

Murder shocks community



THOMAS MELVILLE/ DELAWARE WAVE

Woman, 70, raped and killed in her Millsboro home

By Jon Bleiweis
Staff Writer

MILLSBORO — Barkantine Drive residents are nervous and fearing for their safety after their neighbor, 70-year-old Dorothy Gudger, was raped and murdered at her Millsboro home.

After days went by with no word from Gudger, who formerly served as president of the River Village Homeowners Association, neighbors suspected something was wrong, as she would frequently stop by to say hello.

“(Another neighbor) tried to call (Gudger) and nobody answered, so she called me up,” neighbor Louis Jones said. “We went up there and I found (Gudger) dead. I almost passed out.”

Gudger’s body was found in her home last week. Police say she was killed Oct. 31.

“We were very, very good friends — good neighbors,” Jones said. “She’s one of the best ladies who walked in shoe leather.”

The Delaware State Police

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Veronica and Wallace Shifflett, who have lived on Barkantine Drive in Millsboro for 28 years, were shocked hear about the murder in their quiet neighborhood.

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charged 43-year-old Michael D. Purnell, of the 27000 block of Merchantman Drive in River Village, on Nov. 2 with Gudger's rape and murder. He was also charged with burglary and possession of a deadly weapon during the commission of a felony.

Police learned he was a registered Tier II sex offender and had recently been seen doing odd jobs for Gudger at her residence.

Gudger isn't the first elderly woman to be brutally murdered in Sussex County in recent years. In 2009, police arrested Leslie D. Small, a former taxi driver, for the murder of a 78-year-old Lewes-area woman after driving her home on the day of the crime. Small was sentenced to death in July.

In light of recent events, residents of Barkantine



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The house at 104 Barkantine Drive in Millsboro, where the murder took place.

Drive said they have been taking extra precautions to ensure their safety.

Wallace and Veronica Shifflett, who have lived in their home for 28 years, said they had never heard of such a violent crime tak-

ing place in their neighborhood.

"It was such a shock, I couldn't believe it," Veronica Shifflett said. "We've heard about some homes being broken into, but never like this. It still

floors me to think that something like that happened here. Usually this is a pretty quiet neighborhood."

Wallace Shifflett said he wasn't surprised a 70-year-old woman was chosen as the victim, as she would be

less likely to put up a fight.

"If (the suspect) chose a 70-year-old woman, he knew there wouldn't be any resistance there," he said. "That was probably what he was thinking."

Monica Shumate, who has lived in the neighborhood for almost two years, said she was surprised to hear the news because the community is pretty quiet. Now, she said she's nervous and has lost sleep just thinking about it.

"It really worried me, it could happen to anybody," she said. "My daughter is always walking (down the street). That's where they drop her off at the bus stop, right by where it happened. That's a scary feeling. He could have snatched her, anything could have happened. It's really scary."

Stephanie Sharp, who has lived in the neighborhood for three years, said she feels less safe in light of the recent event, and is afraid something could happen somewhere else.

"I want to put more security on the house," she said.

"I'm already looking into it."

Veronica Shifflett said before the incident took place, she never worried too much about making sure her doors were locked while she was home. That's no longer the case.

"I'll be sure my doors are locked," she said. "Other than that, there's nothing else I can do."

Purnell is being held at Sussex County Correctional Institution without bail.

Police are continuing the investigation and awaiting autopsy results by the Chief Medical Examiner's Office to determine the manner and cause of the victim's death.

A neighbor who wished to remain anonymous said Gudger would frequently visit her home and check up on her husband, who needs constant care.

"We had a wonderful, wonderful neighbor," she said. "She would do anything for anybody."