

REAL CRIME

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Surviving a Serial Killer—and What Comes Afterward

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(Left) Mary Vincent, 15, leaves the Los Angeles Press Club after a news conference on November 9, 1978 warning other children her age not to hitchhike. Mary ran away from her Las Vegas home last April and was picked up by a man who raped her and cut her arms off with an axe and left her for dead. Photo: Bettmann/ Contributor/ Getty Images

Warning: The following contains disturbing descriptions of violence and sexual violence. Reader discretion is advised.

Lisa McVey convinced a rapist not to kill her because she was the sole support of her elderly father. Jennifer Asbenson scratched at the lining of her abductor's trunk until she found the interior latch, waited for the car to slow down, then popped the trunk open and ran for her life. Mary Vincent managed to climb up a culvert and walk three miles to find help, despite being left for dead with both of her arms hacked off.

All three belong to an exceedingly rare group of people who escaped the clutches of a serial killer—only to find their lives forever changed by the ordeal.

Surviving a terrifying experience “changes everything—your sense of yourself, how you interact with the world and how the world interacts with you,” says Mary S. Reigel, a therapist in Sacramento, California, who has worked

with violent crime victims, including serial killer survivors, for 40 years. “When something horrible happens, you can never go back to where you were,” Reigel tells *A&E Real Crime*.

That’s because the human brain has an evolutionary imperative to learn from a traumatic event and try to keep us safer in the future, Reigel explains. “Some survivors have a chronic need to check every window and every door from the day it happens.”

The brain can also respond with maladaptive effects such as anxiety, depression, nightmares, flashbacks, anger, guilt, depression and withdrawing from society. Those often fade as the brain desensitizes the horrific memory and consigns it to the past. But traumatic memories sometimes stay lodged in a primitive part of the brain that reacts as if the event is still occurring, as with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Some violent crime victims try to blunt the powerful emotions with drugs or alcohol, but experts say that working with trained therapists, talking with supportive friends—even telling their stories on TV interviews and real crime shows—are more effective ways to desensitize painful memories and move on.

Surviving Ted Bundy, and More

Jennifer Asbenson, the only surviving victim of Andrew Urdiales, who murdered eight women between 1986 and 1996, described her abduction and the long aftermath in her 2018 memoir, *The Girl in the Treehouse*. She eventually regained control by learning to forgive and love herself, Asbenson wrote.

Kathy Kleiner says each time she tells an interviewer or a rapt audience how she was nearly beaten to death by Ted Bundy, she puts the ordeal “another baby step behind me. Someday, I hope it will be completely gone.”

Kleiner had already survived a near-fatal case of lupus when she enrolled in Florida State University and **joined the Chi Omega sorority**. She woke up one night in 1978 to find a dark silhouette looming over her bed. Bundy, who had escaped from a Colorado prison a year earlier, slammed a hard object down on her face, slashing her cheek open and shattering her jaw in three places. He had murdered two of Kleiner’s sorority sisters earlier that night and was attacking her roommate when a car’s headlights briefly lit up the room, prompting him to stop and flee.

Although her jaw was wired shut for months and her face permanently scarred, Kleiner was fiercely determined to go on with her life. She took a job at a lumberyard to conquer her fear of male strangers. To overcome her aversion to hospitals, she worked in hospital administration for 18 years. Her drive to survive also served her well when she was robbed at gunpoint as a bank teller and endured breast cancer, two miscarriages and Hurricane Katrina, which devastated her neighborhood in 2005.

“Bummer, right?” laughs Kleiner, whose testimony helped seal Bundy’s execution in 1989. He ultimately confessed to at least 30 murders. Now Kleiner gets standing ovations when she speaks publicly and has more than 1,600 followers on Twitter, where she helps others cope with adversity. “I want people to know that they, too, can get through anything,” she says.

Like Kleiner, survivors of serial killers often find their career paths altered. “Someone who planned to be a doctor may develop an aversion to blood,” says Reigel. Others are driven, consciously or unconsciously, to overcome their past helplessness and exert control by becoming police officers, lawyers, martial arts experts, or mental health professionals.

Mary Vincent, who was 15 when Lawrence Singleton raped her, cut her arms off and left her to die in 1978, became a celebrated painter using her artificial limbs. Today, she is revered as “the Patron Saint of BadAss Women” on T-shirts, posters **and social media**.

Spared by a Killer, She Became a Cop

Lisa McVey's encounter with a serial killer in 1984 led to a career in law enforcement. At age 17, she was bicycling home from work at a Krispy Kreme in Tampa, Florida, at 2 a.m. when Bobby Joe Long grabbed her and forced her into his car at gunpoint. She had planned to kill herself when she got home to escape being sexually abused by her grandmother's boyfriend. "But from that moment on, I vowed to survive," she told *A&E's Real Crime*.

McVey kept track of every detail that might help police if she made it out alive—including the car's white seat and dark carpet she could see below her blindfold, the number of turns the car made and the number of stairs at Long's home. As he raped her repeatedly over 26 hours, she focused on gaining his trust—at one point spinning a tale about her elderly father depending on her for help. Long eventually drove her back to her neighborhood and let her out, saying "Tell your father he's the reason I didn't kill you."

With McVey's help, Long was apprehended two weeks later and linked to eight other women found murdered in the area. Seeing their gruesome photos, she thought, "*Man, I want to be a cop. I don't want this to happen to anyone else.*"

McVey later put herself through the police academy, became a deputy in the same Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office that investigated her case and has been a school resource officer for the last four years. "My message is powerful: Be strong. Draw on your instinct for self-preservation." She was also in the front row of the witness booth when Long was executed last year, after 34 years on death row.

When the Perpetrator Emerges—After Decades

When cases go unsolved for years, some victims cope by convincing themselves that their assailant must be dead, in a psychiatric facility or in prison on another charge, Reigel says. But a sudden break in the case can shatter those illusions.

That's what happened in 2018 when DNA evidence linked **Joseph DeAngelo to at least 50 rapes and 13 murders** across California from 1973 and 1986. Dozens of rape victims suddenly learned that their assailant was the so-called Golden State Killer and had been at large for more than four decades.

"I was fine thinking he was a figment of my imagination, but when he was arrested, it was like, 'Holy shit—that really happened,'" **Jennifer Carole**, who was 18 in 1980 when DeAngelo murdered her father and stepmother, tells *A&E Real Crime*.

Kris Pedretti says she was instantly taken back to the day in 1976 when she was 15 and DeAngelo broke into her home, held a knife to her throat and raped her repeatedly. Her conservative parents forbid her from ever talking about the rape, prompting years of denial. "I was in shock. I was happy, sad, mad—all at the same time," she says.

Hearing dozens of other women describe similar experiences at DeAngelo's sentencing in August this year was a revelation, both women say. Since then, many have met for dinners, formed a Facebook group and became fast friends.

"This is not a sorry sack of women," says Pedretti, who also runs a **Facebook group** encouraging other sexual assault survivors to tell their stories. "We are brave. We are successful. We've got the power back."

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