

Victim takes stand against violent crime

Woman, 28, stalked for 14 years after being spotted singing in choir

By CINDI HERR
cherr@thecherokeescout.com

After 14 years of living in paranoia, Charlene Cutshaw Rickett is finally breathing a sigh of relief, largely due to help she received from the Victim Advocate Program of the Cherokee County Sheriff's Office.

INSIDE
■ More on the Victim's Advocate Program. 7A.

Rickett, 28, has been a stalking victim since she was 14. The strange thing was that Rickett had no previous relationship with her stalker before the crime began, said Brandi Watkins, program administrator.

"It's a heinous case," Watkins said.

She served as Rickett's advocate throughout the process. Rickett said she could not have gone through the ordeal without Watkins and the program.

Her ordeal begins

Rickett's stalker, Rickey Wayne Cope, 44, first spotted her when she was singing in a church choir during a revival. She did not even speak to him.

"He just zoned in on me," Rickett said. "He became engrossed with me. He would show up at my house, at school, follow me, and throw rocks at my car and say he was 'casting his love' at me."

Frightened and embarrassed,

"He would show up at my house, at school, follow me, and throw rocks at my car and say he was 'casting his love' at me."

— Charlene Cutshaw Rickett

Rickett did not know what to do. She and her family sought help from law enforcement, but were told nothing could be done since Cope had not harmed her.

Then Cope showed up at her house, covered in fake blood, when she and her sister were not home. When her mother opened the door, he said, "Do you want to know where your children are?" Rickett said although the event terrified her family, it was enough to get a restraining order on him.

Marriage angers stalker

When she married, Cope started making harassing phone calls to her, her husband and her family.

"He thinks we're married, and he says I'm living in sin with another man," Rickett said.

The calls got worse after she had a child. He even called her 94-year-old grandmother and harassed her, trying to find out information about Rickett.

Then came the letters and cards. In 2004, Cope sent her a card for Valentine's Day, written "to my wife." The next month, she received a letter containing a Bible verse taken out of context.
see VICTIM, 7A

Victim: Stalker incarcerated

continued from 1A

text that alluded to her child.

"That really flipped me out. I took the card and the letter to the police. They went to ... where he worked and told him to leave me alone," Rickett said.

But Cope did not heed the warning. He sent a third letter, this one saying he had called the Federal Bureau of Investigations and told them to enforce a "blue law," which he said involved her living outside of marriage with another man.

In the nick of time

One day Cope called Rickett's uncle, who mistook him for someone else and told Cope where Rickett lived. Rickett's dad found out just in time and was able to head him off before he arrived at her house.

Cope was jailed for various violent offenses related to drunk and disorderly conduct.

While in jail, Cope called what he believed to be Rickett's number and threatened to kill her and her husband.

With help from Watkins and

Deputy Todd White of the sheriff's office, Rickett was finally able to press charges in court.

No longer a victim

Cope is serving time in a state correctional institution for various crimes, including stalking, communicating threats, malicious conduct, driving while impaired, trespassing, uttering forgery, assault on a police officer, damage to property, and drunk and disorderly charges. He could be released as early as June.

Rickett said she hopes it is finally over after enduring many hardships through the years. She had to have an expensive security system installed at her home, her child cannot play on certain parts of the school playground, and she missed a lot of work and time with her family during the trial.

"People say, 'Poor Rickey, he's not going to hurt anybody.' But I don't want to be the one that he does hurt, or [my family]," Rickett said. "I hope he's got the picture now and knows we're not joking. We really want him to leave me alone."

Details

■ Call the Cherokee County Sheriff's Office at 837-2589.

Program supports local crime victims

By CINDI HERR
cherr@thecherokeescout.com

Imagine a society where as much care is given to victims of crime as to the offenders themselves.

Thanks to the progressive Victim Advocate Program, that is just what the Cherokee County Sheriff's Office has been doing for more than two years.

The program was launched in 2004 under the supervision of program administrator Brandi Watkins.

The program is primarily funded by a \$75,000 implementation grant from the Office of Victims of Crime, part of the U.S. Department of Justice. When the grant runs out this year, it will be funded by the sheriff's office.

It is one of only 10 such programs in the nation, and has earned regional awards and was nationally recognized as a model for other departments to follow.

Although several other local organizations provide similar services to victims of domestic

and violent crimes, this program features the only response team that is dispatched by law enforcement, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

"The sheriff gives equal weight to both sides of the crime," Watkins said.

Adding more to the program's uniqueness is the focus on the victim, not just the perpetrator.

On-call members of the victim advocate team arrive at the scene of a crime alongside deputies, ready to provide support.

Since its inception, the program has grown from Watkins and one volunteer, sheriff's office chaplain Alan Wildsmith, to two paid staff, an intern and nearly 20 volunteers. The program also has three unmarked squad cars, each fully equipped with child seats, stuffed animals, informational brochures, digital cameras and bulletproof vests.

"We're trained to be on the scene at a moment's notice," Watkins said. "If it's a really bad call, we send an advocate for every



CINDI HERR/Cherokee Scout

Victims advocates from the Cherokee County Sheriff's Office – including staff members Stephanie Thompson, Brandi Watkins, and intern Joyce Bernier (from left) – are on-call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to assist local victims of violent crimes.

family member. We equip them with the knowledge and resources necessary to get through the crime and the recovery."

Advocates assist victims every step of the way, from the crime scene to continued support after the case. Staff member Stephanie Thompson said many victims do not know the number of options available to them.

"It's nice to think you can help

them through the process, to see something good come out of a bad situation," Thompson said.

The victim advocate program works cooperatively with the district attorney's office, the Department of Social Services, REACH, Guardian ad Litem, the HAVEN children's advocacy center and other local counseling agencies to provide the best services.

For details, call 837-2589.