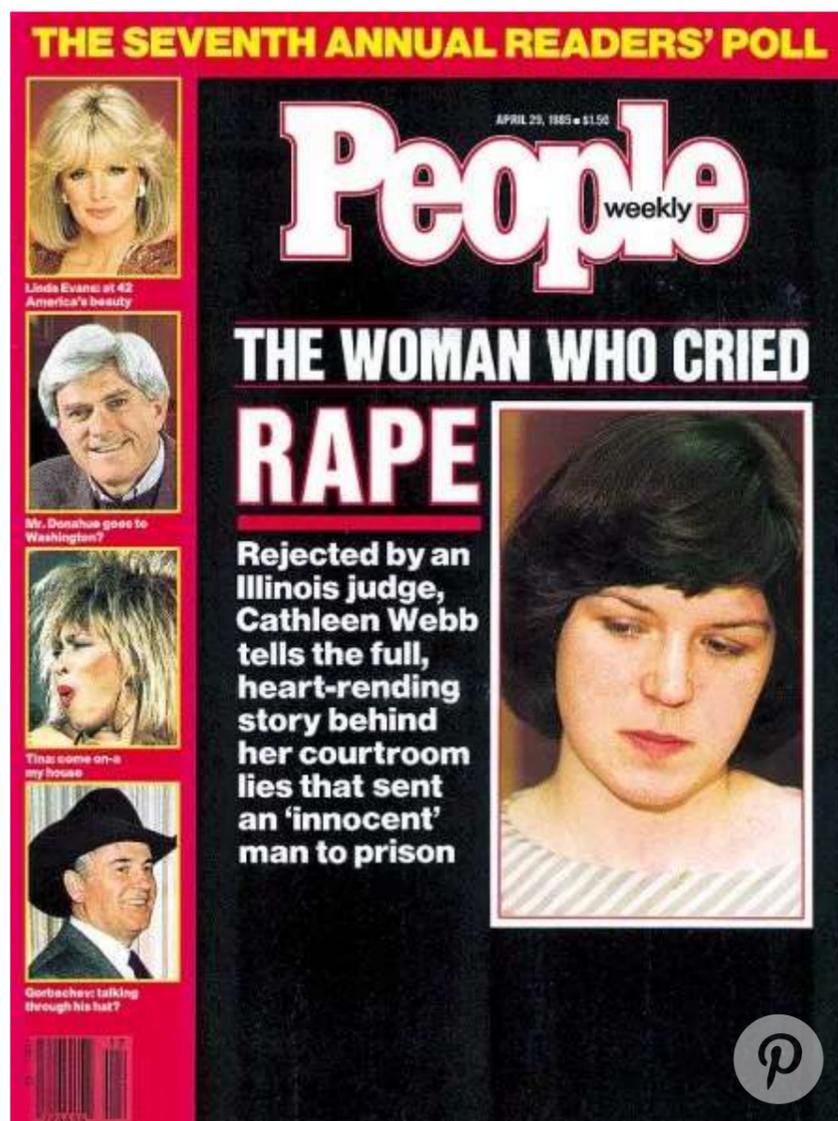


ARCHIVE

'Trying to Make It Right'

BY CATHLEEN CROWELL WEBB

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For more than a month Cathleen Crowell Webb, a 23-year-old New Hampshire housewife and mother of two, has been in the center of a bizarre legal case that has made headlines across the country. In March she came forward to admit that she had lied eight years ago when she claimed that Gary Dotson had kidnapped and raped her in a Chicago suburb. On April 4, 1985 Webb took the witness stand in a packed Cook County courthouse and recanted the testimony that sent Dotson to prison in 1979. She insisted that she had lied about the rape to cover up a sexual experience with a teenage boyfriend. But Circuit Court Judge Richard Samuels, who presided over the original trial and sentenced Dotson to a term of 25 to 50 years, declined to accept her recantation and ordered Dotson back to prison. To the judge, the

prosecutors and the public, Webb remains an enigma. She met with correspondent Civia Tamarkin to tell her story in her own words.

Gary Dotson is innocent. He never raped me. Nobody ever raped me. I concocted the whole story of the rape because I had sex with my boyfriend, and I thought I might be pregnant and I didn't want to get into trouble with my foster parents. So on the night of July 9, 1977, after working at Long John Silver's Seafood Shoppe, I walked past a residential area and into a more secluded place. There I ripped my buttons off my clothing, scratched my body with a piece of broken glass, made a mark around my vaginal area and pinched and bruised myself and did other things to make it appear that I had been violently attacked.

That is how I faked the rape. If you want to know why I did it, that is a much longer story. That is a story that goes way back to my childhood.

My earliest memory is of my parents fighting. I was about 2 or 3 years old. My mother was drunk, and my father came home and they started a fight, and my father ran out of the house. My mother ran into the bedroom and flung herself on the bed, crying. I said, "Mommy, what's wrong? Mommy, what's wrong?" And I remember chasing my dad out the door, saying, "Daddy, don't go, don't go!" But he did go, and I stood there crying.

At about this time, my mother was committed to a mental institution. No one ever really told me what was wrong with her. I remember visiting her there. They used to put me in a playroom while my dad visited my mother. I saw her once in a cafeteria for a very short time. I loved my mother dearly and I felt torn away from her. My brothers and I went to live with my father, but whenever my mother got out of the hospital—she was institutionalized off and on—we went to live with her. I remember sitting on the couch and brushing her hair. But then she would call my father and say, "Come and get them. I can't take care of them."

So my father would take us back. He lived on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago and worked as some sort of executive. To this day I hate eggs because that's generally what we were fed at my father's. That was the only thing he could cook. And I can't stand eggs. I get sick at the smell of them. My father worked all the time, and so my brothers really took care of me. They would take me to a day-care center and pick me up, and they would take me with them when they went out with their friends. They took care of me as best they could, but they are eight and 10 years older than I, so understandably they didn't want to "get stuck" with a 3-or 4-year-old child. One night when they went out, they were tired of having to look after me, and so they left me on a park bench next to a drunk. I remember one brother took me to the beach and tied me to a wire garbage can so I wouldn't get away. They were children themselves and they didn't know what to do with me.

After a while, my father became engaged to a woman who seemed to hate the fact that he had children. She wanted him all to herself and she wanted us out of the picture. When he wasn't around, we thought she was very nasty, especially to my brothers. I guess my father never saw this, and when my brothers tried to tell him, he wouldn't believe them. When I was about 4, my father married this woman. They sent my brothers to separate military schools and I guess they didn't know what to do with me. My father called up an old friend of the family—she was about 76 then—and asked if he could bring me over. He took me to her house for dinner. Later he called her and asked her to take me overnight and she agreed. Then the next day he phoned and asked if she would keep me for a couple of weeks. At the end of two weeks, he called up and said something like can you keep her? I was in the kitchen crying when my daddy didn't

come back. The woman, whom I called Aunt, didn't know how to explain it to me. It is still a "family" joke that I came for dinner and stayed 10 years.

My aunt got legal guardianship of me when I was 9, after my father stopped paying regular support for me. I saw my father maybe once a month, if that, and then he just disappeared. One of the last times I saw him was when I was 11. He dropped by and took me to lunch. I told him how much I hated my "home." It didn't seem to faze him. When he brought me home he gave me a pearl ring for a birthday present and then left. I didn't see him again until I was almost 20.

I didn't see my brothers much either. They came to live with my aunt for a very short time. She just couldn't handle them. They had been on their own for too long. And after that she wouldn't allow me to have any contact with them. Once they called me on the phone, and she grabbed the phone and slammed it down. Another time, they dropped by at Christmas with presents, and I was yanked away from the door. After my brothers pounded on the windows, my aunt took the presents they brought me and sent them away without allowing them to talk to me. I was also not allowed to see my mother. Initially she was denied visitation rights, but she saved enough money to hire an attorney and fight for them. She would come to see me once in a while at my aunt's house, but my aunt made us sit on opposite sides of the room. She would not let us hug or kiss or touch. She thought that my mother and brothers were bad influences on me because every time I saw them I got upset. I was so attached to them.

My aunt was a gruff person. She was very assertive and aggressive and she wasn't very affectionate. I guess she had her own way of loving a person, but she never told me that she loved me. In fact, as a child I don't remember anyone ever telling me that they loved me, except my mother, who died of cancer three years ago.

My aunt was old and very sick when I moved into her house in Chicago. She was sick with heart problems, diabetes, glaucoma, bad feet, arthritis and she was becoming senile. Consequently, by the time I was 10, I was doing all the laundry and the cooking. She would sit at the table and tell me what to do. I had too much responsibility for my age. I really missed out on being a kid. When I was in junior high school, I wanted to be on the softball team, but she wouldn't let me. I also wanted to be a cheerleader then, and she wouldn't let me. I would want to go over to somebody's house, and she'd say no. She needed me around. I couldn't go out after school because I had to make dinner and get her ready for bed. Sometimes I just wouldn't come home from school because I knew what was in store for me. And my Saturdays were filled with laundry and cleaning.

Meanwhile the message I was getting from my aunt was that she was doing me a big favor by letting me stay there. She would say nasty things to me. I remember her saying, "Why don't you go back to where you came from?" And I realized that I didn't know where I came from. I said, "Where did I come from? I'll go back." I tried running away numerous times when I was 12 or 13. I was so unhappy that I tried to overdose on pills. But it was old medication of my aunt's and all it did was make me sick. Sometimes I would take a knife into the bathroom and sit in the bathtub, but I just didn't have the guts to kill myself. I was becoming very hard on the outside. I started hardening my heart when I was little because every time my father left, I'd get upset. Finally I decided I wasn't going to get upset anymore. I never cried in front of people. The older I got, the more control I got over my emotions.

By the time I was 14 my aunt couldn't handle me anymore, so I went to live with her granddaughter and her husband in Homewood, Ill. I remember the first week I went to the new foster home. I felt like all this

tension was lifted from me because in this new house there wasn't a lot of screaming. I was shocked when they let me go out and play. I started going to a new school and I loved it. It was a really nice high school, and I excelled, taking honors classes and joining after-school activities. Meanwhile I was allowed to socialize for the first time. I was allowed to make friends and to go out with them to a movie.

Still, everything was not perfect. I had to go back to my aunt's house every weekend to take care of her when her nurse's aide was off duty. Because of that I missed all the football games, and I couldn't join any sports teams because I couldn't be there for any weekend games. So I missed out on a lot and I wasn't happy.

I liked my new foster parents, but they didn't have a lot of control over me. If they said one thing, my aunt would say another, and I'd be caught in the middle. I didn't really belong to my foster parents because I still had to answer to my aunt. Besides I was so hardened that I was determined that I wasn't going to call anyone "Mom" and "Dad." After a few weeks they said, "Aren't you going to call us Mom and Dad?" What could I say? And they wanted me to kiss them goodnight—just a little peck on the cheek—but that was hard for me to do because I had never done it. I had never had any real physical affection. I was determined that I wasn't going to let myself get close to anyone, and I wasn't going to let anyone get close to me.

Obviously, though, I was feeling some kind of need for physical affection because I started going out with boys and experimenting with petting. That's how I entered into my affair with one of the boys I knew. We were never really boyfriend and girlfriend. I don't remember that we ever went to a movie or dinner. It was more physical than anything. That's what I thought love was all about—and, of course, he was getting just what he wanted. I was barely 16 when I started seeing this boy. I was just stupid. And after having sex with him in early July 1977, I immediately thought I would become pregnant. And so I panicked. I thought, "Oh, no, what am I going to do?"

My foster parents found out that I had been doing some petting with a boy previously, and they told me in no uncertain terms that they didn't approve. They were very morally upright, and I thought that if they found out, I would not be allowed to stay there. I thought my only alternative was to cry rape.

I don't know if I first thought of crying rape right after the sex or if I thought of it later. I do know that I didn't want to wait for a pregnancy test. I figured that could be months down the road. So on the night of July 9, 1977 I left work and walked in the opposite direction from where I lived. It was dark out, and I was in a secluded area. I ripped my clothing and picked up a piece of glass and scratched myself. My wounds were all superficial. I bruise very easily. It was not true that I was all bloody. There was a small stain of blood in my panties.

I had no intention of having any policeman find me. I was going to make it look like I had been raped, go home, look upset and talk my foster parents out of taking me to the police. But it all went askew when I saw those lights on top of a car and I recognized that it was a police car. I thought, "Oh, I gotta get out of here." I tried to run into the bushes or something and the policeman saw me. I don't recall exactly what happened eight years ago, but I'm sure my appearance spoke for itself. The police took me to the station and to the hospital.

If you had looked at me then, I probably would have looked like I had been raped. I don't remember huddling in the corner of the police station like a caged animal—as my legal guardian later described me—but I know I was crying. What was going through my mind was that my whole life was at stake. I suddenly realized that my lie was going to get a lot bigger than I thought possible. I had just wanted to go home

and cry rape to my guardians, and now the police were involved. I thought, "If they catch my lie, I'm going to be kicked out." And that house was the first semblance of a happy home I had ever been in. I'm sure my tears were because of that and because I realized that my lie was snowballing.

I went to all the police stations in the area and went through the mug shot books and pretended I was looking at the pictures. But I didn't identify anyone because I didn't want to identify anyone. In my description of the attacker, I said he had blond hair because the boy I had actually been with was blond. I knew they had taken pubic hair samples for evidence and I thought, "Oh, boy, he's gotta have blond hair." In my description I was "detailed" because the more details you get, the harder it is to pick out a specific person. If you're "general," almost anybody can fit the description.

When the police artist started drawing the sketch, he probably said, "Okay, what did his chin look like?" And I'd say something—I forget exactly what—and he would draw it and I'd say something like, "Oh, that looks good." And he would draw something else and I'd again say something like, "Oh, that looks good." On the whole it was anything goes.

I really thought I was home free. I thought, "They'll never find him." But then they brought a handful of pictures to my house, and I quickly scanned them and handed them back. And then the policeman said something like, Look again, look real closely. And I did. It was obvious to me that the picture of Gary Dotson was so much like the police artist's sketch that if I said, "No, that's not him," then they would find out my lie. I thought, "If I don't identify him, they're going to know I'm lying." So that's why I said something like, "Yeah, that's him."

I don't remember what my feelings were at that moment. I probably felt like I was caught between a rock and a hard place. But I know what my thoughts were. I thought, "I hope this guy has a good alibi for where he was."

Over the next two years, as I waited for the trial, I tried to put it all out of my mind. It was too hard to live with the guilt otherwise. At that time I was hard and calloused. I was manipulative, a liar and very selfish. I had to be very selfish to do what I did. It was: "All for me and who cares about his life?" I knew that what I had done was wrong, but I knew that if I came out and told the truth, I was finished. I tried not to give the rape case much thought. I always tried to be on the go and involved in something. It doesn't surprise me that I was able to concentrate on my studies and get on with my life because I know what I was like: I wasn't going to let anybody hurt me or stand in my way. I wanted to become a career woman.

As the trial approached, I was just too scared to back down. I thought that if my lie was found out, then my whole life was over. My whole goal in life was not to get caught. My testimony at the trial was very rehearsed. I was given a briefing of my story by the prosecutor's office before the trial. They gave it to me to brush up on the facts. I studied and studied that briefing. If I hadn't been given that briefing, I never would have remembered everything. I almost memorized it.

I was scared up on the witness stand, but even more, I was embarrassed. I still thought the jury would find him innocent because he had alibi witnesses saying where he was and I knew there could be no positive physical evidence linking Gary Dotson to the alleged rape. When the jury came back with a verdict of guilty, I tried to make myself numb. But I will never forget how he cried.

After that it took me a little while to put the whole thing out of my mind. Actually it was never totally out of my mind, but I didn't think about it more than once every couple months, and that was very brief. I'd just make myself forget about it. Meanwhile I graduated from high school and I went to a junior college.

After a year there I went to New Hampshire, where my brother lived. There was too much tension at home, and I just wanted to get away.

In July 1981 I went back home to marry my high school sweetheart, whom I had been dating since January 1978. We settled in New Hampshire. The move to that rural area caused me to really look inside myself. It was the turning point in my life. There comes a time in your life when you realize there must be more to this life than what you're living. I hated my life and for years I would lie in bed at night and cry because I hated myself and my life. Part of my soul-searching was wondering why God had put me on this earth. I realized that I had sinned throughout my life. And there came a point when I realized that there was nothing for me without a Savior.

The realization that I needed a Savior was something that evolved. I worked with a girl whose husband was a Baptist pastor. She was familiar with the Bible and I was interested in what the Bible said about salvation. "Religion" just wasn't enough. She told me about her Wednesday night Bible study group. So I went. I asked Pastor Carl Nannini to come over to my apartment and talk to me. He answered my questions and explained some verses in the Bible to me: The pastor explained that "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." I knew that applied to me.

There was no way I was good enough to go to Heaven on my own. He also showed me from Scripture that the only way anyone can be forgiven for their sins is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ's blood sacrifice on the cross. The Scripture verse that spoke to my heart and gave me the desire to accept God's plan of salvation—and change my life—was Ephesians Chapter II, verses 8-9: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: It is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast."

Once I made my decision to become a Christian, I felt at peace. It is an abundant joy and a peace that passes all understanding. I was praising God for all the sins he had forgiven me for. I was listing all my sins in my mind and then I came to this one about the lie. For the first time I faced the fact that I had done something so horrible and I needed to make restitution for it. But there was no way I was going to do that. I started listing all the consequences—maybe my husband would hate me, maybe he would leave me. I thought the whole world would hate me. I decided there was no way I was going to come forward. Basically I was being disobedient to God's commandments. The guilt kept building up and building up over three and a half years until I couldn't take it any more. I'd cry in the middle of the day and I'd look at my infant son and think, how would I feel if my son were in jail? So, finally, I told the pastor's wife about my lie, and she told the pastor. I told my husband the next day. I knew he loved me, but I felt it was going to hurt the trust we had between each other. But he said, "Cathy, you have to do the right thing." He has been totally supportive. Since then we've grown closer, not further apart.

I realized that after I informed the first person about my false cry of rape, that the wheels couldn't stop until Gary Dotson was freed. Obviously this confession was no longer something I could keep secret. Besides, it is a Biblical principle that if you defame a person publicly, you must restore him publicly. I then authorized my attorney, John J. McLario of Menomonee Falls, Wis., a friend of my pastor, to represent me as I came forward and made the truth public.

I hoped with all my heart that the judge would believe the truth (my recantation) as well as the testimony of several other alibi witnesses and the lack of physical evidence against Gary Dotson. I was astonished that he was sent back to prison. Outside the courtroom, on my way to the car, I couldn't contain my emotions any longer. That's when I yelled, "He's innocent."

I understand that the system is made up of human beings, and human beings are capable of making mistakes. The system is not infallible, only God is. I really regret all the problems that I caused the judge and the original prosecutors. I feel that their reputations are on the line because of me. Also, other people are suffering because of my deception. But I have also had to suffer some consequences. The whole world now knows that I was promiscuous. The whole world knows I was a liar. That's hard to deal with. I look at people and know, "They know what I did."

In the end I think this is all going to come out right. God is a just God, and He has allowed Gary Dotson to go through this for some reason we don't know. We can't possibly understand why He is doing what He is doing now. I wish I could turn back the clock six years, but I can't. I wish I could somehow give Gary back those six years he spent in prison, but I can't. I wish I were wealthy and could give him a million dollars and

set him up for life, but I can't. All I can say is, I created a monster of a lie and now I am trying to make it right.