

# Mourners gather for starved child 'No one was there to catch her except God,' minister says

July 28, 1997 | By Kris Antonelli | Kris Antonelli,SUN STAFF

Dozens of mourners filled the pews of a small Pikesville church yesterday afternoon to remember the short life of Rita Denise Fisher -- a 9-year-old girl who authorities say had been beaten, locked in her room and finally starved to death.

During the hourlong memorial service at Ames-Sudbrook United Methodist Church, Rita's teachers at Winand Elementary School put happy face, heart and teddy bear stickers on the tiny black box that held her remains. They also remembered her as a shy and persistent third-grader who celebrated her hard-won social and academic achievements.

"I first met Rita as a first-grader, and she could not recite or write her letters," said teacher Lorraine Thomas. "She did not even have a concept that there was a sequence to these things. But after much hard work on both our parts, she could and was a success at it. By third grade, she had built on those skills and was even adding and subtracting double-digit numbers."

Rita died June 25. Two weeks ago, the state medical examiner ruled her death a homicide. Baltimore County police have charged her mother, Mary E. Fisher-Utley, 49, with first-degree murder. Also charged with murder is Frank Eugene Scarpola Jr., 21, the live-in boyfriend of one of Rita's sisters. That sister, Rose Mary Fisher, 20, is being held on charges of abusing Rita.

Although Fisher-Utley and Scarpola, who lived with Rita in a two-story brick house in the 4100 block of Old Milford Mill Road, have denied abusing the child, Rita had several cracked ribs, as well as marks indicating her wrists and ankles had been bound, court documents show. She weighed 47 pounds when she died.

Last week, at the request of Robin Fisher-Longest, 22, Rita's oldest sister, a judge in Baltimore County Circuit Court granted permission to retrieve the girl's ashes from the house for the memorial service. A private burial service will be today at Druid Ridge Cemetery.

At the start of yesterday's service, Fisher-Longest and several family members followed the Rev. Ruth Ann Miller as she carried the black box that held Rita's ashes from the back of the church to the front, where she placed it on a table. Many of the 120 teachers, friends, relatives and neighbors who attended the service sobbed and dabbed at their eyes as Miller talked of Rita's suffering and how God saved her.

"Rita's life started as a gift from God and ended with a bruised and broken body," Miller told the mourners. "She fell through the fingers of society, and no one was there to catch her except God, who has taken her to a place of peace."

Since Rita, a dedicated student despite some learning difficulties, cherished the reward stickers of hearts, happy faces or teddy bears that she would collect on her school papers, Miller asked her teachers to put those stickers on the box that held her ashes.

"Child abuse in Maryland now has a new name -- it's Rita Denise Fisher," Miller said.

Miller asked mourners to take a handful of sunflower seeds -- Rita's favorite flower -- from a basket in the lobby and plant them in memory of the child.

After the service, mourners gathered in the church basement for cookies and drinks. Michelle Shilling, director of a

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before- and after-school program at Winand that Rita attended, said she remembered Rita as a kind little girl who always looked after others.

"She was just the sweetest little girl who never hurt anybody," Shilling said.

Sharon Wheeler, one of Rita's neighbors, remembered Rita as a thin and hungry-looking child who surprised her the first day she met her three years ago.

"She walked right into our house the day we moved in with her sister and my kids and went straight to the refrigerator looking for food," Wheeler said. "Anytime I saw Rita she looked sad -- she never smiled."

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