

## **HARD LIVES , SENSELESS DEATHS**

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Sunday, December 11, 1983

Author: JACK KRESNAK Free Press Staff Writer

Their work -- pumping gas and fixing flats, cleaning windshields and pulling dipsticks -- was neither quick nor easy.

They kept their books balanced and their service station driveways clear of snow. Nearing retirement age, they kept going, working dawn to dusk six or seven days a week for an honest dollar.

Each did things differently, but they shared a devotion to work, their neighborhoods, their friends and their children and grandchildren.

Last week they were killed by young men looking for a quick, easy buck.

The three service station owners -- Gracien Vandenabeele, Virginia Krzanowski and Aaron Kirkland -- were fixtures in Detroit neighborhoods under siege by crime and poverty.

Their **deaths** left their communities poorer.

NO ONE could make 70-year-old Gracien Vandenabeele retire.

"That was his **life** , the gas station," his wife, Alice, said last week. "We tried to get him to quit, but he still went down there every day, even when he was sick and feverish. He had to talk to his friends in the neighborhood."

In the 1930s, Belgian immigrant Zoe Vandenabeele ran a small grocery store near Mack and Newport on Detroit's east side. Next door was a small gas station where her son Gracien -- whom everyone called Johnny -- worked part-time.

Gracien lost his full-time job at a weapons parts factory during World War II when he developed a severe reaction to paint used on gun turrets. In 1942, the owner of the station offered Gracien a chance to take over the business. For the next four decades, Gracien Vandenabeele arrived at Johnny's Mobil Service at 8 a.m. and left at 5 p.m., pumping gas, talking with his friends and watching the neighborhood change.

**HIS DAUGHTER**, Margaret Sherman, said her father "put in a lot of hours to get what his kids needed. The only days he ever stayed home were holidays. He was always down there. But he was happy."

Vandenabeele's skills as a mechanic were limited. His tools and spare parts had been stolen by burglars and he'd often been robbed. Once, a gunshot shattered the rear window of his car as he drove out of the station. "He just accepted it; he never complained," his wife said.

Nothing seemed to faze him, Sherman said. "I feel he was a brave man to keep going down there after all the times they robbed him and shot at him."

On Monday, two customers drove up and ordered a few dollars worth of gas. Vandenabeele started to make change and one of them pulled a gun. He raised his hands, backed up a step and was shot. The pair drove off with gas the old man had pumped and \$180 cash they snatched from his hand. One suspect was arrested Thursday.

It won't be the same around the neighborhood without Vandenabeele. "He was an old fixture, just like an old Tiffany lamp," said a neighborhood friend, Gene, who is also 70.

"He was a peaceful, loving man," according to Gene, who asked that his last name not be used. "He'd sit around with a few of us chewin' the fat . . . his children and grandchildren, they were the apple of his eye."

SINCE HIS STROKE five years ago, Frank Krzanowski has rarely left his home. A diabetic, he lost use of his legs and cannot easily negotiate the steep steps to his second-floor home above the gas station he and his wife, Virginia, owned since the mid-1950s.

Virginia's father, John Stonik, built the service station at Thirty-fifth and Buchanan in January 1927. Situated between two funeral homes, Stonik's gas station was as much a hub of the Slavic community northeast of Livernois and Michigan as nearby St. Francis D'Assisi church.

Virginia met Frank when they were maid of honor and best man at the wedding of her cousin and his friend shortly before World War II. While Frank served in the U.S. Army in the Aleutian Islands, he kept in touch with Virginia, who donned stylishly cut coveralls and tended the pumps at her father's station.

They married after the war and lived for a short time with Virginia's aunt on Thirty-fifth before moving to the home above the gas station. Except for the first four years of her **life** and the few months with her aunt, Virginia Krzanowski always lived above that gas station.

THEIR DAUGHTER, Alexis Fleming, said her mother took the children to live in a tent at a campground near Walled Lake every summer because Frank was nervous about the children playing around the gas station. Traffic on Buchanan was heavy and cars often pulled too quickly into the station.

Frank Krzanowski worked from 7 a.m. until 10 p.m. six days a week and 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sundays until Virginia made him take Sundays off, their children said. But neighbors with car trouble kept Frank busy at all hours.

"Frank was a darn good mechanic, and he was more than fair with his prices," said longtime customer Ron Stawarz.

"He'd have to charge you for parts, but his labor was dirt cheap. He'd replace your starter and say, 'Ah, give me 15 bucks.' "

Said longtime friend Don Przybylski: "You tell me where in the 1960s you could get an oil change, a filter, a grease job and a brake adjustment, plus do anything else you wanted while the car was up on the hoist, for only \$9.50."

The station also was known for its easy credit.

"If you needed two dollars worth of gas and you only had 50 cents, why, they'd give you three bucks (worth)," Przybylski said.

THE STATION did not have a garage; Frank's hoist was outside and he'd work rain or shine, often moving between a car on the hoist, two parked in the drive with their hoods up and another at the gas pump. Przybylski and others helped him out by pumping gas while he worked on their cars.

"In the middle of winter, if my car didn't start, Frank would crawl out of bed and come over and jump (start) my car," Przybylski said.

Virginia Krzanowski kept the station going after Frank's stroke in 1978. She pumped gas and fixed flats. She also tried to collect some of the thousands of dollars in debts owed to her and Frank.

Some who couldn't pay in cash instead put up new window screens in the station. She tried to barter with others, offering to erase one man's \$20 debt if he cut the weeds in the adjacent lot. The man wouldn't do it and never paid her back, Fleming said. One man still owes the family more than \$1,000, the children said.

Sometimes Virginia had trouble scraping together enough cash for a load of gasoline, which more than doubled in price in the years after Frank's stroke.

BUSINESS PROBLEMS and vandalism by neighborhood youths led to Virginia's decision to close the station before Christmas. She was 60; her invalid husband 64.

"Just a couple of days ago, she told me she had one more week to go and was closing up. And I'm thinking, now where am I going to buy gas?" Przybylski said.

It had just started snowing **hard** Tuesday when Virginia Krzanowski left the warmth of the station to wait on yet another customer. She pumped the gas and turned toward the station to get change. A gun came out. She was forced inside where she was shot in the back while her small dog, Buffy, cowered in the corner. The robber snatched a wad of bills from her pocket and fled.

A LONGTIME customer arrived and had put the pump nozzle into his car to save Virginia the trouble of coming out. He thought it odd that Buffy came out, through a door apparently ajar. The friend, who asked not to be identified, went inside and found Virginia lying on her back. He went two blocks for St. Francis' pastor, The Rev. Zigmund Kowalczyk, who gave her last rites. It wasn't until she was taken to Southwest General Hospital that anyone knew she had been shot.

"Whoever shot her doesn't know how many people around here they crippled," Pryzbylski said. "Frank and Virg were great people. And for anybody to exterminate beautiful people like that . . .

Her murder is unsolved.

"WORKAHOLIC" IS THE word everyone uses to describe Aaron Kirkland. A small, wiry man who wore a large ring of jangling keys, Kirkland could be seen running back and forth between his Clark Gas station at Gratiot and McClellan and his two sidelines across the street: Kirk's Ice Cream Store and Kirk's Re-Sale Shop.

"Working was his hobby," Margaret Kirkland said of her husband. "When he was a young man, everyone used to tease him about it. I didn't like it either, but he figured if you want something you got to work for it."

He had worked in coal mines and steel mills in Pennsylvania. He and Margaret moved to Detroit in the early 1960s. While working at Chrysler's Jefferson Assembly plant, Kirkland opened the Clark gas station, pumping gas until late at night.

"Sometimes he'd look like he was walking and sleeping at the same time, he'd be so worn out," said his friend, Mildred Lee, whose husband and son worked for Kirkland for more than 10 years.

Kirkland usually got out of bed at 6 a.m. and helped his diabetic wife get up, making sure she took her insulin. He tasted the coffee he made for her for sweetness and "to let me know he wasn't trying to poison me," Margaret Kirkland joked.

HE WORKED UNTIL 1 or 2 a.m. but never failed to get down on his knees and pray before going to bed, his daughter, Diane Smith, said.

"Some days he'd be so tired, he would fall asleep on his knees, saying his prayers," she said.

His businesses were burglarized several times.

"They drilled a hole and busted out the whole bathroom wall to come in here," Lee said, referring to the gas station. "They'd take what they could, cigarets, tires, oil, but they never cleaned out the whole place."

Kirkland's brother Frederick owned and operated a gas station on Livernois until about six years ago, when Frederick was shot to **death** during a robbery.

"(Frederick) was known to help people, and they came in with a sad story. It was nothing but a cheap con," Lee said. "They shot him, and he was trying to help somebody."

Aaron viewed his brother's murder stoically. "His famous words were: 'If they're going to get you, they're going to get you anyways,' " Lee said.

AARON KIRKLAND, 65, was pumping gas at about 12:45 a.m. Friday when two young men came out of the alley and ordered him to freeze. When he turned, one of them fired several shots. He was dead.

"Christmas is a **hard** time for gas stations," Lee's husband, Millard Amy, said Friday as he made change for a customer. "They get robbed more around Christmas. Kids see something they need. You know how it is."

While Amy and Lee talked, Margaret Kirkland sat on a stool at her husband's gas station. The couple would have celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary Dec. 18. She had talked to the police, to her friends, to a funeral director. Now she needed to be where her husband had been.

"I don't know. Something just drew me here," she said quietly. "There's something about this place."

\*\*\*\*

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: NWS

Page: 1A

Index Terms: DETROIT ; GASOLINE STATION ; ROBBERY ; MAJOR STORY ;  
MULTIPLE

Record Number: 8303090899

Copyright (c) 1983 Detroit Free Press