

The Dallas Morning News

October 21, 2013

Second of eight parts

THE GIRL IN THE CLOSET | A survivor's story, Chapter 2



As Sabrina Kavanaugh held newborn Lauren in April 1993, it would be only hours before she and her husband became the baby's new parents.



When Lauren reached her first birthday in April 1994, Barbara Calhoun (right) and her soon-to-be husband, Kenneth Atkinson, were fighting the Kavanaughs for custody of the child. Those were the only happy times Lauren had with her birth mother — during the months when court officials were monitoring Calhoun's conduct.

Bundle of joy to burden of sorrow

*After a magical start to life with adoptive parents,
Lauren taken away on a technicality*

SCOTT FARWELL
Staff writer

When the labor pains got serious and the time came to push, Barbara “Barbie” Calhoun reached down and grabbed the hand of her best friend at that moment—Sabrina Kavanaugh, a woman who would eventually hate her.

Lauren’s birth that April night in 1993 fused the fortunes of two mothers—one by biology, the other by proxy—who would, for better and worse, set the trajectory for a little girl’s life.

Calhoun was a 21-year-old mother of a toddler, four months pregnant, who had been living out of the front seat of a white Chevy pickup when she first crossed paths with Bill and Sabrina Kavanaugh.

The Kavanaughs were anxious to adopt a child. Calhoun—who had recently moved in with one of Sabrina Kavanaugh’s relatives—seemed more than willing.

“We went over there and talked to her for like two or three hours,” said Sabrina Kavanaugh, snapping together the first pieces of Lauren’s family puzzle. “She was certain she wanted to give it up. She didn’t even know who the father was.”

Kavanaugh drove Calhoun to every medical appointment, a three-hour loop from Ennis to Mabank to Athens. She occasionally sat in the hallway while doctors and nurses quizzed the young mother to make sure she wasn’t being coerced into giving up custody.

“Sometimes, she acted like she didn’t want to give the baby up, but you could tell it was put on. She was wanting sympathy,” Kavanaugh said. “She was like, ‘I wanna keep her, but I don’t have a job and I don’t have anywhere to stay and it [the adoption] just makes more sense.’”

When light labor started, the Kavanaughs met Calhoun at East Texas Medical Center in Athens.



Sabrina Kavanaugh spent eight months in the euphoria of being Lauren’s mom. But when an attorney called saying the biological mother was going to court to get Lauren back, the suffering was just beginning.

They spent the next few hours holding her arm and whispering encouragement as she walked back and forth in the hallway in front of her room, trying to kick-start the contractions.

Calhoun resisted pain medication at first but soon insisted on it.

“I was holding her hand and listening to her cuss and scream,” said Sabrina Kavanaugh, chuckling. “And I was like, ‘Oh lordy, better you than me.’”

When Lauren was born, Calhoun rolled on her side and looked away. She refused to hold the baby.

Kavanaugh snipped the umbilical cord.

The next morning, after adoption papers were signed, Kavanaugh fed Lauren for the first time. Family members were oohing and aahing and snapping pictures when Calhoun appeared in the doorway.

There were tears in her eyes.

Kavanaugh asked, “Do you want to hold her?”

Calhoun shook her head.

“You sure?”

Dressed in a hospital gown, Calhoun turned and walked out of the room.

The next morning, Kavanaugh sat in the back seat with Lauren on the way home from the hospital.

“That was the happiest day of our lives,” Kavanaugh said, her smile backlit by pain. “We loved her before she was born, I guess you would say. We had a room for her and little clothes. It was awesome.”

The next eight months were magic — pink onesies and lacy little shoes, dimpled cheeks and toothy grins, “da-da” and “ma-ma” and pulling up on chubby, wobbly legs.

Then the phone rang.

“It was always in the back of my head that Barbie could change her mind at any moment. That fear was always there,” Kavanaugh said.

“Then her attorney called and said she was filing a petition to take Lauren back.”

In the intervening yearlong custody battle, Calhoun married Kenneth Atkinson, a high school friend. Prosecutors would later say she enlisted him in the abuse of Lauren.



“I often wished there was another way to interpret the law. But I just didn’t think there was. I had to do what I had to do.”

Lynn E. Markham, who awarded permanent custody to Lauren’s birth mother over the Kavanaughs’ objections that the girl was being abused

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‘Chew it, but don’t swallow’

It’s easy to condemn Barbara Atkinson, a woman who betrayed the most basic instinct of motherhood: the impulse to protect her children.

But Dallas County prosecutors argued her crime was even more monstrous.

Not only did she fail to protect Lauren, she tortured her. And at the abuse’s most malicious moments, she seemed to take pleasure in her child’s pain.

She held Lauren’s head underwater in the bathtub, and laughed as she clawed and gulped for air. When Lauren was starving, Atkinson sat her at the table with a bowl of macaroni and cheese and warned, “Chew it, but don’t swallow.”

She would howl with devilish delight while her husband raped Lauren and the toddler screamed.

The savagery begs one of the most troubling questions in Lauren’s story: Why would a mother fight to regain custody of a child, and then torture her?

It is difficult to reconcile the malevolent Barbara Atkinson — the woman who embodies so much evil — with the tearful birth mother who signed away custody of her baby girl, and immediately regretted it.

But Doris Calhoun, Atkinson’s adoptive mother, said there’s truth in both portraits.

“Barbie had an absolute right to change her mind,” Calhoun said. “A mother who makes a choice to give up a child has not abandoned that child— it is a loving choice. That’s a caring choice, it’s a wonderful choice, and she is a great person to have made that choice.”

Calhoun said her daughter felt betrayed by the Kavanaughs after Lauren was born. Once the custody papers were signed and the social worker walked out, the family dashed out of her room to see the baby.

“She [Barbara] sat in her room for 10 or 15 minutes and thought, ‘What have I done?’” Calhoun said.

Angry and despondent, Barbara Calhoun called the Kavanaughs.

“She called them at home and left word on their answering machine that she had changed her mind,” Doris Calhoun said. “They called back and said, ‘Go get a lawyer.’”

To Calhoun, those were fighting words.

She had spent most of her career as a paralegal. Before long, she had pulled the case file, hired an attorney and researched the law.

That’s when she discovered the mistake: a missing piece of paper that would open the door on six years of horror for Lauren.

The Kavanaughs’ attorney had never filed paperwork to terminate Barbara Calhoun’s parental rights.

It was only a matter of time before she got Lauren back.

Frightening signs

The Kavanaughs lost Lauren little by little over the next year.

At first, a judge awarded Barbara Atkinson visitation, then primary custody was reversed and the Kavanaughs were visiting Lauren on weekends.

Court documents suggest this was the only time Lauren had a healthy home life with her mother and stepfather. Photographs show birthday parties, wagon rides and moments when Barbara Atkinson played patty cake with Lauren on the living room floor.

In 1995, a traveling judge from Houston County, Lynn E. Markham, awarded permanent custody to Atkinson — over the Kavanaughs’ objections that Lauren was being abused.

There were scrapes, bruises and fire-ant bites, but the most worrisome sign was when Lauren started kicking and screaming one afternoon as Sabrina Kavanaugh tried to change her diaper.

“It was blood-red from front to back,” she said. “I don’t think it was diaper rash. I think Kenny was already sexually abusing her because she wouldn’t let us touch that diaper.”

The Kavanaughs took Lauren to Children’s Medical Center Dallas for a sexual-abuse evaluation. They said doctors would not perform a rape-kit examination unless they were pretty sure she had been abused.

“They said the test would have been very hard on her, and it would have been painful,” Sabrina Kavanaugh said. “Our hands were tied, really. There wasn’t anything we could do.”

But they did submit 45 photographs as evidence, which she said prompted an angry response from Markham.

He was circumspect in his written judgment on Jan. 6, 1995.

Markham said the Kavanaughs were clearly the better parents, but to take a child from her birth mother, they had to prove Lauren would probably be harmed if she were raised by Barbara Atkinson.

“The real basis of the Kavanaughs’ case rests upon their belief that the cumulative effect of all their testimony indicates that the child will be injured in the future,” Markham wrote. “This is merely a statement of opinion. It is not supported by any evidence.

“Indeed, many children move often, grow up in unkept homes, receive less than optimal supervision, have frequent injuries, and have some degree of diaper rash. However, the court cannot conclude that these conditions will significantly impair the child’s physical health or emotional development.”

That legal standard still exists.

Markham said the Kavanaughs’ attorney never provided evidence, or expert testimony, that Lauren’s scrapes and bruises were evidence of child abuse. If the attorney had, his decision might have been different.

Scenes of joy

Doris Calhoun said she never saw darkness in her daughter.

“Every time they came to my house, Barbie and Kenny would sit on our couch and there’d be kids crawling all over them, on their backs and hugging and kissing on them,” she said. “And Lauren was a part of that. She wasn’t standing off in the corner. She was part of the crew.”

Calhoun said her daughter had flaws— she was lazy, a thief and a scam artist—but when it came to her children, she sensed tenderness.

But there was always a problem when it came to Lauren.

Even though the Kavanaughs lost in court, they wouldn’t let her go. They volunteered to baby-sit every weekend, bought Lauren clothes and toys and continued to refer to themselves as “Mommy” and “Daddy.”

“The problem wasn’t the fact that Barbie got her back, it was the fact that the Kavanaughs never left,” Calhoun said. “They broke the parent-child relationship, so it never was established strongly like it should have been. That’s what happened between Lauren and Barbie.”

Six years later, when Lauren was rescued from a closet in Hutchins, her brain had atrophied from malnutrition.

Her body had cannibalized much of its muscle, organs and bone to stay alive. Lauren had been deprived of food for so long, her stomach lacked the enzymes required to digest food. To save her, doctors used refeeding methods developed for Holocaust victims.

Markham is now an attorney in Crockett. Through the years, as he heard bits and pieces of Lauren’s story, he turned the decision over and over in his head.

“I often wished there was another way to interpret the law,” he said. “But I just didn’t think there was. I had to do what I had to do.”

The last time the Kavanaughs saw Lauren was the day after Christmas 1994, when she was 20 months old.

By that time, Atkinson had given birth to her third child, broken up with her husband and moved out of her mother’s house.

The Kavanaughs met Atkinson in a Wal-Mart parking lot in Jasper in East Texas.

Sabrina Kavanaugh, with Lauren on her hip, walked to the door of Atkinson’s pickup. She handed her a piece of paper with phone numbers, kissed Lauren on the forehead and let her go.

Kavanaugh looked at Atkinson, eyes pleading.

“If you ever change your mind,” she said. “It doesn’t matter where you’re at, call collect and I’ll come and get her.”

What the Kavanaughs didn’t know when they pulled away is that Atkinson would soon return to that Wal-Mart and park her truck around back.

She lived there with all three of her children.

ONLINE: Read the previous chapter of “The Girl in the Closet: A Survivor’s Story,” see slideshows and watch videos at dallasnews.com/lauren

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.

LYNNE E. MARKHAM, a traveling judge from Houston County, awarded permanent custody to Barbara Atkinson.

DORIS CALHOUN, Barbara Atkinson’s adoptive mother, helped her daughter regain custody of Lauren.