

# Widower crusades for change

**Michael Butler now lobbies for greater protection from violent offenders**

**Elise Stolte, The Edmonton Journal**

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EDMONTON - With his wife dead and his brother in police custody waiting to be charged, Michael Butler sat down with a friend's phone book to call every MLA listed.

Last April, the 27-year-old faced the media and an uncertain future with dark circles under his eyes, but through it all he never appeared to stop. Over the following days and weeks, he met every official and politician he could, begging for more services to help drug addicts and more power for police to hold potentially violent offenders.

Now, one year since Stephanie was killed, Michael has already run for the New Democrats in the provincial election and has been asked to run for the party federally.



"The solution I came up with is, I'm going to be positive," he said.

"I think I'm doing my best."

Michael owns a small business installing hardwood floors and has a diploma in graphic design from MacEwan College. He plays on a basketball team he started with friends, and was in Red Deer for a tournament on April 6, 2007.

That weekend, his 25-year-old wife, an assistant in the Human Resources department at the Grey Nuns hospital, made a last minute decision to stay in home, in the couple's newly renovated bungalow in Mill Woods.

Butler started to worry when she didn't answer the phone Friday night, or Saturday morning.

He called her father, Doug Mah Poy, to check on her and Mah Poy called back Saturday evening, while Michael was eating dinner with friends.

Nibil Ajaj watched him pick up the phone. "When I heard his tone of voice change, I knew right away something bad had happened.

"He screamed out, 'My wife's dead, my wife's dead.' Then he just got up and ran."

Ajaj tried to follow but Michael jumped in his car and took off for Edmonton.

Friends were waiting when he arrived and got out of his car and sprinted toward the house. Police grabbed him before he broke through the crime-scene tape. He collapsed to the ground, then sat numb in the back of the police car on the way to the station.

"He really loved Stephanie," Ajaj said. "He really wants something to come out of all of this."

Many of Michael's friends stopped in that Saturday night. They went along Monday when he approached Mayor Stephen Mandel and Solicitor General Fred Lindsay, then again on Tuesday when he gained an audience with police Chief Mike Boyd.

"This guy's got some guts and a lot of heart," said Derek Abdoud, who helped manage the hardwood floor installation company last spring and summer.

"It's like when he plays poker, he's all in. Mike doesn't really give up," he said. "I'm always worried. I just hope he gets that closure."

Michael Butler grew up in Edmonton. When his parents divorced in the early '90s, he and his younger brothers, Ken and William, stayed with their mother.

Five years ago, Ken set fire to the basement of their family home and was later diagnosed with schizophrenia, said his mother, Shirley Schuster. She and William moved with her aunt; Michael and Ken moved into an apartment together.

Michael said after his brother became addicted to crystal meth, he tried three times to take him in for treatment, but each time there was no space available or Ken would be admitted, then walk out. The treatment centre had no legal right to hold him.

Eventually, Schuster sought a restraining order against her son and she and Michael bought him a house in Regina.

They didn't hear from Ken until late last March, when he called Michael to ask if he could live with him. Michael said no. Ken called again from the downtown Greyhound station a few days later, asking for a ride to Michael's home. He said no again.

Then Ken showed up at the couple's home in Kiniski Gardens, banged on the door and asked to come in. Michael called police, and because Ken was wanted on several warrants, officers brought him to the station.

That was on Wednesday. A justice of the peace ordered his release the next day on \$300 cash bail and the condition that he stay away from his brother's house.

Michael left for his basketball tournament at 8 p.m. on Friday.

Two hours later, a man several doors down from Michael Butler's house looked out his front door and saw Pavan Chohan, a cab driver, severely beaten and gasping for air.

No one found Stephanie's body until Saturday, when her father stopped by to check on her. Autopsy results show she died from a blow or several blows to the head.

Police charged Ken Butler with the aggravated assault of the cab driver and the second-degree murder of Stephanie.

He has been ordered to stand trial but has so far reserved his plea. His trial has not yet been scheduled.

After his wife's death, Michael Butler spent weeks making almost daily trips to the provincial legislature.

"You pass a lot of MLAs on the stairs," he said recently, giving a tour of his usual haunts. "I met (then Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing) Ray Danyluk this way, and (Premier Ed) Stelmach, too, actually."

Danyluk agreed to sit down with Michael, as did about fifteen other MLAs, he estimates.

He would spend a week at a time sitting through question period. Then he'd head down to the wood-paneled legislature cafeteria and sit down across from any MLA who looked open to talking.

"He's a very intense, but very articulate young man," said former New Democrat MLA Ray Martin. "I really do hope he continues. I really think he could have a bright future. He has all the credentials."

When the election loomed, Michael signed up with the Alberta New Democrats and ran in Edmonton-Rutherford, coming in third with 10 per cent of the vote.

The federal New Democrats have asked him to run in Edmonton-Sherwood Park, though his home riding of Edmonton-Mill Woods-Beaumont may also be open.

Shirley Schuster was worried about her son at first, but "when he got involved in the political aspect, I felt better," she said.

Since Stephanie's death, Michael has gone for counselling several times with her parents, bought a motorbike and joined friends on trips to Cuba, Mexico and to Hawaii twice.

He spent half of Stephanie's life insurance on the trips and the election campaign. "The way I see it, I was investing in my soul more than anything else," he said.

The Saturday night when his life changed, after he got back from the police station, he spent nearly four hours sitting in a parked car with four friends, just talking.

"Things happen for a reason," he said, looking back. "This had no reason. Finally I knew the only reason for this happening had to be the one that I made."

When the sun came up on Sunday, he started calling politicians.

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