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'Honoring our past, creating hope for the future'



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The Suffolk Commonwealth's Attorney's Office and its Victim/Witness Services program are inviting citizens to tie ribbons in recognition of Crime Victims' Rights Week, Child Abuse Prevention Month and Sexual Assault Awareness Month.

Throughout April, ribbons may be tied on the trees in the courtyard of the Godwin Courts Building on North Main Street, as well as on the trees in front of Suffolk Police Department Precinct 2 at 3901 Bridge Road. People are also encouraged to wear blue Monday in support of victims' rights.

Ribbons can be picked up at the Commonwealth's Attorney's Office in the Godwin Courts Building from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. Participants may also make personalized ribbons in honor of friends and loved ones.

Commonwealth's Attorney Phil Ferguson and Victim/Witness Services Director Diane Bryant will also place a memorial wreath in remembrance of the lives lost to violent crime in the city. This public ceremony will take place at 3 p.m. Thursday in the Godwin Courts Building courtyard.

Ferguson, Bryant and Deputy Commonwealth's Attorney Marie Walls accepted the proclamation in recognition of Crime Victims' Right Week at the Wednesday City Council meeting.

"We invite all citizens to join us as we tie ribbons on the trees in the courtyard in support of our neighbors, family members or friends who may have been impacted — and sometimes forever altered by crime," Bryant said at the meeting.

The theme this year is "honoring our past, creating hope for the future." This is also what Amy Turner and her family strove for after the tragic loss of her parents, Jean M. Mitchell, 77, and Robert E. Mitchell, 81, a few years ago.

The Mitchells died within about a day of each other after their passenger vehicle collided with a tractor-trailer on Dec. 2, 2016. The crash occurred on Route 58 westbound just before the Wilroy Road exit.

In a phone interview, Turner described her parents as the foundation of the family. They raised her and her sister, Robin Phelps, as devout followers of Christ at Millfield Baptist Church in Wakefield. Her mother loved gardening, and her father would often work right beside her on their farm in Ivor.

Turner's father played the piano, guitar, organ — pretty much anything he could put his hands on, she said. Her mother was the singer, and she still has a Portsmouth Choral Society recording of one of her mother's solos, dated 1969-1970.

"They were both just amazing people, and the world is diminished quite a bit without them," Turner said.

Jemar Tarik Hall, who was driving the tractor-trailer, was indicted on two charges of involuntary manslaughter in June 2017. After a bench trial in Suffolk Circuit Court in October 2018, he was acquitted of both charges and found guilty only of reckless driving.

According to the Suffolk News-Herald report, Hall testified that he followed in his father's footsteps as a truck driver and was excited when he got his commercial driver's license. But he stopped driving immediately after the accident.

"I didn't intend for anything like this to happen," he said during his sentencing hearing on January 25. "Not a day goes by I don't think about that."

Circuit Court Judge L. Wayne Farmer called the crime a "tragic error," according to the report, but said Hall should serve time because he operated a tractor-trailer recklessly.

"Crimes punish conduct, not outcomes," he said at the hearing. "Very small offenses can have extraordinarily horrible consequences."

In their interactions with Hall, Turner said that she and her family wanted to honor her parents by acting according to how they were raised, which was to believe in Jesus and His forgiveness.

She said that Hall had apologized to her family and was openly remorseful of his actions. While there needed to be restitution for what had happened, she and her family held no animosity toward him, she said.

"It was just a bad decision, and it ended up costing the lives of my mom and dad," she said.

Ferguson said at the City Council meeting on Wednesday that it's important to remember that the pain of these crimes lingers long after a verdict is rendered.

"That's why we will continue to recognize those people and those families on a regular basis, to show that they have not been forgotten, and even though the (criminal) case may be over, that doesn't mean that their hurt is still not present," he said. "We want to do everything we can to make them know that we're still thinking about them, that we still care about them and that we're always there to try to do whatever we can to ease their burden in some way wherever possible."

The same holds true for victims of sexual assault. Kristen Pine, chief programs officer for YWCA of South Hampton Roads, described sexual assault as the most underreported crime in communities across the nation, which heightens the necessity of recognizing Sexual Assault Awareness Month.

"It is an incredibly traumatic event that victims carry for the rest of their lives," Pine said Tuesday in an interview at the Suffolk Commonwealth's Attorney's Office.

At the City Council meeting this week, Walls spoke as part of the Juvenile and Domestic Relations team, dealing with crimes such as child abuse and sexual assault.

She said that one in seven boys and one in three girls will be victims of sexual assault, and in most cases, family members, friends of the family or someone that they know and trust are the perpetrators. Recognizing Child Abuse Prevention Month, she said, is about building trust with these victims to give them the support they need.

"We have to gain their trust so that they can trust in us and in the court system," Walls said, "so on behalf of our office we thank Mayor (Linda) Johnson, the vice mayor and all the members of council for giving us the ability to be the voice of the children."

For more information on the remembrance ribbons, call Bryant at 514-4373. For Suffolk Victim/Witness Services call 514-4366, and for the Suffolk Commonwealth's Attorney's Office call 514-4365. Victims of abuse can contact the Regional Crisis Hotline at 251-0144.

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