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Over the next 18 months, detectives plumbed the depths of depravity Lauren suffered at the hands of Barbara and Kenneth Atkinson — the prolonged starvation, the savage sexual torture, the unremitting neglect.

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Lauren seemed unfazed by the commotion. She sat, boney shoulders slumped, staring straight ahead — eyes puffy and red, hair lice-infested and almost colorless.

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Justice, but not for all of Lauren’s pain

Despite the evidence, prosecutors didn’t want to subject fragile child to testifying about sex abuse

SCOTT FARWELL
Staff writer

When the family lived in Waxahachie, Lauren’s stepfather sometimes duct-taped her legs, bound her hands behind her and threw her into a crawl space called “The Hole.”
“I didn’t want to give her anything strong,” Landers said. “So all I could think of was a Mountain Dew.”

In retrospect, he said, it might not have been the best idea to give a starving child a sugary drink. But as a dad and a detective, he’s convinced he did the right thing.

“The doctors told me later it didn’t hurt her,” he said. “I just couldn’t let her sit there thirsty.”

The only thing Lauren remembers from that day is “the Mountain Dew man.”

It was the first kindness she had been shown in years.

‘I never wanted her’

Within hours of their arrests, the Atkinsons were speaking freely to police.

“Lauren should be able to be out playing and laughing with the whole family,” Barbara Atkinson wrote the night she was taken into custody. “I know the one [I] owe the most love and security to is Lauren. She deserves so much more and I love her with all my heart and soul.”

But days later, in an interview with Child Protective Services investigator Stephanie Boniol, she hardened.


Kenneth Atkinson mostly blamed his wife for the abuse, which he said intensified in 1996 when the family moved into an old home in Waxahachie and his wife fell into depression after a miscarriage.

Atkinson, a carpenter by trade, built a wall of cabinets to partition off a windowless room where 3-year-old Lauren was kept. A hole was cut in the floor and a potty chair placed over it.

Barbara Atkinson said her husband would get frustrated when Lauren cried or got into things. He’d duct-tape her legs at the calf, bind her hands behind her back and throw her into a crawl space under the kitchen pantry. It was known in the family as “The Hole.”

By the time the Atkinsons and their six children moved to Hutchins a few years later, Lauren was confined to a closet in the master bedroom almost full time.

She languished there for nearly a year on cans of cold soup, crackers, bags of bread and an occasional tub of butter sneaked in by her older sister, Blake.

“Barbie said it started off where she’d just be mad at her for mistakes and accidents, and she would spank her and the spankings got a little harder and the feelings got a little harder,” said Emily Owens, an investigator for the Dallas County district attorney’s office.

“And as things happen, they don’t seem so bad after you do it over and over. Then it gets easier to do, and you do a little bit more, and you do a little bit more, and then we got to where we are now.”

Food for dogs, not Lauren

Dallas police Detective Dan Lesher kicked in the trailer door the night the search warrant was served.

Over the next several hours, officers from at least three police agencies moved through the home with video and still cameras, looking for evidence.

It smelled like a filthy litter box and looked like a homeless camp: piles of dishes with rotting food, mounds of moldy clothes, toys and stuffed animals strewn everywhere.

The detectives took note of cabinets packed with graham crackers, macaroni and cheese, bags of bread and tubs of coffee.

The refrigerator was stocked with bottles of Coors Light and a few cartons of eggs. In the freezer, a chicken and a ham sat on a shelf next to two packages of microwaveable enchiladas.

“There was a lot of food in the refrigerator and fast-food boxes everywhere, so people were eating and Barbara sure wasn’t missing many meals,” Owens said.

“But what got me was there was food down for the dogs, and dog vitamins. They were treating the dogs better than Lauren.”

The officers discovered a box of sex toys, but no direct evidence of sexual abuse or drugs. They seized a wooden paddle and a book, 101 Activities for Kids in Tight Spaces.
Eventually, officers made their way to the master bedroom closet.

“I remember two things about that closet: the smell and the first step,” said Lesher, who is now retired. “It was carpeted and urine just squished up around my shoes. There wasn’t a dry place I could find that wasn’t soaked with body fluids, and there was feces smeared everywhere.”

Lesher was called in to supervise the collection of evidence because he’d worked some of the city’s most vile crime scenes.

“I’d been in trailers worse than that in my career, but I’d never been in a cage like that before,” he said. “And that’s what it was. It was a cage, not a closet.”

Lesher made two critical decisions that night.

One, he instructed deputies to collect the closet door as evidence — there were scratch marks on the door handle, possibly from Lauren biting and clawing to escape. And two, he asked them to roll up the foul carpet and bag it for use during trial.

“Nobody was thrilled about that, but everybody understood it was a necessary evil,” Lesher said. “The jury needed a vision of what this girl was subjected to.”

‘The stronger case’

Patricia Hogue, who was head of the district attorney’s child-abuse division, has been described by detectives as “meaner than three snakes dipped in kerosene.”

It was meant as a compliment.

“It was a big case, and there was a lot of media attention,” said Hogue, now an attorney for a nonprofit focused on child-abuse issues.

“Obviously, I was aware of that and that’s why I was handling the case. I didn’t want this one coming back on appeal, because she [Lauren] just couldn’t handle that.”

While there was never any real doubt about Barbara and Kenneth Atkinson’s guilt — based on the damage done to Lauren’s body and their confessions — they were never tried for sexual assault.

Both denied raping Lauren.

Kenneth Atkinson was charged with aggravated sexual assault of a child, but those charges were dropped when prosecutors learned Lauren could not testify.

She acted out some of the abuse during play therapy, where she said the “bad dad hurt me” and demonstrated by poking a hand and thumb into the vagina of an anatomically correct doll, according to court documents.

Sabrina Kavanaugh (center), with her mother, Mary Clamon (right), left the courtroom after Lauren’s birth mother, Barbara Atkinson, was sentenced in January 2002 to life in prison. Kavanaugh and her husband, Bill, would adopt Lauren later that year.

During Barbara Atkinson’s trial, Dallas County sheriff’s Sgt. Don Rowe and prosecutor Patricia Hogue showed jurors the door of the closet where Lauren was imprisoned in a Hutchins trailer.
She then hit the doll over and over between the legs, moaned in pain, screamed and growled.

But Lauren would not verbalize what happened to her. When asked, she would shut down, narrow her eyes and stare into space.

Psychologists said it could take years of therapy before she would feel safe enough to put the abuse into words.

“Lauren was so developmentally traumatized and emotionally traumatized, she really wasn’t in any condition to talk about the sexual abuse,” Hogue said. “We went with the stronger case, and the one that wouldn’t require her to testify.”

Victim and victimizer

Barbara Atkinson’s trial unfolded methodically — medical testimony, police reports and psychologists’ statements — until the moment prosecutors unrolled the closet carpet in front of the jury.

Almost in unison, the panel leaned forward to get a closer look, and then recoiled at the stench.

Barbara Atkinson pleaded guilty to felony injury to a child midway through her trial to spare two of her children from testifying. But the jury still had to deliberate her sentence.

In his closing argument, defense attorney Brad Lollar described his client as both a victim and a victimizer.

Born to a drug addict and a schizophrenic 13-year-old mother, Barbara Atkinson bounced from one flop house to another until she was adopted by Doris and David Calhoun at age 4.

Testimony suggested she was physically and sexually abused as a toddler.

“You can only suspect what type of abuse was visited on Barbara at the hands of a known child molester and child abuser,” Lollar said. “For the first three years of her life, she’d been shoved around from place to place, neglected to the max, abused.”

A psychologist testified that Barbara Atkinson suffered from a borderline personality disorder that contributed to a warped reality in which Lauren became a scapegoat for the family’s problems.

In her final statement, Hogue invited the jury into Lauren’s closet.

“I want you to put yourself in the dark, the light switch too high for you to reach,” she said. “And just think about her, day after day after day in the dark as she listened while her brothers and sisters played out in the trailer house and rode their bikes and played outside in the sunshine and walked on the grass.

“Think about how Lauren felt.”

The jury stayed out almost five hours before reaching a verdict of life in prison. The deliberation took awhile, jurors said, because some panelists were worried that Atkinson would be eligible for parole too soon.

Almost a year later, another jury convicted Kenneth Atkinson of the same crime and sentenced him to life. They’re both eligible for parole in 2031, the year Lauren will turn 38.

Owens asked to interview Barbara Atkinson after her sentencing.

They sat down in a small room in the bowels of the Lew Sterrett Justice Center. Slowly, over the next two hours, Owens said, her view of Barbara Atkinson grew in complexity — yes, she was a monster who had committed an unspeakable crime, but she also was wounded and vulnerable and afraid of her future.

Atkinson said she never saw Lauren as emaciated and sick until photographs flashed on a screen during the trial.

“Do you think God will ever forgive me?” Atkinson asked. “I beg him, but I don’t know if he’s going to listen.”

Owens’ mind raced, looking for a way out. She knew where this was going.

“I hear you’re a Christian woman,” Atkinson said. “Will you do me a favor before you leave? Will you pray me out of this place?”

Owens understood what she meant — not pray for her escape from prison, but
pray for a release from her sins.
   She reached across the table.
   “Taking that girl’s hands and praying with her is the hardest thing I’ve ever
done,” Owens said. “I just wanted to pray, ‘God, kill her.’ But I don’t think it was
her chains that were released that day, they were mine.
   “And I saw her in a different light.”

About the series
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vanaugh’s life, conducting hundreds of interviews with family members, doctors,
detectives, judges, therapists and many others. He also reviewed thousands of
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Key figures

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injury to a child. She received a life sentence and will be eligible for parole on June
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KENNETH ATKINSON, Lauren’s stepfather, was convicted of felony injury to a
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DAVID LANDERS, the Hutchins assistant police chief, showed Lauren the first
kindness she had seen in years.

DAN LESHER, a Dallas police detective, supervised the collection of evidence.

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

PATRICIA HOGUE, head of the Dallas County district attorney’s child-abuse
division, prosecuted Barbara and Kenneth Atkinson.
Lauren Kavanaugh, now 20 years old, watched for her favorite football player after last fall's homecoming game at Eustace High School. She graduated in June and is attending Trinity Valley Community College.
Psychologists say victims of severe childhood abuse often have a hard time believing good things last, joyful moments are real, expressions of love are sincere.

Lauren can relate.

“I’m pretty good at putting on a smile,” the 20-year-old said. “But it doesn’t mean I’m happy.”

A quick scan of Lauren’s bedroom — beyond the Pepto-Bismol pink walls, zebra-striped bedspread and fuzzy pillows — suggests her insecurities still live near the surface.

A black sheet hangs over her closet — no door. A drawer near her bed is stuffed with Pop-Tarts, and a book on her nightstand, The PTSD Breakthrough, offers insight into her struggle.

She gets anxious when food isn’t nearby, anytime she’s alone and when country music comes on the radio. For six years, it was the soundtrack of torture at the hands of her mother and stepfather, Barbara and Kenneth Atkinson.

Lauren was rescued from a foul bedroom closet in June 2001, bone-thin and deeply scarred. She spent five weeks at Children’s Medical Center Dallas recovering from the worst case of child abuse in the hospital’s history.

There were tears in the eyes of doctors and nurses the day she left the hospital, because if anyone deserved a carefree childhood, it was Lauren.

She’d spent too much time alone, hurting and hungry, listening to a life she deserved outside the closet door. Cartoons on television. Card games at the kitchen table. Her five brothers and sisters tearing through the house, laughing and fussing and fetching Popsicles out of the freezer.

Too much time terrified — by the sickening, sweet smell of her mother’s perfume, or beer, or her stepfather’s bad breath, which often telegraphed a session of sexual abuse.

Too much time waiting — naked except for a thin, urine-soaked blanket, focused on a sliver of light under a locked door, praying it would open, dreading what would happen when it did.

“There was a million dollars better than being in there,” Lauren said, her eyes darkened by the memory. “But they abused me when they let me out, so I can’t really say what’s worse. They were both torture.”

‘Let’s go, let’s go’

Lauren’s story, of a bruised and battered but resilient little girl, captivated the nation.

News leaked that she was going home, so reporters and television satellite trucks collected in front of Children’s, hoping to get a glimpse of “the girl in the closet.”

Five floors up, 8-year-old Lauren bounced and spun and tugged at the hands of her new parents, Bill and Sabrina Kavanaugh. She was wearing a pink dress and sunglasses.

Lauren pounced on Kim Higgins as the 24-year-old caseworker with Child Protective Services stepped off the elevator.

“I’m going home today,” Lauren chirped. “Come on, let’s go, let’s go.”

Moments later, Higgins swept Lauren onto her hip and slipped out a back door, away from the reporters and into a sun-soaked morning.
It was an hour’s drive from Dallas, a straight shot on U.S. Highway 175 into the peaceful and piney woods of East Texas.

Higgins strapped Lauren into an infant car seat for the trip. Even though she’d gained 10 solid pounds during her five-week hospital stay, by state law she was still too little to ride in a seat with a lap belt.

She wore size 2T clothes and weighed around 35 pounds.

Balloons, streamers and a pile of presents greeted Lauren when she walked in the front door of her new home in Canton.

The Kavanaughs showed Lauren her room, drawers full of new clothes, and told her graham crackers and pink lemonade would always be sitting on the kitchen table.

Lauren was especially tickled by a herd of llamas her dad raised in an open field behind their place.

In some ways, it seemed like the Kavanaughs could provide the perfect setting for Lauren, a life without drama, an opportunity to heal, a quiet place where she could sink emotional roots in firm and fertile soil.

Foster parents from all over the country, many with advanced degrees and long titles after their names, submitted thick applications to adopt Lauren.

But Higgins never seriously considered anyone but Sabrina Kavanaugh — a self-described East Texas redneck — and her husband, Bill, a man with a syrupy slow drawl who rarely stepped outside without his cowboy boots and hat.

The Kavanaughs had adopted Lauren at birth but later lost custody to her biological mother on a legal technicality.

“Bill and Sabrina wanted Lauren because she was their baby,” Higgins said. “Not because of what she’d been through, not because of the news story. And having someone love you for who you are just can’t be replaced.”

In some ways, Lauren’s homecoming that July day seemed like a happy ending to a heartbreaking story.

But the lives of severely abused children rarely follow a script.

The only thing doctors knew for sure was that Lauren faced grave risks — for lingering learning disabilities, a constellation of emotional problems and the potential for debilitating diseases.

And worse, there were no cases exactly like Lauren’s in the literature, no reference points, no child who had been tortured this long by people this sick.

At least none who survived.
Loving new parents

Bill Kavanaugh parented Lauren with tears in his eyes. He stood 6-foot-2 with a pink dome of a head, a snow-white beard and the calloused hands of a man familiar with hard work under the hot sun.

Some people worried that Kavanaugh, big as a bear with an equally intimidating voice, might frighten the fragile girl who’d had so many terrifying experiences with men.

But Lauren said she never saw her dad that way. His lap was big, his belly was the perfect cuddly pillow, and he was funny.

Kavanaugh would fold himself nearly in half and sit at Lauren’s kiddy table with plastic chairs on the patio. She’d serve him pretend tea and cookies, and he would pretend to enjoy them.

“Oh, this tea is delicious,” he’d say in his best squeaky voice, holding tiny cups, pinky outstretched.

Lauren laughed at the memory.

“He spoiled me,” she said. “It felt good to be spoiled.”

Since Bill Kavanaugh assumed the role of good guy, the bulk of unpopular parenting fell to his wife.

Sabrina Kavanaugh seemed to relish the role.

She believed Lauren needed discipline, a structured home life, clear expectations.

In time, she said, those things would build self-confidence, which would provide handrails for her daughter to hold onto while navigating a new world of school and social groups.

“She used to tell me I was as mean as her other mother,” Kavanaugh said. “Yeah, that hurt.”

The Kavanaughs clashed over parenting styles, but one issue — spanking — led to a split.

Lauren Kavanaugh attended a therapy session in April with Lindsay Jones. When Lauren was dealing with depression, Jones says, they focused on control. Lauren made significant progress after realizing she can’t let her biological mother and stepfather control her through the inescapable memories of their abuse.
Bill Kavanaugh took the side of CPS workers and doctors at Children’s, who said Lauren already had suffered too much violence in her life. Spanking was off limits.

“But Sabrina was like, ‘This is my child and I’m doing it my way. I’ll spank her when I want to and y’all can come take her away if you want to.’ So, it was that kind of bravado,” said Sondra Mahoney, a licensed therapist who became a de facto family counselor.

Sabrina Kavanaugh said no other form of discipline worked with Lauren.

“I did whip Lauren, and CPS didn’t like that,” she said. “But when you have a child who has had no toys, taking toys away as a punishment means nothing. And we tried timeout, but that didn’t faze her either. She’d been in a closet for six years.”

Bill Kavanaugh died of a stroke in December 2003 at age 65.

Lauren remembers the fighting between her parents, and she was frightened of her dad at the end of his life.

Even so, she prefers happier memories of him: fishing trips, feeding the llamas, breakfast runs to Dairy Queen on Saturday mornings.

“I cried a lot when he died,” Lauren said. “He was a good guy.”

**Staying close by**

At age 8, Lauren was older than her kindergarten classmates. Most days, her mother went to school right alongside her.

Sabrina Kavanaugh volunteered in classrooms at Eustace Elementary School so she could sneak across the hall a few times a day and check on Lauren. She eventually was hired as a teacher’s aide.

The proximity helped.

Once, Lauren walked up to the front of her class and started talking about her abuse.

“The teacher was like, ‘Oh my God, what do I do? Do I make her stop? Do I let her go on?’” Kavanaugh remembered, laughing.

Lauren finished and walked back to her seat.

“It was good that she got up and talked about it,” Kavanaugh said. “And I’m glad the teacher didn’t stop her because it would have made Lauren feel ashamed.”

Most parents, and eventually most of Lauren’s classmates, knew her story.

For the most part, they were kind about it.

But Lauren was teased about being older, and her self-esteem sagged as she struggled with reading comprehension and math concepts.

“I’m stupid,” Lauren would say through tears.

Kavanaugh was ready for her.

“If you took those kids in your class and put them in a closet and did to them what happened to you, 99 percent of them wouldn’t even be alive today,” she told Lauren. “You’re strong. You’re a survivor.”

And while she was fierce in Lauren’s defense, Kavanaugh also could be witheringly critical.

“It was hard not to just come across at Sabrina and say, ‘This is harsh. This is wrong,’” said Mahoney. “Because I knew she would cut me off, and then Lauren wouldn’t have a counselor.”

Mahoney said it took a long time for Kavanaugh to accept that her daughter’s prolonged starvation and torture resulted in some intellectual disabilities.

Over the years, Mahoney learned to comfort, more than confront.

“I love Sabrina because I see the warm side of her and the hurt and the tears that will come sometimes,” Mahoney said. “But it’s also been like, ‘I just wanna shake you.’

“We can look back over the years and see that other sets of parents might have handled many issues better. But I don’t know that there could be any more love for Lauren than Sabrina has for her.”

Kavanaugh knows what people think.

She said it’s easy to critique someone’s parenting from afar, with the benefit of a cool head and time to consider options.

Lauren’s relationship with her mother is hot and cold.

Sometimes they sleep in the same bed. Other times, they’re so angry they don’t speak for days.
‘I just haven’t felt it yet’

In 12 years, Lauren’s never spoken in-depth to her mother about the abuse. “She’s judging,” Lauren said. “She doesn’t listen and she just asks a bunch of questions like, ‘Why didn’t you do this?’ or ‘Why didn’t you do that?’” Lauren said she would take a bullet for her mother, but she doesn’t know if she loves her or anyone else.

“I’m not saying I’m not capable of love,” she said. “I just haven’t felt it yet.”

Psychologists say that parenting children who’ve suffered extreme abuse is an exercise in sacrifice.

“You can’t fill Lauren up,” said Mahoney. “She wants more, she needs more, she never feels loved enough.” Kavanaugh agreed it’s been hard, but she’d do it all over again.

The only thing she truly regrets — other than the time she whipped Lauren with a belt — was the time eight years ago when she let Lauren spend the night with family members.

For five years, Kavanaugh rarely let her daughter out of her sight. No sleepovers or slumber parties or spending the afternoon at a friend’s house.

Mahoney, CPS caseworker Higgins and others urged her to loosen the apron springs.

So, in August 2005, she let Lauren sleep over with Kavanaugh’s niece, her husband and their two young boys.

The next morning, the niece’s 24-year-old husband, Jesse Bass, invited Lauren out to the family’s barn, where he sexually assaulted her.

He was sentenced to 13 years in prison for aggravated sexual assault of a child and possession of child pornography. His wife received probation because she knew her husband had child pornography in their house but did not report it.

“I blamed her [the niece] a little bit, but I blamed myself mostly,” Kavanaugh said as she sat next to Lauren at a Denny’s this summer. “So, you know those people who think I’m strict, well, they’re entitled to their opinion. You leave me to mine.”

Tears leaked down her face.

“Don’t even think about trying to tell me how to raise my child,” she said, her voice rising. “That’s my baby right there and ain’t nobody going to jack with my baby. That’s not happening again.”

Lauren listened impassively to her mother’s monologue.

“You eventually learn to role play and do whatever they want without fighting back and it usually makes it easier,” Lauren said of the assaults.

“But you shouldn’t have to do that,” Kavanaugh snapped.

“Sometimes it just happens,” Lauren said, “and you can’t stop it.”

Feelings of despair

In the months after being abused by Bass, Lauren felt more and more hopeless. She began keeping a razor blade under her mattress.

Little by little, she’d pull it across her wrist. Just a little deeper, she thought, and it’d all be over.

The flashbacks consumed her — when she slept and all day while walking around school.

“I’d hear Barbie and Kenneth saying they wish I was dead and I should just kill myself,” she said. “And I’d think about the sexual abuse. Not just them, but my cousin’s husband, too, and I was like, ‘What’s next?’”

Twice, school counselors noticed cut marks on Lauren’s arms and referred her to a juvenile behavioral center in Tyler.

Then one afternoon, Lauren attacked a girl in the hallway of her high school.

Her punishment, a year of alternative school and three months of residential therapy at the Meridell Achievement Center in Austin, helped her turn the corner.

Lauren learned she’s not alone.

“Emotionally, it felt like I was the only person in the world who felt like that,” Lauren said. “But I looked at these kids and I thought, ‘Yeah, maybe mine was worse, but they went through some stuff, too.’”

The voices didn’t fall silent, but Lauren felt stronger.

Mahoney referred her to a new therapist, Lindsay Jones, who specializes in counseling teenagers.
It was slow going.
Lauren said it took two years before she really opened up.
“In the early days, she would talk to me about her plans to kill herself and having nightmares and flashbacks, and she was just going to end it all,” Jones said. “She was severely depressed.”

Jones narrowed in on one issue: control.
For all those years, her biological mother and stepfather had it all. And she told Lauren they were still controlling her.
Was she going to let them do that? Was she going to let them win?
That’s when Jones saw it: Lauren’s light.
“This look came over her face and she realized: ‘This is one thing I have control over,’” Jones said. “‘I can live or I can die.’”
Lauren chose to live.

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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.

KIM HIGGINS, a CPS caseworker, placed Lauren with her adoptive parents.

SONDRA MAHONEY, a play therapist, became the Kavanaughs’ de facto counselor.

JESSE BASS, a relative by marriage, sexually assaulted Lauren when she was 12.
Lauren Kavanaugh and Brandon Sheller shared earbuds last spring at Eustace High. She’s moved on to the next phase of her life, attending a junior college while dreaming of studying psychology at UT and getting married.
Lauren doesn’t do dresses, but she made an exception for her junior prom, zipping herself into a red, sequined number she glammed up with heels, earrings, makeup, the whole thing.

Then her date canceled.

Lauren was disappointed, but undeterred, and went to the dance anyway. But it was a bust — she spent most of the night sitting alone under spinning lights.

“Sometimes, kids at school were mean, and some would try to provoke her because she got mad easily and was always ready to fight,” said Lindsay Jones, Lauren’s therapist. “But mostly, they would just act like she wasn’t there.”

High school is hard for a lot of teenagers, but it was especially brutal for Lauren.

Her adoptive mother, Sabrina Kavanaugh, kept a close eye on her daughter after all she’d been through. But even when Lauren did have friends visit her house, they would get on her nerves.

And if she got bored, she’d just go to bed.

“Lauren really pushed people away,” Jones said. “She wanted friends but didn’t know what to do with them.”

Lauren blamed her social problems on her style, which she said didn’t fit into the country cliques at Eustace High School.

She prefers the uniform of disaffected youth: baggy boy shorts, bejeweled baseball cap turned sideways, dangling earbuds, flopping, untied high-tops. Some days, she dresses head-to-toe in red. Other days, it’s green.

She wants to be seen, but in an asexual way.

All in front of her

Lauren eager to make new memories, not relive old ones

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Staff writer

During her senior year at Eustace High, Lauren headed back to class after lunch break. Lauren, who has had trouble making friends, blames her style, which she said didn’t fit into the country cliques at the school.
“There are so many men who’ve hurt me, which is why I wear boys’ clothes all the time,” she said. “I try to wear clothes that don’t really show much, so I’m not out there feeling vulnerable.”

When prom season rolled around her senior year, Lauren came up with a plan to avoid the disappointment.

She threw her birthday party at Whatz-up Family Fun Park, an arcade, laser tag and go-cart racing attraction in Seven Points, a small town an hour east of Dallas. It’s a place popular with 12-year-olds, not those turning 20.

The party started at 2 p.m., right when her classmates would be getting ready for the dance. Lauren invited five friends.

An hour later, she sat alone at a folding table wearing a T-shirt that read “Extravaganza,” tears collecting in her eyes. Predictably, no one showed up on time.

Sabrina Kavanaugh slid next to her daughter and pulled her close. Lauren leaned in.

It was a moment like many others in Lauren’s school years, when her attempts at connecting with classmates were misplaced, misunderstood or ignored.

Kavanaugh had a lot of experience picking up the pieces.

She ordered the pizzas, broke out Lauren’s birthday cake and set out the presents. The last gift bag was from Kavanaugh.

Lauren’s face lit up when she slid out a new MacBook.

Kavanaugh stood, looking down on her daughter, smiling.

“Did that make it all better?” she asked rhetorically. “See, Mama does think about you sometimes.”

Kavanaugh reached down and tickled Lauren’s ribs, as if she were an infant.

“Ah, she’s happy now,” Kavanaugh said. “It’s not everything you hoped for, but it’s better than you expected.”

Tough graduation day

Lauren finished her high school career in much the same way she experienced it — alone.

One by one, dressed in purple gowns with white sashes, seniors marched across a stage in the Eustace High auditorium last summer. Afterward, graduates streamed into a back hallway, hugging each other and pumping fists.
But not Lauren.
She stood in a pool of isolation, leaning against a wall.
Minutes later, after pictures with family members, Lauren slipped into the passenger seat of her mother’s SUV. She was livid.
“Y’all didn’t even cheer for me when I stood up,” she said.
“Yes we did. I yelled, ‘Whooo-hoo, that’s my girl,’” Kavanaugh said.
“Well, it wasn’t very loud,” Lauren said. “Other people were cheering, but they didn’t cheer for me.”
Kavanaugh changed the subject.
“I’m so proud of you,” Kavanaugh said. “I love you so much. Have I told you that today?”
Lauren’s lip quivered, fighting a smile.
“Only every day of my life,” she said.
Lauren’s been scared this past year.
Her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, underwent a mastectomy and was eventually declared free of the disease.
Lauren sat by her mother at Baylor University Medical Center at Dallas during many of her 28 chemotherapy treatments and follow-up radiation.
And instead of acting like a kid, she became more of a caretaker.
She cleaned the kitchen without asking, often made dinner, seemed more understanding when her mother didn’t have the energy to get out of the house.
Lauren also enrolled in a remedial reading and writing class at Trinity Valley Community College in Athens. If she passes, next semester she plans to tackle remedial math, which may be difficult because Lauren never learned addition.
Doctors say Lauren is generally in good health, especially for someone who was deprived of nutrition during key years of physical and psychological development.
She’s been diagnosed with cerebral dysrhythmia, which has led to a mild learning disability. And she has seizures that neurologists say are brought on when her body tries to suppress traumatic memories, and her brain short-circuits.
Lauren said the nightmares are never far away.
She can’t sleep, or get through a full day, without the memories invading.
Sometimes they wash over unexpectedly: A song comes on the radio, or the elevator doors slide shut. Other times, they come on drip-by-drip, like a leaking faucet in the back of her mind, soaking her in fear.
The triggers are everywhere, but Lauren said there’s one predictable thing about the flashbacks — they always involve a rape.
“That was the worst part,” she said, sitting against the headboard of her bed, hugging a pillow. “You start out crying, and then you beg them, and then you shut up because nothing’s working and everything you do seems to make it worse. So you just lay there and try not to make a sound.”

Barbara and Kenneth Atkinson, Lauren’s biological mother and stepfather, were convicted of felony injury to a child and sentenced to life in prison.

“I know what they did to me, and they know what they did to me,” Lauren said. “They can deny it, but we both know what they did to me.”

Prosecutors never pursued sexual assault charges because Lauren was too traumatized to testify.

Twelve years later, Lauren understands why that decision was made.

But it sits in her gut like a piece of broken glass.

It haunts Lauren that she never fought back, or jumped out a window, and that when her parents told her to talk dirty, or act sexy for a rapist, she did it.

“Don’t give me that ‘You were only a kid’ crap,” Lauren said one night, venting via text message. “It’s my fault. It’s my fault because I never did anything to stop it.”

This is Lauren’s world — one of self-doubt, bubbling anger and the knowledge that no one was punished for the worst of what happened to her.

‘The best … she can be’

Dr. Barbara Rila, a child psychologist who evaluated Lauren after she was rescued in 2001, said Lauren may never be what most of us would consider “normal.”

“Every single human being — whether gifted with intelligence or the ability to earn money or personal attractiveness — we all come with gifts and we all come with burdens,” Rila said.

“And we spend our lifetimes maximizing our talents and working with our burdens. Lauren has more than her share, but her job is to be the best Lauren she can be.”

In some ways, Lauren is close to being on target for a 20-year-old, taking classes, applying for jobs, exploring first romances. But developmentally, family members and therapists say she’s as mature as most 15- or 16-year-olds.

For example, Lauren said her dream car is a hot pink Lamborghini with black flames, a kicking stereo and spinners the shape of dollar signs. Favorite movie? Fast & Furious. Favorite musicians? T-Pain and Eminem.

“She talks like a teenager, ‘Oh, this guy in my class is hot,’ but I think deep down inside, the idea of a relationship scares the crap out of her,” said Kavanaugh.

“My worst fear is she gets into a relationship and he’s abusive, because then I’m going to jail and he’ll end up in the grave.”

Of all of Lauren’s challenges, psychologists say developing healthy emotional attachments may be the most daunting.

Experts say she will almost certainly miss people’s clues — when they’re irritated, fed up or open to affection. And she’ll lack the savvy required to compromise and resolve conflict.

Lauren knows she has trouble making friends, looking people in the eye, smiling to be friendly.

But she’s trying.

She has a 9:25 a.m. class four days a week. But she shows up at 8:45 most mornings to hang out in the hallway.

She sits on a wooden bench, listening to music, searching people’s faces, looking for an opportunity to connect. So far, she’s met one girl online. They went shopping, ate some ice cream and watched a movie.

That would be a modest accomplishment for most people, a single friend.

For Lauren, it was huge.

“This is a kid who knows what her strengths and weaknesses are and is attempt-
ing to find a way to walk through the tough stuff,” Rila said. “Like taking remedial
courses in college. She’s not throwing her hands up and saying, ‘This stuff is too
hard for me.’ She’s finding another way. That’s what we call resilience.”

Lauren dreams of moving to Austin and enrolling at the University of Texas,
studying psychology, getting married, buying a house. Some days she’s firm — it’s
going to happen. Other days, she says it’s all a fantasy.

“I’m hoping one day
I’ll be able to have a nor-
mal life,” Lauren said. “Of
course, my life hasn’t ever
been normal.”

Lauren knows. She
knows the odds are long
against her, as they have
always been.

The night she stepped
from the closet, so little
and skeletal and damaged
inside, some people sus-
pected there was nothing
left of Lauren — she would
be feral, wild and without a
conscience.

Others may have pre-
dicted she would live a life
of darkness and dysfunc-
tion, like her biological
mother. A life in a mental
institution, a life of crime and incarceration.

Those were safe bets.

Lauren is the long shot.

She is a young woman who functions, one who is surprisingly whole.

“The girl in the closet” has grown up, and she’s standing in the light.

She swings a gold-colored SUV into the parking lot of her small community
college in East Texas. She steps out, slings a pink backpack over her shoulder and
shuffles with other students toward a building with a marquee that reads “General
Studies Center.”

Her head bobs alongside her classmates, and a moment later, she is gone.

Somehow, miraculously, she blends into the crowd.

Online
JOIN THE CONVERSATION about this series at 7 p.m. Sunday with Lauren
and her adoptive mother, Sabrina Kavanaugh.

VIDEOS: Barbie Atkinson (above) apologizes to Lauren from prison; Lauren’s
story and her life today. ALSO: Read all eight chapters in the series and see slide-
shows. 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 sen-
tence 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 adop-
tive father, died in December 2003.

DR. BARBARA RILA, a Dallas
psychologist, interviewed Lauren at the
hospital and testified in the criminal tri-
als of Barbara and Kenneth Atkinson.
TIMELINE
Lauren’s life, from birth to college

April 12, 1993: Lauren Ashley is born at East Texas Medical Center in Athens. Barbara “Barbie” Calhoun relinquishes custody to adoptive parents Sabrina and Bill Kavanaugh.

June 19, 1993: Calhoun files paperwork to regain custody of Lauren.

August 1994: Calhoun marries Kenneth Atkinson a month after she gives birth to her third child.

Jan. 6, 1995: Judge awards full custody of Lauren to Barbara Atkinson. Lauren’s legal name is changed to Lauren Ashley Calhoun.

Spring 1995: Barbara Atkinson leaves her husband and moves in with her adoptive parents, Doris and David Calhoun. She later moves to Jasper, in East Texas.

June 1995: A report is filed with Child Protective Services that Atkinson is tying 2-year-old Lauren to a bed. By the time a caseworker arrives, Atkinson and her children have moved.

March 3, 1996: Atkinson gives birth to her fourth daughter. She later reconciles with Kenneth Atkinson. They move to a trailer park in East Texas.

November 1996: A second CPS complaint is filed alleging Barbara Atkinson is abusing her children, but an investigator is unable to make contact with the family. Atkinson begins locking Lauren in a bathroom at night.


Spring 1998: The Atkinsons move to an old house in Waxahachie, where the abuse of Lauren intensifies.

AT A GLANCE
Recognizing, reporting abuse
Categories of abuse

There are five major categories of child abuse — neglect, physical, sexual, psychological and medical — but they are not always easy to recognize. Bruises and black eyes are obvious signs of physical abuse, but a child who is overly aggressive or reluctant to go home to see his or her parents also may be a victim.

Authorities urge the public to be vigilant in reporting suspected abuse when a child appears to be in trouble, is uncared for or exhibits behavior inappropriate for his or her age.

SOURCES: Texas Department of Family and Protective Services; Dallas Morning News research

Making a report
The law requires any person who believes a child is being abused, neglected or exploited to report the circumstances to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services.

■ For life-threatening or emergency situations, call your local law enforcement agency or 911 immediately.

■ A person making a report is immune from civil or criminal liability, and the name of the person making the report is kept confidential.

■ Call the abuse hotline at 1-800-252-5400, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, from anywhere in the U.S. to report abuse or neglect that occurred in Texas.

■ Go to txabusehotline.org. If you have trouble or questions about making a report on the website, call 512-929-6784 or 1-800-252-5400 for help.

Helpful information when filing an abuse report:

■ Name, age and address of the child

■ Your name and contact information

■ Brief description of the situation and the child

■ Current injuries, medical problems or behavioral problems

■ Parents’ names and names of siblings in the home

■ Names of relatives in or outside the home

■ An explanation of the situation