

FRANKLIN, IN — On Father's Day, Amy Shanabarger found her chubby-cheeked infant son, Tyler, face-down and dead in his crib.

Two days later — just hours after the tot's funeral — Ronald L. Shanabarger told his wife he'd killed their son. The next day he gave police a confession saying that not only did he kill the boy, he planned the crime even before the child was conceived as a way of exacting revenge against his wife.

The father
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Tyler didn't die of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome as the coroner had ruled, Shanabarger said. He confessed to suffocating the 7-month-old with plastic wrap.

He said it was revenge because Amy, before they were married, had refused to cut short a vacation trip to comfort him when his father died in 1996.

"Shanabarger said he planned to make Amy feel the way he did when his father died. He married her, got her pregnant, allowed time for her to bond with the child, and then took his [boy's] life," according to an affidavit prosecutors filed to support a murder charge.

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Shanabarger, 30, who begged officers to shoot him after he confessed on Wednesday, was charged with murder. He is being held without bail pending a court appearance Monday for an initial hearing. An attorney will be appointed for him at the hearing.

Johnson County Prosecutor Lance Hamner said he hasn't decided whether to seek the death penalty.

Shanabarger said in his confession that on the evening of June 19, he wrapped plastic wrap around his son's head and face, then left the boy's nursery to get something to eat and brush his teeth.

Twenty minutes later, he said, he returned, removed the plastic and placed Tyler face down in the crib before he went off to bed.

Mrs. Shanabarger, 29, had been working that night at her job as a cashier at a grocery store. When she came home she went straight to bed, assuming that Tyler was asleep, and found the boy's body the next morning.

He'd long resented his fiancée's refusal to cut short a cruise after his father died.

Shanabarger, who worked at a tire retreading center, told police he confessed because the image of his son's face, flat and purplish from rigor mortis, haunted him.

Since then, he's confessed at least three times, Police Chief Harry Furrer said in an interview Sunday. Each time, the story has been the same — that he hatched his plan because he was enraged by his then-girlfriend's refusal to cut short a cruise and return home after his father's death in October 1996.

The Shanabargers were married the following May.

As police arrived, the husband acted "cold, distant,

Detectives who have interviewed relatives confirmed that Shanabarger had long resented Amy's refusal to cut the cruise

and offered no comfort to his sobbing wife." short, Furrer said. "Their statements substantiate his confession," he said.

The Rev. Randy Maynard, a volunteer chaplain for Franklin police, accompanied police to the couple's home in this town south of Indianapolis on Father's Day.

While most parents of children who die from AIDS are weeping and consoling each other when authorities arrive, Maynard said Shanabarger was cold, distant and offering no comfort to his sobbing wife.

And after Mrs. Shanabarger's parents arrived later that morning, Shanabarger gave his father-in-law a gift-wrapped commemorative knife as a Father's Day present, Maynard said.

"That really struck me as odd."

Maynard said he's still troubled by the image of Tyler's tiny face.

"He was a beautiful boy, even in death, he was just the most beautiful boy. I'm still getting goose bumps thinking about this guy."

Shanabarger's father-in-law, Robert Parsons, wears a tiny gold cherub pin to remind him of his grandson. He won't discuss his son-in-law, but says his daughter, an only child, is devastated.

"He was a little boy, he played, he laughed, he loved. We loved him dearly and that's what this is all about," said Parsons, 52. "We don't want vengeance, but we do want justice."

Neil S. Kaye, a forensic psychiatrist who specializes in investigating infanticide cases committed by fathers, said he's never heard of a similar crime.

"A lot of times people say this or that crime was just too complicated of a plan to be anything other than a sign of pure wickedness," said Kaye, of Wilmington, Del. "But science would say otherwise, that this man was delusional and you

have to wonder about his overall mental state, his mental capacity."

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AFTERWORD:

Two days later Shanabarger was placed under a suicide watch in jail, where he is being held without bond until his trial, scheduled for Nov. 30.

At an earlier hearing, wearing a brown flak jacket over a jail jumpsuit, Shanabarger mumbled brief answers to the judge's questions.

Asked if he had money to hire his own attorney, Shanabarger said, "I don't know. I'd have to check with my wife."

Asked if he had money for his own attorney, Shanabarger said, "I don't know. I'd have to check with my wife."

The judge suggested help was unlikely to come from Amy Shanabarger, and assigned a public defender to represent him.

A police department chaplain said even he was shaken by his visit with the accused. The Rev. Randy Maynard said Shanabarger was depressed, complaining about life in jail and all the things he had lost: his job, his house, his money, his wife, his friends.

"I said, 'And you lost Tyler too,'" Maynard said. "'Oh yeah, I lost the boy too.' That was it for me. He said the wrong thing. I was out of there."

UPDATE:

A jury convicted Shanabarger May 8, 2002 of

killing his son. Shanabarger muttered, "I'm just shocked. I'm just shocked," as the verdict was read.

On June 13 Shanabarger was sentenced to 49 years in prison. Shanabarger will now begin a stay in state prison that will last at least 23 years before he is eligible for parole. The three years he has spent in the Johnson County Jail will count toward his sentence.

Amy Parsons, mother of the slain baby, shared her father's shock that Special Judge Raymond Kickbush did not sentence Shanabarger to life in prison without parole.

The judge based his decision on Shanabarger's lack of prior convictions, his diminished mental ability and the jury's indecision. He noted that without Shanabarger's confessions, the prosecution might not have been able to prove its case.

The prosecution cited nine confessions and dozens of letters Shanabarger wrote acknowledging his guilt.

The defense contended Tyler was a victim of sudden infant death syndrome, not homicide; raised claims that Shanabarger was mentally retarded; and suggested that Parsons engineered the killing and the confessions to cash in on a \$100,000 life insurance policy on the baby.

"Happy Father's Day," Amy Parsons told her ex-husband through angry tears as he left the courtroom.

As the blank-faced Shanabarger left the courtroom, Amy's father, Robert Parsons, said, "Ronald, you'll burn in hell for this."

As the Parsons work to get on with their lives, they hope to make a difference in laws about infant deaths.

They announced Thursday at the courthouse that they want to work to get the Indiana General Assembly to pass a bill next year that would require an investigation into all sudden infant death syndrome cases in Indiana. Until

Shanabarger's confession, authorities thought
Tyler died of SIDS.

*compiled from Indiana Star and Associated Press
reports*

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