Kevin's police cruiser following him multiple times, and his skydiving business' gear had been stolen. He also believed that Kevin was using Kyle's social media accounts to stalk him. Now, as Pam prepared to leave Kevin, she called Ed, presumably worrying he might become a target of Kevin's rage. As Ed recalls, she said she'd gone to a shelter for help but had left, feeling unsupported after staff told her that reporting Kevin would cost him his job.

Pam told Ed she didn't think Kevin would hurt her because she was his daughter's mother. But the conversation left Ed worried for Pam and for himself, so he shared his concerns with a relative who knew Chief Bomar. "He said, 'Chief Bomar is a nice guy,'" Ed recalls. "'You can just go talk with him about this.'"

Ed made printouts of some of his online conversations with Kyle and showed them to the chief the next day, a Friday. He says he talked about feeling like Kevin was following him, and about the thefts at his business. He also told the chief that Pam was planning to leave Kevin. "I told him that if they don't do something," Ed says, "Kevin's going to kill her."

Late Saturday afternoon, Pam called Jenni to ask if she could stop by. When Pam arrived with her daughter, the two women sat down to talk. "I offered to have her come and stay with us," Jenni recalls. "That's when she decided what she was going to do. She wanted to get out of there."

They agreed that Jenni would pick up Pam and her daughter on Monday evening after Kevin left for work. Decision made, "She seemed happy," Jenni recalls. "I could tell a weight was off her shoulders."

Pam worked a labor and delivery shift on Sunday, calling Jenni from work at around 1 p.m. Again, they discussed the plan for Pam to leave. "Keep it under your hat," Jenni warned. Pam agreed to call again after work.

That evening, when Jenni hadn't heard from Pam, she dialed Pam's number, but the call went to voicemail. "Oh, it's 8," Jenni told Don. "She's probably just upstairs giving her daughter a bath, like she does every evening."

A Tragic Scene

Kevin's final phone call was to his mother, Gloria Brainard, at 9:44 p.m. on Sunday. She couldn't understand what he was saying. Kevin's father, Roger, left for his son and daughter-in-law's house and called a few minutes later, telling Gloria to call the police.

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When officers arrived at Kevin and Pam's home in Otsego, Michigan, Roger met them at the front doorway. "They're upstairs," he yelled, clearly distraught, according to police reports. "I think they're dead."

They rushed upstairs to find Kevin in the hallway, near death from a gunshot wound to the head. He was wearing jeans and a sweatshirt, as well as a holster for a semi-automatic pistol. His police duty gun was in his hand. His badge lay nearby.

Officers found Pam lying on her back in a bedroom doorway. She was wearing pink pajama bottoms with hearts on them and a white top and had what appeared to be gunshot injuries to her mouth and throat. She had no pulse.

Officers also found Pam and Kevin's daughter upstairs, unharmed. One of them

picked her up and took her downstairs. Gloria had arrived by then and was standing at the bottom of the stairway, where she was handed the little girl.

Investigators later found a note from Kevin to Pam in the kitchen and another attached to a heart balloon on the bed in the master bedroom. It read:



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In the investigation that followed, Pam's death was declared a homicide; Kevin's, a suicide. Before and after Kevin shot Pam, he made a series of distressed calls to friends and family. In one, police reports note, he told a relative that Pam had told him "it was over." In another, he said, "my life is over" and that he was "a total failure."

Danger in Blue

Violence within police families is thought to be at least as high as, and possibly significantly higher than, violence in the general population. Studies indicate that as many as [40% of police officer families experience domestic violence](#), compared to around 10% of civilians. Plus, police officer suicide is thought to be two to three times the rate of the general population — and they're at a disproportionate risk of suicide/homicide, according to [a 2007 study](#) published in the *International Journal of Emergency Mental Health*. A high-stress career with an all-or-nothing mentality, combined with any family issues or outside pressures, and a lack of proper support can add up to a crisis that feels too difficult to overcome.

Statistics like these help reveal why officer-involved domestic violence and even deaths like Pam Aukerman's still occur with surprising frequency. Earlier this year, [a former New Jersey police officer](#) killed himself after a highway chase while he had his wife's dead body in the trunk. In November, [a rookie police officer in California](#) fatally shot his wife and then himself at their condo.



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Mark Wynn, a former Nashville police lieutenant, advises police chiefs worldwide on procedures related to domestic violence. His message: Police officers are among the most dangerous abusers. "By necessity, we train young women and men, when they come into policing, to control their emotions and stay focused in a dynamic situation," Mark explains. "We train them to interrogate when suspicious, we train them to intimidate or match aggression when challenged, and we train them to use physical control techniques over combative citizens resisting arrest or hurting someone.

"But the risk is, if we've got someone who is abusing their family, we've just trained an abuser to be very lethal and very sophisticated — much more sophisticated than the average citizen."

Interrogation and manipulation techniques meant for criminals can also be used against an intimate partner. Mark has heard dozens of wives and girlfriends recount abusers' threats: "I'll lose my pension" or, "I've got credibility in court. No one will believe you."

And chillingly, the victim of a law enforcement officer has nowhere to turn. "Who

knows where the shelter is located in a community?" Mark asks. "Law enforcement."

Tackling the problem head on, the Nashville department instated a zero tolerance policy in the 1990s to counteract officers' instincts to go easy on their brothers on the force who were violent at home. The department also invited the significant others of new recruits to meet with a division captain, who would offer an open door for filing complaints. Mark says, "We sent a signal to every spouse, girlfriend and boyfriend that became a part of our family that they were going to be protected."

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By 2003, the International Association of Chiefs of Police had taken a strong stand on officer-involved domestic violence, using successes in Nashville and elsewhere to develop a recommended policy focused in victim safety. But as of 2013, only about one fourth of the largest city and county police departments had a distinct policy for domestic violence involving officers.

The Aftermath

The morning after Pam's death, Ed Straub told a local reporter about his conversation with Chief Bomar. The resulting news story stated that he'd gone to the police station to tell the chief he was scared for Pam's safety. But the chief told the reporter that it had been a private conversation, not a police report. When Jen read the article and talked with Ed in the days that followed, she was horrified, wondering if this was another way the tragedy could have been prevented.

Since then, she has pored over documents from the investigation, including the

report Chief Bomar filed on November 9, 2007. The report states, "At no time did Ed indicate Kevin's intent was to do harm to himself (Kevin) or Pam." It also states that Ed had said Pam was a "mean, spiteful woman and he would not wish her on anyone" — something Ed adamantly denies.

Talking about it now, Ed shakes his head, saying he did discuss Pam's safety and his, given the pending divorce. "That's the only reason I went in there for that conversation," he says. "I wish I'd recorded it."

Pam's friend Jenni Roberts grappled with questions for a long time, too. "*What if I'd gone over to check on Pam that Sunday night?*" she asked herself. "*What if I hadn't asked her to go on the bus trip?*"

Nine years later, Chief Bomar says that beyond the rumor about marital issues, he'd seen signs of genuine love in Kevin and Pam's relationship, including a time when Pam brought a nice meal into the office for Kevin. Measured and courteous, Chief Bomar says that after their deaths, he developed a new general order for the department, stating that anyone with knowledge of a domestic-related crime committed by an officer will report it immediately to the director, who will initiate an internal affairs investigation. (However, in the policy and a recent interview, there was no mention of an undisclosed location to safeguard Plainwell officers' intimate partners beyond existing shelters, or evidence that victims are advised in advance that management will support them if they fear their partners.)

Her Family's Future

Pam's son, Kyle Auckerman, is now an upbeat 24-year-old who works as an account manager for Red Bull. He got married in July and lives with his wife and their 3-year-old son just a few blocks from the house in Kalamazoo where he

lived with his mother. They have dinner once a month with his mom's family, including Jen and her two kids, and his now-11-year-old sister.

His grandparents, Debra and David Aukerman, have been awarded custody of his sister and a co-guardianship with Gloria Brainard, whose husband, Roger, died in 2015. Both families are committed to giving Pam and Kevin's daughter the best life possible.

Amanda and Kyle Aukerman on their July 2016 wedding day with their son, Gavin.

COURTESY OF JENNIFER AUKERMAN DRAKE

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Jen Drake and her two children have continued living with her parents, helping them surround Pam's daughter with extended family. A few years ago, she

planted a garden in Pam's honor, starting with daisies in her sister's favorite color, blue.

In the years after her sister's death, Jen gathered everything about the crime that she could secure. She filed requests for investigation documents and phone records and gathered letters and testimonials from Pam's friends and co-workers. She extensively researched officer-involved domestic violence and served as a mentor for area victims seeking protection through the court system.

Despite her computer files and notebooks of documents, she still has questions. She wonders why the police department in Otsego, Kevin's hometown, conducted the investigation of her sister's death, despite the fact that Police Chief Gordon Konkle was Kevin's instructor at the police academy as well as his manager at the Otsego fire department, and told a reporter that the case was very personal and very sensitive for him for that reason.

Jennifer Aukerman Drake tending the garden in her sister Pam's memory.

ANN HINGA KLEIN

She wonders why Chief Bomar told a reporter just after the crime that Kevin had "never had any issues" and another reporter, in August 2016, that he only had one write-up in his file — for borrowing a patrol car without permission to propose to Pam — when she holds a second one, a written warning signed by Chief Bomar in July of 2007, citing Kevin for leaving city limits to reportedly assist the Otsego police department on a fireworks complaint and remaining in

that community for 87 minutes. To her, it seems one more sign that Kevin's behind-the-scenes behaviors could have been spotted sooner.

Asked about it later, he acknowledged the report, saying that a warning letter for responding outside the jurisdiction for a non-priority call is something "most every young cop gets here" and saying that he thought the media would be looking for major policy violations versus minor ones. "This is more of a reminder or warning that, 'hey, we don't do that here,'" he said.

In the months and years after her sister's death, Jen felt like an outsider in a world that cared more about its own than the loss she and her family were left to grapple with. "There needed to be more investigation and there wasn't," she says. "People might say, 'It doesn't matter. They're gone. But that was my sister. I thought she would always be here for me. I always thought we would grow old together.'"

She wonders why a public system, paid for by the community to protect citizens, left her sister with seemingly nowhere to turn for protection. "I still think the end result was that Pam was going to be dead," she says finally. "Pam just wasn't coming out of that relationship alive."

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