

Six people murdered in Florida tragedy

David Walsh
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The murder last week of six young people in Florida is one more manifestation of the brutal character of American society, whose volatile tensions often find expression in this kind of horrific and anti-social act.

Four men, three of them 18 years old, are alleged to have bludgeoned and stabbed to death their victims in Deltona, Florida. According to local authorities, the killings were the outcome of a dispute over an Xbox video game system, which sells for about \$150, and a box of clothes.

The tragic sequence of events began when Erin Belanger, 22, of Lowell, Massachusetts, who rented a house in Deltona, arrived at her grandparents' summer home about five miles away and found a group of squatters living there. The squatters, among whom was the alleged ringleader of the murderers, 27-year-old Troy Victorino, quit the house, leaving some of their belongings behind. Several days later, Belanger or someone else reportedly took the video system and the clothes back to her house, while Victorino spent time in jail on a charge unrelated to his dispute with Belanger.

Over the next several days, the police were called numerous times to the grandparents' house and Belanger's rental house, one time over a tire-slashing incident.

The squatters told Belanger "they were going to come back there and beat her with a baseball bat when she was sleeping," according to the young woman's brother-in-law, Joe Abshire. He told the *Orlando Sentinel* that Erin and her boyfriend, Francisco Ayo Roman, were terrified by the threats. "She was afraid for her life. She said the police didn't take her seriously."

Police officials allege that Victorino and the three teenagers, dressed in black and wearing scarves to cover their faces, burst into Belanger's house around 1 a.m., Friday, August 6. They grabbed knives to stab their victims, but death resulted from beatings with

aluminum baseball bats. Belanger was apparently beaten so badly that she could not be identified from dental records. Volusia County Sheriff Ben Johnson told the press, "This is the worst thing that I've ever seen in my career. The brutal force used against the victims...It's indescribable."

The other victims were Roman, known as "Flaco," 30; Michelle Ann Nathan, 19, and her boyfriend, Anthony Vega, 34; Roberto "Tito" Gonzalez, 28; and Jonathan Gleason, 17. Gonzalez spent the night because he was planning to get up early with Vega for a painting job. Gleason, who had attended high school with Nathan, was staying at the house temporarily.

Three of the suspects have reportedly confessed to the killings and were arrested on charges of first-degree murder and armed burglary. They are being held without bail in the Volusia County jail. Prosecutors intend to press for the death penalty.

Hundreds of grieving students from Pine Ridge High School and Heritage Middle School gathered to pay tribute to the victims Sunday evening. Michelle Nathan and Jonathan Gleason were recent graduates of the high school.

The lives and circumstances of both the alleged perpetrators and the victims say a great deal about the prospects American society holds out for young people.

Victorino, 6-feet, 5-inches tall and weighing 272 pounds, has a history of violence. One of six children, born in a working class neighborhood of Deltona, Victorino was charged with grand theft of a motor vehicle and arson at the age of 15. He entered prison two days before his seventeenth birthday, and served three years. Eight weeks after his release, he nearly beat a 20-year-old community college student to death with a 4-foot-long walking stick. He spent another six years and one month in prison for this incident. In all, Victorino has spent eight of the last 11 years in prison.

Dan Washington, the father of Jerone Hunter, one of

the youths alleged to have participated in the killings, told the press, “He was a good kid, he just got with the wrong crowd. He never seemed to be that type...that was violent.”

The pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Rev. Todd Denoyer, told a reporter from the *Sentinel* that he had coached Hunter in football at Pine Ridge. “I had Jerome in my class. He said, ‘Yes, sir; no, sir.’ He was a polite kid. I feel for his family.”

Erin Belanger and Francisco Roman moved to Deltona in hopes of making a life for themselves. Belanger taught Roman English, and he—born in Puerto Rico—taught her Spanish. Family members told the *Lowell Sun* that Roman “was always smiling” and that his ambition was to become a nurse. The couple met while both worked in the kitchen at the Fairhaven Nursing Home in Lowell.

One of the birthplaces of American industry in the 19th century, Lowell is now a depressed mill town of 105,000 people, “plagued by alarmingly high rates of unemployment and poverty,” according to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Large, long-vacant textile mills sit alongside miles of canals on the banks of the Concord and Merrimack rivers. Seventeen percent of the population lives below the official poverty line, compared with 9.3 percent for Massachusetts as a whole. The median household income is \$39,192.

Erin’s father, Bill Belanger of Hudson, New Hampshire, told the press that his daughter and her boyfriend wanted to be where the weather was milder and the cost of living cheaper. He bought them a pair of airplane tickets for Florida in March and gave them whatever money he could afford. “They loved each other. Flaco took very good care of her. They were good kids. They didn’t deserve to die.” Members of the two families were grieving together at the house of Roman’s older brother in Lowell.

Belanger commented further, “I have nothing but praise for Flaco. I would have been very proud to call him my son-in-law.”

Belanger and Roman rented a three-bedroom house in Deltona with grapefruit and orange trees in the backyard. But their economic prospects did not immediately improve. Both got jobs at Burger King.

Ironically, the median household income in Deltona

is \$39,736, only \$700 more than in the Massachusetts town. The unemployment level is considerably lower than in Lowell, however, indicative of the type of low-wage employment available in this “working class bedroom community” of 75,000, located almost midway between Daytona Beach and Orlando, the home of Disney World.

Deltona only came in existence in the mid-1960s as a subdivision marketed “to senior citizens looking for the ideal place to retire,” according to the town’s official site. By 1970, the area had 4,000 residents and a median age of 62.

“Subsequent to the development of Disney World, and the growth of the regional population, the marketing scheme changed and residential lots were sold to broader interests. ... A housing boom occurred in the 1980s,” and by 1990 the average age of the 51,000 Deltona residents was 35. The per capita income for the city is presently only \$16,648, and 8.1 percent of the population lives below the federal government’s official poverty line.

All six of the victims of last Friday’s murder worked, or had worked, at Burger King. Michelle Nathan and Anthony Vega met at the fast-food restaurant. Vega moved into the three-bedroom house two weeks before his death. Steve Nathan, Michelle’s father, had only recently met Vega at his house in Sanford, Florida. He told a reporter, “I was always proud of her. I trusted her judgment.” Gleason, a 2004 high school graduate, was an aspiring actor and dancer. He would have been 18 August 10. Gonzalez had left his 7-year-old daughter in the Bronx a few months earlier with the aim of establishing himself in Florida. He evidently hoped to get a job as a cable television technician.

The killing spree was the deadliest in Florida since June 1990, when a man whose car had been repossessed randomly shot eight people to death at a General Motors Acceptance Corporation office in Jacksonville, before shooting himself.



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