

Cullman murder offers chilling reminders of mental health issues in state



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Published 12:33 am Saturday, July 22, 2017

In a week filled with countless national stories interesting enough to capture the attention of a shameless news addict, it was a story from Cullman County that reeled me in.

The first news alert bleeped across the screen of my phone Monday night. A Cullman attorney had been shot and killed in his Vinemont home, and his assailant also was dead. No names were released.

My beloved college roommate hails from Vinemont. One of the people who lived next door to us then and with whom we spent countless hours now practices law in Cullman. There were too many possible connections for me to not be worried.

As the story unfolded, we learned that a 45-year-old man with a history of mental illness went to the home of attorney Steve Griffith, knocked on the door, and was invited in. The man shot Griffith. After a long struggle, the victim's wife, Jackie Griffith, killed the intruder. Law enforcement officers have declined to say how, only that it was after a long battle. At last report, she remained hospitalized.

Mr. Griffith was 73.

Investigators believe the assailant, Patrick Walker, 45, was "infatuated" with the idea that Griffith had been involved in a legal case 20 years ago that never happened.

"They had no connection before," Cullman County Sheriff Matt Gentry said. "It's an issue that makes me angry and that's mental illness. This was not a murder for hire; this is a failure in our society of treating mental illness."

It was only as I reached out to our Cullman attorney friend – a former law partner of Griffith's – that it hit me: This case grabbed me by the lapels and sucked me right in because it was eerily similar to 1978, when a Coffee County man set out to kill five people, all of whom he believed to have wronged him. He succeeded only in killing then-Sheriff Neil Grantham, but he intended to also kill the owner of a Chevrolet dealership, because his car had been repossessed (by the bank, but he blamed the dealership); a judge, who had sentenced him for a drug charge; an attorney; and my father, who reported his drug charges in the weekly newspaper.

We have heard over and over again that many of the people who overpopulate our state's prisons likely would not have committed the crimes for which they are incarcerated if they had had access to mental health services, or were able to remain on their medications.

And we have learned from recent lawsuits that Alabama prisoners also don't have access to enough mental health services while incarcerated. In fact, a U.S. District Judge has ruled that Alabama must do better.

It is cases like this one that remind us how serious the mental health crisis is. A man who by all accounts was a respected and well-liked attorney, and who spent his life in the legal system *lost* his life because of it. It could as easily have been a law enforcement officer, a judge, or a newspaper editor the man blamed for his problems, just like in 1978.

And that, my friends, will give you lots to think about late at night.

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