

ISP: Mother shot children, self at family's home Friday in Spicertown area of Austin

Written by Marty Randall

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An Austin police officer dispatched late on Friday afternoon, January 21, to check on the welfare of a family in the Spicertown neighborhood found a scene that defied belief.

Lt. Shawn Hurt had been sent to the home on New York Street because family members could not contact Amanda Leigh (Todd) Bennett, 30, and her three children, 14-year-old Jasmine Marie, nine-year-old Katelyn and four-year-old Ryan Matthew.

The officer said he smelled what he perceived to be burned material. He broke the door to gain entry, and, through use of a flashlight, found a portion of the interior burned and one body. Lt. Hurt called his superior, Major/Detective Lonnie Noble, to the scene. Using a larger light, Det. Noble discovered the woman and her children in the home. All were dead, apparently from gunshot wounds to the head. The family dog was curled beside Amanda Bennett. It too had been shot but was still suffering. It was taken to a local veterinary clinic, where it is recovering.

Det. Noble called Indiana State Police as well as the Jennings Township Volunteer Fire Department and the Scott County Coroner's Office. Scott County Prosecutor Jason Mount was also notified, and officers with the Sheriff's Department arrived to help at the scene as well.

Police were on the scene for many hours in that quiet neighborhood, collecting evidence. Staff of the Indiana Fire Marshal's Office also assisted. Neighbors stood in the cold and watched the barricaded crime scene as technicians came and went. The four bodies were removed that evening and sent to the Kentucky Medical Examiner's Office in Louisville.

At that facility, autopsies conducted Saturday morning, January 22, pinpointed the cause of death of the victims. Although all did have gunshot wounds to the head, only Jasmine and Ryan died before the residence was set afire. Causes of death for both Katelynn and Amanda were determined to be not only their head wounds but also smoke inhalation.

What has been pieced together by authorities thus far paints a picture of a family in turmoil. Amanda Bennett had filed for divorce from husband John on January 10 in Scott Superior Court. He was living apart from the family at that time. Her alleged recent message to friends on an Internet website indicates that she felt she had little for which to live.

The most recent news release from ISP Public Information Officer Sgt. Jerry Goodin verified what the family's relatives and friends feared; Amanda had allegedly taken a gun and shot her children and their dog, started the fires that she apparently hoped would burn down their home and then shot herself.

"It's a horrible, horrible situation, and no words can be put together that can explain this tragedy," stated Sgt. Goodin.

Prosecutor Mount stated that he did not anticipate any criminal charges being filed posthumously in the case.

Jasmine Abbott will be remembered by her friends as a bubbly, attractive girl who enjoyed school. Teachers said she was always surrounded by friends. She was a freshman at Austin High School.

Her little sister, Katelynn, was quieter but most affectionate and also a good student. She was a fourth grader at Austin Upper Elementary School.

The girls' little brother, Ryan, loved sports and going to pre-school at Austin Elementary.

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Their mother was described as a good mom, someone who watched out for the welfare of her children and other youngsters in the westside neighborhood.

Extra counselors were at Austin schools on Monday, January 24, to help students with their grief. Some students who were friends with the children stayed home that day, it was reported.

Visitation for the four was conducted on Tuesday, January 25, at Scottsburg First Christian Church. Their combined funeral service will be held at 11 a.m. today (Wednesday) at the church. The Rev. Robert Flynn will officiate. A private burial in a cemetery near Underwood will follow.