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**Capitol View**

**Commentary by J.L. Schmidt**

**Statehouse Correspondent**

**Nebraska Press Association**

**Don’t Say It Can’t Happen Here, Why We Need Community**

A gut-wrenching, confidence shattering crime happened in Laurel, one of many Nebraska communities of about 1,000 population where people are accustomed to leaving their doors unlocked and keys in the ignition.

Four people were shot and killed, in their homes, in the early morning hours by a suspect who allegedly set fire to both houses and suffered severe burns in the process.

Nebraska State Patrol Col. John Bolduc spoke of the “indescribable grief that this community is experiencing right now, compounded by the betrayal of trust that they're going to feel because a community member here is alleged to have committed these crimes."

Grocer James Roberts said “stuff like this doesn't happen in this town. Everybody here knows everybody. It's a tight-knit town. Everybody here is family."

Volunteer EMT Rachel Steffen said she has never felt unsafe in the small community.

“It’s the type of thing you see on a CSI movie, not something you see in your own town.

Police Chief Ron Lundahl spoke of three of the victims. “I called them friends all my life. Their kids were just a little bit younger than I was. We went to the same church for 50 years. That’s going to be a tough one for everyone here. Everyone knew them.”

Folks in the northeast Nebraska community said it was the first multiple murders since two people died in 1918

But it wasn’t the first time in Nebraska. Back in October 1975, six members of the Kellie family were murdered in Sutherland. Erwin Charles Simants, a reclusive unemployed alcoholic, then 29, was arrested the next day. Authorities said that after the Kellie murders, Simants had a beer at each of the town’s two taverns and then hid in the brush near the home just north of the community of 1,500.

***For Release Wednesday, August 17, 2022 – Page 2***

He was found guilty but received a new trial after it was learned the county sheriff had visited the jury during deliberations at a North Platte motel. He was found not guilty by reason of insanity at a second trial in Lancaster County and has been at the Lincoln Regional Center mental health hospital ever since.

Charles Starkweather of Lincoln was an American spree killer who murdered eleven people in Nebraska and Wyoming between December 1957 and January 1958, when he was 19 years old. He died in the electric chair in 1959. There’s never been a comparable incident in Nebraska history.

So, in a world where violence in general and gun violence specifically has increased, what do incidents like those in Laurel and Sutherland teach us?

Perhaps the lessons about personal safety are the most compelling. Lock your car, take your keys, lock your house, use motion and security lights and cameras (they really aren’t that expensive anymore). Pay attention. Get to know the normal routines of your neighbors so you can immediately recognize when something is “off.” Check in regularly on neighbors, especially if they are elderly.

Develop a sense of community, a feeling of fellowship with others sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals. There’s a reason people choose to live in small towns. Celebrate that.

But most of all, learn to care. It’ll take a while for Laurel to bounce back, but it will, and it will be safer and stronger.

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for more than 20 years*.