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[BY RYAN SABALOW](#)

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Sacramento State President Robert Nelsen and friends of student William Molina, who died from a pellet gun shooting early Friday, gathered at the campuses' library quad to mourn over the loss of the 21-year-old's life on Sunday, April 14. BY [MILA JASPER](#)
KETTENPOM

Norma Gund avoids mirrors. She doesn't like having her photo taken.

To a stranger, the scar on her neck and the slight sheen of her face — the remnants of reconstructive surgery — are barely noticeable. But to her, the injuries stand out like neon signs on a dark highway. They're constant reminders of the afternoon seven years ago when a Trinity County sheriff's deputy put her and her husband, Jim, on a collision course with a man who killed two of their neighbors.

"I want to be normal," Norma, 56, said. "But I know I'm not. I'm never going to be normal."

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The Gunds say they would like to move beyond the day they were severely injured by a man wielding a large hunting knife and a stun gun. But their ongoing legal dispute with the Trinity County Sheriff's Office has made putting the past behind them impossible.

"It has been (years) where we get a phone call from the attorney, and we get sick," Jim, 66, said. "We have to deal with being told 'no' over and over again. We can get no justice. It's wrong."

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In June, a state appellate court sided with the sheriff's office in dismissing a suit the Gunds filed in 2012 seeking \$10 million in damages from the attack. The court said the Gunds

were de facto employees of the county because they had agreed to do a deputy's duties and therefore were entitled only to workers' compensation.

Experts say the Gunds' story underscores the troubling reality about safety in impoverished rural counties where residents say they have often look out for one another because law enforcement can be scarce.

"They basically did their job. They showed up. They looked to be good neighbors, and then found themselves in some kind of horror movie," said Dee Davis, founder of the [Center for Rural Strategies](#), a non-profit organization that advocates for small towns and communities.

The Gunds' ordeal began March 13, 2011, in the remote town of Kettenpom, a former timber outpost 250 miles north of San Francisco.

A spring snowstorm was blowing in that day. Norma and Jim were settling in for a quiet Sunday dinner and "60 Minutes" over their satellite dish when the phone rang. It was Cpl. Ron Whitman of the Trinity County Sheriff's Office.

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Norma said Whitman told her that their neighbor, Kristine Constantino, had dialed 911 and hung up. Whitman, who was on his way from the county seat of Weaverville, nearly three hours away, asked the couple to check on her, she said.

They allege Whitman withheld critical information that might have tipped them off to the danger at their neighbor's home. The Gunds have said in court documents that Whitman never told them that Constantino, before hanging up, had whispered "Help ... help ..." to a California Highway Patrol dispatcher in Humboldt County who received the 911 call.

Instead, the Gunds claim, Whitman told Norma that Constantino's call was "probably no big deal" and likely related to the stormy weather.

After receiving the call, Norma and Jim drove their Ford pickup truck the quarter-mile to Constantino's place. Norma walked to the home while Jim waited in the truck. A man she had never seen before met her outside. She asked him about Constantino, and he said she was fine. Norma said she wanted to be sure, and the man escorted her into the house.

At that point, Constantino, 33, and her boyfriend Christopher "Sky" Richardson, 26, already were dead. In the house, Norma saw them wrapped in plastic on the floor.

Their killer, Tomas Gouverneur, a [musician from](#) Corvallis, Ore., shocked Norma with a stun gun as she entered the house. He also attacked her with a hunting knife, slashing her throat, head and face. The blade opened her carotid artery and cut her trachea in half, Jim said.

Jim entered the house to check on his wife. Gouverneur attacked him as well. "I had never been in a fight in my life," Jim said. "He had a Taser, a knife, a black belt in karate and he outweighed me."

After being shocked and stabbed, Jim bit the assailant's arm until he dropped the knife. Gouverneur fled in his teal blue Subaru. After leading sheriff's deputies in neighboring Mendocino County on a 40-mile chase, he fatally crashed into an oak tree on Highway 101. In his car, authorities found bags of marijuana and \$11,000 in cash taken from Constantino's home.

Norma, blood gushing from her neck, managed to drive to Kettenpom's only store as Jim fought with Gouverneur. Struggling to speak through her damaged throat, she had to scribble what happened on a notepad.

Medics eventually flew her to UC Davis Medical Center, where she underwent multiple surgeries to reconstruct her face and her neck. Jim, who later made his way to the store as well, suffered less serious injuries.

Initially, the sheriff's office disputed the Gunds' version of what Whitman had said during the phone call. In statements to local media, the sheriff's office said Whitman told Norma Gund to stay put and see if she could see anything from her home.

"At no time was Mrs. Gund instructed to go to Kristine's residence," the statement said. "Nor would the Trinity County Sheriff's Office ever send a citizen to perform a deputy's job."

But the county's story shifted in court. The county's attorneys said the corporal asked Norma Gund to go Constantino's house to see if she was OK, but Whitman advised her not to go without her husband. The department also acknowledged the deputy had suggested the call might be related to the snowstorm and failed to tell them Constantino had repeatedly whispered for help.

Trinity County Sheriff's Lt. Christopher Compton declined to discuss the case in an interview, citing the litigation.

In April 2014, a Trinity County judge dismissed the case in favor of the county's argument that the Gunds were only eligible for workers' compensation because they volunteered to perform "active law enforcement service."

In its legal arguments, the county cited "posse comitatus," a term that harkens to the days of the Old West, when sheriffs could conscript any citizen into an officer of the law on the spot.

The Gunds appealed. In June, the 3rd District Court of Appeal in Sacramento upheld the Trinity County judge's ruling.

"(The Gunds) knew they were responding to a 911 call, and therefore they were assisting in active law enforcement," the appellate court judges wrote. "Although the deputy misrepresented that the 911 call was likely weather-related and omitted facts suggesting potential criminal activity, the deputy's misrepresentations and omissions are irrelevant. ... All that matters is that plaintiffs knew they were responding to a 911 call, the nature of which was not certain."

The state Supreme Court has said it will review the case. A separate federal civil rights suit the Gunds filed has been put on hold, pending the resolution of the state case.

As their legal cases have dragged on, the Gunds have attempted to find a measure of peace through helping Kettenpom's children. They run an informal after-school program at their horse barn, teaching neighborhood kids how to ride and do woodworking.

Deeply religious, the couple believes the only thing that saved them that day was God's grace.

Norma has an angel tattooed on each wrist. She said she believes angels carried her to the truck and breathed into her neck, partially cauterizing the wound, so she was able to drive to the store for help.

Every so often, she requires surgery to burn away the scar tissue that forms inside her throat and chokes her windpipe.

Some scars are psychological. Both Norma and Jim suffer from memory loss. Norma's anxiety can become so crippling she doesn't want to get out of bed. She quit her job as a county school bus driver because of her insomnia. She said she couldn't shake the feeling that an unseen attacker was lurking as she got the bus ready for the morning route.

The Gunds' ordeal has affected the community as well. Kettenpom no longer has the small-town serenity that drew the Gunds to Trinity County in the 1980s, when they were looking to escape big-city life, they said.

"Before this thing happened, everybody had their doors open," Norma said. "We all left the keys in the car. Now, we had to buy a security camera. We lock our doors."

And whatever trust the Gunds had in the sheriff's office has disappeared as well.

"Over here," Jim said, "we have to take care of ourselves."

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Norma Gund, 56, of Kettenpom, a rural community in Trinity County, shows tattoos of angels that she has on her wrists in early February, 2018. In 2011, Gund and her husband were stabbed after they received call from the Trinity County sheriff's office to do a welfare check on a neighbor. Gund survived being stabbed and having her throat slashed by an unstable ex-boyfriend of her neighbor. HECTOR AMEZCUA HAMEZCUA@SACBEE.COM