

POLICE: KNIFING VICTIM OWED MONEY TO DRUG DEALERS

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Alicia Smith, the young mother stabbed **to** death with three members of a Detroit family that had helped her through pregnancy, was deeply in debt **to drug dealers** , according **to** police investigators trying Friday **to** find a motive for the slayings.

"Anything's still possible at this stage, as far as a motive's concerned, but the **drug** angle's the strongest," said one investigator, who asked not **to** be named.

Smith, William Darnell Jr. and his pregnant wife, Bette -- a deeply religious Catholic couple who had taken Smith into their home during her pregnancy and cared afterward for her baby daughter -- were found dead Thursday afternoon. They had been bound and gagged and piled one on top of the other in the basement of the Darnell home in the 17300 block of Cooley Street.

The Darnells' 2 1/2-year-old daughter, Stephanie, was found dead in an upstairs bedroom, a few feet from the crib in which she apparently had been lying when she was attacked and her throat cut, police said.

Each of the **victims** died of numerous stab wounds caused by a "sharp knife or knives," Dr. Ljubisa Dragovic, Acting Chief Wayne County Medical Examiner, said Friday.

Police continued searching Friday for the Darnells' Dodge Caravan and another family car, both of which have been missing since Wednesday, when investigators believe the slayings occurred.

The Caravan was bought for William Darnell last spring by American Business Computer Information Systems, a 15-employee company in Farmington Hills where Darnell was a vice-president.

The Caravan was purchased "in lieu of a raise," said Vera Dye, the wife of Gordon Dye, the firm's president. "Maybe when they find that, they'll have more clues."

Police also continued searching Friday for computer equipment and expensive stereo gear that was missing from the Darnell home.

Homicide detectives have not ruled out the possibility that the Darnells and Smith were the **victims** of what one investigator called "a straight rip, a robbery."

But most of the investigative activity Friday centered on Smith's use of cocaine and a substantial amount of **money** she had **owed to a drug dealer** who recently had beaten her because she could not repay him.

Investigators were searching Friday for that **drug dealer** and several other people, police said.

"It was my understanding she was under a lot of financial strain. She **owed** somebody a lot of **money**," said Calvin Whitaker, 28, a chef at Southfield's Skyline Club, where Smith had worked as a dishwasher for the past two months.

Whitaker said Smith, 24, was hired at the private club after her cousin, a close friend of Whitaker's who also is a chef, asked if he had any work available for her.

"We needed some help so I decided **to** give her a chance," he said.

Smith, a 1982 graduate of Taylor Center High School, had worked previously as a waitress at an Elias Brothers restaurant in Birmingham and before that at Lee Ward's, a craft supply store in Novi, where Bette Darnell had urged that she be hired in September 1987.

"I met Alicia. She was kind of friendly and outgoing, but there also was underlying that a shuck-and-jive con artist. But as a favor **to** Bette, we took her on," said Karl Klusman, the former assistant manager of the Novi store who now works at a Lee Ward's outlet in Minnesota.

"Alicia was a day cashier. . . . A few register shortages started **to** happen," he said. "Nothing major, but frequently."

Klusman said he determined Smith was responsible for the shortages after he began putting an extra \$5 in the cash drawer that was not recorded on the register tape.

"Sure enough, after her first break it always was gone," Klusman said.

Charles Prince, the former manager of the craft store who fired Smith two months after she was hired, said he "wouldn't be totally shocked if **drugs** were involved. . . . She had a lot of difficulties."

Klusman agreed, and said that "on an initial meeting, Alicia was a very pleasant, friendly individual who appeared **to** be trying **to** handle adverse situations. But once you get **to** know her, it becomes evident that there's an undercurrent of anger and that she's out **to** take advantage of the world."

The Darnells, natives of Houston, moved north about two years ago **to** escape the stagnating Texas economy, according **to** relatives and friends.

Devout Catholics who opposed abortion, the Darnells met Smith in August 1987 through Pregnancy Services, a non-profit agency which assists young woman like Smith by placing them in temporary homes.

Smith, whose 25th birthday would have been tomorrow, was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., and raised in Plainfield, N.J., her mother, Shirley Kelly, said Friday.

Kelly said she didn't know the Darnells personally, although she had talked **to** them on the telephone, often discussing biblical passages.

"I was very, very happy, very pleased, that Lisa was living with religious people," Kelly said.

She said there was no room in her home for Alicia, whom the family called Lisa, and "all children should learn how **to** stand on their own two feet and how **to** take care of themselves and know what the world's like. She's been on her own since she was 19 years old."

Cecilia Barna, the co-founder of the four-year-old Pregnancy Services, located at 5730 Woodward in Detroit, said the Darnells provided Smith "with a stable, loving environment. . . . With Bette and Bill, there was an immediate click. . . . Whenever Alicia had a problem, she would turn **to** the Darnells."

Smith had a daughter, Alynnya, who was born Sept. 15, 1987, and is now living with her father, Derrick Jennings of Inkster.

Last Saturday, Smith, who no longer was living with the Darnells, returned **to** the couple's two-story white frame house, badly bruised and seeking shelter. She said she had been beaten by a man and was terrified he would come after her again, according **to** police and neighbors who knew the family. The Darnells took her in, police said.

"It's an old, hokey phrase, but Bill and Bette were the type of people who'd give you the shirts off their backs and not ask too many questions," said Klusman.

At 2 p.m. Thursday, after William Darnell had failed **to** arrive at work, two co-workers drove **to** the family's home and discovered the grisly murder scene, police said.

Even some seasoned homicide investigators were stunned.

"You're inside and see what happened **to** that little girl and then come outside and see her Big Wheel that she probably got for Christmas just waiting for her **to** ride it again, and it kind of got **to** a couple of us," one senior investigator said.

Kelly said she believed her daughter had some trouble "learning how **to** judge people. But who am I **to** say? I don't want **to** put a bad light on the subject."

William Darnell's mother, Noreen Darnell, said she did not know a lot about Smith, except that she occasionally watched Stephanie for the Darnells.

"They trusted her with the baby. Otherwise, I don't know more than what I read in the paper," said Darnell, a resident of Spring, Texas, near Houston.

Darnell said her son and family were "planning **to** move within the next year" from their Old Redford neighborhood **to** get closer **to** Darnell's job in Farmington Hills.

Anyone calling the computer company Friday received a recorded message: "We will be closed today, Friday the 13th, due to a personal tragedy."

CUTLINE:

Alicia Smith

Stephanie Darnell's tricycle sits outside the home where she and three adults were found slain.

Caption: Photo Richard Lee; Photo Color

Memo: SEE ALSO RELATED STORY ON PAGE 15a

Edition: METRO FINAL CHASER

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Page: 1A;

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