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Forth of eight parts

THE GIRL IN THE CLOSET | A survivor's story, Chapter 4



File/Staff Photo

Laabrina Kavanaugh watched Kenneth Atkinson, Lauren's stepfather, during a custody hearing in June 2001. The following month, Kavanaugh and her husband, Bill, gained full custody of Lauren.

Ecstasy and agony

Kavanaughs felt high of reunion, low of abuse's toll

SCOTT FARWELL

Staff writer

The news was almost too horrible to believe: an 8-year-old girl found locked in a closet, starved nearly to death, singled out for torture in a home of six children.

In the back of Sabrina Kavanaugh's mind, she wondered.

It seemed like her adopted daughter Lauren had just disappeared after that terrible night six years earlier, when Kavanaugh handed the squiggling 20-month-old to her birth mother, Barbara Atkinson, in a Wal-Mart parking lot in Jasper.

"I knew she was going to abuse her, but there wasn't anything we could do," Kavanaugh said, the pain still fresh in her eyes. "I asked her, 'Why do you want her back?' because I knew she hadn't bonded with Lauren."

Atkinson's answer was unsatisfying and infuriating.

"My mom spent too much money getting her back," she said. "I can't give her up."

The attorney's fees were \$650.

Kavanaugh and her husband, Bill, tried everything they could think of to find Lauren after they let her go that night.

They called Atkinson's mother, Doris Calhoun, begging for information. The answer was curt: You lost her in court, now just let it be.

They hired a private investigator. He came up empty.

So, after eight months of pure parenting joy and a yearlong custody fight, their house fell silent.



File/Staff Photo

Bill and Sabrina Kavanaugh, at their Canton home in June 2001 just days after Lauren's rescue from her abusive mother and stepfather, had continued to collect Barbie dolls for her after losing a custody battle.

Sabrina Kavanaugh couldn't stand to box up Lauren's toys, so she kept the Tonka trucks and tea sets on shelves next to the toddler's empty crib. The room remained untouched for years.

The Kavanaughs moved from Ennis to Canton in 1999 when Bill retired after 35 years at a glass company in Waxahachie. They raised llamas, and Bill — a 6-foot-2 cowboy with a barrel chest and snow-white beard — spent as much time as he could fishing and deer hunting.

Sabrina Kavanaugh decorated her new house with posters from John Wayne movies, memorabilia from *Gone With the Wind* and photos of Lauren — her deep dimples and pursed lips smiling back from frames on the living room wall.

And each year at Christmas, Kavanaugh bought Lauren "Brilliant Barbie" dolls with painted-on smiles and sparkly dresses. She stacked the unopened boxes in her bedroom closet, privately hoping one day her little girl would come home and open them.



File/Staff Photo

The Kavanaughs' home had grown silent after they gave Lauren back to her birth mother in late 1994. They left the girl's room untouched for years.

As the Kavanaughs struggled to keep Lauren's memory alive, her birth mother tried to forget her.

In the six years after Barbara Atkinson was awarded custody of Lauren in an Ellis County court, she had married twice, divorced twice and eventually reconciled with Kenneth Atkinson, an unemployed carpenter.

She'd given birth to two boys and a girl, which gave the unemployed mother six children with four fathers.

She seemed to move every time the rent was due — from Jasper to a women's shelter in Louisiana, a mobile home park near Longview, a couple of places

in Waxahachie and, finally, a filthy mobile home in Hutchins.

At each turn, Lauren's life got worse.

Detective Sgt. David Landers of the Cockrell Hill Police Department led the criminal investigation of Lauren's mother and stepfather in 2001. He remembers every detail, even the ones he'd like to forget.

"It started out with Barbie just putting Lauren next to her on the floor on a pallet," said Landers, a burly man whose kind voice and gentle manner betray the macho-cop stereotype.

"But Lauren would get up and go into the other room and get into stuff, so Barbie started putting her in the closet with a little gate across it. Then, when Lauren got old enough to push it down, Barbie just shut the door."

Lauren was rescued from the closet on June 11, 2001.

She had more than two dozen cigarette burns and puncture wounds across her back and face. Her hair was lice-infested, almost translucent, and her esophagus was clogged with feces, carpet fibers and plastic.

News of the abuse exploded locally, and within days it had ricocheted around the country.

A crowd screamed insults as Barbara and Kenneth Atkinson were led out of the Hutchins Police Department the day after their arrest, and more protesters met them when they arrived at the Dallas County Jail.

Local television stations led their newscasts with the "perp" walks.

In Canton, Sabrina Kavanaugh was working the night shift at the Dairy Queen when the newscasts played.

Her husband Bill called with a question: "What were Barbie and Kenny's full names?"

She told him their last name was Atkinson.

He said, "Sabrina, they're on TV."

She was skeptical, so she called her sister and asked her to watch the news at 10 p.m.

Kavanaugh was outside smoking a cigarette when her relatives pulled into the Dairy Queen parking lot.

"That's when I knew it was Lauren," Kavanaugh said. "The next thing I remember, I was on the ground crying."

‘Just as beautiful’

It took three days for Sabrina and Bill Kavanaugh to persuade police and Child Protective Services workers that they had adopted Lauren at birth but lost her on a technicality.

Emily Owens, a special investigator for the Dallas County district attorney’s office, met them in a downtown hotel. She brought heartbreaking photos of Lauren in the hospital: skeletal, broken teeth, sunken eyes.

“Listen, before I show you the photos,” Owens warned, “I want you to know she’s not going to look like the chubby toddler you remember.”

Bill Kavanaugh flipped through the images and his eyes filled with tears.

“She’s just as beautiful as the first day I saw her,” he said.

Sabrina Kavanaugh paced and cursed.

“She went back and forth from crying and disbelief to wanting to kill both of them and castrate Kenny,” said Owens. “And she just kept saying, ‘I want my baby. I want my baby. I want my baby.’”

The next morning, Sabrina and Bill Kavanaugh got off the elevator on the fifth floor of Children’s Medical Center Dallas. A nurse walked them to a playroom, where some children were running around and others were sprawled on the floor with puzzles.

“She was in there with a bunch of little kids, but we knew who she was right off,” Sabrina Kavanaugh said. “She was little bitty. Oh my God, you wouldn’t believe her little arms and legs. They were no bigger than a pencil. She was real white and she had an IV pole.”

The Kavanaughs ached inside as they watched Lauren struggle to her feet and shuffle off to the bathroom like an old woman.

Day after day for about a week, the Kavanaughs watched Lauren from afar — usually craning to see through a little port-hole on a swinging door into the playroom.

Then one afternoon, Lauren’s pediatrician, Dr. Susan Scott, and CPS caseworker Kim Higgins decided it was time for the emotional reintroduction.

Doctors and nurses always fed Lauren alone, at a little red picnic table set up in a side hallway, because she was terrified someone would take her food.

The group waited until she finished her lunch, then walked to Lauren’s table.

“This is Sabrina and Bill Kavanaugh,” Scott said. “Do you mind if we sit down?”

Lauren looked up at Scott and asked, “Is this my new mom and dad?”

The Kavanaughs caught their breath.

“You couldn’t cry because it would scare her,” Sabrina Kavanaugh said. “They said that she remembered something about the two years we had her, and that’s why she knew us.

“Nobody had told her about having new parents. None of the doctors or nurses had introduced that fact.”

Strides in the hospital

Lauren was in the hospital for about five weeks, and Sabrina Kavanaugh was there every day and most nights.

Lauren could only eat small meals — six or so a day — because she had been starved so long, her stomach lacked the enzymes required to break down food.

Nurses gave her a little watch, and after each meal, they’d show her where the hands of the clock needed to be before she could eat again.

Even so, she hoarded food. She’d take two bites of a banana and then hide the rest in her pillowcase.

Lauren’s other reflexes were less predictable.

She didn’t always like to be touched and preferred to suffer in solitude after



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Emily Owens, special investigator for the Dallas County district attorney’s office, remembering Sabrina Kavanaugh’s reaction to heartbreaking photos

See related video at dallasnews.com/lauren

medical procedures. When nurses would try to soothe her, she'd flinch.

And she never wanted to be alone.

One afternoon, when the Kavanaughs took her outside barefoot, Lauren started screaming. She thought something was biting her feet — she had never felt grass.

Lauren gained weight and strength at Children's, but doctors weren't sure what was ahead.

Her brain had atrophied from malnutrition and she was intellectually delayed, but there was no way to know if she would be able to catch up.

The most troubling questions were emotional — for six years, during a time when kids are being hugged and told they're smart and having every boo-boo kissed, Lauren was being tortured.

Scott sat the Kavanaughs down the day they were to take her home.

Her face was stern. She said Lauren was not retarded and shouldn't be treated that way.

But Sabrina Kavanaugh said that's where her guidance ended.

"We've had children who've been beaten," Scott told them. "We've had children who have been starved. We've had children who've been sexually abused and neglected and psychologically abused.

"But we've never had a child who's had it all."

The upshot?

Doctors had no idea what to expect.



Lauren, shown at the hospital the night of her rescue, remained there for five weeks. She regained weight and

About the series

Senior reporter Scott Farwell spent the last year trying to understand Lauren Kavanaugh's life, conducting hundreds of interviews with family members, doctors, detectives, judges, therapists and many others. He also reviewed thousands of pages of legal documents and medical records. The result: "The Girl in the Closet: A Survivor's Story."

Sunday: Lauren grows up, considers an uncertain future

Monday: Custody fight opens door for abuse

Tuesday: Finally free, Lauren begins long journey toward recovery

Wednesday: Adoptive parents reconnect with a damaged Lauren

Thursday: Rage, pain, terror revealed during play therapy

Friday: Mom and stepfather on trial, public and media riveted by case

Saturday: Lauren sexually abused again, attempts suicide, nearly gives up

Sunday: Lauren reveals her source of inner strength

Key figures

BARBARA "BARBIE" ATKINSON, Lauren's mother, was convicted of felony injury to a child. She received a life sentence and will be eligible for parole on June 12, 2031.

KENNETH ATKINSON, Lauren's stepfather, was convicted of felony injury to a child. He received a life sentence and will be eligible for parole on Nov. 29, 2031.

SABRINA KAVANAUGH, along with her husband, Bill, adopted Lauren after she was rescued. She and Lauren now live in Canton.

BILL KAVANAUGH, Lauren's adoptive father, died in December 2003.

EMILY OWENS, a child-abuse detective for the Dallas County district attorney's office, worked 18 months investigating Lauren's mother and stepfather.

DAVID LANDERS, a Cockrell Hill police detective, headed up the criminal investigation of Barbara and Kenneth Atkinson.

DR. SUSAN SCOTT, one of Lauren's pediatricians, reintroduced her to Sabrina and Bill Kavanaugh.