When Whitney French was about 3 years old, her mother, Eileen, took her and her baby sister, Lindsey, to see an Easter exhibit with a large pen full of bunnies. “As they were standing there enjoying the sight, Lindsey diverted Eileen’s attention for just a moment,” her father, Brent, said at a March 4 memorial for his daughter at the Jefferson Theater. “When Eileen looked up again, Whitney had somehow managed to break into the rabbit pen. She was standing there hugging a bunny and grinning from ear to ear.”

He continued speaking to the crowd of more than 500 people who attended the memorial for Whitney. “That is one of our favorite stories because it catches the very essence of Whitney. Not only was she precocious enough to defeat the double-latch mechanism, it epitomizes her ‘no boundaries,’ ‘live-life-to-the-full’ attitude, even from a very early age. It did not matter that nobody else was inside the rabbit pen. She was totally fearless, and there were cute little bunnies just beyond that fence. She did not hesitate for an instant to break in so she could love on them.”

Brent and Eileen—and countless friends, family and community members—are mourning the loss of Whitney, a bright, passionate, stylish 33-year-old daughter, sister to Lindsey and Alexander, and wife to Rafal Kalemba, who shot and killed her and then himself on February 26 in the bedroom of their home on Monticello Road.

Whitney French, 33, was the victim of a domestic-related homicide at the hands of her husband, Rafal Kalemba, who killed himself after murdering her in their Monticello Road home. Whitney’s parents and friends remember her as a strong, powerful woman, and in looking back on her life, her parents say there were no obvious warning signs of lethal domestic abuse, which occurs to three women in the U.S. every day.
Whitney’s world
On a recent evening, Brent and Eileen French sat on the back porch of their Dunlora home, slipping peanut-shaped treats to Whitney’s Australian shepherd, Zoey, who has required a little extra love since the loss of her owner.

“Whitney was a power woman,” her mom says. “She took care of things. She had her life in order. She got projects done on time, she organized amazing trips, she made amazing meals and she planned great parties.”

At her memorial, family, friends and co-workers spoke about each of those aspects of Whitney’s life. They couldn’t speak highly enough of the girl who prepared grilled radichio with yogurt tapenade for a potluck, often made bird calls, carried pretty flowers in her pocket and matched her nail polish to her shoes and earrings every day—perhaps most notably in a beautiful blue-sequined gown, dangling earrings and sparkling eyeshadow for Planned Parenthood Charlottesville Health Center’s ’80s prom, an event she helped create and ran for many years.

“The streamers, the balloon arch and the bright colors had Whitney’s name all over them,” said Becky Reid, a close friend whom Whitney met while working as a summer intern at Planned Parenthood, at the memorial. “But she had a hand in just about everything—she was a very hard worker with both the vision and the attention to detail to get things done and the results were never less than perfect. I still remember huddling over a shopping cart with Whitney late one night at Kroger as we tried to calculate how many tubs of Kool-Aid powder we’d need to make enough Purple Rain, one of the signature cocktails she’d created for the event.”

Talk to Whitney’s close friends—be they coworkers, neighbors or her WillowTree coworkers for lunch, only to bump into him on the Downtown Mall. “It wasn’t just the work,” says Eileen. “They’d been having problems. They had started going to counseling and I think he knew Whitney—that there was something else that was demanding her time.” Brent says. “We think maybe he saw that he was losing his grip on her.”

Then came marriage
Whitney married her high school sweetheart, Rafal KALEmba, in 2008 when she was 24 years old. His friends describe him as personable, intelligent and very skilled in his field; he worked at perfecting cybersecurity and surveillance technologies at General Electric in Richmond.

“A lot of people looked up to them,” Eileen says. “They were always together. They always cooked together and shopped together and spent their weekends doing fun things.”

But in December, her parents say Whitney had just received a request from someone in Japan who asked if he could translate her talk into Japanese.

“He [surprised] her one time at work,” says Eileen. “He threw a birthday party for himself in town Friday night (February 24). Whitney was worried about him coming and trying to argue with her, so she stayed with us that night. She didn’t say that she was really scared of him, she just wanted to avoid him.”

Her father adds, “And that’s as close to domestic abuse as we ever had any evidence of. That’s why this is really quite an atypical case as far as domestic violence is concerned, because there was no forewarning. The worst that Whitney anticipated was an argument she’d rather avoid.”

But in looking back, her parents say they have recognized some concerning signs.

“They also believe he was tracking her location for the last couple months of their lives, because often when he was supposed to be at work in Richmond, she’d leave the office with her WillowTree coworkers for lunch, only to bump into him on the Downtown Mall.”

“He [surprised] her one time at work,” says Eileen, when he showed up unannounced in her office, which is located in a locked building, around 5pm. “I guess, if you’re happily married, that might be a nice surprise, but it creeped her out. It [took] him until 6-something to get home from Richmond. He shouldn’t have been there.”

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Whitney replied that she’d be ready. But something horrific happened in that 40 minutes.

"I got there and she didn’t answer the door," Eileen says, so she let herself in the house. This is when she found Whitney and Rafal, both with gunshot wounds to the head and no pulse, lying about 10 feet away from each other. Rafal’s glasses lay broken beside him. So did the murder weapon.

Charlottesville police ruled Whitney’s death as a domestic-related homicide and her partner’s as a suicide. They found two cellphones on Rafal with various pictures and videos of his wife and her belongings on it—taken without her knowledge.

Rafal had taken pictures of the journal their counselor encouraged Whitney to use to write down any revelations about their marriage while deciding its fate. "Some things [in the journal] could have been a little hurtful," Eileen says, but not intentionally. Those were supposed to be Whitney’s private feelings.

Brent and Eileen say they know she kept the book in her purse, so Rafal must have taken it when she was in the shower or asleep. Another image on one of the phones appeared to be taken through the slots of a vent. In the home, Brent saw the air duct vent in the bedroom hanging. He reached inside and found a phone charging cord hardwired from the attic.

On the last day of her life, Sunday, February 26, Whitney spent time with family—she met her dad after breakfast to train for the Charlottesville Ten Miler they planned to run together and later they made a big lunch. She went home in the late afternoon. Eileen then texted her daughter around 6:30pm to say that she’d pick her up from her house at 7:10pm for a show they planned to see at the Paramount. Whitney replied that she’d be ready.

But something horrific happened in that 40 minutes.

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ARE YOU AT RISK?

Sometimes it’s obvious. Sometimes it’s not. If your partner does one or more of the following, you may be in a domestically violent relationship, according to the Shelter for Help in Emergency.

- Verbally insult, demean or threaten you
- Isolate you from friends, family or other people
- Organize schedules to follow or harass you
- Limit your mobility or access to money
- Explode into a rage and assault you physically or sexually
- Negate your words, abilities, ideas and actions
- Choke, punch, slap, kick or otherwise hurt you
- Excuse each attack and promise to stop

If you are in need of assistance, call the shelter’s hotline at 293-8509 or visit its website at shelterforhelpinemergency.org for more resources.

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Rafal Kalemba and Whitney French were high school sweethearts who married in 2008. Her parents say other couples looked up to them, but by the end of their relationship, something dark loomed under the surface. In February, Rafal shot and killed Whitney and then himself.

On the last day of her life, Sunday, February 26, Whitney spent time with family—she met her dad after breakfast to train for the Charlottesville Ten Miler they planned to run together and later they made a big lunch. She went home in the late afternoon. Eileen then texted her daughter around 6:30pm to say that she’d pick her up from
"We're really sorry that we couldn't protect her more," Eileen says. "We all have said we would have just left, just gone wherever we needed to go with her, just ripped our lives apart just to protect her. We didn't know that's what we needed to do, but we probably would have done it."

"We were essentially robbed of that opportunity," adds her father. "Our family feels especially betrayed by Rafal because he was sharing upbeat text messages and Facebook posts with us right up to that fatal Sunday evening. We cannot prove it yet, but he must have been intentionally misleading both his friends and family, so that we could never guess his true intent, nor how desperate he had become in those final days."

Rafal's parents did not respond to an interview request, and the Frenches say they haven't seen them since the event.

The larger picture

The number of American troops killed in Afghanistan and Iraq between 2001 and 2012 was 6,488. The number of American women murdered by current or ex male partners during that time was 11,766, as reported by the Huffington Post in 2014. That's three women every day.

In Charlottesville, 149 domestic violence incidents were reported in 2016, with an average of 144 per year over the past five years. That number was 701 in Albemarle County, which has averaged 636 annually since 2012.

At the Albemarle County Police Department, Chief Ron Lantz has stepped up doing detective work to specialize in investigating such incidents.

The department's investigator and local victim advocate organizations will review cases of abuse and contact survivors to offer services and discuss law enforcement options, according to ACPD Captain Sean Reeves, who adds that all officers are trained to respond and to investigate domestic violence.

The domestic violence investigator also works with the ACPD's victim witness program staff to review police reports and determine if a follow-up is necessary. He researches best practices of law and works with the commonwealth's attorney's office on relevant prosecutions.

At the Charlottesville Police Department, Officer Logan Woodzell filled a similar role in 2015. The position has since been cut due to staffing shortages, but any available detective is in to be assigned a domestic violence case, according to police spokesperson Steve Upman.

Domestic abuse victims are overwhelmingly female, but a local shelter and other resources exist for male victims, too. One of Woodzell's most notable cases, he says, was an instance where a man was being severely beaten by his wife, and when Woodzell introduced him to available services, the man thanked the officer for saving his life.

On average, Woodzell says it takes a seventh of time of being abused before a victim calls for help.

"A lot of low-income people have no problem calling the police," says Woodzell. "Higher-income people are sometimes afraid to call the police because they don't want their neighbors to see that the cops are there."

In February, Woodzell says the department wrapped up its first year using the Lethality Assessment Program, a strategy developed in Maryland to prevent domestic violence homicides and serious injuries. When law enforcement officers respond to a domestic violence-related call, the LAP gives them a series of questions to ask the victims, such as whether their partner stalks them or checks their e-mail and phone messages or has threatened them with a weapon before. Depending on their answers, the officer determines whether the victim is at a high risk of being in a lethal relationship.

From there, the officer asks the victim if she's willing to call the Shelter for Help in Emergency. If she agrees, the officer dials the number on his personal cell phone and sits with the victim while she's on the phone. A representative at the shelter will ask if she's in immediate need of assistance and details the services they provide.

In Virginia, if police are called to a domestic assault, they are required to make an arrest if there's probable cause, Woodzell says, so victims don't have to decide whether they'd like to press charges. "It takes the pressure off the victim when I say, 'I, Officer Woodzell, am pressing charges against you,'" he says. "Not your wife."

But a successful prosecution can still be tricky if the victim is intimidated, or in the "honeymoon stage," which is a calmer period where the abuser may become apologetic, beg for forgiveness or promise it will never happen again. That comes after the violent crisis phase in the cycle of violence.

Woodzell points to another shocking domestic violence fatality in Charlottesville, the high-profile killing of UVA student Yeardley Love in May 2010 by her on-again off-again boyfriend, George Huguely, who was charged with second-degree murder in 2012. He says police take this type of work seriously.

"We just want to help make sure everyone's safe," he says. "You get one life and you gotta live it full of love. Don't live it miserably."

The staff at the Shelter for Help in Emergency have the same mentality—that's why they offer a slew of resources, including temporary housing for domestic abuse victims and a 24-hour hotline.

Each year, about 1,200 people call the hotline and 200 women and children stay in the shelter, according to Sarah Ellis, SHE's fundraising and development coordinator.

Though she's only been with the shelter for six years, she's been in domestic violence victim advocacy for nearly 40 years.

The 23-bed facility is in a confidential location in Charlottesville. Residents have their own suites with a bed, dresser and bathroom, and special accommodations are made for any children they bring with them. The women in the shelter are offered counseling and services to help them get back on their feet, such as looking for a job or housing. Because it's an emergency shelter, they're limited to a six-week stay. Most women stay for about 16 days.

"I think people's perception of Charlottesville is of this lovely, peaceful place," Ellis says. "We're surrounded by beauty, the community seems very liberal and welcoming—and to think about this particular kind of violence in homes here is hard to imagine."

On the heels of Whitney's death, Ellis says she has heard from some of the 33-year-old's friends who are "understandably" very shocked. "They've told her that they couldn't believe a person like Whitney could be a victim of domestic abuse."

"She had a job, she was capable, she was in the community, she was helping," Ellis says. "She didn't look like the picture that many people have of a domestic violence victim, but it doesn't have a face. It can happen to all socioeconomic statuses, all races, all ages."

Ellis says there are warning signs to watch for in these types of relationships, though they don't necessarily apply to Whitney and Rafal's situation.

"Every case is different," she says. "Beyond the obvious, like noticing physical injuries or things like that, a typical sign would be some form of isolation. Somebody who was regularly in touch with friends and family, when she starts this relationship, or at some point into it, she starts being a little more isolated. She doesn't call so often."

"It's a very, very gradual process that she doesn't even recognize is happening, Ellis adds. Some women who do know it's happening choose to stay away. "They're hoping the situation might change," Ellis says. "And making big life changes is not always that easy." Add children, affordable housing and the abuser's threats into the mix and it can sometimes feel impossible to leave.

Though SHE declined to disclose the number of donations made in Whitney's name since her death, Ellis says they have been significant and she is extremely grateful for the generosity.

The Frenches have encouraged community members to donate to local organizations such as SHE, Sexual Assault Resource Agency, Help Save the Next Girl, Planned Parenthood and Hospice of the Piedmont in memory of Whitney.

And Whitney's mother has a message for anyone who may be experiencing early signs of domestic abuse: "You should never take it lightly."

It's worth noting that when the Frenches heard about the Lethality Assessment Program, they reached out to the shelter to see if they were able to help pay for it. "We were thrilled to see the positive feedback of gratefulness, " adds her father. "Our family feels extremely betrayed by Rafal because he was sharing upbeat text messages and Facebook posts with us right up to that fatal Sunday evening. We cannot prove it yet, but he must have been intentionally misleading both his friends and family, so that we could never guess his true intent, nor how desperate he had become in those final days."

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CHELSEA ESPOSITO