

A TALE OF ANGUISH: HOW ONE LATINA MISSED NETWORK / FEELING ABANDONED, MIGUELINA ESTEVEZ, 19, KILLED HER 3 SONS AND HERSELF. OTHERS LIKE HER HAVE FOUND HELP.

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Body

Se sentia sola.

She **felt** alone - so alone, so despondent that she could see no other way out.

At **19** - little more than a child **herself** - **Miguelina Estevez** was in a strange country, unable to speak English, unable to **find** work, taking care of triplet toddlers and a younger sister.

Her boyfriend, the children's father, had returned to their native Dominican Republic. Deported, her family says. **Abandoning** her for another woman, her friends say.

In either case, his departure pushed **Estevez** into despair.

On Monday, that desperation disintegrated into tragedy, when **Estevez** shot each of her 2-year-old **sons** in the head, then turned the 9mm semiautomatic gun on **herself**. All four died.

Miguelina Estevez felt hopelessly, incurably alone.

She wasn't.

Many immigrants - especially Latinas - are navigating the same murky waters. **Like Estevez**, they come here to **find** better lives and instead meet up with homesickness, confusion and deprivation.

Their husbands or boyfriends - the partners who often serve as translators, protectors and breadwinners - are gone. Some leave through divorce or estrangement or death.

But a growing number have been deported, picked up during increasingly frequent Immigration and Naturalization Service raids. The men are sent back to their native countries, stranding their wives and children.

Social-service agencies in Philadelphia, Chester County, Reading and Camden say they field dozens of calls from women in need of food, housing and legal assistance because their husbands have been deported or detained by the INS.

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"It leaves families who are already impoverished destitute," said Anita O'Connor of La Comunidad Hispana in Chester County. "The emotional strains are dramatic. It takes a terrible toll on the entire family, to lose the person who's the main breadwinner and main decision maker."

The emotional turmoil caused by losing a partner is compounded by cultural barriers. They may not know English. They may have no work experience, no sense of how to navigate the bureaucracy of a new country. And they may be reluctant to seek outside help - a fear magnified if the woman is in this country illegally.

"There's a feeling of hopelessness, of not being able to help yourself," said Cherylle Corpuz of the Nationalities Service Center. "Women in this situation more often than not give up."

* Look at me, Josefina Widmeier likes to tell other women. I've been there, too, and I've survived.

"I've gone through divorce, death, custody problems, welfare problems, immigrations problems," explains Widmeier, a native of El Salvador. "I went through all that, and here I am, still here, still bettering my life. If I can do it, you can, too."

Like Miguelina Estevez, Widmeier was just 19 when she first came to the United States, as the young bride of an American soldier. She remembers herself as a starry-eyed teenager, eager for new adventures.

"Then I realized what I got myself into," she says now, 28 years later. "I was homesick, terribly homesick. I was isolated here. I had terrible depression."

Widmeier says she encountered language barriers and rechazo - rejection - because of her ethnicity. Still, she pressed on. She had no choice. Her parents would not accept a divorce or separation.

She had three children. She hung on through a marriage that she says was racked by her husband's alcoholism. Then, just as she seemed to be adjusting to life here, her marriage fell apart.

"I was back to where I started," says Widmeier, who remembers that she did not even know how to write a check. "My husband took care of everything. It was so hard, so frustrating."

Many times, she would lie in bed staring at the ceiling and wondering: "What do I do? Who do I call?"

Then she found El Centro Para La Mujer - the Women's Community Center - at El Congreso de Latinos Unidos.

There, in the basement of El Congreso's office building at Seventh Street and Girard Avenue, Widmeier found a support system and a doorway out of her depression. Three times a week, she gathers with other women to exchange stories, offer encouragement and learn skills.

Carmen Arroyo, who fled an abusive husband in Puerto Rico and came to Philadelphia with four young children, runs the center, which opened in March 1997. In its first year, it served 2,500 women, including immigrants from all over Latin America, Arroyo says.

El Centro also serves as a link to other services that El Congreso offers, including maternal and child health care, domestic-violence counseling, legal assistance, and job training. It offers those services in Spanish and with an understanding of the Latino culture.

"The connections here are connection of family - familia," said Lisa Cordeiro de Mello, a health director at El Congreso. "It's not just about language but about culture. We realize what people have to go through to access services with limited English and cultural barriers."

The day after Miguelina Estevez shot herself and her three sons, Cordiero de Mello stood with other Congreso workers as they read a newspaper article about the deaths.

"If only she had known about us," they murmured. "Maybe."

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Maybe they could have helped.

The same thought shuddered through the offices of many agencies that work with Latinos and immigrants. The case of Miguelina Estevez evokes the stories of many women who pass through their doors every day.

"We get a lot of calls from young mothers. There is a lot of need and not enough programs for us to help them," said Sara Mulero, legislative assistant for State Rep. Benjamin Ramos (D., Phila.).

Ramos' office led an effort to raise money to pay for the estimated \$6,000 in funeral expenses for Estevez and her sons. The four will be buried in Santo Domingo.

"This young girl, either no one was listening, or she didn't know how to go about getting help," Mulero said. "The tragedy is that the system is failing a lot of families."

And the number of families in need of help may be on the rise, advocates say. Even as the INS steps up workplace raids on undocumented workers, the immigration agency has made it harder for families to argue against deportation.

Financial hardship alone is not enough to receive a stay of deportation, said Carl Rusnok, a spokesman for the Philadelphia INS office. From October 1997 to August, there were 1,480 noncriminal deportations in the Philadelphia district.

* No one may ever know exactly what led Miguelina Estevez to her death.

She moved to the United States about five years ago from the city of Santo Domingo, family members said. Her father, two brothers and a sister live in the United States. Her mother remained at home.

According to relatives, Estevez lived for a while with the father of her children, Franklin Sanchez, 19, whom she had met in the Dominican Republic. Then she became pregnant with Franklin Jr., Frankelly and Fabian.

The pregnancy was difficult and the boys were born in delicate health, but Estevez seemed to thrive in the role of protective mother, friends say.

Shortly after the boys were born, Franklin Sanchez was deported, said Estevez's father, Miguel Estevez, who was at his daughter's house last week, cleaning up and retrieving her belongings.

Others say it was a recent breakup with Sanchez that caused Estevez's depression. Police say they believe Sanchez moved back to the Dominican Republic five or six months ago. But some neighbors say they saw him as recently as two weeks ago.

One friend told an Associated Press reporter that Estevez found another woman's underwear in her boyfriend's suitcase when he returned from a trip to Santo Domingo two months ago. When she confronted him, said the friend, Joycelyn Perez, Sanchez said he planned to marry the other woman and moved out.

In either case, Estevez, a tall, thin brunette with long, shiny hair and a toothy smile, seemed to be pulling herself through heartache and over obstacles skillfully. She had a monthly income of more than \$1,800, including welfare benefits for herself and SSI disability benefits for the three boys, who had been born with health problems, according to state welfare officials.

Last year, Estevez bought her small Feltonville rowhouse with a down payment of \$1,950. She was taking English and job-readiness classes and talked of finding employment. She received car fare and child-care money as part of her welfare benefits, so she could attend the classes.

A week before she died, Estevez visited her welfare caseworker.

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"Our worker noted that she seemed hopeful and on a good track toward employment," said Frederick Bostwick, director of community services for the Philadelphia County Assistance Office. "She knew how to present herself. She knew how to talk to people. She could navigate systems. . . . It's such a tragic story."

Underneath that veneer, however, Estevez was crumbling.

She began telling family and friends that she was depressed.

On Saturday, two days before her death, she asked a store owner for rat poison, saying she wanted to kill herself. When the store owner said she didn't have any, Estevez reportedly told her she would throw herself and her children in front of cars on Roosevelt Boulevard.

That Sunday and Monday, Estevez spoke with relatives by phone, telling them she felt alone and depressed. They urged her to see a doctor and made an appointment for her at a mental-health clinic for Wednesday.

But Wednesday was too late.

Somehow, Estevez got a pistol that had been purchased from an illegal gun trafficker earlier this year, officials say. Sometime before 1 p.m. on Monday, she put two of her sons on her bed and shot them in the head. She and the third boy were found on the floor, each with a gunshot wound to the head.

"She didn't get the help she needed," Miguel Estevez said. "If you know someone who needs help, go to their house and help them."

FOR MORE INFORMATION * Si necesita ayuda - if you need help - here are some places to call:

Congreso de Latinos Unidos:

719 West Girard Ave.

Philadelphia

215-763-8870

Comunidad Hispana:

223 Birch St.

Kennett Square

610-444-4545

Hispanic Family Center

425 Broadway

Camden

609-541-6985

Latina MOMobile:

2753 N. Fifth St.

Philadelphia

215-739-8600

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Graphic

PHOTO;

PHOTO

Miguelina Estevez could have been saved, social activists say.

By candlelight, Miguel **Estevez** sits before photographs of his triplet grandsons, (from left) Frankelly, Franklin and Fabian, and their mother. "She didn't get the **help** she needed," he said of his daughter. (For The Inquirer, RON CORTES)

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