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South KC man, 93, accused of killing wife in a failed murder-suicide

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The Kansas City Star

A 93-year-old south Kansas City man stabbed his ailing wife to death Wednesday, then slit his wrists and plunged a knife into his chest in a failed suicide attempt, according to court records.

The fact that he survived surprised him, according to the records.

A paramedic treating Harry D. Irwin after the incident asked if he killed his wife, Grace P. Irwin, who celebrated her 95th birthday earlier this month.

"Yes, I killed her," Harry Irwin said, according to court records. "And then killed myself. Why am I still awake?"

Harry Irwin told a shift nurse later that he tried to stab himself in the heart but that he must have aimed too low and hit a rib. He reportedly said he killed his wife because she was "arguing and screaming at him all night and he couldn't take it anymore," court records said.

He told the nurse he couldn't remember what he hit his wife with, but he knew he "did her in," court records said.

The Irwins marked their 70th wedding anniversary in December, having wed in Kansas City in 1942, six months after Harry enlisted in the U.S. Army to fight in World War II.

Jackson County prosecutors charged him with second-degree murder. He remained in a hospital intensive care unit Wednesday night but was expected to survive, police said.

The facts warranted a murder charge, said Jackson County Prosecutor Jean Peters Baker.

"No victim deserves someone else deciding when they will die," Baker said.

One of the couple's seven children called police about 6:40 a.m. to the couple's home in the 11000 block of Wyandotte Street.

The daughter told police she received a troubling phone call from her dad at 6:30 a.m. He asked her to come over about 9 a.m. When she asked if her mother was alive, he said, "No."

The daughter notified a brother and drove to her parents' house. She found her mother in bed with blood on her face and the pillow. The daughter also saw blood in the bathroom, where her father tried to kill himself. She found her father unconscious, sitting in a recliner with blood on his chest and arms, still holding a knife in his right hand, according to court records.

Her brother soon arrived and found a suicide note on a table.

Harry Irwin was rushed to a hospital. Grace Irwin was pronounced dead at the scene.

Neighbors said Grace Irwin suffered from debilitating medical problems and had been seen outside just a few times in recent years. The husband was her primary caregiver, neighbors said, but their children, in their 60s, and grandchildren also visited often to help them and take care of yardwork. The couple had lived at the home for at least 10 years, a neighbor said. They were mostly homebound as neither drove a vehicle, the neighbor said.

Grace's brother, Salvatore Privitera, said he had visited his sister last week and taken her some of his homemade noodles.

She wasn't doing well but could walk with the aid of a walker, Privitera said. She had undergone recent surgeries to replace her hip and remove cancerous growths. She was having serious abdominal problems but did not want to have more surgery, he said.

Despite her pain and medical issues, she maintained a sharp mind and was thankful for that, Privitera said.

"She always said, 'Lord, I can take anything. Just don't let me lose my mind.'"

Harry's health was better, and he took care of his wife "24 hours a day, seven days a week," Privitera said.

Privitera didn't know the specifics about what happened to his sister but said she didn't have a death wish.

"My sister was very much interested in living," he said. "She was very content."

Grace Irwin never considered going to a nursing home, he said. She had taken care of her ailing mother at home before her mother died, and Grace Irwin wanted to remain at home. Grace Irwin particularly liked the fact that all her children lived about 15 minutes away, Privitera said.

Privitera said he didn't think Harry Irwin wanted to die either. After Harry's last birthday, he told Privitera that he was "good for another five years."

But elderly caregivers who kill is an emerging problem as the population ages, said Donna Cohen, a professor at the University of South Florida who has been researching the issue. She said elderly people die in murder-suicides about every two weeks in Florida. She is analyzing about 135 such cases across the country from 2010 through 2012.

Men are the perpetrators 90 percent of the time, which could be due partly to their reluctance to ask for help, Cohen said. A military background is another risk factor.

Cohen said there usually are three core issues: He has been the caregiver for a long time, he feels captive in the role and he feels he has done everything he can.

Another characteristic is feeling completely exhausted. Men can develop clinical depression and believe that no one else can care for their spouse as well as they do.

"It doesn't make sense in the world you and I live in," Cohen said. "But it is the mind of a depressed caregiver."

The criminal sentence for elderly caregivers who kill varies widely depending on the region, she said. A 95-year-old man who killed his ailing wife in Illinois received a life sentence, she said. But others have been released with "time served" or have been sent to mental health centers.

People who know older caregivers should reach out to see if they need help, Cohen said. She said caregivers often contemplate killing long before taking action.

"So many people don't want to intrude," she said. "But they (the elderly) need to know what they are going through is not abnormal and that there is help available."

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