

Shelby Ann Peace

Honors Capstone: Written Reflective Critique

“Examining Systemic Failures in Domestic Violence Cases: A Case Study of Domestic Violence Murders in Virginia”

When I first began my honors capstone, I knew I wanted to focus on a local cold case, but I didn't yet know what I was trying to say. As I dug deeper into the 2016 murder of Janina Jefferson, the gaps in Virginia's domestic violence response became startlingly clear. I was shocked to learn that Janina's killer had been released on bond without a formal risk assessment being conducted—even though his criminal record and history of violence were extensive. This absence of structured intervention highlighted a critical weakness in our justice system and helped shape the focus of my project.

The project began to take shape more clearly after I encountered resistance when seeking public documents related to the case. Multiple sources confirmed that Janina was not notified to testify at her estranged husband's bond hearing, but without access to official transcripts, I couldn't include that detail in the paper. Still, the experience reinforced my belief that change was necessary, and that cases like Janina's deserved more thorough scrutiny.

One of the most impactful parts of this project was speaking with Janina's family. Their hope for justice and their trust in my research added a layer of responsibility and purpose that motivated me to continue, even when the work became emotionally difficult. I hope I've honored their trust by proposing a policy—Court-Appointed Risk Advocates (CARA)—that could help prevent future tragedies. The CARA model is designed to ensure that risk is fully assessed and communicated in court, especially in high-risk cases where victim witness staff or law enforcement may be overwhelmed by heavy caseloads.

I believe the strength of my project lies in its effort to bridge systemic gaps through practical reform. It expands upon existing literature on the Lethality Assessment Program (LAP) and builds on the advocacy framework used in CASA programs, applying it to adult domestic violence cases. My education in criminal justice and psychology, combined with personal connections to the victim's family and a strong commitment to victim advocacy, allowed me to approach this project with both academic and emotional depth.

If I had the opportunity to do things differently, I would have tried to identify my core message earlier in the process and sought IRB approval sooner, which would have allowed me to gather even more direct input from practitioners. Despite those limitations, the research has already begun to have an impact. What started as an undergraduate research project is now evolving into meaningful policy advocacy—with potential legislative support in Virginia.

Ultimately, this project taught me that I am capable of making a difference. I had worried that this would be “just a paper,” but the momentum it's gained shows that research, when rooted in compassion and purpose, can become a catalyst for real change.