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'Help me!'; Years later, lives still torn apart by notorious Bonner Park case

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PONTIAC - The stick figure is scribbled on a sheet of paper sent from jail.

It's a girl with a few doodles for hair. She's standing behind pencil-drawn bars, crying out to her mom.

Just above the sketch, two words: "Help me!"

It might be too late.

Nicole Barham, who was raped and shot eight years ago in Bonner Park in one of Flint's most notorious crimes, is now a professional escort facing life in prison, accused of recruiting friends to rob a hooker, court records show.

Her recent arrest was the low point in a self-destructive slide that saw Barham, 23, go from shielded victim to a drug user and prostitute.

Today, she sits in the Oakland County Jail, unable to afford \$275,000 bail and awaiting trial in January.

Barham's situation is the most visible ripple that Bonner Park has left on the survivors and their families.

Dustin Kaiser, who was 15 at the time he survived the attack with a bullet in his head, also has had brushes with the law and lives with a closed-head injury.

"It's a full-time job to keep him on track," said his father, Patrick Kaiser, adding his son has undergone counseling.

And the trauma has left the mother of Michael Carter - who was 14 and Barham's boyfriend when he was shot to death - embarrassed by the racial fears she feels.

Barham, Kaiser and Carter hopped a CSX freight **train** in Highland Township in northern Oakland County on a June night in 1997 with the misguided

aim of getting to Holly. Instead, they ended up in Flint, where they were lured into the park by six black men and shot.

The attack drew national attention. The New York Times called it a "small-town version of the O.J. Simpson case," pouncing on racial undertones involving three suburban white kids being brutalized in a big city. Critics derided that as a simplistic recasting of what happened.

Barham has struggled because she never confronted the pain, relatives said.

"It's like her life fell apart," said her mother, Lori Jamieson, 43. "Look what a split-second tragedy turned her into."

On the fifth anniversary of the assault, neighborhood activists who lived near the park told **The Flint Journal** they had put the attack behind them. Barham never has.

Just look at the jailhouse letters.

Filled with hearts and frowny faces, pleas and promises, the letters indicate Barham is both a scared daughter and a protective big sister. And, in some ways, she's still a 14-year-old girl, her stepfather said.

"Don't get me wrong. She's got to accept some responsibility - I'm not denying that. But there definitely is a cause and effect," said stepfather

Daryl Jamieson, 45. "Her emotions are frozen in time."

Attack changes everything

Lori Jamieson's sprawling mini-mansion in Gibraltar, a Downriver Detroit suburb, is waiting for Barham. If she ever gets there, Barham vows to undo eight years of pain. No more smoking, no more weed, no more drinking, according to the jailhouse letters. Barham agreed to be identified because she wants to fight the robbery charges and tell everyone she's innocent. She does not fear being identified as a sexual assault victim.

"There's nothing more that can hurt me," she said Thursday during an interview at the Oakland County Jail.

Before the attack, Barham played the clarinet and was a Brownie. She was a popular kid who loved to swim, ski and volunteer at a senior center.

She wanted to be a beautician. When she was 6, maybe 7, she would **train** by lugging a stool to the sink, climbing up and snipping her hair. After the attack, her dreams fizzled, relatives said.

"Her goals kind of went to heck," said her aunt and godmother, Rhonda Lemke of Waterford Township. Her parents divorced in 1988, and she later split time with her mom, who operates a string of nursing homes, and her father in Howell. She was staying with her grandmother when the attack

happened. Afterward, she bounced between her mom and dad's homes but rarely went outside for two years.

Barham said she copes by pretending the attack never happened. She just covered it up, like the makeup she uses to hide the scar on her right cheek where the bullet entered her head and the dent on her nose where she was pistol-whipped.

She also coped by quitting. First Milford High School - too many questions - then correspondence school and counseling sessions.

"She wanted to forget about that part of her life," her mother said.

Barham couldn't be forced into counseling, her stepfather said.

"The whole family was on pins and needles," he said.

"What to say, how to act, how not to act. We really didn't know how to support her."

When Barham finally emerged in 1999, trouble surfaced. A friend was working for a Detroit-area escort service, and Barham was dazzled by the dollars. She started driving the friend to meet clients and eventually started working as an escort, she said.

On Aug. 17, 2001, Barham, then 19, registered a business called Sweetie's Entertainment, Livingston County records show. It was a secret. And she had a cover story.

"Catering," her mom says. "And making good money. I believed it. I did not know she was screwing men for money."

Barham said she had a stable of about 20 escorts and advertised in Detroit newspapers. She also had a Web site where she was known as "Kittie," and charged clients more than \$300 an hour.

On a good day, she'd make \$5,000. Barham said she spent lavishly on cars, cocaine, marijuana and Ecstasy.

In 2002, years after that ill-fated **train** trip, Barham finally got to Holly.

She lived in a house on Seminole Street with her boyfriend, Shontaye Penn, 26, who has a criminal record for drugs and stolen property convictions and is the father of Barham's 3-year-old daughter. Penn was later arrested and sent to prison for having sex in the house with a 15-year-old girl, according to court records and Holly Detective Scott Fischer.

And in April 2004, Barham was arrested in Holly on a marijuana charge, a 4-year felony.

More than six years after she testified against the Bonner Park attackers, Barham was back in court. In a way, so was Bonner Park. Her attorney, Daniel Blank, told the court about the attack.

"I got probation," she said.

Parallel pain

Bonner Park also may have helped keep the other attack survivor out of prison.

Kaiser was arrested in Waterford Township on Jan. 22, 2003, for his role in possessing with the intent to deliver cocaine and marijuana, Oakland County Circuit Court records show.

He was driving a car and shuttling a friend to pick up and distribute cocaine, according to court records. He also used his Waterford Township apartment as a cocaine warehouse where he weighed, cut and packaged the drug, records show. Assistant Oakland County Prosecutor Brett Chudler wanted Kaiser to serve at least a few years in prison.

But Kaiser's attorney submitted a psychological evaluation indicating his client suffered from a closed-head injury caused by the Bonner Park attack. He also argued that Kaiser should be spared prison time because he testified in the Bonner Park case, court records show.

Chudler disagreed.

"Prior victimization is not a substantial and compelling reason," Chudler wrote.

Despite Chudler's objections, Kaiser was sentenced last March to lifetime probation, court records show. A number of factors were considered, including the Bonner Park incident, and it appeared

he was manipulated into his role in the drug case, Chudler said.

"He did not receive any leniency merely because he was a crime victim in the past," Chudler said in an interview.

Kaiser, 23, a father of daughters ages 3 and 4, did not respond to interview requests.

He has never held a regular job for more than two weeks, so his father, who owns a building company, created a business for him: cleaning out repossessed manufactured homes.

Kaiser also lives with the risk that the bullet lodged in his brain could shift and leave him blind, paralyzed or mentally retarded.

"It's bad enough that he deals with this on a daily basis," his father said. "His best friend was killed, and he's aware of the way Nicole's been going."

Attack changes mother

Sitting through the trials and staring down her son's attackers changed Joan Boyce, whose son, Michael Carter, was killed in Bonner Park.

Growing up in Detroit and living in rough neighborhoods in Florida, she said she never judged people by their race. Her two surviving children are biracial.

Now, she feels scared in certain situations and in chance encounters with black men.

Boyce, 43, is not proud how she's changed. It's reality.

"I'm still working on it," she said.

She recently moved to Highland Township, not far from where the three kids met at a trailer park and south of where they hopped on the **train**. She worked until recently as a prep cook at a Highland Township restaurant and is raising Michael's brother and sister, who were 7 and 8 when he died.

"We have made it a point or crusade to make it," she said. "No matter what comes at us."

Her son was her light. Not an angel, not a bad kid, either, she said. He had spent time at an Oakland County juvenile detention facility after he was caught breaking into a home, according to Journal reports from 1997.

Boyce said she hopes Barham and Kaiser use her son's memory as inspiration to improve their lives.

"You hope that would happen," Boyce said.

She believes Barham and Kaiser are struggling with survivor's guilt.

"Feeling as though they do not deserve better days than that day that they lost their friend to such an awful end," Boyce said.

Facing life

Barham sits in jail, facing life in prison over \$3 stolen from an escort - a crime Barham said didn't involve her.

"It's a crime of opportunity by some kids that aren't very intelligent," said Jeffrey Hall, an assistant Oakland County prosecutor.

The facts: A 44-year-old escort was robbed and assaulted Feb. 1 in a Novi apartment.

Police said the cellphone used to book the escort was traced to Katie Murphy, a single mother from White Lake. Police soon arrested Murphy and two men who lived with her; one is Barham's cousin.

Murphy told police the group was recruited by Barham to rob the prostitute and collect a debt. Barham was charged in September with armed robbery, conspiracy to commit armed robbery and home invasion.

Court records, however, show the hooker didn't know Barham, and the assistant prosecutor in an interview said he doesn't believe Murphy.

A co-defendant identified Murphy, not Barham, as initially recruiting him, court records show.

Murphy and Barham are set for separate trials Jan. 19.

Barham's time in jail has led to introspection.

She tells her mom she's changed. She'll be a good girl. She spends the days in jail reading the Bible and finally dwelling on Bonner Park.

"I want a new type of life," she said. "I don't know what is normal. I think I've lost a lot. I lost my childhood."

There's one reminder. It's on her left ankle: A tiny heart-shaped tattoo Michael Carter made with a needle and black ink when she was 13.

She also spends her time writing letters, such as the cautionary note she wrote to her teenage sister, Valerie.

"Nothing is worth your freedom," she writes. "Be nice to mom and don't be like me. ... I would do anything to be able to rewind time."