

Mother's woes are no explanation for killing kids



ANNE MOSER-KORNFELD

The police in Union, S.C., doubted Susan Smith's carjacking story from the beginning. Their suspicions finally to the discovery of her submerged car with her sons drowned and still strapped in their safety seats. Her husband never questioned her claim and said she was a "devoted" mother to 3-year-old Michael and 14-month-old Alex.

Had a survey been taken in the days just after the disappearance of the boys, the response probably would have reflected that women, particularly mothers, knew that Susan Smith killed her children. Men, and fathers, may not have been quick so to point the finger.

The story shakes the foundation of many parents' belief systems. Most parents put their children's lives above all else. Their children matter more to them than money, prestige, anything.

However sensational and disheartening it may have been, the media coverage of this story allows Michael and Alex to have a voice denied them by their mother and to ask the question, "Mommy, why are you

doing this?"

The most shocking elements about what Susan Smith did to her children derive from that question. In stories reported shortly after the discovery of the boys' bodies, Susan Smith said her son Michael told her the evening of the drowning that he loved her so much. Most 3-year-olds feel free to express emotions of love and devotion to their parents, especially to their moms. Susan Smith's emotional needs were not met, and for her it was too little, too late. The boys did nothing wrong and yet they paid with their lives.

Looking carefully at the photograph of the two brothers seated together, I see pain, fear, and sadness showing through the older boy's expression. Sadly, no one in Union approached the family or discussed their inner turmoil to prevent the boys from being murdered.

The unhappiness evolving in their private lives brings up issues central to the greater understanding of society. Social policy-makers can consider gender roles, parenting and couples relating to one another more closely in light of this tragedy.

Raising two children who are younger than 3 years of age challenges any parent. Single parents are doubly burdened, even when as in Susan Smith's case, family support existed, and the boys' father or friends could be turned to for help. The pressures of money, her children's seemingly endless demands and her expectations conjured a horrible brew that led to the needless

deaths of two beautiful, healthy children.

Susan Smith is a young woman, a young mother who probably was not ready for motherhood and certainly not prepared to be on her own. Her situation supports family planning and women being in control of their reproductive rights. The boys had a right to life. It was taken from them by the person they most trusted, who never should have considered motherhood if she didn't know what it meant to be a mother.

She didn't even know enough to just speed past the boat ramp, drive hysterically, if need be, to the nearest house she saw, stop the car and get as far away from the boys as possible. Going crazy and taking it out on herself would have made more sense than abusing her power as a parent and destroying her children's lives. She had an obligation as the boys' mother to protect those children, even from herself. This is a key element to raising children in mentally sound and secure environments.

Mothers are usually burdened with the great responsibilities of child care and child rearing. There are times when kids drive moms nuts and when moms want to act drastically. Still, killing a child is extreme, and there's no rationalization, psychiatric or otherwise, to explain why a mother would act in such a manner.

Forensic experts refer to the predator/prey relationship of assailants and their victims.

Michael and Alex got in the way of the one adult who was around them the most. Susan Smith received a letter from her boyfriend telling her he was not ready for a ready-made family. Smith felt her children were an obstacle to her maintaining a relationship so she eliminated them.

They were easy prey, and in her demented mind, she thought she'd find love by getting rid of the boys. Blaming the boys' father may also have contributed to her actions. By drowning Michael and Alex, she could attack their father in ways she felt powerless to when after

they separated.

It's really impossible to know why two children, who never had a chance to live out their lives, had to die. Psychologists will study Susan Smith throughout her incarceration, and she'll become one of those well-documented crazies society wishes would explain themselves.

The boys can't be brought back to life. I hope, down the road, that there will be a remedy to prevent a similar event from happening to other children.

Anne Moser Kornfeld is a columnist for the Emerald.

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