

THE BOSTON GLOBE • TUESDAY, MARCH 28, 1995

Woman fends off stalker with lawsuit

Court victory sets precedent to fight privacy invasion

Continued from Page 1

for instance. "We can pursue him indefinitely," Knowles said of Slaughter, who has moved back to Virginia, where he lived before he came to Maine and where he had compiled a frightening record of abuse against women, including a murder charge.

Olivia Hilldon, executive vice president of Washington's National Criminal Justice Association, said that Knowles' strategy in attacking Slaughter is "consistent with the creativity states are going to have to use to deal with this problem."

The approach can be used even as criminal complaints are being lodged and it may be catching on elsewhere. Similar civil lawsuits are pending in Texas and Oregon.

Stinson's victory in court on March 17 overcame arguments from Slaughter's attorney, David Van Dyke, that she concealed the case against his client as a cover for what he called her "Marty little secret" — that Stinson was in love with a woman and was meeting in with her. Van Dyke implied to the Cumberland County Superior Court jury that Stinson, 32, was using the lawsuit to keep her family from knowing about her private life.

The jury deliberated for two hours before ruling that, even without physically harassing Stinson, Slaughter had caused her intentional harm and violated her right to privacy. While the individual incidents of Slaughter's stalker's repeated telephone calls, slashed tires, doors glued closed — were not enough under Maine law at the time to bring a criminal indictment, their threads were a thread of terror for the jury.

"What I went through wasn't a piece of cake," said Stinson, who at a police hearing kept a diary of Slaughter's unsavory presence in her life, and who continues to carry a gun. "But at least for somebody else now the steps will be easier."

Stinson met Slaughter on Christmas Eve in 1991 at her aunt's home in Prospect Harbor, Maine, where the family ran a fish cannery business that employed Slaughter. She was there to pick up her grandmother and only vaguely remembers being introduced to Slaughter.

Later, a cousin would tell her that after she left, Slaughter said, "I want to go out with her. Set me up on a date."

Within days, the cousin had called and Stinson went on what she thought was a phone dinner date in Portland.

"He was fine, he really was a gentleman," she recalled last week. A Southern gentleman was how everyone described him. They had a second date, but she told him there would not be another. He showed up for a third date anyway.

"The clicker for me was when he set up a date that I told him I could not make," Stinson said. Slaughter, she said, went to the date site and then to her home.

"He turned strange. He started getting real controlling," she said. She recalled him saying her, "Where were you? You stood me up."

In March 1992, Slaughter hired a private investigator to track Stinson. Knowles said that Thomas D'Alfonso was hired on the pretext that Slaughter was dating a woman he thought might be cheating on him. D'Alfonso would later realize that Slaughter knew quite a bit about Stinson's day-to-day schedule, and said for the court record that Slaughter seemed "obsessed" with her. He said that at times when he was following Stinson, he spotted Slaughter lurking in the background.

Stinson said she knew Slaughter was following her. "I even confronted him, but nothing I did would stop him," she said. She obtained a restraining order against him in district court in Portland in October 1992.

According to Stinson's diary, few days went by without some evidence of Slaughter's presence. Her telephone would ring on five, sometimes



Joanne Stinson acquired a gun to protect herself from a stalker, Richard Slaughter. Later, she won a civil lawsuit against him.

20 occasions in a day. The caller would hang up, laugh or breathe heavily. She was followed to the airport, the mall, to her job at L.L. Bean in North Conway, N.H., and later in Freeport, Maine.

Slaughter was spotted looking in the window of her condominium. He followed Stinson to her softball games, and was seen in the woods near her home. He drove by as she jogged. Once, a rubber dildo wrapped in L.L. Bean paper was left at her door. Slaughter even posed as a potential lover for her condominium and twice convinced a wife to agree to have him alone inside while Stinson was away. This action violated the restraining order, but he was given a suspended sentence.

In September 1992, Detective Tabert Williams of the Police Department in Topsham, where Slaughter was stalking a woman in the Portland area, Williams did a background check and what he discovered called him.

"My reaction was, 'Get your hammer watch your butt,'" Williams recalled. "This guy is very dangerous." He said he told Stinson, "Keep a journal on everything you do and everything that happens."

What Williams had discovered jogged him was that in 1980, a Virginia jury had indicted Slaughter in the murder of 24-year-old Olivia Thordike, who had reported Slaughter after a few dates in 1980. The indictment said he had stalked her at home and work and harassed her by telephone and mail.

During the same period, Slaughter was also found guilty of four misdemeanor assaults on women in Henrico County, Va. In 1980, he attacked Thordike with a rock, smashing her face and breaking a tooth. He was convicted of assault. Two months later, the indictment alleged, Slaughter told Thordike's mother that her daughter was a dead woman. Two days after that threat, Olivia Thordike was stabbed to death. When a key witness in the case disappeared, Virginia officials, fearful of losing the case, withdrew the indictment but retained the right to refile it.

Stinson learned from Williams of Slaughter's past, the harassment increased. She found a hand note on her car asking "How Does It Feel To Be A Lesbian?"

at home the night before, how they had shared drinks and touched affectionately. It was all on videotape, the author warned, along with tapes of more intimate moments. All were being copied to send to family and employers, the note threatened.

"It made me sick to think that someone was really out there watching that closely," said Stinson. Knowles and Stinson said they turned to the civil process for protection because, while they granted police for helping throughout the ordeal, individual and relatively benign acts of intimidation can fall through the cracks of the criminal system.

"You cut somebody's tires, you pour a milkshake on their car, you telephone them and hang up — those aren't acts that are going to make it at the district attorney's office," said Knowles. "They're not people over there who are physically beating, day in and day out."

And even if criminal charges are pursued, he added, "By the time you get to sentencing, you've got nothing."

With a civil lawsuit, he said, it is possible to quickly "put their name in the paper, put their photo in the paper."

Not long after Stinson's lawsuit was filed in September 1992, Slaughter moved back to Virginia. He did not attend the trial. The court complaint against him said, "The sole purpose of Slaughter's harassment is to cause Stinson to believe Stinson is rejecting Slaughter's romantic interest in her."

"Every noise that I hear, I get up and look outside," Stinson told the jury. "I still have nightmares about what I think he's going to do to me."

Van Dyke said he is appealing the verdict. Neither Van Dyke nor police in Virginia would comment on Slaughter's whereabouts.

The appeal, Van Dyke said, will be based on "various procedural errors in the conduct of the case." He said the judge should not have allowed the jury to hear about Slaughter's record in Virginia.

That record, however, continues to worry Stinson and makes her wary of Slaughter's return.

"I still have a lot of fear with this guy that it's not going to end with me," she said. "You never know when that lightning's going to go off again."

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