

BLATCHFORD'S TAKE

A desperate phone call, a lost file, brought this woman's story to its deadly, tragic close



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For the first time, a coroner's jury has heard the voice of Diane Anderson, who died in a fire along with two of her children.

A recording of the call Ms. Anderson made to Toronto Police on April 13, 2006, about nine months after the wrenching day her murdered fiancé, Leroy Whittaker, was buried while she was in hospital giving birth to their stillborn baby girl, Beautiful, was played for the five-member jury and coroner Dr. David Evans on Friday.

"I'm having a difficult time with me right now," Ms. Anderson told the police call taker, "and I don't, I, I don't think I'm able to continue."

"Continue what, ma'am?" call taker Catherine Mohan asked.

"Umm, taking care of my kids all on my own," Ms. Anderson said.

Minutes later, she said, "I've lost my fiancé and I had a child on the way and I lost my baby. And everything's just been going downhill and I am - I just - I don't feel like I'm, I'm, I can't, I can't cope. I can't, I can't cope any more."

In the background of the call, the source of her joy and the measure of her responsibility, was the din of some of her other kids alternately playing, chattering and crying.

She maintained her poise throughout - the Anderson women, as the jury has learned after hearing from Sophia, Ms. Anderson's sister, and Ieisha, her oldest child, are enormously dignified - but it was evident she was hanging on by the skin of her teeth. You could hear the tears in her voice and sense the steel harden in her spine as she forced them back.

Ms. Mohan, warm and sympathetic, asked if she could refer Ms. Anderson to victim services or if she'd like an officer to come by, but she replied that she'd tried the agency before and "they haven't been very helpful to me" and that she didn't want police at her Grandravine Drive house.

But she agreed in the end she would talk to victim services again, and later that night, a young counsellor named Brandy Lantz called her.

Ms. Lantz told the jurors that in addition to describing the twin blows she had suffered in the summer of 2005, when Mr. Whittaker was shot to death at his apartment - an act witnessed by Ms. Anderson's 10-year-old son - and Beautiful was stillborn, Ms. Anderson admitted she was having

"thoughts of ending her life, and that she had attempted suicide once in the past, by taking pills."

Ms. Anderson was very clear about a couple of things, Ms. Lantz said - how very much she loved her children and how overwhelmed and sad she was feeling.

Ms. Lantz offered to send an ambulance, but Ms. Anderson didn't want that because "she didn't want to leave her children." Unaware that she had already been referred to the trauma clinic at a downtown Toronto hospital, where she allegedly had difficulty getting through or at least getting concrete help, Ms. Lantz referred her to the clinic again.

She asked if she wanted a follow-up call, to see if she'd connected with the clinic, and Ms. Anderson said she did. One of Ms. Lantz's colleagues phoned back the next day, and left a message, and three days later, Ms. Anderson called the agency.

Ms. Lantz said she believed Ms. Anderson had "de-escalated" a little after their conversation, but "I wouldn't say she's not in crisis."

The young worker was sufficiently alarmed by the call that she phoned the Children's Aid Society of Toronto to report - not because she feared the children were at risk from their mother, but because she worried Ms. Anderson's abilities as a parent were deteriorating.

The jurors already have heard that through "human error," the record of that report, which should have prompted a response by Children's Aid within a week and probably sooner, was either never printed or never assigned.

It was "lost," a CAS official has testified.

While Ms. Anderson had been referred to various social service agencies immediately after Mr. Whittaker's slaying and the loss of her baby, this call to Toronto Police, and her subsequent discussion with Ms. Lantz, was surely her at her most naked - admitting she couldn't carry on, that she had tried suicide, that she was desperate.

This in effect constituted her official notice to the world that she was in deep trouble, that she who had managed a life of grinding poverty with so much grit was reaching the end of the line.

And what did the world do?

One agency phoned the next day; another lost the file.

The world yawned.

She hung on for 19 months more, drinking more heavily, not answering the phone or the door more often, leaning on her big daughter more and more.

On Dec. 22, 2007, as she slept on the futon she'd bought because she couldn't bear to sleep any longer in the bedroom she had shared with Mr. Whittaker, the littlest boys played with her lighter and accidentally started the fatal fire.

If only the world had tried as hard to save her as she tried to save herself.