

## Life on the Line



Young woman gets life behind bars for kidnapping gains unlikely allies in Shawnee family, many others trying to get Mead to commute sentence to 23 years already served. Governor unwavering in refusal.

By Jen Kocher  
Budget staff

**T**hey'd dubbed their get-away "the new adventure of Bonnie and Clyde," a crime spree that would eventually be dramatized in "Nightmare Ride Through Wyoming" in the December 1997 issue of The Reader's Digest. For nearly a week, 19-year-old Darla Rouse and boyfriend 23-year-old James (Jay) Boule drove along backroads between Texas and Wyoming, ducking police cruisers, laying low and sleeping under the stars.

Suspended in time between reality and make-believe, the couple fell under the honeymoon spell of two outlaws in love and on the run.

Today, more than two decades later, 42-year-old Darla Rouse has a hard time rectifying that stony-eyed girl with the woman she's become, as she contemplates that brief period in her life while behind bars at the Wyoming Women's Center, where she will likely spend the next 30 years.

### A LIFE SENTENCE

Cheri Reese doesn't believe in making waves or drawing attention to herself. Mild-mannered and petite, the soft-spoken Shawnee rancher is a devout Christian who believes in keeping her nose down and doing good deeds quietly without a lot of fanfare and trusting in God's plan.

*It started so little then just grew to be so big.*

— Darla Rouse in response to the kidnapping of the Rocknes that would forever change their lives, and hers

She's beginning to lose patience.

The frustration continues to mount as she turns out of the Wyoming Women's Center parking lot and her wheels slip into the well-worn ruts along highway 18/20 toward home for what seems like the countless trip to visit the inmate who she considers family.

The open prairie yawns under the hazy late afternoon sun, and the miles of sprawling, unfettered land stands in cruel contrast to the clanking steel bars and metal detectors she's just left behind.

Today, at age 42, Darla Rouse has spent more than half her life in prison. What she doesn't know about the world far outweighs her experience of it. Smart phones and technology have whizzed past her like most of the other milestones. Motherhood. College graduation. Holding her dad's hand in the waning days of cancer.

The weeks and months march on as Darla celebrates another birthday, and Cheri is running out of ways to rationalize the faraway promise of freedom.

Since meeting Darla, Cheri and her husband Charlie have unofficially adopted Darla, who both

regularly call and visit. Cheri met Darla nearly 14 years ago when she had signed on mentor through a program at the now-defunct Jubilee House in Douglas. At that time, Darla was up for parole and had optimistically applied for a spot in the transitional facility, though her release was ultimately denied. Cheri, who had already mentored other inmates unintentionally let down her guard after meeting Darla, who immediately struck a chord in her heart.

"One look at Darla and I was hooked," Cheri said.

This was true for the rest of the Reese family, who has also informally adopted the inmate. Along with birthday cards and holiday visits from Cheri's children, their kids are also now frequent visitors to the prison where they color and play games at the cluster of tables in the visiting room under the vigilant eye of ticking cameras monitoring their movements from underneath domes of cloudy, gray glass.

Despite the severity of her crime, as far as Cheri is concerned Darla has repented for her wrong doings and deserves to be forgiven. After 21 years in prison, Cheri feels she's more than served her time in light of the severity of her sentence of 53 years to life. There are murderers who have served less time behind bars, she points out, and she's adamant in her belief that

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# Life in Prison

Darla was handed a Draconian sentence.

"There's no doubt she did a terrible thing," Cheri said, "but she was just a kid, and she's more than served her time."

We've all done stupid things when we're young, she added, especially kids lacking role models.

"One mistake, no matter how awful, shouldn't define her life or anyone else's life," Cheri said, "and Darla, like everyone else, deserves a second chance and to be forgiven."

At what point does rehabilitation go south, Cheri wonders.

Over the years, the Reeses have written letters to legislatures and hired lawyers, none of whom have been able to help. Not even the parole board's recommendation carries any weight. Ultimately, it comes down to Governor Mead's signature on the commutation, and so far after eight years in office, the governor remains unwilling to put his name on the line.

"Nobody's life should come down to a signature," Reese said through gritted teeth. "I'm sorry, but it's just not fair."

## SPINNING OUT OF CONTROL

With curly, shoulder-length dark blonde hair hanging in damp ringlets above the shoulders of her inmate-issued orange jumpsuit, Darla shyly apologizes for her wet hair and explains she was running late.

Unlike the other inmates who are heavily tattooed with inches of black roots showing and rough-skinned faces that tell of much darker times, the tall springy haired, lithe inmate is pink cheeked with no visible scarring or marks. Behind bars for almost two decades, she's missed out on all the trends and passing fashions and is preserved in a time capsule of her 19-year-old self.

She gives her hair a self-conscious fluff before sitting down at the table. This is her office, she explains, pointing to the desk where an outdated PC with an impossibly small screen blinks gray into sleep position.

This is about as high-tech as it gets for inmates at Wyoming Women's Center, and apart from missing the social media wave, other mysteries add to the murkiness of Darla's understanding of adulthood and the outside world, which for her ended in her teens after less than a year being out from under her domineering stepfather's thumb. Seemingly mundane intricacies of modern life allude her - coupons, ordering a cappuccino, waiting in line to use an ATM. Commuting to work and grabbing lunch from a food truck.

She enjoys hearing about all these bits and pieces that stretch her imagination beyond these concrete walls and steel doors.

Prison life has its own nuances and rhythms to mark the passing days. Because she's a "lifer," Darla receives certain concessions that other inmates don't get, like teaching aerobic classes and keeping an office in the open gym. Naturally athletic, she's accrued a wall-full of certifications over the years for personal training and other fitness classes.

By all accounts, Darla has been a model inmate with no disparaging marks on her record.

According to Wyoming Department of Corrections Public Information Officer Mark Horan, Darla has received only one disciplinary while incarcerated, which happened more than 20 years ago.

This is rare to his knowledge.

"While not unheard of, it's certainly not the norm for an inmate to be relatively free of disciplinary infractions and

inmate conflicts for that long a period of time," he said.

Darla is also currently attending on-line college courses, and has a budding support network in the outside world. Along with the Reeses in Wyoming, Darla's network extends beyond state lines to Minnesota.

Lyn and Russ Underdahl, like the Reeses, have also taken Darla under her wing after meeting her during a 2007 prison visit where Lyn was doing research for a book project. Now, they make annual trips to Lusk to visit Darla and talk on the phone several times a week. They've even made the trip with Darla's Aunt Lynda from Texas, who is also a frequent visitor on the list.

Darla's warm smile and polite "yes, ma'am's" and fresh-faced cheeks don't line up with the persona of a cold-hearted criminal, the girl who once callously waved a gun before the two elderly victims that she and her then-boyfriend James Boule, who tied up the couple and robbed them at gunpoint.

Today, that girl is unrecognizable to Darla as she looks back on those early days when she would have - and did - follow him off a cliff.

What can she say? She was a dumb teenager in love with a rough kid.

James Jeremy Boule came into her life when he walked into the restaurant where the 18-year-old was waiting tables in a small town in her home state of Texas. Today, she can't help but wonder what might have happened if he'd gone somewhere else.

That day, he laid on the flattery and made a point to listen, the first time in Darla's adult she can recall receiving any positive male attention. Growing up, her step-father was controlling and occasionally crossed the line when he became too friendly, though her mom shot down any suggestion of abuse when Darla tentatively brought it to her attention. Instead, Darla left home.

Boule was addictive. Good looking and attentive, the 23-year-old also shared the names of her two brothers.

In his mid-20s, he had recently left behind an ex-wife in California and a pregnant ex-girlfriend.

He took her out for hamburgers and drove a r o u n d

shooting guns at things. Business signs, windows, the odd gasoline storage tank. It struck her as strange, but she went along and eventually moved in with him.

His controlling nature eventually cost Darla her job. Unemployed himself, he wanted Darla to stay home.

With no money, he hatched a plan to rob his aunt, who lived on the other side of town. He staked the place out and when he learned his aunt was spending the night in the hospital to be with her son, who was in critical condition with fluid in his brain, he pounced. The plan was to load up garbage bags and then blow up his aunt's house. Darla and a friend helped Boule lug out the loot but waited in the car while he blew out the pilot light and lit a candle on the stove.

Darla wasn't privy to that part of the plan.

Jay's aunt called the police to report her nephew for the crime, and when the cops showed up, Boule confessed and went to jail. Darla and the friend were never charged.

Despite the crime, he was still the charming guy who loved and cared about her, she recalls of that time, the first guy who ever made her feel special. Turning her back on him was never an option.

Darla devotedly visited him a few times in the Tyler, Texas, jail where he talked about staging an escape. She would drive the getaway car.

One night the call came. Boule had stolen a prison-issued blanket and used it to shimmy across the barb-wire, chain-link fence. He stood in his underwear and socks as he called her from a public payphone.

After pawning their remaining possessions, the pair stepped into their Bonnie and Clyde roles, romanticizing their life on the lam as some kind of romantic holiday. Boule was ready with his cache of two revolvers and a shotgun.

Today, Darla has a hard time rectifying that version of herself with the person she is today. It's like a bad movie with someone else playing the lead role.

Aug. 10, 1996 - the day one life ended, and another began.

She and Boule glided their sedan on fumes into a rest stop off I-90, seven miles west of Gillette. With no money, food or gas, the plan was to steal a vehicle and head to the mountains in Montana.

When 64-year-old Jerry Rockne, and his petite 69-year-old wife Rose pulled in with their pickup and fifth-wheel camper, the couple had their mark. Boule pulled out his revolver. After tying the couple and hand cuffing them to metal chairs in the camper, Boule left Darla in charge with the weapon as he took care of other business outside.

Sitting on the couch across from them with the shotgun balanced on her lap, Darla said she attempted to make awkward small talk. She wondered if the Rocknes had been to Canada because someone once told her about that there were purple skies. They watched her with wide, wary eyes. Her hands were shaking but she tried to stay tough. How had things gotten to this point? she wondered. Everything was spinning out of control.

Her eyes wandered to a plaque on the wall declaring how no one knows what another person feels unless they've walked a mile in their shoes.

True, she thought. How true. Maybe they can forgive me?

In court, the Rocknes told a different version. They testified that Darla said they should just kill them and steal the vehicles, while Boule took the more measured approach of kidnapping them. She was the mastermind, they insisted. The one who hatched the plan to kill and dispose of their bodies. They describe how they were more afraid of the coldness in Darla's darting eyes compared to Boule's attempts at politeness.

"They misunderstood what was going on in my mind," Darla said two decades later, reiterating how scared she'd been holding that revolver and how she'd begged Boule not to hurt them. "It had started so little then just got to be so big."

Instead, the couple decided to keep the Rocknes tied up in the camper while they pulled it with their stolen truck as they headed north to Montana. At some point outside of Buffalo, the pair agreed



Courtesy photo

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to stop for a pizza, and leaving the Rocknes tied up in back, they enjoyed a quick 15-minute meal at Pizza Hut while the Rocknes craftily began working loose the ropes. By the time Boule returned to check on them, Rose's hands were free from the chair but still handcuffed. When Boule slowed the truck to take a turn, Rose hurled her chair down the steps where she rolled on the pavement across from the McDonalds on Main Street, narrowly missing being run over by traffic.

She alerted authorities. With Jerry still tied up in the back, Boule led the caravan of wailing sirens down I-90 until they were eventually nabbed at milepost 39, outside of Gillette.

As law enforcement circled the vehicle, Darla held her breath. Boule had always promised that if they'd were caught, he'd go out with guns blazing. Death by cop, he'd said with a grin. When the cops appeared in the window with guns trained on their faces, Boule quietly put the revolver on the floor and raised both hands.

## MAXIMUM TIME

The trial that began on Dec. 16, 1996, in Sixth District Court before Judge Dan Price II would reveal other extremes and surprises. For starters, Boule's wife would travel from California to testify on his behalf, and when given the chance to save his own skin, Boule rolled on Darla, insisting she'd been the one to hatch the idea.

Darla went cold when she heard those words come out of his mouth and felt a second sucker punch in the gut. He'd never loved her and all this time it'd been in her head. Worse, she had

dutifully followed his plan without question, which now would continue to work against her as she faced her own trial.

The prosecutor tore into her unwilling manipulation plea, pointing out that she'd had several attempts along the way to part company with Boule, most condemning at the last stop at Pizza Hut when she had walked past a pay phone en route to the rest room. Then, the Rocknes took the stand to reiterate that it was Darla that they were most afraid of.

Darla's unfortunate tendency to giggle when she got nervous further worked against her as a state trooper reported seeing her laughing as they tore after the truck in pursuit.

Her attitude stuck with the judge, who in 2001 wrote her in response to her letter asking for a sentence reduction.

"I denied your sentence reduction not because you took your case to trial but because of what I perceived as your attitude when you testified at your trial and even during the sentencing phase of your case," he wrote.

While the prosecutor presented his iron clad case, Darla's court appointed attorney was hospitalized in the middle of the trial, only to turn her case over to another attorney, which in the end led to Darla receiving maximum sentences of four separate counts, a historically harsh ruling, leading to four 20-year concurrent sentences for a total of 53 years to life. Both Darla and Boule would be found guilty by the jury on all seven counts. On the day of his pre-trial, Boule unsuccessfully attempted to take his life in his jail cell.

The Rocknes also filed a civil suit for \$10 million, claiming that the kidnapping had put undue stain on their marriage and cost them time and money in medical bills on top of travel expenses back and forth to the courthouse. Darla denied the charges while Boule failed to respond.

Twenty years later, events of the trial still haunt Darla who looks back at the 19-year-old girl laughing at her mother's jokes while the Rockne children stonily listened to the prosecutor lay out the cold-hard facts of how Rose Rockne hurled her 5'11" broken body into moving traffic.

The severity of the sentence shocked not just Darla but even a former Wyoming Women's Center administrative assistant, who during the Underdahls' initial visit to the prison, used Darla's case as an extreme example of what she perceived to be extreme sentencing.

The assistant compared it to the case of Kelly Sheehan, a young woman who like Darla had held an elderly couple at gunpoint in Wyoming. She and her boyfriend needed drug money. Upon arrest, Kelly made a run for it and when the cop caught up to her, there was a tussle in which the officer dropped his mace and Kelly picked it up and sprayed him in the face. Prior to this crime, she had been an accessory to murder when she was 18 and multiple drug convictions with several more stints in jail. For this last crime, despite her track record leading up to the robbery, Sheehan got 5-7 years of concurrent sentences.

Sheehan said she genuinely felt bad when she heard the discrepancy in the two women's sentences for what was essentially very similar crimes.

"I feel really lucky but why did I get the break and not her?" Sheehan wondered last spring. "It's not fair and I don't understand how it can be so different?"

In later years in letters to Darla, Judge Price came to regret his decision, and beginning in 2007, continued to write letters to the parole board advocating for her release. Once a ruling is made, however, nobody but the governor can overturn the commutation.

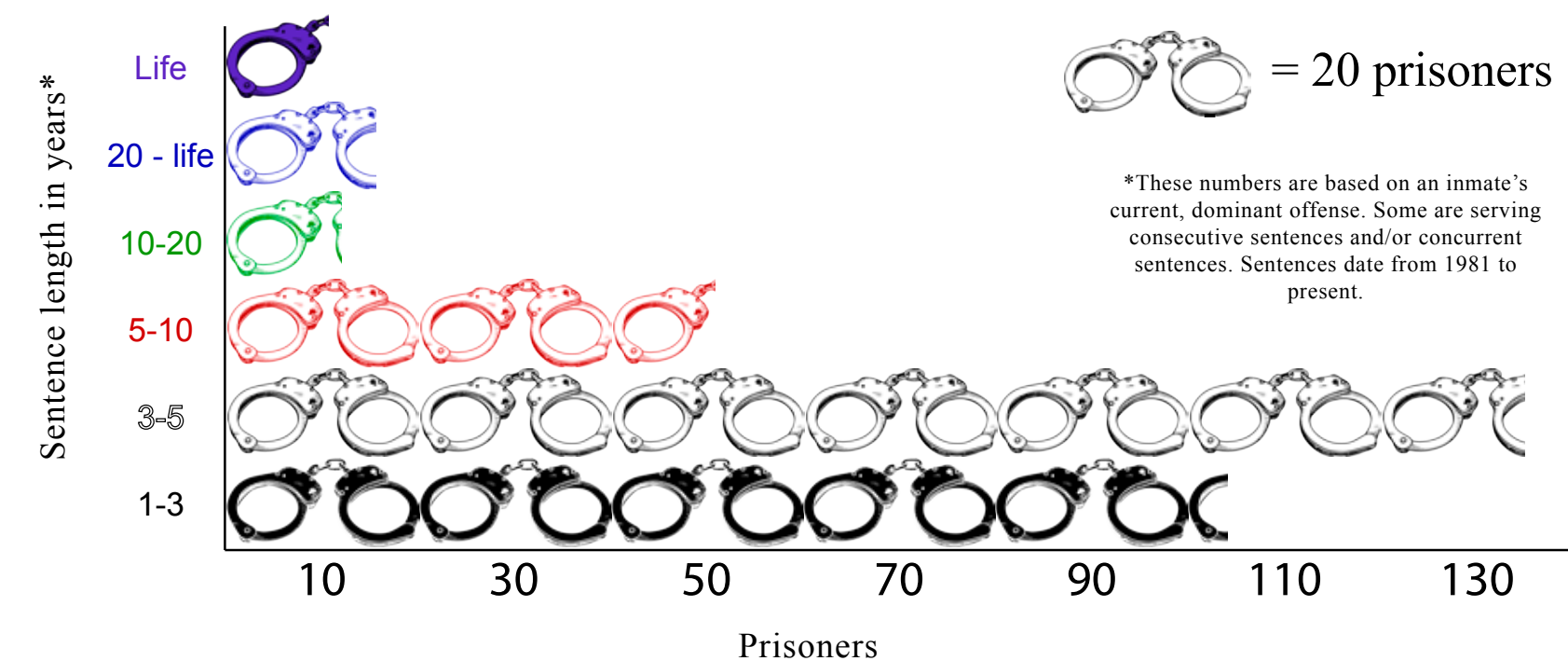
Given that many people have committed far more severe crimes in Wyoming and beyond without receiving even



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## Women incarcerated in Wyoming by sentence





*(Editor's note: As one of the many advocates for Darla, Lyn Underdahl began a personal journey with Darla to examine her life and details surrounding her crime and is in the process of writing a book with the support of Darla and her Aunt Lynda. For more information, contact 53yearstolife@gmail.com)*

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## Rouse

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half of Darla's punishment strikes the Reeses as very unfair.

### LASTING SCARS

In the governor's latest denial letter in January 2016, he noted that though Rouse has been making good progress in prison, including having surrounded herself with a support group of friends and family, his denial was hinged on Rockne family's description of the lasting harm done to the late Gerald and Rose Rockne and the family's strong opposition to the parole board's commutation recommendation.

Responding on behalf Gov. Mead, Special Counsel to the Governor Richard Barrett noted that the denial was based on the governor's belief that a 2016 release date would be inappropriate in light of the seriousness of her crimes.

"Allow me to observe that inmates have no rights, expectations or legally protected liberty interests in receiving a commutation from the governor," Barrett writes. "Executive clemency is entirely discretionary with the governor."

During his eight years in office, Gov. Mead has only granted three commutations, all of whom were male inmates, for which he cited medical conditions, lack of physical injury to the victim and lack of a violent past among other reasons.

In support of the Governor's denial, Barrett references an unanimous opinion written by Wyoming Supreme Court Justice Al Taylor affirming the judgment and sentence of the district court in all respects as well as a letter of opposition from prosecuting attorney Ralph Boynton as well as a letter from Diane Rockne Mayhew, daughter of Jerry and Rose Rockne, to the Board of Parole.

To date, Mayhew remains a staunch advocate against Darla's early release. In a 2015 letter to Wyoming Board of Parole, Mayhew documents the lasting effects that the incident had on her parents and family.

"Not only did it affect her generation, it has had a great impact on the generations that follow," Mayhew wrote. "My children learned early on that they couldn't play an innocent game of 'boo' with grandma. You wouldn't dare sneak up on her or pull any childish prank. She always had those demons with her from the kidnapping. Often, I would have to sit down and explain to my little ones what grandma and grandpa had lived through. How do you explain this to unsus-



WY Dept. of Corrections courtesy photo  
Darla Rouse in a recent inmate photo.

pecting children, what evil lies in the world? As they grew up they began to understand how grandma's experience with this event left her permanently traumatized. The kids realized that grandma was a victim, but she rose above it and became a hero to them and anyone who knew her."

Please don't let Darla walk free in 2016, she implored.

"The judge bestowed upon Darla the punishment he saw fit for the crimes that she committed and by decreasing the sentence so drastically," she added, "I feel that it is an insult to the judicial system of Wyoming."

For her part, Reese understands the family's sentiment but wonders when the point comes where it's time to forgive and move on.

### PAYING THE PRICE

As much as Rouse enjoys leading the tours for visitors, including high school and college students visiting for class assignments, the hardest part is watching the young girls in their fashionable clothes, smiling shyly with an uncomfortable wave goodbye as they disappear through the gates back to their world.

If she could do it all over again, that would be the life she would choose. A girl with confidence to follow her own dream, not follow the dark deeds of a man who in the end had no claims on her best interests.

But as she knows, there are no do-overs and every decision, particularly the bad ones,

have consequence.

As a Christian, she believes that her punishment is part of God's larger plan, and as such, feels a moral obligation to help prevent other girls from making the same mistake.

"It happens so easily," she said as she drew circles with her thumb along the top of the laminated top of her desk in the gym. "Things just get out of hand."

Rouse recognizes this shortcoming in many of the female inmates.

"This place is full of insecure women," she said. "Mostly, they haven't figured out how to live on their own without a man and that gets them into trouble."

Like her, they go along with whatever the guys tell them to do because they don't want to lose him, a mistake that can never be undone, regardless of her sentence.

"Don't live by default," she said. "Every choice has a consequence."

In the meantime, she does what she can to stay positive and look ahead and counts her blessings for being confined in Wyoming Women's Center, which she points out is a lot better than most prisons. Along with the educational and work opportunities afforded to her and other inmates, apart from being locked behind bars, it's not such a bad place. Fights are rare and unlike federal prisons, the drug scene is fairly mild.

She looks forward to the election of a new governor in the fall when she will again request a commutation. Assuming he or she also refuses to sign, she's looking at several more decades in prison when she'll be in her early 70s.

Too late to be a mother, most likely, but still time to live out a few dreams. She thinks about the simple freedom of standing on a city street and being a part of the normal world. She thinks about swimming again, going to the grocery store and bringing home items to cook her own dinner, walking a dog, taking a phone call, and getting a job to pay her bills.

She can't wait to be a part of a community and to take communion with others in an actual church.

She tries not to worry about feeling alienated on the outside or the necessary learning curve to catch up with technology and everything else she's missed.

"Good things come out of bad situations," she said with a tired smile. "I took a lot from the people I hurt, and it's only fair that I pay the price."

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