

2022 STATE LEGISLATURE

Lawmakers gear up for cultural warfare

Statewide crises take a back seat to DeSantis' re-election year agenda, which features issues that play more to a national audience.

BY MARY ELLEN KLAS AND ANA CEBALLOS
Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — On Nov. 7, Melinda Jackson's landlord told her she was ending the lease on the three-bedroom home in a quiet suburban neighborhood of Sarasota that Jackson had rented for seven years, forcing her to move by Jan. 5 so the landlord could sell.

Jackson, 56, a single medical assistant who makes \$16 an hour, frantically started filling out rental applications and paying application fees, only to be told repeatedly she had been put on a waiting list.

Still eyeing reform

Sen. Jeff Brandes will again push for prison reform in his final legislative session. **Local & State, 1B**

As panic set in, Jackson turned to the online neighborhood app Nextdoor with a call for help. "Time is running out and I still can't find a place to live," she wrote. "...If anyone knows of anything coming up in early January (moving during the holidays can you imagine) please, please let me know."

The post touched a nerve. But instead of getting ideas for a place to rent, she got more than 400 responses, mostly from people in the same situation. There were young and old families, people caring for sick relatives, teachers, police officers and medical assistants like herself.

"This is the new face of homelessness," Jackson said in an interview a week before her move-out date. "They are not

Study: Omicron likely to peak soon in Florida

UF researchers say the variant will cause a record number of infections.

BY DANIEL CHANG
Miami Herald

Florida's rocketing number of COVID-19 cases likely will peak by mid-January as the highly contagious omicron variant potentially infects most of the state's population during this wave alone, according to disease modelers with the University of Florida's Emerging Pathogens Institute.

UF biostatisticians and scientists said they revised their forecast for the state's omicron wave to account for the astonishing speed and breadth with which the virus was spreading through Florida in December, leading to record numbers of COVID-19 cases during the state's fourth wave of the pandemic.

The university's model still calls for omicron to cause fewer deaths than prior surges of the pandemic, and like past waves this one is expected to diminish with the same speed that it spiked — making for possibly one of the shortest though still devastating waves of the pandemic.

See **PEAK, 12A**



Courtesy of Kruspe family

Pam met Steve Kruspe at a Marine ball when she was 18, he was 20. The couple loved to dance, rollerblade and ride bikes together. They raised three children and were married for 42 years.

MERCY OR MURDER?

As Pam Kruspe's disease worsened, Stephen Kruspe, a retired Marine, drew a gun.

BY LANE DeGREGORY | Times Staff Writer

Chapter 1

When he visited his wife that day, she was agitated and angry, more adamant than ever.

She didn't want to be in that place. She didn't know what was wrong with her or why she couldn't go home.

For three months, she had been at the Parkside Inn, an assisted living facility for Alzheimer's patients in Boynton Beach.

Her husband visited every day. Every day, she seemed to be getting worse.

They had been married 42 years, had raised three children and a Saint Bernard. She had worked at the courthouse, sung in the church choir, run marathons.

Now, a few weeks after turning 61, Pam Kruspe couldn't remember how to use the bathroom and stared at the phone, trying to figure it out. In rare lucid moments, she sobbed that she didn't want to live like this.

Her husband had been a career Marine, then a teacher. He was 62, used to taking charge, fixing things.

But that morning — March 27, 2017 — Stephen Kruspe had prayed for guidance: How could he help his wife?

That evening, he signed her out at the front desk and drove a mile down the road to the Dunkin'.

He got her hot coffee. His was iced. As they talked,

he said later, "she would come and go, come and go."

After almost an hour, she looked at him and asked, "Do we have to go back there?"

Well, he said, yes, we do.

During the drive back, the closer they got, the more unhappy Pam became, Steve later told a detective. This account is drawn from his interview at the Boynton Beach Police Department.

Steve signed his wife into the facility at 6:30 p.m. "And when we finally went back inside is when she started almost incessantly with, 'I want you to ... to ... I ... I don't want to be here anymore.'"

She said she wanted to die. That she was going to kill herself. She told her husband, "I want you to kill me."

He walked her down a long hallway, through the building, then out a side door facing the parking lot. She kept begging: "Please."

He led her to their van, where he got his pistol from the glove box and put it in his jeans pocket.

She told him no one loved her anymore. She felt trapped. This was not how she wanted to live the rest of her life.

They went back toward the building and stopped on the patio. Pam stood close to Steve and looked into his eyes.

He thought, maybe, if he pulled out the gun, she would get scared and back off.

But she didn't flinch.

See **KRUSPE, 6A**

3/18/17	Pam Kruspe	Steve Kruspe	Walk in Park	5:30	6:51
3/21/17	Pam Kruspe	Steve Kruspe	Panera	5:35	6:20
3/25/17	Pam Kruspe	Steve Kruspe	Dunkin Donuts	2:30	3:25
26-17	Pam Kruspe	Steve Kruspe	Dunkin Donuts	5:36	6:20

Steve visited his wife almost every day at Parkside Inn, an assisted living facility for Alzheimer's patients in Boynton Beach. He often took her for walks or coffee. On March 27, 2017, he signed her out for the last time.

Coming Wednesday: tbt* Weekend returns



We are bringing back our lifestyle and entertainment guide, tbt* Weekend! Starting Wednesday, the section will once again feature the arts, TV, movies, entertainment and culture around Tampa Bay. Yes, the pandemic is still out there. But we will feature ways to safely experience the world around us. The section will include recommendations for things to do on a date night or fun outings for the entire family.

Our food coverage from Taste, including restaurants and recipes to make at home, will be part of tbt* Weekend every Wednesday. Our first section showcases some of the top restaurants around Tampa Bay, including critic Helen Freund's best new dining hot spots and her reliable, go-to favorites. Happy dining!

TO MAKE ENDS MEET, SENIORS HIT THE ROAD

As the cost of living increases, older adults are turning to gig driver apps like Uber or Lyft to afford life in Tampa Bay, where they make up a higher share of drivers than nationally. **Local & State, 1B**

RECEIVER FOLLOWS UNUSUAL ROUTE

Former sprinter and Bucs wide receiver Cyril Grayson is used to picking up the baton. **Sports, 1C**

Bucs vs. Panthers, 4:25 today, CBS

Partly sunny

8 a.m. Noon 4 p.m. 8 p.m.

68° 80° 82° 74°

25% chance of rain
More, Page 8C

INSIDE SUNDAY

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Editor's note

Today's *Parade* magazine features a cover story celebrating actor, comedian and much-beloved icon Betty White to coincide with her 100th birthday. It was printed before White died Dec. 31.



KRUSPE continued from 1A

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What do you do when someone you love is hurting, and there's no way to fix it?

It's illegal, in most places, to help someone end their life. Even if they beg you.

Since 1999, when Jack Kevoorkian was jailed for helping terminally ill people die, several states have adopted a Death With Dignity act that allows medical aid in dying.

But in Florida — and 39 other states — doctors can only try to ease physical pain. Sometimes, at the end, the only advice right-to-die groups can offer is to inhale helium or starve yourself.

Even if Pam had gone to Oregon, the state that led the country in medical aid in dying, she likely would have been denied that option because of her dementia. Patients have to be deemed competent enough to make their own decisions.

Recent polls show broad support for end-of-life options for the terminally ill in America. But laws haven't caught up.

So many of us have these conversations: If I'm incapacitated, can't care for myself, left in a ward, then put me out of my misery.

Our loved ones often agree.
But would you really?
How could you?

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The band was playing *In the Mood*, and Steve wanted to dance. None of the other Marines at his table that night in 1974 seemed to notice the music.

But one young woman was swaying in her seat. "A tall, attractive girl with auburn hair and green eyes," he remembered in a memoir his lawyer asked him to write.

Much of this account comes from those 31 pages, as well as conversations with Steve's old colleagues and friends and police interviews with his wife's caretakers. Steve's youngest son, Matt, spoke at length about his parents. His other two children declined to talk.

"Do you know how to swing dance?" Steve had asked the pretty woman. She did. So he led her onto the floor and twirled her around, showing off his best jitterbug.

Pam had come to the Marine Corps Birthday Ball in Washington, D.C., with a friend, who had set her up on a date. But later, when the band broke into *Tuxedo Junction*, she asked Steve if he knew how to foxtrot. They danced until the evening was over.

"As I rode back to the Marine barracks," Steve wrote, "I knew I would someday see her again."

Steve was 20 and had been a Marine for two years. He was working security at the Gerald Ford White House and carrying caskets at Arlington Cemetery.

Pam was 18. She had finished a semester at the University of Maryland and decided not to go back. She was a civilian worker at the Naval Sea Systems Command.

They ran into each other a few months later, at a New Year's Eve party.

At midnight, they kissed.
He proposed that spring.

"We vowed to give ourselves to each other, and for each other."

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When you marry a Marine, you learn your family can't come first. A soldier's duty is to God. Country. Corps. Then come spouse and kids.

Pam was 20 when she had their first child and followed Steve into base housing at his new post at Camp Lejeune, N.C. He was soon shipped overseas for six months, the first of endless deployments. During two decades of service, he was gone more than he was home. Pam would wake the kids in the middle of the night to say goodbye to Daddy.

Steve worked with Navy SEALs and Green Berets, teaching them to jump out of helicopters, swim through dangerous waters, become expert marksmen. Since he was in Special Warfare Ops, his family seldom knew where he was or if he was in danger. Pam had to live with that uncertainty while helping her daughter and two sons with homework, taking them to church and driving them to football, basketball, track, band and color guard.

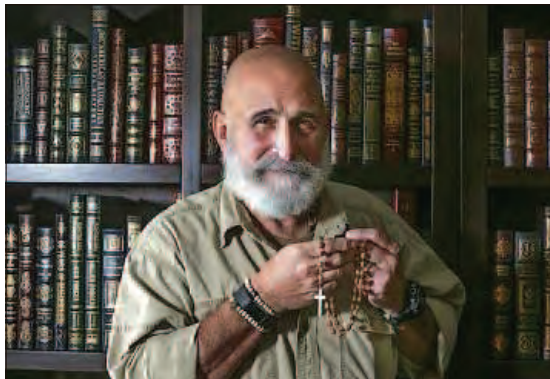
"She always put everyone else first and made them feel OK," said their youngest son, Matt. "She taught me compassion. And if you're going to do something, do it all the way, whether it's doing the dishes or loving someone."

The only thing Matt ever saw



JOHN PENDYGRAFT | Times

Matt Kruspe holds some of his mother's ashes in his home in Lake Worth. He keeps the urn wrapped in a British soccer scarf she brought him from a trip.



JOHN PENDYGRAFT | Times

Kent Bolin was Steve's boss at Camp Lejeune, N.C. The Marines shared long talks about philosophy, spirituality and God.

his mom do for herself was start writing a couple of murder mysteries. But she never had — or took — the time to finish one.

He describes his dad as "a man's man" with a commanding presence. He wasn't affectionate. But when Steve was home, he went to all of his kids' sporting events and band concerts, dressed up and went trick-or-treating. Matt said, "You definitely knew he loved you."

His dad taught him to shoot guns and handle them safely. Steve was his Boy Scout leader — and disciplinarian. "If I jacked up really bad, I got a butt whipping," Matt said. "But he never bruised me. ... That's the true sign of a warrior: Being peaceful, knowing when *not* to use violence."

He remembers his parents yelling, sometimes, over the years. But never any physical altercations or even slammed doors.

Kent Bolin was Steve's boss at Camp Lejeune. Their families celebrated holidays with each other; their kids grew up together. He called Steve trustworthy and courageous. Steve prided

himself on his integrity, Kent said, and above all, his honor.

Though Steve didn't go to college, he devoured books about history, politics and philosophy, Kent said.

He said Steve and Pam were "madly in love."

By 1990, Steve had risen to master sergeant — one of the highest ranks for enlisted Marines. He moved his family to Florida, where he trained 250 reservists in West Palm Beach for Operation Desert Shield.

Pam worked as a bank teller, then at the courthouse. She started running miles, then marathons. While she was training, Steve rode his bike alongside, handing her water, clocking her time. On weekends, they took long walks, holding hands, and went to church.

Many evenings, after dinner, they would drink wine and dance on their screened porch, said Kent's wife, Deb. "They were just beautiful dancers."

In 1994, Steve left the Marines and became an ROTC instructor at Deerfield Beach High School,

where he was later teacher of the year. He helped train the sheriff's SWAT team, stood up for LGBT students, took at-risk kids on trips into the Everglades.

Steve's friend John Wiseman, a retired journalist, said, "He never even got a parking ticket."

When he retired from teaching after seven years, Steve started restoring the lighthouse at Jupiter Inlet. Pam and Matt often went along. He also rescued the ancient lens of Pensacola's lighthouse, so sailors could again see the beacon.

Both of their sons joined the Marines. All of their children married. Steve and Pam enjoyed their five grandchildren — and each other, going rollerblading, having rum drinks with friends, traveling to St. Augustine, Key West, even Croatia.

For a couple of years, Steve wrote: "We went on cruises, visited theme parks and National Parks. And very much enjoyed being just us again."

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It started with her job. In January 2013, Pam walked into her office, threw the keys on her boss's desk and said, "I'm done." She'd been stressed out over "the new system of doing things," Steve wrote. Often, she would come home in tears.

Once Pam quit, Steve noticed, she seemed to regain some peace of mind.

Then Pam had to renew her driver's license — just go to the office and get a picture taken. But that process propelled her into a panic. She got a driving manual and tore it apart, taping pages to the kitchen cabinets. "She obsessed over it," Steve said. "She wouldn't stop."

She started seeing a psychiatric nurse, who diagnosed her with an anxiety disorder.

Every two weeks, Steve took her to appointments. But Pam was often frustrated. When their daughter, Stephanie, threw a surprise party for Steve's 60th birthday, Pam couldn't remember friends of 30 years. She struggled to recognize her sister, who flew **See KRUSPE, 7A**



JOHN PENDYGRAFT | Times

John Wiseman, a retired journalist, said his friend Steve Kruspe was so principled that "he never even got a parking ticket."



Kruspe family photo (2011)

Steve, left, and Pam Kruspe, in red, and their children Stephanie and Matt at a Marine Corps ball in 2011. Steve and Pam met at a the Marine Corps Birthday Ball in Washington, D.C., in 1974.



Boynton Beach Police Department (2017)

On March 27, 2017, police blocked off the crime scene at the parking lot of Parkside Inn, an assisted living facility for Alzheimer's patients in Boynton Beach. Pam Kruspe had lived there for almost three months and often tried to escape.

About the story

After hearing that a decorated Marine had killed his wife in 2017, *Tampa Bay Times* reporter Lane DeGregory and photographer John Pendygraft wanted to know more.

Who was this couple? What led to the shooting?

The pandemic kept postponing the trial, and the Palm Beach County Jail prohibited journalists from interviewing Stephen Kruspe. He didn't reply to numerous letters.

Much of the information for this story comes from his lawyer, a private investigator, police reports and interviews and a handwritten account of Steve's life that he wrote behind bars.

The *Times* also talked to Steve's youngest son extensively, over a couple of years. Steve's oldest son and daughter did not agree to several interview requests. The prosecutor also declined to speak to the *Times*.

Other information came from interviews with the couple's friends, his military records and from dozens of letters people wrote for and against him, which were included as evidence in court.

End of life options

The ancient Greeks debated euthanasia. So did Ohio politicians at the turn of the 20th century.

In the 1960s, efforts to legalize end-of-life options gained momentum under a variety of terms, like assisted suicide, mercy killing and medical aid in dying.

Oregon became the first state to approve a Death with Dignity Act in 1994. If someone has a terminal disease, is expected to die within six months, resides in the state and is still competent enough to make their own decision, a doctor can help them die.

But in Florida — and 39 other states — all doctors can do is try to ease physical pain.

In 2020, a state senator introduced Florida's first Death with Dignity Act to bring attention to the issue. But there was no time for a bill to be filed in the House, so it was withdrawn. State statutes categorize "assisting self-murder" as manslaughter.

Seven countries, including Canada, Spain and the Netherlands, allow doctors to help terminally ill patients die. Switzerland is one of the few places where sick foreigners can go to end their lives.

Officials there are even testing 3D-printed "suicide capsules," where people could lie down inside and die painlessly.

Many groups across the U.S. advocate for laws allowing people to plan their own deaths: Final Exit Network, Death with Dignity, Compassion & Choices. Often the only thing they can recommend is to put a plastic bag over their head and inhale helium or nitrogen. Or stop eating and drinking.

Opponents of right-to-die legislation say suicide devalues human life and death shouldn't be a treatment alternative. They also worry about a slippery slope, which might encompass people who are depressed, have disabilities or are unable to make their own decisions.

Where to find help

Alzheimer's Association

Caregiving, 800-272-3900

Alzheimer's Association,

Florida Gulf Coast Chapter,

407-543-9428

Alzheimer's Foundation of

America, 866-232-8484

Alzheimer's Disease

Education and Referral

Center, 800-438-4380

KRUSPE
continued from 6A

in from out of state.

She started picking fights. Her relationships began to fall apart, “but she didn’t know what to do about it,” Steve wrote. “And for the longest time, she wouldn’t let me out of her sight. ... She said life is just no fun anymore.” So he took her on vacations.

In New Orleans, Pam rode the streetcar, walked through the French Quarter, ate beignets at Cafe Du Monde. But then she freaked out because there were so many people. She refused to go out at night because she didn’t feel safe.

When Steve and Pam visited Pensacola in 2015, their friends noticed Pam was much quieter.

“She was walking around the house in the middle of the night and didn’t recognize me,” Kent said.

Matt had just returned from a tour in Afghanistan, where a roadside explosion had injured his brain. His dad and siblings tried to shield him from how bad things were getting with his mom. But soon, he saw it, too.

She had always dressed well and had her hair done. Now, she was forgetting to shower and brush her teeth. “It scared her,” Matt said. “She’d drift in and out.”

Finally, in early 2016, Stephanie convinced Steve to take Pam to a neurologist.

She was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer’s — at age 59.

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For the first few months, Steve took over the shopping, cooking, cleaning — all the duties Pam had shouldered through their marriage. He encouraged her to help, so she’d have a sense of purpose. They were always together.

Pam was confused but compliant.

The disease starts years before symptoms show. Protein builds in the brain, forming plaque. As it takes over different areas, the afflicted person loses memory and the ability to do basic tasks. There is no cure or proven treatment.

Alzheimer’s is primarily an elderly person’s disease. Only 5 percent of people get sick before age 65 — at least 220,000 people in the U.S., according to the Alzheimer’s Association. When the disease strikes early, it’s much

more aggressive. A patient’s personality can change completely.

If your body goes first, you still have your mind. And memories — something, still, to savor and share.

But when your brain gives out before your body, you’re stripped of connections and context. You lose yourself.

One night, soon after the diagnosis, Pam jumped out of bed screaming, “I can’t f--king do this anymore.” She was paranoid, delusional, and started pacing the house, Steve said.

He coaxed her into the car and took her to the emergency room, where nurses calmed her with lithium and Seroquel. The next day, a doctor deemed Pam dangerous to herself or others. She spent three days in a psychiatric facility.

A few weeks later, Pam phoned her sister, “Where’s Stephen?”

“I’m here with you,” Steve said beside her.

“Are you my Stephen?” she asked. “Is that you? If you’re lying, I’ll call the police.”

She got committed again. And again. Doctors kept adjusting her medications. She couldn’t ride bikes anymore because she kept pedaling through the intersections. She couldn’t remember how to put on her skates.

“Mom could recognize my face,” Matt said, “but she didn’t know I was her son.”

Another night — it was always at night — Pam woke in a fright, demanding, “What’s going on?” She started pulling on Steve’s shirt, stumbling through the bedroom. He grabbed her wrists to keep her from falling, and she insisted he let go. She hit his chest and arms and, in the tussle, her finger broke. On the way home from the hospital, she asked, “Am I in trouble?”

“I don’t think she ever fully understood what disease she had, or what it was doing to her,” Matt said.

Soon, it became impossible to take her out. She’d jump out of the car into traffic.

Steve had to put new locks and alarms on the doors to keep her from running. He lay awake all night, listening for Pam.

Kent, Steve’s friend, visited the couple three times after Pam’s diagnosis. “We cried together,” he said. “That was the only time I ever saw him cry.”

One evening, Pam thought Steve was an intruder and threat-

ened to kill him. He couldn’t calm or reassure her. He had to call 911. Matt came and took Pam to his house.

“I’ve never known my dad to be afraid of anything,” Matt said. “I didn’t know what to say. How do you tell Superman not to be afraid?”

Matt said his dad felt helpless but wouldn’t ask for help. “Sometimes, your strength is your weakness.”

Finally, experts at the Alzheimer’s care center convinced Steve he couldn’t handle Pam at home.

Matt knew his mom didn’t want to be incapacitated. “If I’m a vegetable, or can’t be me, I don’t want to be anymore,” she had told Matt before she got sick.

“That can be argued a thousand ways,” he said. “But I knew what my mom meant.”

Pam’s living will spelled out her wishes. But she was still physically healthy. There was no life support to end.

Sometimes, dying takes a long, long time.

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They moved Pam into Arden Courts memory care on July 29, 2016. Right away, she tried to escape, flipping beds, tossing chairs, smashing walls.

“It would take a couple of men to subdue her,” Matt said, “then she wouldn’t sleep for days.”

Most of the other residents were 20 years older than Pam. Sometimes, she thought she worked there and was supposed to take care of them. Other times, she said they were mistreating her. In cogent moments, she was humiliated by her condition and pleaded with Steve to take her home.

Steve would dress and bathe her, his friend Kent said, despite paying for the facility’s services. He wanted to preserve some dignity. And he wanted to be there, Kent said, “in case she had even a moment of clarity.”

By fall, Pam often couldn’t recall words or articulate her thoughts. When Matt brought his kids to visit, she didn’t recognize them.

“She was gone.”

Living alone took a toll on Steve, Matt said. He wasn’t eating. Their normally packed fridge was down to ketchup and milk.

“We didn’t talk about her much, because it was so hard,” Matt said. “But he started telling me war stories, which he never

did. He said he’d started dreaming of Marines he hadn’t thought about in 30 years and wake up in a cold sweat.”

Finally, Matt talked his dad into seeing a counselor at the Veterans Administration. On top of the stress and loneliness, Steve worried about finances. Memory care is expensive. After six months, Steve had burned through their savings. He and his kids found a nice place for \$3,000 a month — half the price. Pam moved into Parkside Inn on Jan. 16, 2017. “She almost broke the door down trying to get out,” Steve said.

She took medications for depression, dementia and anxiety. Workers at the facility said she sometimes seemed happy. Other times, she yelled at everyone. She often broke down and cried. One aide said Pam told her, “I can’t take it anymore.”

Less than a week after Pam moved into Parkside, while Steve was visiting, someone forced open the kitchen door of their home and stole his laptop and Pam’s wallet. Steve gave Matt his shotgun, muzzleloader and .22 rifle, so if the burglar came back, he couldn’t steal them.

He started stashing a Colt .45 in the glove box of his van, he wrote, “for self-defense.”

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On that evening in March 2017, he stood behind the assisted living facility, facing his wife, so close he could have kissed her. He pointed the gun at her heart.

Neither said a word. Steve had been watching Pam wither away for four years.

Was he trying to help her? Or end his own helplessness?

Did he think about what would

happen to him? To their kids?

Was this his duty?

Did he think about his honor? And what about Pam? What did she understand as she looked at her husband holding the gun? Was she capable of pulling the trigger herself? In that last second, was she in? Or out?

“She didn’t move,” Steve said.

A single bullet pierced her heart. An expert marksman, Steve knew to “go for the kill shot.” It hit so perfectly that blood barely stained the front of her blue T-shirt.

She slumped to the ground. Steve knelt and cradled her, then kissed her. For the first time in forever, she looked relaxed. Like his Pam.

“What the f--k have I done?” he said out loud.

He sat there, holding her for a few minutes, then, at 7:33 p.m., called 911.

“I just shot my wife.”

“OK,” said the dispatcher. “Is she awake?”

“No,” Steve said. His voice was flat and measured. “She’s dead.”

He unloaded the gun and put it on the patio railing, then sat on the ground beside Pam. He was still on the phone when he asked, “You OK, baby?”

“Who are you talking to?” asked the dispatcher.

“I’m — I,” Steve stammered. “I was just talking to her.”

“Can you tell me why you shot her, Steve?”

“She asked me to.”

Coming Wednesday, Chapter 2: Fractured family

Contact Lane DeGregory at ldgregory@tampabay.com. Follow @LaneDeGregory.



Boynton Beach Police Department

Steve Kruspe’s gun sits on a railing outside the Parkside Inn assisted living facility, where he left it after shooting his wife, Pam, on March 27, 2017.



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