

1. Emotional Responses

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the GIRL in the CLOSET

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2. Information that is revealed

First of eight parts

3. Ethics

Lauren is alone in the dark.

She's naked, sitting cross-legged in her own filth, eyes focused on a sliver of light.

It's all she has, that light.

It glows from underneath a locked closet door, and Lauren's discovered if she stares at it long enough, her mind will open a portal to another place.

Doctors say that's how she survived all the years of starvation and solitude and sexual torture. They call it disassociation — the psyche's ability to float away from the pain.

Lauren calls it her "escape hatch"

It's been a dozen years since Lauren was rescued from that wretched back room of a mobile home in Hutchins and became known as "The girl in the closet."

News of the case, and the arrest of her mother and stepfather, shocked and sickened the nation.

Little Lauren looked like a Holocaust survivor — bloated belly, protruding ribs, arms as big around as quarters — when she arrived in the emergency room at Children's Medical Center Dallas the night of June 11, 2001.

At 8 years old, she weighed 25.6 pounds, the size of an average 2-year-old, and was damaged in ways doctors had never seen.

A lot has happened in Lauren Kavanaugh's life since then.

Earlier this year, she graduated from high school at age 20 and enrolled at Trinity Valley Community College in Athens, a few miles from the rural home she shares in Canton with her adoptive mother, three dogs and a squawking parrot.

For the first time in years, Lauren's off medication for depression and bipolar disorder. She's exercising, talking more and seems to have new energy and optimism.

"There were a lot of tough years in there," said Sabrina Kavanaugh, who, along with her husband, Bill, finalized the adoption of Lauren about a year after she was rescued.

"Sometimes I wasn't sure we were going to make it. But all things considered, Lauren's doing great. I think we may have turned a corner."

Lauren's successes are striking when one considers her early life was punctuated by so many abject failures.

By the courts, which took her from loving adoptive parents despite ample signs of danger. By her biological mother and stepfather, who then abused her in almost every way short of murder. By other family members, who held Lauren on their laps but say they never noticed she was scarred by cigarette burns, or starving. By Child Protective Services investigators, who lost track of her even though every month, her mother got a state welfare check.

all she knows
Write questions

Why is she in there?

ANSWER questions

Symbol? revealed

Why is she alone?

hope

escape?

Why short sentences?

not by choice

makes you consider it

imagination = coping
great change

Ethics

Break

Look at the pic

factual

Lauren's road back has been long and bumpy.

There have been years of psychotherapy and hundreds of doctor visits. Fits of rage, long nights of tears and terror, suicide attempts, fistfights, handfuls of mood-altering drugs.

None of those are unusual for victims of severe child abuse, who often struggle with lifelong emotional problems.

But Lauren's challenges were greater than most.

During six key years for growth and development — from age 2 until 8 — she was deprived of nourishment and stimulation, which resulted in brain atrophy.

Equally important, she missed a million lessons learned by toddlers and young children: how to trust, cope with disappointment, give and receive affection.

Dr. Barbara Rila, a Dallas psychologist who specializes in the treatment of severely abused children, visited Lauren in the hospital days after she was rescued.

"If you would have asked me then, I would have told you there was very little future and hope for this youngster," Rila said. "I'd never seen a child who was so very broken physically and emotionally."

Lauren did not know how to sit in a chair, hold a pencil or recite her ABCs. She was not potty-trained, didn't recognize the sun or know what grass felt like under her feet.

Rila knew what that meant. From birth to age 6, children's brains triple in size, producing cells at a dizzying rate, establishing critical neural connections.

It would be impossible for Lauren to regain those lost years, or for her adoptive parents to re-create the psychological experiences that teach complex emotions such as empathy and sympathy, along with morals and values.

Studies by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and others suggested Lauren faced a bleak future: antisocial behavior, crime, drug and alcohol abuse, disease and early death.

Lauren does have deficits, but so far, Rila says, she has beaten the long odds against her — not by making up for lost time, but by understanding her weaknesses and figuring out ways to compensate for them.

"The fact that we're talking about her graduating from high school, that she has reflective thoughts, that she has a relationship with her adopted mother, that she can talk about the things that happened in her past," Rila said, "these things are amazing and remarkable."

A bond that never formed

Barbara Atkinson said she never bonded with Lauren, her second of six children.

"It was the problem," she told a Dallas Morning News reporter in 2002, the only interview she's granted. "Out of sight, out of mind. I shut it away and don't think of it."

Atkinson's oldest child, Blake Strohl, remembers her family's hostility toward her half-sister.

She didn't see all the terrible things that happened, but she heard some of them.

Lauren screamed at night. And when 10-year-old Blake would occasionally take her out of the closet for a bath, she saw why: bloody, circular wounds across her head and back that looked like cigarette burns. And her vagina was swollen.

“I could tell she needed help,” said Strohl, who is now 23 and has a toddler. “Everybody knows right from wrong, and my heart was tugging at me about the way she was being treated. She would talk to me, but it was almost like talking to a baby.”

Strohl said she didn’t learn until years later that both her mother and stepfather, Kenneth Atkinson, were sexually abusing Lauren.

Strohl lives a few miles from Canton and aches to reconnect with her sister.

“I knew Kenny and Barbie had sex a lot because we could hear them, but I didn’t know what they were doing to her,” Strohl said. “They always had the music turned up really loud back there. Lauren would scream, but I always thought they were hitting her and stuff. She screamed a lot.”

Age has invited perspective, and guilt. Strohl’s eyes rim with tears when she pries open the door of childhood memories.

“My whole life, people have been asking me why I didn’t do anything, why I lied,” she said, her voice cracking. “I was just doing what my parents told me to do. I’m afraid it makes me a terrible person because I didn’t help her.

“But when I think about it, there’s nothing I could have done. I was scared to death of that woman. I didn’t want them to do to me what they were doing to her.”

‘Out of a horror movie’

Gary McClain was the first police officer to walk up the steps of the white trailer with green trim the Monday night Lauren was rescued.

He bit his lip and looked away when asked to describe what he saw.

“She looked like one of those kids out of a horror movie,” he finally said. “I know that’s terrible to say, but I can’t think of any other way to describe it.”

Child abuse is always heartbreaking and stomach-turning.

But there was something haunting about Lauren’s case, according to those who’ve spent careers working to prevent and prosecute crimes against children.

Perhaps it was the emaciated state of her body, the broken teeth, the cigarette burns and the puncture wounds. Maybe it was the way she managed a weak smile and said “cheese” when a detective took her picture.

Or the fact that in a home of six children, Lauren — once a moon-faced toddler with dimples and an impish grin — was singled out, locked away, despised by people who should have loved her.

“There are bad people in the world, there are evil people, there are criminals, and then there are monsters,” said Susan Hawk, a GOP candidate for Dallas County district attorney, who, as a prosecutor, helped convict Lauren’s mother and stepfather of felony injury to a child.

“These people were just monsters.”

Barbara and Kenneth Atkinson both received life sentences. They’ll be eligible for parole in 2031.

Lauren received a life sentence, too.

“We know that for at least five or six years, she was tied down and locked up,” said Emily Owens, a child-abuse detective for the Dallas County district attorney’s office who worked 18 months on the case.

“This was during those formative years when you’re supposed to be bonding and the years when you’re supposed to be learning love and trust. All she got was pain. How do you ever get past that?”

That is the central question in Lauren’s life.

What’s possible? How far can she go?

Surviving and thriving

Many feared Lauren was physically and emotionally damaged beyond repair when she emerged from the closet, bone-thin and so far behind developmentally.

But she surprised people.

“When I first started seeing her, she was not social, she was chronically depressed, she was suicidal, she felt worthless,” said Lindsay Jones, a therapist who’s been treating Lauren for six years.

“Today, she’s ready to embrace her past. She’s not embarrassed about it or ashamed about it anymore. She’s like, ‘This happened to me, but I’m still here. I survived and I’m thriving.’”

Leslie Baker, a court-appointed advocate who’s stayed close to the case for more than a decade, said she gets goose bumps when she thinks about the transformation.

“Lauren, for all of us, is really a teacher,” Baker said. “She teaches us that recovery really does happen.

“And as human beings, we have capabilities we’re really not aware of until someone like Lauren shows us what’s possible.”

Here’s the thing about Lauren: During all those years of captivity, she never stopped calling out for help. She never surrendered to the darkness, never lost focus on the light under the door or what it represented — an escape.

In some ways, she’s still fighting to get free.

Lauren worries the dark clouds of her childhood will forever cast a shadow on her future.

She wonders if the nightmares will ever stop. If the voices in her head — the ones suggesting she slide a razor blade across her wrist — will ever fall silent.

Will she ever have a long-term relationship, be able to hold a job, be a mother?

Lauren doesn’t have many answers.

For now, she’s just trying to concentrate on the good things in her life: college, a budding relationship, the freedom that comes with adulthood.

“I don’t want to be like my parents,” she said late one night. “That’s my focus. I have that fear of turning out like them, because every day I feel it. I have that rage inside like my mother.

“The only difference is, I’m trying to control it.”

http://res.dallasnews.com/interactives/2013_October/lauren/#.V-k9rfArLIW