

Teens often don't see when love turns into control



Prosecutors say Lauren Astley, left, was murdered by her former boyfriend and 2011 Wayland High School classmate Nathaniel Fujita.

By Kathy Uek/Daily News staff

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Power and control are at the center of unhealthy relationships, experts said a day after Nathaniel Fujita was charged with the slaying of his 18-year-old ex-girlfriend and Wayland High classmate, Lauren Astley.

Experts say teen dating violence can be different from violence between older adults. For starters, teens communicate differently and don't have the maturity that comes with life experience.

With the prominence of electronic communication - email, cell phones, texting and social networking sites - control becomes easier, said Mary Gianakis, director of Voices Against Violence, a confidential service that helps victims in MetroWest.

"Unlike adult relationships, teens don't have the experience that helps them weigh the behaviors they see. By the time the relationship is physically violent, they are...too frightened to

leave or tell anyone," said Gianakis. "Fear plays a huge role."

The teens may have a gut feeling, but they don't always want to talk to parents because they don't understand it or they want to be independent.

In teen dating, control is one person, usually the male, telling the other what to wear, what to say and who to hang around with, Middlesex District Attorney Gerry Leone said.

Leone said Astley's murder appeared to be a case of a man trying to exert control over a woman - a tragic instance of violence against women.

Fujita slit his ex-girlfriend's throat and strangled her Sunday before leaving her body in a Wayland marsh, a prosecutor said Tuesday in Framingham District Court. Fujita, who planned to play football in the fall at Trinity College in Connecticut, tried to hide the evidence, investigators said.

The couple had dated for three years, but Astley had recently ended the relationship.

The dynamic of power in a relationship can be the ability to be the smartest, the most athletic or the best looking, Leone said in an interview yesterday.

"If you are in so much control of these three areas, that lends to social power," Leone said. "With the issue of rejection - 'I don't want to be with you anymore' - that causes a lot of different reactions - hopefully not fatal, but we know it can."

The complicated dynamic is often masked by excessive attention, which appears to be positive, Leone said.

Reach Beyond Domestic Violence visits schools in MetroWest. The support group talked with Wayland High juniors last month about healthy relationships, said its executive director, Laura Van Zandt.

In addition to a hotline, Reach Beyond Domestic Violence offers shelter and other services to victims of domestic violence. They tell young people what a healthy relationship looks like and how to support friends who may be perpetrators or victims.

"We try to approach it as kids understanding their own values and boundaries and give them the tools to look at behavior and see it differently," said Van Zandt.

In an earlier era, before cell phones, parents could monitor calls that came into the home. Without that buffer, teen relationships are different.

"A lot of what happens is away from homes and parents," said Van Zandt.

On the night Astley was killed, police say, phone records show Fujita and Astley made contact at least three times via cell phone in less than an hour.

Suzanne Sege, a board member of the William Kellibrew Foundation in Washington, works with teens and provides education resources on issues of dating and relationship violence. She said teens must find someone to confide in about their fears.

"If you or a friend are in a situation that does not seem right, the first step is to tell someone you trust - a parent, teacher, counselor or clergy," said Sege, who is also a former board member and co-president of the Sudbury-Wayland-Lincoln Domestic Violence Roundtable Inc.

The roundtable provides community outreach, education and support for victims of domestic violence.

Sege advises parents to give children an opportunity to talk - without overreacting or becoming emotional. Set a calm space for them to tell you what they are dealing with, Sege said.

The group's website, domesticviolenceroundtable.org, has tips on how to talk about domestic violence.

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