

Life in New Orleans turns tragic for Canadians

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From Saturday's Globe and Mail

NEW ORLEANS — It was Helen who wanted to come back to New Orleans but Paul was worried.

After all, the couple's home had been deluged by five feet of water during hurricane Katrina and they would have to find a new place to stay. And everybody knew that the recovery of this long-troubled city was advancing in fits and starts. Toxic sludge lay over many neighbourhoods and crime was surging.

So to persuade him, from her parents' home in South Carolina, where the couple had fled from the hurricane, Helen Hill, a 36-year-old animator and filmmaker, began her postcard campaign aimed at persuading her husband and soulmate, family doctor Paul Gailiunas, who grew up in Edmonton and trained in medicine in Halifax, to move back to New Orleans.

"She had all of her friends [in New Orleans] write postcards [to her husband] with all the reasons why they should come back," recalled Rene Broussard, director of the Zeitgeist Multi-Disciplinary Arts Center, where Ms. Hill showed her experimental films. "Paul was my doctor. So I wrote — to keep me alive," said Mr. Broussard, a heavy-set 42-year old.

Perhaps Dr. Gailiunas's reticence was well-founded. Early Thursday morning, Ms. Hill — who was born in the United States but took Canadian citizenship — was shot in the neck and killed in the entrance of their modest home on the edge of the French Quarter.

Dr. Gailiunas was hit four times in the cheek and arm but was released from hospital yesterday. Their two-year-old son, Francis, was unhurt. He was reportedly found in the entrance of his house, protected by his injured father.

In a city that has become accustomed to tragedy and to an endless strings of crime — there have been a dozen homicides in the past two weeks — this latest outrage was just too much.

"I'm so aggravated and angry," said Helen Gillet, an experimental cellist who gathered with about two dozen other friends of the couple outside their modest frame house in New Orleans's Faubourg Marigny neighbourhood late yesterday afternoon. "I'm outraged at what's going on in the community."

Dr. Gailiunas, who worked in a medical clinic for the poor run by the Daughters of Charity religious order, and Ms. Hill were part of the community of artists, poets and other creative types, refugees from the rest of the United States and elsewhere, who

have been drawn to New Orleans because of its singular history and culture.

They all know that the city is bedevilled by crime, but what has happened since Katrina has shaken them to the core. There were 161 murders here last year — all in a city that has only about 220,000 people, half the number from before Katrina, giving it one of America's highest murder rates.

If anybody thought they could make a difference, it was Ms. Hill and Dr. Gailiunas. The two met at Harvard as undergraduates and came to New Orleans when they graduated in 1992. According to friends and family, it's where their friendship blossomed into love.

Ms. Hill went off to California to attend film school and Dr. Gailiunas returned to his father's alma mater, Dalhousie and studied medicine. Ms. Hill soon joined Dr. Gailiunas and the couple became mainstays of the city's artistic community.

But the lure of New Orleans was there and, in 2001, they moved here and bought a home.

"My sister was truly the best person I know. She was the sweetest, most compassionate, selfless person," said Helen's brother, Jacob, a magazine publisher from New York, as he thanked friends and neighbours for coming and made a TV plea for witnesses to come forward in an effort to find the killer.

"They came back to New Orleans because they wanted to be part of the reconstruction and they wanted to come to help," Jacob continued.

Paul's brother, Adam, said his brother didn't move to the United States to escape Canadian medicare. Quite the opposite, he came to New Orleans because he wanted to work in a Third World environment and he felt his skills were needed.

According to Adam, a musician from Portland, Ore., Dr. Gailiunas was released from hospital yesterday and is staying with his son and other members of his extended family, including his mother, who flew down from Vancouver.

"He's in shock, in grief and disbelief like the rest of us," Adam said.

"I've cried more in the past two days than I've cried in 20 years," said Ms. Hill's step-father, Kevin Lewis, a professor of religious studies from South Carolina.

The couple moved last year into a New Orleans apartment close to a renovated church called St. Cecilia's, where Dr. Gailiunas started work with a Roman Catholic organization that provides health care to the poor.

Her self-sufficiency and artistic mindset were remembered yesterday by outraged friends, who said that the crime should be a call to action for the city. A rally is planned for Sunday and protesters intend to march on city hall.

"They are wonderful people, two bright spots in New Orleans," said Sheri Branch, who was taking care of Francis while Dr. Gailiunas was being treated in hospital.

"They gave us hope that people could live together."

Ms. Hill's slaying was one of four homicides in New Orleans in less than a day. The burst of violence has added to the fears of locals, who say that crime was already a serious concern. Many argue that, while the number of murders last year was the lowest in 30 years, if adjusted for the reduced population after Katrina, it actually represents an increase.

A person posting online under the name Sophmom gives a sense of the level of fear some endure in the city.

"I never stop watching the crime," this person wrote. "Every morning when I arrive at work, I Mapquest the locations where someone was shot or found shot, fearfully."

Some argue that the situation is bad enough to warrant National Guard troops, others say that the Department of Justice should take over the New Orleans Police Department.

In many ways the couple showed their socially progressive mindset.

During their first stint in New Orleans, Dr. Gailiunas and a partner opened Little Doctors Neighbourhood Clinic. They used a sliding-scale fee based on a patient's income.

And Ms. Hill, after winning a local award with an animated memorial to her dying grandfather, created a film intended to encourage others by showing how easy it is to make movies.

Dr. Gailiunas is also the vocalist/guitarist for a band called The New Orleans Troublemakers. Using a style described by a local music critic as a cross between singing and rapping, his lyrics explore universal health care, flag burning and early anarchist Emma Goldman.

They were both vegan, in Dr. Gailiunas's case since the first month of medical school, and moved in an artistic circle. They had a small role in a 2003 amateur documentary on the Atkins diet, appearing for several minutes in the film *Fat* as a counterbalance to the others, who were testing the famously carnivorous diet.

Ms. Hill began making her own films while still a grade-schooler and received her masters of fine arts degree in experimental animation from the California Institute of the Arts in 1995.

Two years ago, she won a \$35,000 fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation's program for media artists for her film *The Florestine Collection*.

Courtney Egan, a teacher at the New Orleans Centre for Creative Arts in New Orleans, where Ms. Hill was a visiting artist, described her as a happy, exuberant person.

"She was irrepressibly cheerful. She was always very enthusiastic. It was an infectious kind of enthusiasm. She would never speak a bad word about a soul."

Ms. Egan said the couple were kind-hearted. "They had the innocence of children in their sweet nature."

With a report from Oliver Moore, Estanislao Oziwicz, Jill Mahoney and Associated Press

Halifax arts community devastated

SHAWNA RICHER

From Saturday's Globe and Mail

HALIFAX — The last time Halifax filmmaker Walter Forsyth saw his good friend Helen Hill here, she was joyfully pregnant with her son, Francis. Today, the boy is two years old and, tragically, without his mother.

Ms. Hill, a 36-year-old independent filmmaker who came to Halifax in 1995 with her boyfriend, Paul Gailiunas, who was studying medicine at Dalhousie University, was shot dead in the couple's home near the French Quarter in New Orleans early Thursday morning.

"We're angry. We're all very sad, and everyone is talking about it and trying to make sense of something so tragic and senseless," said Mr. Forsyth, executive-director of the Atlantic Filmmakers Co-operative.

The sense of shock ricocheted through Halifax's arts community.

"It's desperately terrible," said Stephanie Domet, a friend who once lived around the corner from the couple. "Anyone who knew them for 10 minutes knew they were the kind of people who would give you anything you asked for."

"They sparkled with life. It came off them in waves," Ms. Domet said. "They were such good people; they just kind of arrived in town and started changing things for the better. People are reeling."

Both artists and activists, they had met at Harvard and lived in Halifax until 2001, when they moved to New Orleans, a city that captured their imagination while they were on vacation.

Ms. Hill was a filmmaker and teacher; he a guitarist and singer and budding doctor. They started the Halifax Food for Bombs program, providing free vegetarian meals for less fortunate people; he worked at a local clinic while earning his medical degree. She taught animation filmmaking at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and the Atlantic Filmmakers Co-operative, and also in schools and libraries as a volunteer.

"The two of them together were pretty unique characters," Mr. Forsyth said. "They were quirky and odd enough that people would recognize them wherever they went, and they were friendly and open enough that almost everyone actually knew them personally. They were super kind and generous."

Ms. Hill last visited Halifax in 2005, after Mr. Forsyth commissioned her to make a short film. The result was *Bohemian Town*, a "love letter to Halifax" based on a song written by her husband before they moved to New Orleans.

In only six years here, they made a significant impact on the city. A native of Columbia, S.C., she loved Halifax enough to become a Canadian citizen. And Halifax loved both of them in return.

"She was relentlessly positive, the most optimistic person I've come across in my life," said Lee Anne Gillan, a friend and filmmaker. "She saw the good and talent in everybody. She thought everyone could make something of themselves. She really inspired people to make art, had no ideas about who could be an artist and who couldn't.

I know a lot of wonderful people in the world, but no one like them."

They lived with their 90-pound pot-bellied pig, Daisy, now deceased. Daisy's successor, a pot-bellied pig named Rosie, also lived with them in New Orleans.

Dr. Gailunas, who dedicated his medical career to treating the poor, was also a singer-songwriter who played in Piggy, what Mr. Forsyth described as "the Calypso band of the Maritimes."

In New Orleans, Ms. Hill set up a film co-operative and he co-founded a clinic for the poor. "It didn't take them long to make an impact there either," Mr. Forsyth said.

At this year's Mardi Gras, the couple took Rosie the pig and a homemade vegan hot-dog cart on a float to protest against the eating of meat.

Ms. Hill was also known for the cotton-candy machine she kept in her Halifax home.

"That made her quite popular," Mr. Forsyth said. "They had a lot of fun toys, but they weren't commercial, material people at all. That's what's so especially tragic. Anyone breaking into their house looking for things to steal, they wouldn't find

anything in their place.”

Heather Harkins, a Halifax filmmaker and close friend of Ms. Hill who spoke to her every few weeks on the phone, talked to her just days ago for the last time. She said Ms. Hill was in an upbeat mood and that the couple were talking about buying another house in New Orleans to replace the one they lost during hurricane Katrina.

“Because I spoke to her a couple days ago, it's just so hard to believe it's true. It's truly awful; they were the last people you'd expect something like this to happen to. She had an incredible enthusiasm for life and creative work. She had a very deep love for everything she did and everything the people around her were doing. It's so rare.”

She had won a number of filmmaking awards, including a \$35,000 fellowship in 2004 from the prestigious Rockefeller Foundation, but volunteered endlessly, both in Halifax and her new home of New Orleans, doing outreach workshops with youth and adults.

“She was part of the community and we all loved her,” Ms. Gillan said. “They were real Halifax fixtures. I don't think anyone's ever been embraced so completely. No one knows what to say about this. They were the two least likely people you'd ever want to see harm come to. We're all thinking about Paul and Francis.”