

# Anatomy of a tragedy

*Could anyone have saved the Reid family?*

**I**t was a suburban nightmare come true. On a sunny Saturday afternoon last June, adults tended their gardens while children played on Braemar Street in Winnipeg's quiet, middle-class neighborhood of St. Boniface. Then, gunshots rang out from the small bungalow at 75 Braemar, and Mary Ann Reid, 42, ran out of the house screaming. Another shot was fired, and she fell onto her neighbor's front lawn. Then, her husband, Raymond, 45, emerged from the house, holding a high-powered rifle. He shot his wife again, killing her. A few seconds later, Bradley Reid, 15, ran out the front door, clutching his side. His father fired again, and the teenager collapsed on the boulevard—and died later in the hospital. Reid then retreated into the house where, for nearly two days, he engaged in a tense standoff with armed police. During its course, the gunman told authorities that he was holding another son, James (Jimmy), 17, hostage. Finally, 43 hours after the first shots, police fired a barrage of tear gas and stormed the house. But, by then, Reid had shot himself and lay dead in a pool of blood. The body of Jimmy, who had been dead for nearly two days, lay nearby.

The tragic events of that weekend sparked harsh criticism from Reid's neighbors about the way that Winnipeg police had handled the lengthy standoff. Critics noted that, before the shootings, both the police and at least three social service agencies had been called upon to deal with sometimes violent disputes in the Reid household. And during a five-day inquest that ended last week, the testimony of over 20 witnesses and entries from Reid's own diaries painted a vivid picture of a family terrorized by an irrational, deeply troubled father. It fell to provincial court Judge Winston Norton, who oversaw the inquest, to try to determine how—and whether—the tragedy could have been averted.

Evidence at the inquest showed that the conflicts within the Reid family had been building for years. For one thing, Reid himself, a former carpet salesman who had been unemployed through most of the 1980s, fought constantly with his son, Jimmy, who was on

probation for a number of minor criminal charges. In April, 1988, Reid called in the police, claiming that Jimmy had attacked him. Then, just a month before the shootings, police were called again, this time by Mary Ann, who said that Jimmy was physically threatening his father with a gardening tool. The police broke up the fight, but no charges were laid.

Reid's diaries, spanning a period from Au-



**Police removing Mary Ann Reid's body: a deadly 43-hour standoff**

gust, 1985, to May, 1989, revealed a deeply tormented man. He described his pride in Jimmy, who, he said, was "very bright and personable." But, in the next sentence, he wrote that his son was "sneaky, conniving, lazy and a lying cheat." His perceptions of himself were equally inconsistent. Reid wrote that he was "smarter and better informed than most others." But he also called himself "a complete jerk because I've been unable to relate to people properly." More than once, he mused about committing suicide.

Meanwhile, Mary Ann Reid had sought professional help. In one 18-month period, the family's case was referred through no less than seven social workers at Child and Family Services of Eastern Manitoba. At the same time, the Reids met two family therapists from an-

other agency, a school psychologist, a probation officer and the police. But several social workers testified that, despite the family's conflicts, they did not consider the Reids to be in any immediate danger. David MacDonald, a family services co-ordinator, told the inquest that, a month before the June 10 shootings, he decided that the case needed attention—but that it could wait until one of his workers returned from vacation in mid-June. Added MacDonald: "This is quite beyond anybody's ability to predict. It's an act of true insanity."

The inquest also examined the way in which police responded to the outbreak of violence. Within 15 minutes of the first shots being fired, members of the Winnipeg police department's Emergency Response Unit had surrounded the house. About 20 nearby homes were evacuated and the neighborhood sealed off. For the next 30 hours, police remained in contact with Reid by phone. Declared Sgt. Thomas Anderson, who monitored events during the weekend: "He said the whole incident was precipitated by his intention to kill himself and by his wife's lack of sympathy. In his words, 'I lost it.'"

The last conversation between police and Reid took place at 1:22 a.m. on June 12. Then, at 5:50 a.m., police began to volley tear gas into the house. At that point, police thought they heard a single gunshot from the house. Finally, at 11:10 a.m., they entered the building—finding Reid and his son Jimmy dead. Some critics later said that the police had waited too long to storm the house. But Sgt. William Vander Graff, one of the officers who negotiated with Reid, told the inquest that he believed the police had acted properly. Said Vander Graff: "We have nothing to lose. By waiting a person out, they'll give up or, as in this case, kill themselves."

Summing up the case last week, Stuart Whitley, Manitoba's assistant deputy minister of prosecutions, said that Reid was clearly the author of his own—and his family's—misfortune. But he criticized the social agencies for not doing enough to monitor the family. Said Whitley: "Each agency seemed to have a piece of the puzzle, but no one had an overall view of the family." For his part, Judge Norton called the case "a family tragedy of immense proportions." His recommendations, expected within the next few weeks, may help to shed further light on why families like the Reids sometimes go unnoticed—until it is too late.

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