

GTA: Fear keeps residents from helping dying woman in dangerous neighbourhood

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Woman's cries ignored as she freezes to death:

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Kuguthasan Kanagaratnam at his home with his wife

Kalaivany, background. Kalaivany was the first person on scene while delivering newspapers outside a house on Kennaley Cres., where a woman with dementia froze to death near her Scarborough home early Monday. **ANDREW**

WALLACE/TORONTO STAR Curtis Rush Staff Reporter

It was 5 a.m. Monday and, with a wind chill plunging to **-28C** overnight, a woman delivering newspapers noticed a couple of police cruisers circling a quiet Scarborough street.

She soon found out why.

As Kalaivany Kugathan, 35, crossed Kennaley Cres. and dropped off a Toronto Star at one residence, she turned up the sidewalk and was stopped in her tracks by a body blocking her path on the darkened sidewalk. (...)

"I was scared," she told the Star from her home later in the day. She frantically phoned her husband and then flagged down the police cruisers. (...)

Police found a woman's body, with her coat and eyeglasses a few steps away, lying face up on the sidewalk between the two cars — more than three hours after her husband noticed her absence a block away on Cleadon Rd.

Her body was so frozen that paramedics had trouble doing chest compressions.

However, nothing could be done.

She was pronounced dead in hospital at just past 7 a.m.

Police have not identified the victim, other than to say she was 66 and had been suffering from dementia.

Police say the husband noticed his wife wasn't in bed at 2 a.m. and got worried an hour later when she was still missing. After conducting his own search of the neighbourhood, he called police at 4:45 a.m.

A haunting aspect of this case is that police say two residents ignored cries or screams for help.

Police found dirt marks around a car door, leading them to believe the woman tried to get inside the vehicle. There were also indications she tried to open a screen door of a home.

Why didn't neighbours call police?

"They didn't call police because they said it was a dangerous area and they didn't want to get involved," Toronto police Sgt. David Dube told the Star about reports from front line officers.

"It's sad because this could have been a totally different outcome."

Is this truly a heartless neighbourhood, with residents unwilling to help each other?

Those who spoke to the Star denied this.

George Cheang said he would have called had he known it was a tragedy unfolding across the street. At 3 a.m., he was awoken by "yelling or arguing" he said.

"I thought it was a family argument or perhaps some partying or drinking going on." He went back to sleep.

Cheang said the Scarborough neighbourhood is friendly.

"They can think what they want to think. Neighbours always say, 'Hi,' to each other and we often borrow from each other, things like tools," he said.

At the house where the woman's body was found, Arthur St. Bernard, 61, said he can't understand why people wouldn't have phoned 911. Even though she was found right in front of his house, St. Bernard says he didn't hear a thing.

Several years ago he saw a mugging on the street, and a couple of years ago he saw somebody trying to break into a car at around 3 a.m.

"I called police at that time," he said. In this case, "I'm not saying she should have been let in, but people should have at least phoned 911."

Others say the Rosewood community meets occasionally to discuss the importance of reporting suspicious behaviour.

Said one neighbour about the meetings: "We watch over each other."

Community activist Valerie Plunkett said, "For people to say that Rosewood does not care is not true."

Plunkett founded the Rosewood Taxpayers' Association "to bring the community together" and retired in October as co-chair of the Community Police Liaison Committee.

"This is tragic," she said. "This is not the normal thing that would have happened."

Police said an autopsy will be conducted, but it's believed the cause of death is hypothermia.