

Precious yet troubling

Kingston Whig-Standard
August 1, 2009

In an upstairs apartment in the east-end suburb of Saint-Leonard, Maryann Moufrage is rummaging through her purse.

She is looking for something precious yet troubling.

It's a drawing by the eight-year-old daughter of the Shafia family, done after the recent funeral for the little girl's three older sisters and family friend who were found dead in the Rideau Canal at Kingston Mills.

"She told me about it. One sister was in the car and the rest were in the water," says Moufrage, beginning to cry.

On June 30, Zainab Shafia, 19, and her sisters Sahar, 17, and Geeti, 13, were found dead in a submerged car at the locks, along with 50-year-old Rona Amir Mohammed, their father's first wife.

Kingston police have charged the girls' parents, Mohammed Shafia and Tooba Mohammed Yahya, and their 18-year-old son, Hamed, each with four counts of first-degree murder and conspiracy to commit murder.

Moufrage retrieves the artwork from the bottom of her purse -- a folded piece of lined paper adorned with horizontal stick figures.

The little girl had given it to Moufrage's granddaughter. The two played together when the Shafia daughters would come to visit at Moufrage's apartment.

In the picture are a car with four stick figures, all lying down -- one who seems to be inside the car and three outside in the blue, wavy water. A fifth figure, perhaps driving the car, is drawn in darker, bolder lines.

Moufrage had immediately taken the drawing from her seven-year-old granddaughter.

She didn't want to have to explain the tragedy it depicted.

Moufrage knew all the members of the Shafia family. She liked them.

The younger girls, in particular, were regular visitors to her apartment.

The tragedy hurts. Moufrage has four daughters of her own and can't comprehend what happened or why.

"When she gave it to my granddaughter, she said ..." Moufrage stops, too emotional to continue. "You see, I couldn't even speak to her. I took her in my arms and said, 'Everything's going to be all right.' "

At the time, the three family members had not been charged with the murders.

A psychiatrist who is an expert in how children deal with traumatic events says kids often use play or artwork to make sense of tragedies in their lives.

"That's what all of us do. We're trying to make sense of it," said Peter Jaffe, a professor with the faculty of education at the University of Western Ontario. He is also director for the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children.

Jaffe said that if a child or adult has directly witnessed a traumatic event or even just heard about it, they may experience flashbacks that they cannot prevent.

"What's common for children is to express those feelings, either in their play or their artwork," he said. "What's different about children is as adults often we don't want to talk about it but kids have a need that's a much more obvious need than adults. All too often children are discouraged from talking about it."

Jaffe didn't want to discuss the eight-year-old's picture specifically.

"I wouldn't draw conclusions from a picture by itself without knowing more about the child," he said. "It's certainly a piece of a puzzle but you wouldn't want to draw conclusions from it."

Any child coping with the loss of family members, Jaffe said, will experience grief and the sense that the world is "a less-certain place."

"It's only when you get older you realize the world's not a predictable place. When you have a sudden event it takes away that sense of stability and security -- even moreso when you're dealing with a potential homicide, depending on what the kids hear," he said.

Jaffe said there is also "vicarious trauma" that will be experienced by people coming into contact with a horrific death or crime, including neighbours.

Revelations about the case have shocked and saddened the Montreal neighbourhood where the Shafias lived for two years.

One of the first neighbours to learn what had happened was Joyce Gilbert who lives in the basement apartment of the building on rue Bonnavet.

In a recent conversation on her patio, below the second-floor windows of the Shafia apartment, she recalled the turmoil of that fateful week.

Gilbert had been on vacation and returned home on June 30. On July 1, she went shopping in the morning and returned at noon. A female Montreal police officer approached Gilbert and asked her if she'd heard a noise overnight.

About half an hour after talking to the officer, Gilbert heard footsteps overhead in the Shafia apartment even though the family was supposed to be away.

When she went back outside, there were more police in the driveway of the multiplex. Across the street, Gilbert saw the father, Mohammed Shafia, looking "lost."

"I went to see him and ask him what happened," Gilbert recalled. "He said, 'Three of my daughters are dead and my cousin is dead.'

"A few of the neighbours came because I was crying."

Relatives of Rona Mohammed would later reveal that she was actually Mohammed Shafia's first wife, not his cousin.

"She was so nice. I never knew (she) was his wife," Gilbert said.

"They were angels, those girls. They were so sweet. To end their lives like that."

A day-care worker at the school that some of the Shafia children attended, Gilbert helped the family overcome language barriers. The family spoke mainly Farsi when they moved into the Montreal home. The children studied in French and Gilbert said they "learned very fast."

"All the papers they got in French, so I was translating for them, even with the landlord," said Gilbert.

She was upset when she heard that the parents and oldest son had been charged with murder.

"There's a lot of people that (are) very angry right now," Gilbert said. "Me, I'm not there yet. I'm sad for the kids and the lady who died and the kids who are left."

"I don't think a mom would do that to her kids. It's hard for me to imagine that."

In the upstairs apartment, Moufrage fetches a second tragic souvenir. She returns to the kitchen with a pair of heavy, gold-coloured earrings.

Rona Mohammed had visited one time, bringing cookies that they ate as they talked.

"I asked her, 'A beautiful girl like you, you're not married?' She just smiled and said, 'Maybe I'll find someone here (in Montreal),' recalled Moufrage.

Moufrage then complimented Rona on her earrings.

"She took them off and gave them to me," said Moufrage. "I feel so bad."

This week, the Whig-Standard learned that the oldest daughter, 19-year-old Zainab, was married to a man with whom she had recently broken up. On July 1, she was to have announced her engagement to a second young man.

Moufrage had talked to Zainab about a young man she assumed was her boyfriend. It caused a rift in the family this spring and Zainab disappeared for several days.

"I was shocked when she left," said Moufrage. "I'd see the police and I wondered what happened. When the father left to work out of town, she came back."

Moufrage said she had good relations with Mohammed Shafia, despite the language barrier.

"The father, I would call him Papa because I was mixed up with all the names," she said. "The last time I saw him I left for Ottawa and I left him my keys. I said, 'If you need to use the entrance, just move the car,' and he said, 'No problem.'"

The apartment building is quieter these days.

Maryann Moufrage said television images of the father, mother and son being led, shackled and handcuffed, into a Kingston courthouse still don't seem real.

She and other neighbours have seen the three surviving siblings and guardians occasionally entering the family's mid-level apartment, presumably to retrieve clothes and personal effects.

Moufrage recalled the conversation she had with the eldest surviving daughter who paid her a visit around the time of the funeral for the four women.

"She said, 'Do you think I'd ever forget?' I said, 'You'll never forget. I said, 'Allah will help heal your heart but never forget.'"