

Popular teacher reportedly kills masked intruder who was his Wellington neighbor

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WELLINGTON — A popular middle school band teacher shot and killed a masked gunman who broke into his house and forced him into a gunfight early today, authorities said. Heath Miller, 34, of Wellington leveled a .38-caliber pistol and shot the robber in the duplex at 1382 White Pine Drive about 2 a.m., according to the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office. Neither Miller, a beloved music teacher at H.L. Watkins Middle School in Palm Beach Gardens, nor his wife, Mirelle, were hurt in the attack.

"He's better now, but he had to have sedatives to sleep this morning," said Miller's mother, Harma Miller, who took in the shaken couple at her Wellington home this morning. "They're fine. They're actually better now, and concerned friends have been calling all morning."

The gunman was identified as Robert Rashard Tomlin, 22, who lived down the street from Miller. Detectives had yet to pinpoint why Tomlin, who dressed in black and wielded a .40-caliber handgun, targeted Miller's duplex. "It's hard to say at this point," said sheriff's Detective Sgt. David Conklin, whose homicide squad is handling the case. "I couldn't even take a guess."

Just before 2 a.m., the masked intruder slipped into the duplex, possibly through a rear sliding glass door, and set Miller's dogs to barking. Miller and his wife, who just bought a house near West Palm Beach and were getting ready to move in two weeks, huddled in their bedroom as the intruder moved toward them in the dark.

Miller got out his pistol and held it at the ready. Through the bedroom doorway, he saw the silhouette of the gunman coming toward him, said Sgt. Pete Palenzuela, sheriff's office spokesman. A gunfight ensued. It wasn't immediately clear who fired the first shot, but after a brief exchange the masked intruder stumbled bleeding back toward the glass door, where he collapsed and died, Palenzuela said. Harma Miller said her son didn't know his attacker. "This could have been anyone in the world," she said, noting the apparent random nature of the crime.

Neighbors told investigators Miller was well regarded in the community, near Forest Hill Boulevard and Wellington Trace. Miller is the son of a prominent Belle Glade family. His father, Henry Miller, owns the successful Miller Funeral Home on Southwest Third Street; his mother served on the Belle Glade city commission for a number of years and was mayor for at least one term in the early 2000s. She also taught at Palm Beach Community College's Glades campus.

Miller graduated in 1992 from Glades Central High School, where he served as Student Council vice president. He earned degrees in finance and music at Howard University in Washington, where, as a freshman, he led the drum section of the college's "Thunder" marching band.

Heath Miller worked at his father's funeral home as a security guard and produced the music of his sister, Harva, an aspiring recording artist who performed at the 2000 SunFest.

Speaking about the embalming business in 1998, Miller said, "Being around this has given me a respect for life and made me want to live every day like it's my last."

It was as a teacher that he shined, his students' parents said. Miller liked to brag about running his band with military precision, saying he punished students by ordering them to do push ups. "The parents call me: 'So-and-so needs push ups,'" Miller said. "He reminds you of how the teachers were back in the days," said Latracia Hayes, whose son Jacoby was in the band part of this school year. "He understands the kids."

Catharine Darant said her 14-year-old son Derick was having trouble with his grades. So she sat down with all of his teachers, including Miller. The band teacher applied just the right amount of pressure, warning Derick that if his grades continued to slip, he would have to quit playing. "That's one of the reasons my son is keeping his grades up, so he can stay in the band," Darant said, calling Miller "very influential."

Miller, a teacher at Watkins since 2005, was selected as the school's most popular teacher in 2007, according to the yearbook. Band parents praised Miller's leadership, especially of the school's awarding winning, 40-plus-member Percussion Academy, one of the largest such drum lines in the country.

As Miller rested at his mother's house this morning, investigators studied the crime scene. The owner of the duplex, Angelo Palumbo, drove up to the property just before 10:30 a.m. and walked in to survey the damage. He said he saw some bullet holes scattered through the house, and said the rear sliding glass door was shattered. Palumbo, who described Miller as a "very good tenant," said the neighborhood is in decline.

Staff writer Sonja Isgar and staff researcher Niels Heimeriks contributed to this story.