

Ames church shooter's record wasn't shared between authorities

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The man who authorities say shot and killed two Iowa State University students this month in the parking lot of an Ames church had a legal record spanning several years that included alleged violent behavior against women, but

Story County's prosecutor said his office wasn't aware of it after Johnathan Lee Whitlatch was arrested two days before the shooting.

Even if other law enforcement agencies had shared or could have shared the information about Whitlatch — including previous concerns about his mental health — Story County Attorney Tim Meals said it probably would not have

changed how bond was set for him after his May 31 arrest or whether he would have been allowed pretrial release.

Whitlatch, 33, of Boone was arrested May 31 for allegedly harassing the woman whom authorities say he targeted two days later outside

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Cornerstone Church — Eden Montag, 22, of Boone. Whitlatch and Montag had been in a romantic relationship that had recently ended and served together in the same Iowa National Guard unit.

Montag planned to attend the June 2 evening service for Salt Company, a worship program for college students, but Whitlatch shot her and her friend Vivian Flores, 21, of Ames in the Cornerstone parking lot with a 9mm pistol before turning the gun on himself.

Antonia Mildenhall, of Eldora, who said she was a close friend of Whitlatch's, wishes he would have reached out for help before the shooting and is left to wonder, "What happened that made him think this was his only way and his only way out?"

Whitlatch made bond before authorities could review his legal history and make any further recommendation

Mildenhall said she met Whitlatch in the Guard five or six years ago, when he was stationed in Johnston for the first time.

They quickly became friends, and Mildenhall said she thought of Whitlatch like a big brother.

"I plan on just grieving him my way, and just continuing to remember him as the good person that I knew him to be," she said. "... He felt like family."

Before about the last year, Mildenhall said she didn't notice any signs of physical or mental illness in Whitlatch. He would sometimes feel low, but when that happened, he'd call her and "I'd do the best that I could to shake him out of it," she said.

Mildenhall never felt in any danger around Whitlatch and said her husband never expressed concerns about her safety, either.

In terms of grappling with what Whitlatch ultimately did, Mildenhall said, "So far, I've just chalked it up to the man that I knew was not the man that did these things, because the man that I knew never would have."

A woman who had a child with Whitlatch in 2016 sought and received a do-

mestic abuse protective order in 2017. In her petition Aug. 8, 2017, the woman wrote Whitlatch grabbed her by the throat three days earlier and made a motion as if to punch her, but stopped before the blow landed. The following day, she wrote, he threatened that he was going to come to her home and murder her.

The woman said she was concerned because Whitlatch had military training and access to a gun. She also wrote that she thought he was unstable and that he had attempted suicide Aug. 7, 2017.

The protective order was dismissed in September 2017.

In October 2021, Whitlatch allegedly assaulted a woman at a bar in Cedar Falls, in Black Hawk County. According to charging documents, that woman told police Whitlatch had put his hand down the back of her pants twice in unwanted contact. Police said a witness and surveillance video corroborated her account, and Whitlatch was arrested and charged in November.

Depositions in the case had been scheduled to take place after the shooting, but with Whitlatch's death, the case has been dismissed; a jury trial was scheduled for July.

Sgt. 1st Class Christie Smith, spokesperson for the Iowa National Guard, said there were no records of Whitlatch having unsatisfactory participation — also known as being absent without leave — since his release from full-time Guard duties that the arrest in the Cedar Falls case prompted in November.

Mildenhall said Whitlatch "wanted to find a way back into being full-time in the Guard. He wanted to get his life back where it was."

She declined to comment on what, if anything, she knew about the previous allegations against Whitlatch and whether she had ever spoken with him about it.

Leading up to a welfare check that Mildenhall called on May 6 for Whitlatch, she said he "was trying to get back to being his normal self, because he knew he could feel himself changing, and he knew that he didn't want to be sad or anything like that anymore, so he was trying to be the him that he was before."

She got concerned when he stopped answering his phone and called the police after consulting with a former

Guard 1st sergeant from the time when they were in the same company.

Boone Police Department officers arrived at Whitlatch's home around 11:30 a.m. on May 6 to perform the welfare check.

Responding officers found Whitlatch passed out or asleep in the driver's seat of his pickup truck, which was not running but appeared to have rolled down his driveway partially into the adjacent alley and edge of the street, according to the police account of the incident.

An officer described Whitlatch as "very lethargic and confused." Whitlatch told them he had "not been feeling well lately and was having severe GI issues."

The officer noted that while talking with Whitlatch, "he was visibly confused and not functioning appropriately," and he was ultimately taken to Boone County Hospital for medical treatment.

Boone Police Department's Administrative Cmdr. John Slotter said that no information about the welfare check was forwarded to other authorities because personal medical information is protected.

Slotter also said, "Typically, no follow-up is done regarding welfare checks. Our responsibility is to make medical treatment available and any follow-up is between the person and their healthcare provider."

Mildenhall visited Whitlatch in the hospital and said they regularly hung out after he was released. The weekend before the shooting, she had stayed the night at his home, they had gotten breakfast and shopped in Ames.

"He had talked about how low he felt," she said. Suicide — especially with firearms present at his home — was a concern they had previously discussed but Whitlatch always reassured her, "and I believed him, because up until the last year, it had not been a concern."

Meals, the Story County Attorney, said he and his office were not aware before the shooting of the 2017 domestic abuse protective order, the Black Hawk County assault case or the welfare check on Whitlatch in Boone.

On the domestic abuse protective order, Meals said even if he had known, it's "doubtful the court would have used it as a reason to hold (Whitlatch) on a higher bond" at an initial appearance because the order was voluntarily dismissed after about a month.

"We normally review criminal histories and make a bond recommendation at initial appearance, but in this case the defendant bonded out before he had his initial appearance," Meals said.

If Whitlatch had appeared in court following his arrest, Meals said, "It's not an option to revoke pretrial release absent a violation of a condition of release once bond is posted. Even if there was a further charge, the remedy would be to ask for a higher bond than the bond schedule on the new charge, not increasing the bond on the current one."

Meals added on the welfare check in Boone that, "Mental health calls for service are not normally shared between jurisdictions, nor are hospitalizations."

Mildenhall said, "You do the thing that every best friend does. It's like, 'Well, I wish I would have done this, and I wish I would have done that,' but realistically, you know you did everything that you could, and the minute he chose for this to be a thing was the minute he wasn't thinking about anything or anybody else, which is unfortunate, because if he just would have taken two seconds, I'm sure a lot of things would be different."

She later added, "I also believe the

mental health system let him fall through the cracks."

The Black Hawk county prosecutor in the Cedar Falls assault case did not immediately return a request for comment, and neither did Whitlatch's attorney in the same case.

Why was there no restraining order between Whitlatch and Montag?

A no-contact order was put in place Nov. 1 between Whitlatch and the woman he allegedly assaulted in Cedar Falls, but Capt. Nicholas Lennie, chief deputy with the Story County Sheriff's Office, said last week that no other restraining order had been in place at the time of the shooting.

Lennie said harassment is not currently a crime that triggers an automatic protection order like domestic assault charges generally do. That means "it would be up to the individual to petition or request the court grant such an order" in a harassment case.

Whitlatch was arrested in Boone on an Ames warrant for the alleged harassment of Montag on May 1 at her workplace.

Ames Police Department spokesperson Cmdr. Dan Walter said, "I am not aware that there were any discussions prior to the shooting about more protection" for Montag.

"The officer handling the case will often make suggestions regarding safety and offer the services of partners like ACCESS. If you are asking me if there were specific discussions about this case prior to the shooting, I don't believe that to be the case," Walter added.

The Assault Care Center Extending Shelter & Support — ACCESS — is an inter-county service provider in central Iowa that helps survivors of domestic or sexual abuse and other violent crimes with crisis counseling, housing and other needs.

Following a series of deadly, high-profile mass shootings around the country in recent weeks, a bipartisan group of U.S. senators has said that it has an agreement in principle on gun control legislation.

The Associated Press reported that the proposal includes that convicted domestic abusers who do not live with a former partner, such as estranged ex-boyfriends, would be barred from buying firearms.

Whitlatch was never convicted of anything related to the previously described allegations against him.

Story County's Capt. Lennie has said he could not know until further investigation was completed whether any of the ammunition Whitlatch purchased in West Des Moines an hour before the shooting outside Cornerstone Church was used there.

He also did not know whether Whitlatch legally possessed the pistol used in the shooting or where or when he may have obtained it.

Lennie said this week that the Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation is the only other agency besides the Story County Sheriff's Office that's still involved in the ongoing investigation.

He could not provide a timeline of the investigation going forward, "as some parts of an investigation of this nature could take several weeks or more."

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