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Long
Story
For
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Nellie Honeycutt's Story by JoAnn Merkle Vrabel

For 20 years, Nellie Honeycutt endured continual batterings from her husband until she finally shot him in the head while he slept in their rural Silver Lake, Ind., home on April 25, 1985.

In January, 1986, Mrs. Honeycutt was tried for voluntary manslaughter in the Kosciusko County Circuit Court, Warsaw, Ind.

During a brief, two-day trial, Mrs. Honeycutt's court appointed defense attorney offered no expert psychiatric testimony concerning the battered woman syndrome for the jurors' consideration.

→ Mrs. Honeycutt was subsequently found guilty and sentenced to 10 years in the Indiana Women's Prison, Indianapolis, Ind.

Abused by her husband for years, and now by a justice system that gave her inadequate defense, Mrs. Honeycutt has been in prison since March, 1986. In the following interview, she tells why she killed her husband, Gene Honeycutt.

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"I shot Gene because he was going to kill my children and I didn't know what else to do. I didn't see any way out. No way to turn. No help from anywhere."

Nellie, now 40, still bears the reminders of the beatings and assaults that her husband Gene inflicted. She has a long scar down the right side of her throat from a knife wound, a battered left ear drum which makes her hearing impaired, a broken nose, a scar on her left wrist, a mouthful of chipped teeth, and memories and nightmares.

In 1964, when Nellie began dating Gene, she did not realize that he was violent and that he had a history of fighting and beating others.

"When I first dated Gene, he would be very sweet . . . One time he built me a swing in the backyard, because I liked swings. And he used to tell me that I would always be a little girl. At that time, I had never seen anything violent from Gene," says Nellie.

During their courtship, Nellie dreamed of marrying Gene and having children and watching them grow in a home filled with love, she recalls.

"Gene was special and I wanted to live with him for the rest of my life," says Nellie.

The first time Gene struck Nellie was in late 1965 when she was pregnant with Tina, the oldest of the Honeycutt's three daughters.

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That time, Gene came home from work in a rage and slapped Nellie across the face. He called her stupid and no good for anything, recalls Nellie.

"I cried when he hit me. I tried to figure out what I had done wrong. It just surprised me. It was the first time Gene had ever done anything like that," says Nellie.

An hour later, Gene apologized and promised he would never hit Nellie again.

"I believed him when he said he wouldn't do it anymore. I loved him enough to take his word for that," Nellie says.

"I asked Gene, 'Why did you hit me? What did I do?' And he said, 'You didn't do anything. I was just upset and aggravated from work . . .'"

For the next three or four months, Gene didn't hit Nellie. But after Tina was born in December, 1965, Gene began drinking heavily and battering Nellie.

During this time, Nellie learned that Gene had been in trouble with the police for fighting in Ohio, where he lived before moving to Indiana. Gene told her about weekends in his past when he would look forward to bar hopping where he drank and picked fights, Nellie says.

"He might go to five or six bars, and in every bar Gene would start a fight," describes Nellie.

After December, 1965, beatings became a regular part of Nellie's life.

"Gene would attack out of the blue; you would never know when he was going to do something," states Nellie.

"The beatings usually began when Gene came home from work or he'd be out drinking all night and would come in."

"It started off, he'd call me names. Then he'd accuse me of running around with other men. Gene was very jealous all the time and he kept telling me that I went out on him, even though I never did."

As the attack progressed, Gene would break furniture and throw ashtrays and other objects at Nellie which would hit and bruise her. He would hit Nellie with his fists and knock her down again and again. He would slap her, throw her, grab her by the throat with his fingernails, choke her, kick her in the back and chest, scratch her, pull out her hair and sexually assault her, describes Nellie.

Some beatings lasted more than six hours.

Then, suddenly, Gene would stop battering Nellie; the beatings would stop as quickly as they had started, Nellie says.

Hours later, Gene would tell Nellie he was sorry, but added that it was really her fault that he beat her. The last two years before Gene died, he quit apologizing for the beatings and showed no remorse.

During Nellie's trial in January, 1986, Tina confirmed that Gene would attack unprovoked.

Tina said that her father "could talk to you one minute and knock you off the wall the next."

When Gene beat Nellie, she felt "very degraded, no good, worthless and confused."

"I was very confused because I couldn't understand. I hadn't done anything to make him mad that I knew of. I couldn't understand how he could keep beating me and then say he was sorry and then go back and do it again. And what confused me even more was that he could not give me the reason why these beatings were happening," explains Nellie.

"Finally I figured out that Gene didn't need a reason to beat me."

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Nellie talked to Gene and suggested they consult a minister or doctor about the violence. Gene slapped her and said, "I'm not the one that needs help; it's you."

Another time, Nellie begged Gene for a divorce. He busted her in the mouth, reports Nellie.

There was no way for Nellie to fight back when Gene was beating her. Gene was a muscular 240 pounds. Nellie weighed 120.

During one battering, which Tina recalls, Nellie attempted to escape.

Gene had been out drinking all night and he came home upset and mad.

He began beating Nellie.

During the attack, Nellie ran out the door and kept running until she fell and got tangled in a fence.

"Gene caught me and dragged me back to the house," describes Nellie.

That time, Gene beat Nellie so badly that she was too weak to get up off the floor. Then he kicked her because she couldn't get up.

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"Gene had new work boots on and he set his foot across my throat and I thought I was going to die . . . He said that I better never run away again because he would find me and the kids wherever we went and kill all of us," states Nellie.

"The thing that I thought about most is that 'he'll kill my kids if I try to leave.' There was not doubt in my mind that he would have killed them."

"That was the time I learned that I couldn't get away from Gene and take the kids with me. And if I couldn't take the kids with me, then I wasn't going," explains Nellie.

A Knife incident taught Nellie that the police could not help her either.

One evening, Gene began battering Nellie because she over-cooked his meat. He threw a tea Kettle of hot water on her, then continued to beat her. Finally, he took a Knife and slit her in the right side of the throat, describes Nellie.

One of Gene's girlfriends, who was witnessing the beating, knocked the Knife from Gene's hand and saved Nellie.

The police were called.

When the police came to the house that night, Gene told Nellie to say that everything was okay and that she and Gene were going to bed. Then Gene hid behind the house to listen, says Nellie.

"When I answered the door, the policeman looked at me and said, 'Well, it looks like you've had some problems.' And I said, 'No, I'm okay.' Then he said the police couldn't protect me unless I pressed charges against Gene. I knew that if I would press charges, the police would lock up Gene, but they wouldn't hold him long and Gene would come after us," states Nellie.

"After the policeman was gone, we left the state in the night so people wouldn't see me the next morning. My face and neck were badly swollen. Gene told me to tell friends we stayed with in Tennessee that I got hurt when I ran his truck off a bridge."

(In September, 1985, four months after the Honeycutt homicide, Indiana adopted a probable cause code which allows an enforcement officer to arrest an abuser for battery, without requiring the victim to press charges.)

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Other times during beatings, Nellie attempted to phone the police for immediate help, but Gene ripped the phone off the wall, say Nellie and Tina.

Besides having no adequate police protection, Nellie had no money to move away with the children since Gene controlled the family income.

Neither did Nellie have a shelter where she and the children could hide.

The Beaman Shelter, in Warsaw, Ind., the only shelter for battered women in Kosciusko County, opened in July, 1985, two months after the Honeycutt homicide.

"I probably would have tried for an abused women's shelter because I'm sure the police back those places and at least I would have had protection for me and the kids. I would have needed a lot of protection because if Gene had found out where I was with the kids, nothing would have stopped him from going into a building and taking us. He wouldn't have thought about who else was going to get hurt," states Nellie.

Gene could be wild and dangerous. He was jailed in the Scioto County Sheriff's Department, Ohio, for "assault with a dangerous weapon," and he was arrested for public intoxication in Warsaw, according to police records.

Sometimes the batterings got so bad that Nellie contemplated suicide.

"I thought about cutting my wrists when Gene wasn't home to get away from the pain. But I thought, 'If I do, what is going to happen to my kids?'"

As long as Gene focused his beatings on Nellie, he would mostly leave the children alone. Nellie thought if she stayed at home and took Gene's attacks, she would be a sort of pillow, a buffer for her children.

"Even with all the beatings Gene gave me, the worst dread I had was seeing one of my kids where he had beat it to death. That was continuously on my mind. I was dreading the thought of the day that Gene would just forget about beating me and start on the kids," says Nellie.

Though Gene did occasionally beat his three daughters and a step-daughter, the beatings were not as harsh or as long as those he gave Nellie, says Tina. Tina adds that she "was scared to death" of her father.

As she weathered year after year of batterings, Nellie became certain that she would eventually be beaten to death. But she prayed that nothing would happen to her daughters until they could "come of age" and could get away from Gene. Then they would be safe, tells Nellie.

The batterings that Gene doled out were kept well hidden from relatives, teachers and friends.

Gene used to tell Nellie that what went on in his household was nobody's business and he warned her to never tell anyone about the beatings. Tina testified in court that Gene threatened that if Nellie or her daughters ever told anyone about the beatings, "he would beat us so bad that we would be in the hospital for months - and he meant it."

When Gene hit Nellie, he would try to beat her where her clothes would cover the marks. When Nellie was in very bad shape from a particular beating, Gene told her to just stay home until her cuts and bruises healed. That sometimes meant Nellie had to suddenly quit her nurse's aid jobs, which she did several times at different nursing homes in Kosciusko County, Nellie explains.

If Gene would leave bruises on his daughters, he'd make certain they wore pants or long-sleeved blouses to school. And if the bruises still showed, he just kept the girls home, say Nellie and Tina. Tina adds that Gene was careful never to beat the girls or Nellie in front of others.

Very few persons in Kosciusko County saw Nellie, anyway. Gene

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Kept her isolated most of the time. He ordered her to keep away from friends and relatives. The only places he usually allowed her to go were the grocery store, laundromat and doctor's office, if the children were sick. He demanded that she account for every minute or hour of her day that she was out of his sight, describes Nellie.

The longer Nellie lived with Gene, the more brutal and more frequent the batterings became. The last two years before Gene died were the cruelest.

By 1983, Gene was battering Nellie about once a week, he had beaten all the children, and had sexually molested two of Nellie's daughters.

By now, Tina was 18 years old and she moved out of the home to get away from her father's violence, according to her testimony at Nellie's trial in January, 1986.

From 1984 to April 25, 1985, Nellie's life became even worse.

Gene would batter Nellie, then laugh and say he enjoyed it, reports Nellie.

Forcing his two younger daughters to watch, Gene began beating Nellie two or three times a week.

The beatings were more savage than ever. Some of the batterings lasted six to eight hours during which Gene would commit such bizarre and severe sexual attacks on Nellie that she could not walk some mornings, states Nellie.

On Easter Sunday, 1985, he broke her nose.

Nellie stopped eating when Gene was at the table because he would unexpectedly throw hot food in her face or suddenly knock her out of her chair.

She couldn't sleep much of the nights because Gene would attack her in her sleep, sometimes pulling her out of bed and beating her. One time she awoke when he began choking her, says Nellie.

Nellie mostly worried about her daughters because Gene said he would kill them someday, and she believed him.

"Gene always carried out what he said. Always," states Nellie.

"Once he told me that I was ugly anyway and noone else would want me. But he was going to make sure that nobody else would want me because he was going to tear my face up. Then he put big scrapes all over my face."

Other times during the beatings, Gene described to Nellie how he was going to assault her and then carry it out.

"I finally got to the point where I didn't feel anything; I was just numb when he told me what he was going to do to me. Because I was sure he was going to do what he was telling me he was going to do," says Nellie.

Since she was enduring such brutal and frequent beatings, Nellie was constantly worried and panicked.

All she could do was take care of her children and wonder and dread when Gene would come back and attack her again, says Nellie.

On April 24, 1985, near 2:30 in the afternoon, Gene came home from work. And he was angry.

Later that afternoon, Gene began beating Nellie. He slapped her backwards on the couch. He made her stand up, knocked her down with his fists, made her get up and knocked her down again, until she bled so much she couldn't get up, describes Nellie.

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"Gene started screaming and yelling at me and knocking me around. He choked me. He slapped me in the face. He beat me with his knuckles on the forehead and in the head. He grabbed my throat. He pulled out bunches of my hair. He knocked me down several times. He kicked me in the stomach," reports Nellie.

"He said there wasn't anywhere I could go with the kids or without the kids where he would not find us all and kill us."

I tried to get away from him and he walked between me and the door.

He forced my girls to watch him beat me. They would get very upset and cry and Gene told them, 'If you don't shut up, you'll be next,' " relates Nellie.

"At that time, Gene held a gun up to the girls' faces and told me that he ought to shoot them and make me watch and then shoot me."

"That was the first time that he'd ever put a gun in their faces," states Nellie.

"At that time, he slapped me again. I went down on the floor. He gets over me and tells me that he's going to get rid of me one way or another and it's going to be by his doing. He was either going to beat me to death, cause me to shoot myself, or cause me to have a nervous breakdown and be put in an institution. He said that was the only way I could get away."

"And then, at 11 o'clock, the beating quit. Just like it started. Just right now. Like Gene flipped a switch," says Nellie.

"He turned around, went to the restroom and came back out and said, 'I think I better go to bed. I got to get up early in the morning.' "

"I was numb. I couldn't concentrate. I couldn't think. And I started praying.

"I went to bed. And Gene went to bed. He lay there 15 or 20 minutes."

Then Gene asked Nellie, "Are you asleep?"

And she answered, "No, not yet."

"And he said, 'I just want you to know that if you go to sleep tonight, you won't wake up in the morning and neither will your kids.' "

"Gene told me that when he got up in the morning, it would be finished, that everything would be taken care of for good," says

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Nellie.

Nellie panicked. Gene had never told her a specific time that he was going to kill her and her children before.

"Gene would just say someday - someday I'll kill all of you. But this time he told me a time," states Nellie.

Nellie laid in bed until she heard Gene snoring. Then she went to the livingroom and spent the rest of the night pacing back and forth, crying, praying and checking her daughters.

She believed it was the last night they would be alive.

"And I didn't know what to do. I didn't even know where to take my children. No way to get away with them. No one to turn to," remembers Nellie.

"I prayed. I was hoping for maybe something to happen where Gene would be all right the next morning."

"I walked the floor all night, watching the clock because I knew the alarm was set for 5 o'clock for Gene to get up to go to work," says Nellie. "I was dreading the time when Gene was getting up because he had already told us he was going to kill us."

"The closer it got to 5 o'clock, the more scared I got. I couldn't think. I was dreading when he was going to wake up and kill the girls."

Gene stirred in his sleep. Nellie feared he was awaking and walked into their bedroom to check.

"I was crying. I was shaking. And I was praying, 'Please, God, don't let anything happen. Just let him get up and go on to work.' But I kept seeing my kids, their bodies all torn up, bleeding, nothing I can do . . .")

"I thought, 'What's going to happen to my kids?'" says Nellie.

"The sun was coming up and the sun started coming through the window at the foot of the bed," describes Nellie.

"As I turned around, the sun hit on the gun."

"I don't remember picking the gun up. I don't know how long I stayed in there. And I don't know how long I had the gun in my hand.

I heard a loud noise. That would have had to be when the gun fired. And I think I screamed, I'm not sure. The next thing I remember is dropping the gun somewhere in the house," states Nellie.

At that time, Nellie did not know if she'd shot Gene or not.

Though Nellie does not remember it, her daughters recall that Nellie took them outdoors before the shooting to make sure they were safe.

Loss of memory, sometimes called post trauma stress reaction, is a common occurrence in cases of abused women who strike out and kill.

They don't remember what happened, according to Beverly Taylor, Chief Clinical Psychologist at the Southwestern Indiana Mental Health Center, in Evansville, Ind.

After the shooting, Nellie went to the Kosciusko County Sheriff's Department and turned herself in. At that time, photographs were taken of some of her injuries. These included a knot on her forehead and bruises and scars on her face and body which Gene had caused during frequent batterings.

Nellie was given no psychiatric evaluation for the battered woman syndrome.

The battered woman syndrome is a cluster of symptoms which include physical and emotional reactions to a traumatic situation. These symptoms are physical and emotional reactions that include: excessive anxiety and fear of harm, sleep and eating disorders, depression, hyper-sensitivity to memory recall of previous harm, sense of feeling trapped and unable to escape, feeling that one has no alternatives, being isolated from others' knowledge of the violence, and learning to accomodate the abuser, according to Psychologist Taylor.

When Nellie was tried for voluntary manslaughter in January, 1986, Gene's arrest records for drunkenness and assault were never presented to the court. However, several witnesses testified that Nellie had been battered for years. The Honeycutt's oldest daughter, Tina, told how her father had beaten all his children and battered Nellie. Nellie's sister, Rose Honeycutt, of Warsaw, Ind., described Gene's violent temper and reported that Nellie continually wore bruises.

Though there was ample testimony that Nellie had been battered for 20 years, no expert psychiatric testimony concerning the battered woman syndrome was offered for the jurors' consideration.

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When her court appointed attorney was asked why he did not present expert psychiatric testimony in Nellie's defense, he answered that he believed the battered woman syndrome was considered inadmissible evidence in Indiana courts at the time of her trial, which is not correct.

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Psychologists' testimonies about the battered woman syndrome have been allowed in Indiana courts since June, 1985. During the past three years, at least three battered women who committed homicide were acquitted by jurors in Indiana trials that included expert testimony of the battered woman syndrome, states Psychologist Taylor.

At her two-day January trial, Nellie was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter.

She was found guilty because "The jurors found it difficult to think that Gene was an imminent threat to Nellie and the girls while he was sleeping," speculates Kosciusko County Prosecutor Michael Miner.

"She may have had inadequate defense," states an Indianapolis attorney who offers counsel to battered women through the Indiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence (ICADV). Without an explanation of the battered woman syndrome, it would be difficult for jurors to understand Nellie's perception that her children were in serious and imminent danger, the attorney says.

When she was sentenced, her defense attorney argued that Nellie is not a criminal and requested that the judge suspend her prison term.

Nellie entered prison in March, 1986. 21

When she went, she left her youngest daughter, Tammy, then 14, who is a brittle diabetic. Tammy had depended on Nellie emotionally and for the care of her diabetes. Between March and June, 1986, Tammy was hospitalized twice for "emotional trauma of being separated from her mother," according to a Petition for Shock Probation, filed June 14, 1986, in the Kosciusko County Circuit Court.

In prison, Nellie worries mostly about her children, especially Tammy who has been missing since December 26, 1987.

Nellie's health is better. She can eat but she does not sleep well. She has nightmares and wakes up in a cold sweat, she reports.

Reflecting about her life with Gene, Nellie offers:

"For me, when I realized how violent Gene was, it was too late. But I would tell all women: The first time a man hits you, don't stay. Get out. You can't figure out the cause of this brutality if you're still sitting in the middle of it. Get away where you can be by yourself or somewhere where you know you can sit with your back against the door and know that somebody is not going to jump you.

Just take the time to sort things out for yourself. Then, if you realize that you need somebody to talk to, I'm sure there are people out there that will talk."

Nellie says she advises her daughters to make certain their partners do not have violent backgrounds. She also urges her girls to use their heads in matters of love. She says there is no use loving a man who abuses and tortures. She wants her daughters to invest their love where it can be constructive.

"I have been asked what it's like being here, in prison. And my answer is that I have more freedom being here and being locked up than I had with Gene," says Nellie.

Though prison may seem freer than the 20 years Nellie spent with Gene, it is still an unhappy place. Besides overcrowded conditions and racial unrest inside the prison, Nellie must fend off inmates who threaten to whip her or try to make homosexual advances, she says.

Though Nellie gets depressed when she remembers the past, she is determined to make good use of her time in prison. Since March, 1986, she has studied and passed the General Education Development (GED) test

and she graduated from a Health Occupation class for nurse's aids. She has taken courses including anatomy, English, three semesters of public speaking, and a criminal investigations correspondence course from the Indiana University-Purdue University program. She also does Bible studies, writes poetry and crochets.

This year, Nellie will request a sentence modification from County Prosecutor Miner.

Miner says whether or not he grants prisoners sentence modification depends on the seriousness of the crime, the record of the person while she is in prison, and the likelihood that she has been rehabilitated.

"I deserved to be in prison because I took a life and that was wrong," sighs Nellie. "But I took Gene's beatings for 20 years. I stayed because I was afraid to leave. I've been punished long enough."

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV), in Washington, D.C., offers a crisis intervention hot-line for abused women who need information about shelters or who need to talk to someone for support. The number is 1-800-333-7233.