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Slain Tri-Cities paraeducator spent years asking judges to protect her from ex-husband

Cameron Probert, *Tri-City Herald*

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Amber Rodriguez was killed by her ex-husband outside of West Richland's William Wiley Elementary school in April 2024. She told judges and investigators she was scared of his potential for violence for years. Courtesy GoFundMe

Amber Rodriguez told judges and investigators she was scared of her ex-husband's potential for violence years before he killed her.

Her estranged husband Elias Zuniga Huizar, a former Yakima police officer, was short-tempered and controlling of her actions, and she was terrified of what he might be capable of, she told police and judges.

Hundreds of pages of public documents obtained by the Tri-City Herald paint a picture Huizar's escalating behavior dating back to when he worked as a school resource officer in Yakima and later after he became a substitute teacher in Richland.

Before Rodriguez was gunned down a month ago outside the West Richland school where she worked, she had applied for four protection orders in four years.

Two Yakima County judges were unconvinced by her claims that Huizar was mentally unstable, grew up in a violent household and was stalking her.

One Yakima judge said Huizar and Rodriguez were both to blame for the bitter divorce that was one of the most contentious the judge had ever handled.

It took Huizar's arrest for raping a Tri-Cities teen and the discovery that he got a 15-year-old pregnant, to move a Tri-Cities judge to finally issue a protection order on Feb. 6.

About two months after, she filed to have his parental rights terminated. He killed her three days later at the school bus pickup area at William Wiley Elementary School.

It was the same West Richland school where he'd previously gotten into a confrontation in 2021 with his ex and her dad — a retired nuclear plant security officer in the Tri-Cities. The school's principal had to step in before it came to blows.



Flowers were placed at William Wiley Elementary School in West Richland, Wash., after paraeducator Amber M. Rodriguez was shot outside the school. (Karlee Van De Venter – Tri-City Herald)

This time, on April 21, Huizar hid near some portable classrooms and approached Rodriguez as classes were letting out, shooting her several times in front of their 9-year-old son.

Police then found his 17-year-old girlfriend, Angelica Santos, stabbed to death in his nearby house. He'd kept their relationship and her age secret for some time.

The murders launched a 300-mile manhunt that stretched from Tri-Cities into Eugene, Ore. He crashed on Interstate 5 during a chase with Oregon State Police, and then shot and killed himself before he could be arrested.

His 1-year-old son with Santos was in the car but wasn't hurt.



Huizar, 39, of West Richland was stopped by Oregon State Patrol officers after a high-speed chase. He shot himself before he could be arrested.

Growing up in Yakima Valley

Huizar grew up in the Yakima Valley and attended Sunnyside High School, where he was on the wrestling team.

It's not clear what he did immediately after high school, but he was in his early 20s when he enrolled at Dickinson State University in North Dakota, transferring some community college credits.

The Dickinson Press reported that he was a star wrestler at the school and was ranked in the top 10 nationally at the time.

In 2008, Huizar was charged with terrorizing and trespassing in connection with a fight that involved numerous Dickinson State University students. He was accused of threatening people with a knife at a home but all charges were eventually dropped.

It appears he graduated in 2009, returned to the Yakima Valley and began volunteering to help train Sunnyside High School wrestlers. He joined the Yakima Police Department in June 2013.

Rodriguez would later say in court documents that her husband grew up in a violent home, that he was molested by a grandfather and physically abused by his dad.

"His father, Nathan Huizar, went to prison for attempting to murder Eli's mother by stabbing her 17 times (in 1995)," Rodriguez wrote in a March 2021 affidavit.

Court documents show that Nathan Huizar has stayed out of trouble since his 1995 conviction for first-degree burglary.

Huizar's younger brothers also had troubles. David Huizar had four convictions for child molestation from when he was a juvenile in 2009, as well as a drug conviction in 2019.

Another brother, Joseph Huizar, was convicted in 2011 for holding someone against their will and was named on 11 protection orders connected to domestic violence, according to state court documents.

"Eli's claimed huge family support system that can help him with our children in the Tri-Cities includes those three men," Rodriguez had said in one of her requests for a protection order.

Sunnyside High wrestling

Rodriguez was 17 when she first met Huizar in 2009.

She was a talented wrestler — placing third in the state in her division — at Sunnyside High when Huizar, then 24, helped coach the team.

After Rodriguez graduated, she attended Yakima Valley Community College and earned an athletic scholarship to Oklahoma City University.

It's not clear when her relationship with Huizar began but five years after she graduated from high school she married the 29-year-old officer. She was 22.

That was 2014 and they had their first son about a year later. Their second was born in 2018 in Yakima.

The couple didn't have any outward signs of conflict before the divorce. Court documents said the two praised each other on social media.



Yakima Police Officer Elias Huizar, on the left, is pictured here in 2018 with two other resource officers delivering food to families in need.

Later during their divorce, Rodriguez and Huizar were praised by family members for being good parents.

Rodriguez initially stayed home with the boys while Huizar continued working for the Yakima Police Department. At some point, Rodriguez became a real estate agent.

Their relationship turned sour after about six years and Rodriguez filed for divorce in December 2020.

Her father David Rodriguez, a retired Energy Northwest nuclear security officer, described in a declaration to the court that Huizar was "jealous and controlling" and emotionally abusive. He wrote that Huizar rarely interacted with their family and never openly volunteered to watch his own sons.

Amber Rodriguez told her mother, Connie Johnson, that Huizar was often mean and negative about her real estate career.

Huizar also had trouble at work and was put on medical leave from the police department in December 2020 for post-traumatic stress disorder, according to court documents.

In Rodriguez's arguments to get full custody of their sons, she told a Yakima judge that psychologists found Huizar was suffering from depression and alcohol use disorder.

Their divorce dragged on for more than two years. When it was done, Huizar and Rodriguez had accumulated more than \$80,000 in attorneys fees.

Misconduct investigation

Soon after filing for divorce, Rodriguez moved to West Richland to live with her sister, taking the boys with her.

She was working for a local real estate firm and later got a job as a paraeducator with the Richland School District.

Court records show Huizar moved to the Tri-Cities soon after Rodriguez but was forced to go back to Yakima in May 2021 after the house he was renting was sold.

During the course of the summer of 2021, the children stayed with him, according to court documents. Then in October 2021, the children were returned to her care.

He returned to the Tri-Cities in November 2021 and began renting a house on Highlands Boulevard, a block from where his oldest son was attending Wiley Elementary.

Huizar never returned to work for the Yakima Police Department, officially resigning in February 2022 following a sexual misconduct investigation that was conducted by Union Gap police while he was still on medical leave.

They were looking into whether his then-wife and a previous girlfriend were underage when he began dating them.

Later, Huizar accused Rodriguez in court documents of sparking that investigation by contacting Yakima police leadership in 2021. She adamantly denied the claim and was extremely reluctant to be interviewed about her relationship with Huizar, according to the Union Gap detective doing the investigation on behalf of Yakima police.

Union Gap determined there was not enough evidence to charge Huizar with sexual misconduct but he resigned anyway.

Soon after, he was hired in February 2022 by the Richland School District as an emergency substitute teacher. Washington state law allows districts to hire needed substitutes with any type of bachelor's degree on a temporary basis.

District officials have since said they were not told that Huizar was under investigation for a possible sex offense or inappropriate relationships with students.

He worked full-time as a substitute until June 2023, according to court records and the school district.

The Richland School District said he also applied to be a volunteer assistant wrestling coach, but never volunteered.

Protection order

Within four months of Rodriguez filing for divorce and moving to Tri-Cities, she went to court in Yakima seeking protection from her husband and his father and brothers.

She cited his family's violent history but didn't mention the confrontation that happened just days earlier outside Wiley Elementary. Though her father added a description of the confrontation in support of the protection order.

The police report by West Richland Officer Daniel Flores gave few details about what happened but March 29, 2021, altercation, however the report said Huizar agreed to let his son leave with his estranged wife and that they would handle the issue in court.

Later in April 2021, Rodriguez's father, David, described in a court affidavit what happened. He said he had gone with her to pick up her son at school and Huizar was there.

"I told Eli he was making things more difficult and that he should leave. Eli became very agitated and said, 'Don't point your f--g finger at me, Dave!' I told Eli, 'Don't talk to me like that,' and Eli replied, 'F--k you, Dave!'" David Rodriguez wrote.

He and the principal said Huizar started taking off his sweater like he was preparing for a fight. The school principal stepped in between them and school employees called the police.

Court Commissioner Sonia Rodriguez-True said she felt that family members were contributing to the ongoing animosity.

Rodriguez's request to block Huizar's visitation was denied in May 2021.



Flowers were placed at William Wiley Elementary School in West Richland, Wash., after paraeducator Amber M. Rodriguez was shot outside the school.

Restraining orders requests

A year later in May 2022, Rodriguez returned to court to again ask for protection from Huizar, saying he was tracking her using the OnStar system in a vehicle she was driving.

"Mr. Huizar is morally corrupt; he has been stalking me and continually drills my children for information about my personal life and the people I spend time with," wrote Amber Rodriguez.

Huizar denied the claims. He said she wouldn't have any concern about him accessing the OnStar account if she took over the car loan.

Commissioner Rodriguez-True again decided that granting the restraining order would create more problems.

"I think it would make the conflict worse. I don't think there's any basis to grant the restraining order," she wrote. "I want to say each of you in your text messages have ways that you're manipulating and pursuing conflict. Neither of you is without fault in that regard."

'High-conflict situation'

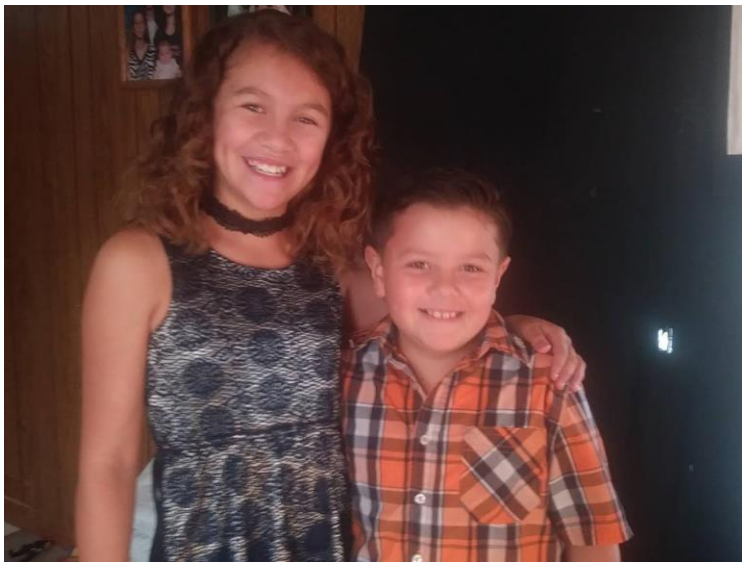
Another time, Huizar accused Rodriguez of abusing their boys, an allegation that was proven unfounded following an investigation by child protection officials.

Finally their divorce hearing was held in January 2023 before Yakima County Superior Court Judge Elisabeth Tutsch. Testimony included a psychiatrist who said Huizar's post-traumatic stress disorder was under control.

Tutsch granted the divorce and agreed to shared custody in January 2023, calling the case a "high-conflict situation. Probably one of the highest that the court has seen."

"There's been an enormous amount of negativity, but not all of that negativity has been supported in the facts in this case. Everyone agrees that the kids love both of the parents," she wrote.

"We don't have domestic violence. We have some control issues, but we don't have the usual domestic violence that we see under (the state law) factors."



Angelica Santos, shown here in an undated photo with her brother, was a sixth-grade student in Yakima when she told friends that she was dating a Yakima police officer. Courtesy Samantha Deluna

15-year-old girlfriend

Neither Tutsch nor Rodriguez knew at that point, that Huizar was already in a relationship with 15-year-old Angelica "Jelly" Santos.

She had been a former student at Washington Middle School where Huizar was a school resource officer.

His divorce was finalized the day before his third son, Roman Santos, was born.

Jelly had grown up in the Yakima Valley and was raised by her grandmother. She was in the sixth grade when she started telling friends that Huizar was her secret boyfriend. At the time, Huizar denied those claims, and got a protection order against the 13-year-old.

It wasn't until years later, that his wife discovered that her husband's new girlfriend was the same girl.

Amber Rodriguez's oldest son would tell his mom that he'd seen his dad having sex with her when the boys were visiting him.

2--secondary--Angelica SantosA GoFundMe was created for Angelica M. Santos, 17, who was killed by her boyfriend Elias Huizar, a 39-year-old former police officer, inside his West Richland home in April 2024.

The boys — the oldest in elementary school — also told her that they had been left alone in the house to care for their new baby stepbrother.

"Jelly" reportedly told the older boy that Huizar hit her in the face in August 2023, and that his dad also struck him and his brother that month.

The boy also reported hearing the couple fighting in January 2024. "When (Huizar) came out (of the bedroom), our son saw the TV was smashed and the (his) hand was bleeding," Amber Rodriguez said in her application for the fourth protection order court documents.

By July 2023, Elias Huizar stopped working as a substitute for the Richland School District. It's not clear what he was doing for work at that point.

Rape and arrest

On Feb. 3, 2024, Huizar was drinking with Santos and one of her 16-year-old friends at their West Richland house.

The friend got drunk and Huizar raped her after she went to sleep, according to court documents. Santos took the friend and her baby and fled, sparking an investigation that resulted in Huizar's arrest on rape charges.

And that investigation raised questions about whether his relationship with Santos began when she was underage, he also was charged with third-degree child rape.



Rape suspect Elias Huizar, 39, of West Richland appeared Feb. 15, 2024 in Benton County Superior Court for a sexual relationship with a teen girl and for raping her drunk friend.

Back to court

Days after Huizar was arrested, Amber Rodriguez applied for her third protection order.

"I believe he would try to cause harm to my children and I," she wrote.

This attempt was denied because the judge wanted more information. So, she applied again after Huizar was charged for raping Santos.

Rodriguez claimed Huizar "does not understand what is right and what is wrong. Our children cannot be around (him) unsupervised as they have already witnessed way more than any child should."

Benton County Court Commissioner Andrew Howell approved the protection order.

Huizar was also ordered in criminal court to stay away from Santos. When she was found dead in his house it's unclear if she had gone back to living with him after he was charged with her rape.

Investigators have yet to release more information on her death and when they think she was killed.