

The Torturing Death of Sylvia Marie Likens

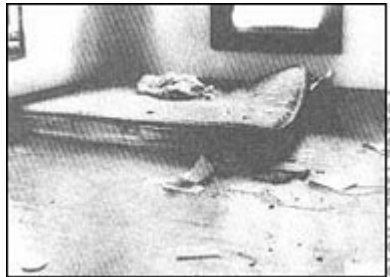
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A Young, Tortured Girl is Dead

On October 26, 1965, Indianapolis police answered a call saying that a girl had died. The call came from a pay telephone in front of a Shell station in a poor section of the city. The caller was a teenaged boy whose voice had not finished changing into that of an adult man. He sounded very nervous and directed the police to the address, 3850 East New York Street, at which they would find the dead female.

When the cops got to the dingy, rundown, clapboard home to which the anonymous caller had directed them, they found the emaciated dead body of 16-year-old Sylvia Marie Likens. She was covered with bruises and small wounds, later revealed to be cigarette and match burns that numbered over 100. There were also large areas where the outer layer of skin had peeled off. Likens also had a large letter "3" branded on her chest. However, the most remarkable injuries, by far, were the words in block letters that had been burned directly onto her stomach: "I'M A PROSTITUTE AND PROUD OF IT!"



Room where Sylvia's body was found.

Thus ended one of the most horrible crimes ever committed against a single victim.

The crime had been perpetrated by an informal group of teenagers and children, some as young as 11 and 12, led by a 37-year-old woman. That woman's name was Gertrude Baniszewski (pronounced "Ban-i-SHEF-ski" rather than the more fittingly ominously sounding way it looks like it should be said: "Ban-i-ZOO-ski"). Sylvia and her younger sister, the 15-year-old disabled Jenny Fay Likens (she had a limp due to polio and a brace around that leg) had been boarding with Baniszewski since early July.

At that time, the Likens parents had left Sylvia and Jenny in the care of Mrs. Baniszewski — they knew her as "Mrs. Wright" — so they would be free to travel the carnival circuit operating a concession stand.

Baniszewski's Background

Gertrude Baniszewski's life up until the time she met the Likens family had been difficult and sad but in no way criminal (at least on her part). She was born Gertrude Van Fossan in 1929, the third of six children in a lower-class family. She always liked her Dad better than her Mom and suffered the trauma of watching her beloved father die of a heart attack when she was only eleven years old. Sometimes clashing with her mother as a teenager, she dropped out of high school when she was sixteen to marry 18-year-old John Baniszewski — and seems to have lived pregnantly ever after. Although John Baniszewski was a police officer, charged with enforcing the law, he frequently broke it to assault his wife when she annoyed him.

John often ended disagreements between himself and Gertrude with his fists. The couple split up after a decade.

Awhile after she was divorced, Gertrude met and married Edward Guthrie but the marriage lasted only three months because Edward did not want the responsibility of caring for children who were not his (at that time, Gertrude had four kids). She and John remarried each other, then divorced seven years and two more kids later in 1963. A much younger man named Dennis Lee Wright took an interest in Gertrude. He was twenty-three and she thirty-seven when their romance blossomed. Although it was unfashionable at the time, they lived together for a while out of wedlock. Dennis could be abusive to his live-in girlfriend. He impregnated Gertrude twice. She suffered a miscarriage, then gave birth to Dennis, Jr. before her boyfriend absconded.



Gertrude Baniszewski

At the time of her fateful meeting with the Likens family, the underweight Baniszewski had a kind of "young-old" look about her. She had a sadly careworn and prematurely lined face. Although not yet forty years old, she had been pregnant no less than thirteen times, giving birth seven times and enduring six miscarriages. A chain smoker, she suffered from asthma, bronchitis, and nervous tension. Her income consisted of haphazard child support payments (both of the fathers of her children were seriously delinquent) and the few dollars she managed to scrape together from occasional work like ironing and baby-sitting. Not wanting people to know that her youngest child was "illegitimate," she called herself and was called by others, "Mrs. Wright."

Betty Likens, together with daughters Sylvia and Jenny, had recently moved into one of the many rundown, boxlike little houses in the neighborhood. Betty and Lester Likens were recently separated. The family moved often as their father searched for jobs to keep the family's financial head above water. They had previously resided in this very area.

Sylvia and Jenny, together with a new friend named Darlene McGuire, were walking around the sidewalks in a normal, aimless teenaged manner when they met up with a girl named Paula Baniszewski. Paula was an overweight seventeen-year-old with a decided mean streak. Although not yet showing, she was also pregnant as the result of a brief fling with an adult, married man.

The bunch of teenagers headed to the Baniszewski house where they shared soft drinks and laughs. Paula invited them to spend the night. Sylvia and Jenny didn't have to ask their Mom for permission since she was in jail.

Foster Care

The next day, Lester Likens, having been informed of his wife's arrest, went with his oldest son, nineteen-year-old Danny, to his estranged wife's place to pick up Sylvia and Jenny. Not finding his daughters there, he began canvassing the neighborhood. Darlene MacGuire told him they were at the Baniszewskis.

When Lester got to "Mrs. Wright's" home, it was late in the evening and he was both tired and distraught. He talked about how he and Betty had reconciled and were going to travel with a carnival. Mrs. Wright graciously offered to let him spend the night sleeping on the couch in her cluttered and dusty living room.

The next day, Lester asked, or Gertrude offered (accounts are unclear), to board Sylvia and Jenny. Regardless of whose idea it was for Mrs. Wright to care for them, an agreement was made that she would board them for \$20 a week.

Over a year later, in court, Lester Likens would be asked if he had inspected the home in which he left two of his five children. He replied, "I didn't pry," an odd way to describe not bothering to take a look-see about a place one's children will be living in. If he had, he would have found that the household had no stove, only a hot plate, that it possessed fewer beds than were needed for those already living there, and that its kitchen drawers boasted a grand total of three spoons. During Sylvia's tragic stay, the pitiful number of spoons would shrink to only one.

Thus, Lester Likens placed his minor daughters in the care of a woman he had known for only a couple of days and who had not been recommended to him by anyone. He did know, however, that she had the responsibility of caring for a large family without the help of a husband or other adult in the home.

Before leaving, Lester gave Mrs. Wright some advice that he would later have much reason to regret: "You'll have to take care of these girls with a firm hand because their mother has let them do as they please."

Who Was Sylvia Likens?



Sylvia Likens

Sylvia's photograph shows a pretty, freckled teenager with wavy dark hair and bangs, gazing into the distance with an expression that, as one of the prosecutors said at the trial of her killers, seems "full of hope and anticipation." The girl described in *The Indiana Torture Slaying* by John Dean (he has since changed his name to Natty Bumppo to prevent confusion with the John Dean of Watergate fame) and in the non-fictional and non-speculative passages of Kate Millett's *The Basement*, appears to have been a

fairly average youngster. She enjoyed attending church and made average grades in school. She liked roller skating and dancing. Nicknamed "Cookie," she is said to have had a lively sense of humor and tended to smile with her mouth closed because she was self-conscious that a front tooth was missing (the result of some childhood roughhousing with a brother).

Dean quotes an acquaintance as remembering that Sylvia felt like "the odd one in the family because she was born between two sets of twins." Both twins in the Likens family were fraternal rather than identical and both were of different sexes. Danny and Diana were two years older than Sylvia while Jenny and Benny were a year younger.

The Likens family was always poor and the marriage was troubled; Lester and Betty had split up, then gotten back together, more than once. Given the demands of two sets of twins and the extra care that had to be given Jenny because of her disability, it seems reasonable that Sylvia may have felt rather neglected by her parents.

In her sixteen years of life, Sylvia had known no less than fourteen addresses because the family moved so frequently. In the past, she had been left at a grandmother's house or boarded out when Lester and Betty did not find it feasible to take Sylvia and Jenny along with them.

Like most teenagers, Sylvia made a little cash through odd jobs. She baby-sat and did ironing (ironically, the same jobs Gertrude Baniszewski held). Also like most in her age group, Sylvia enjoyed music. Her favorite rock group was, unsurprisingly in that era, The Beatles. She also enjoyed singing herself. During her early time with the family B., she would sing to Stephanie Baniszewski, who returned the favor. Sylvia's favorite tune had a lyric about "all the stars in the sky."



Jenny Likens with her older sister Diane Shoemaker

Sylvia appears to have been very close to her disabled sister. When the girls went on one of their frequent roller skating expeditions, Jenny would put a skate on her good foot and Sylvia would pull Jenny around the ring so Jenny could experience skating even with the steel brace around one leg.

A Dubious Start

The Likens girls' first week with the Baniszewskis passed without incident, getting to know the other kids and starting at a new school. However, during the second week, the Likens parents' payment was slow

to arrive. Gertrude screamed at her boarders, "I took care of you two bitches for nothing!" Both girls had to lie across a bed and expose their bare buttocks so Baniszewski could spank them.

The payment came the next day.

However, the next week brought another paddling for the sisters because Mrs. Wright believed that Sylvia was leading the other kids into stealing out of stores.

Three major accusations against Sylvia would recur. One of them was that she was dishonest, another was that she was physically unclean, and the third, leading to the gruesome work on her belly, was that she was sexually promiscuous.

Were any of these accusations true? Sylvia's mother had shoplifted from a store in Indianapolis and Sylvia herself was to admit that she stole at least one acquisition. However, it is also true that Mrs. Wright accused the girl of stealing, and punished her for it, when she did not. The Likens family had a custom of going through debris looking for empty soda pop bottles to turn in for refunds and Gertrude would erroneously believe that treats Sylvia acquired through this means were stolen.

There is no reason — prior to her enforced dirtiness — to think that Sylvia's hygiene was particularly bad.

Sylvia was, in all likelihood, a virgin. It is also possible that she was flirtatious.



Paula Baniszewski

Gertrude Baniszewski was probably projecting her personal fears outward through these charges. There is no evidence that she ever stole but theft had to be sorely tempting to one in her circumstances. Her personal hygiene and the cleanliness of her household were poor which is understandable considering that she was a chronically ill woman trying to cope with many youngsters and an infant. She had reason to fear for her own and her daughters' reputations for chastity since she had twice been pregnant out of wedlock and, at the time the Likens girls stayed in her house, her own seventeen-year-old unmarried daughter Paula was pregnant.

Early in her stay, Sylvia attended church each Sunday with the Baniszewski kids. Paula Baniszewski tattled to her mother that Sylvia had pigged out at a church supper so Mrs. Wright and some of the children came up with a punishment that had, as many of the torments inflicted on the Likens girl would, a perverse logic to it. Sylvia's frankfurter was passed around the Baniszewski table and loaded with condiments. Sylvia was ordered to eat this concoction. The girl complied, then promptly vomited — and was forced to eat her vomit.

Sometime after this, Mr. and Mrs. Likens stopped by for a visit, as they had a few days after their daughters had been paddled for the late payment. On this occasion, as on the previous visit and those that would follow, neither of the Likens girls complained about the way they were being treated.

"Was She a Masochist?"

This leads us to a troubling psychological puzzle. In his foreword to *The Indiana Torture Slaying*, prosecutor Leroy K. New says "I have been repeatedly asked why Sylvia did not just simply run away." When the crime was first discovered, a newspaper reporter asked, "Was she a masochist?"

There are several things, other than masochism, which could account for her passivity. First, Sylvia had a limited frame of reference as to what constitutes inappropriate discipline. As noted by Dean, Sylvia and Jenny "were accustomed to being punished, often unjustly." The early "paddlings" the Likens girls received might have been unfair but they were not clearly abusive. Grown-ups frequently make issues out of youngsters' eating habits as in the universally famous "eat your vegetables!" scolding so even the hotdog with way-too-much of "everything on it" would not necessarily be seen as beyond the pale.

Indeed, at least one adult witnessed abusive incidents and, although disturbed by them, did not consider them serious enough to report them to the police.

According to *The Indiana Torture Slaying*, a middle-aged couple with two kids, Raymond and Phyllis Vermillion, moved next door to the Baniszewskis late in August of 1965. Phyllis Vermillion worked the night shift at an RCA plant and needed a babysitter for her children. She decided to visit Gertrude Baniszewski, thinking that the mother of seven who had taken in two boarders might be a good person to care for the Vermillion youngsters.

The two neighbors sat around a table and drank coffee while kids yelled at each other and baby Dennis fussed and cried. Vermillion noticed a slim, pretty but timid and nervous-looking girl who had a black eye. "That's Sylvia," sighed Gertrude. Paula Baniszewski added, "I gave her the black eye." Just before making this boast, however, Paula filled a glass with hot water and threw it at Sylvia.

Understandably, Phyllis Vermillion decided to look elsewhere for a babysitter. Less understandably, she did not report what she had seen and heard to the authorities.

Early in October, Vermillion paid another social call to the large family next door. Again she saw Sylvia, who looked dazed, even zombified, and who had another black eye plus a swollen lip. "I beat her up," Paula readily volunteered. Later, Paula began hitting the listless girl with a belt.

Again Phyllis Vermillion left the house without believing she had seen something the police ought to know about. If a supposedly normal, responsible adult could not recognize these actions as criminal, why should anyone expect an untutored teenager like Sylvia to be able to do so?

Running away may never have occurred to her. Where would she go? By the time sleeping out in the street became preferable to life with the Baniszewskis, it wasn't an option: she was tied up and/or locked in the cellar.

In fact, there was one instance, which will be described later in this essay, in which she and Jenny *did* complain about mistreatment. They were not believed. The fear of being disbelieved — which would prove well founded — probably contributed to Sylvia's previous silence.

Another reason for her failure to complain about the mistreatment may be that she anticipated the question traditionally asked of kids who get picked — why don't other people like you? — and knew she could not answer it

Complaining to others would have meant having to tell them what had been done to her. As the mistreatment worsened, it is likely that shame silenced Sylvia.

Both Sylvia and her sister were, for good reason, terrified of Gertrude. They greatly feared the woman's wrath if they should "tell."

Finally, Sylvia was probably fiercely protective of her younger sister and feared that "telling" would lead to revenge being taken out on Jenny.

The Slow Descent into Horror

It is important to emphasize the truth that Sylvia's life at the Baniszewskis did not turn into a horror overnight. It was a slow slide from getting unfairly punished on occasion in July, to getting "picked on" and physically hurt in various ways regularly around August and September, to the mind-boggling torture that characterized the last few weeks of October.

During her first weeks with Gertrude, Sylvia went to the same church the Baniszewskis did, listened to phonograph records with the other kids, watched TV, and took trips to the park with friends. She attended high school with Stephanie and Paula. She ate with Gertrude and the other kids.



The Baniszewski home

Of course, meals at the Baniszewski home were not a terribly enjoyable experience for any of its residents. Ten people had to be fed without a stove. They ate things like crackers and sandwiches. Soup

formed a major part of their diets since it could be heated up on the hot plate. However, they had to eat it in shifts since they had three spoons when Sylvia got there, then two, and finally only one. The sole spoon would be used, rinsed off in the sink, and then handed to the next hungry person.

It is believed that, sometime late in August, Sylvia let it slip that she had once allowed a boyfriend to get under the bed covers with her. "You're going to have a baby!" Gertrude announced. Then Mrs. Wright kicked the girl hard in the crotch. Many more kicks to the genitals would follow and the autopsy would show that Sylvia's pubic area was horribly mauled.

Sylvia's imagined pregnancy outraged the genuinely pregnant Paula Baniszewski. Paula knocked Sylvia onto the floor, saying, "You ain't fit to sit in a chair."

Apparently as revenge, Sylvia told some of her fellow students at Tech High School that the two oldest Baniszewski girls, Stephanie and Paula, were "prostitutes."



Coy Hubbard

Stephanie's fifteen-year-old boyfriend, Coy Hubbard, heard about this, flew into a rage, and beat Sylvia up. Coy was a handsome guy with dark, curly hair. He was big for his age and frequently a disciplinary problem at school. As he would many times in the future, Coy practiced judo on Sylvia, flipping her against walls and onto the floor. Mrs. Wright gave Sylvia yet another paddling.

Mrs. Wright encouraged neighborhood children to believe bad things about Sylvia and take "revenge." Heavysset, thirteen-year-old Anna Siscoe liked Sylvia until Gertrude told her that Sylvia had said Anna's mother was a hooker. Anna viciously attacked the older girl. During the melee, Sylvia supposedly clutched her stomach, saying "Oh, my baby!"

It appears that Sylvia, although probably a virgin, had been convinced by those around her that she really must be pregnant. She may have been ignorant of the specifics of reproduction.

Gertrude whispered similar things about Sylvia making sexually-oriented slanders into the ears of her daughter Paula as well as a girl named Judy Duke and more fights resulted.

Was Sylvia impugning the morals of the females around her? It is possible. She was being taunted about her own alleged sexual indiscretions and may have tried to direct similar negative attention elsewhere to take it off of herself. *You're weird. No, you are,* is a battle heard each day in schoolyards throughout the world. However, it's also possible that Gertrude was making false accusations to get others stirred up against her favorite scapegoat.

Paula Baniszewski soon made a hobby out of plunking Sylvia in the head with anything that came to hand whether dish, bottle, or can. Often when a group was tormenting Sylvia, her sister Jenny would be ordered to hit her. Timidly, Jenny refused. An infuriated Gertrude slapped her face. Jenny then complied but later said she used her left hand instead of her right (she is right-handed) so it wouldn't really hurt Sylvia.

The Sexless Sex Crime

In early October, an incident occurred that led Mrs. Wright to order Sylvia to quit school. Sylvia had no gym suit for her physical education class and Gertrude would not give her the money to buy one. However, Sylvia came home from school with just such a suit that she claimed she had "found." Gertrude believed, not unreasonably, that the suit was a theft. Badgered about it, Sylvia confessed that she had indeed stolen it. The woman slapped and kicked the girl, then whipped her with a belt.

Mrs. Wright left the subject of Sylvia's stealing to return to that of her alleged promiscuity and, after scolding the teenager, began kicking her in the crotch area. Later that day, still not satisfied that the girl had been adequately punished for theft, she applied a lighted match to Sylvia's "sticky fingers" and gave her yet another whipping.

Heat would become a major feature of Sylvia's torture. Its origin probably lies in an incident in which Gertrude Baniszewski's abusive boyfriend, Dennis Wright, put a cigarette out on her neck.

The motley group began burning Sylvia with cigarettes and lighted matches. Paula Baniszewski broke her hand hitting Sylvia, then used the cast to beat the girl. The favorite pastime of several kids in the area was getting Sylvia: kicking, hitting, flipping her around through Coy Hubbard's judo tricks or imitations of them, and burning her.

The autopsy would disclose two indices of how much agony Sylvia would endure: she had broken each of her fingernails backward in painful clawing and had bitten her lower lip so deeply it was partially severed.

As the persecution of Sylvia worsened, it became increasingly sexual in character. However, it was also a peculiarly "sexless sex crime." The sexual aspect started with the constant teasing, alleging that she was sexually promiscuous and escalated with Mrs. Wright's vicious kicks to the girl's crotch. There would be other sexual-like assaults, including one to be described shortly, but no "sexual assaults" in the standard meaning of the term. There are no reports of Gertrude ever touching Sylvia in any manner suggestive of lesbianism. None of the young males who excitedly took part in the beatings and torturings of the girl are believed to have either raped her or forced any type of oral sex upon her. The autopsy would disclose a gross swelling of Likens's genital region due to the kicks but none of the internal vaginal lacerations consistent with rape and tests for semen would be negative.

Since the group inflicted almost every sort of assault the human mind could come up with, the omission is puzzling. Mrs. Wright, probably had a horror of being thought "perverted" (assuming she was even familiar with the term) which would explain her not assaulting her victim's sex organ with fingers or

tongue. Perhaps Coy Hubbard feared offending Stephanie if his girlfriend considered a rape "two-timing." It is also possible, as Millett speculates in some of her more credible fictional passages, that they genuinely believed Sylvia was a "slut" and feared sexually transmitted diseases or a more ambiguous sort of "contamination" from such contact.

The Brutality Escalates

On one awful day, Mrs. Wright was indignant because she was told that, much earlier in the girl's stay, Sylvia had had a bit of extra cash: she knew that the girl had to have been either stealing or prostituting. Sylvia could not just be turning in empty soda pop bottles as she claimed. So, while several kids were at the Baniszewski house, Gertrude forced a weeping Sylvia to perform an awkward striptease in front of the bunch. When Sylvia was fully nude, Mrs. Wright made the weeping girl shove a soft drink bottle up her vagina.

At the climax of this horror, Stephanie Baniszewski came home from school. Seeing Sylvia naked before a bunch of kids, shoving a bottle up herself, and unaware that her own mother had ordered this performance, the outraged Stephanie rushed up to Sylvia and slapped her. Then she furiously ordered Sylvia to go to her room.



The Baniszewski's bathroom

One night in October, Sylvia wet her bed. This could have been the result of psychological anxiety — if anyone ever had reason to be nervous, she did — or it could have been because the many cruel blows to her stomach and crotch had weakened control in that area. However, her tormentors decided that she must now live down in the basement with the dog because she was too dirty to live with human beings. Paula punished Sylvia's bed-wetting by preventing her from using the toilet, thus forcing her to befoul herself.

At the same time, her torturers began a regimen of forced bathing in which they tied up the "dirty girl" and forced her into the Baniszewski's old-fashioned, claw-footed bathtub tub after filling it with scalding hot water. Sometimes she was put in the tub by Gertrude and Paula and on some evenings fourteen-year-old Richard (Ricky) Hobbs was there to assist. Hobbs was a soft-featured, good-looking lad who sported straight blonde hair parted on the side, wore thick eyeglasses with black horn rims and often hung out at the Baniszewski house.

Paula Baniszewski rubbed salt into Sylvia's wounds.

Sylvia was often kept nude or nearly so for days at a time. She became a game for the neighborhood kids to enjoy, burning, punching, and now pushing her down the stairs to the cellar, then forcing her back up just to throw her back down again.

On one occasion, the starving teenager was allowed up from the cellar and told to try to eat soup with her fingers. Famished, she made an attempt at it only to have the soup grabbed away from her by John. Later, Mrs. Wright. and John forced the girl to eat shit and drink urine.

No Rescue in Sight

One of the most depressing aspects of the Sylvia Likens case is the realization that there were several times when, if people had acted just a bit differently than they did, Sylvia could have been rescued. People have always asked, "Why didn't they tell someone?" In September, Sylvia and Jenny told someone. That someone was their older, married sister, Diana Shoemaker, a slim, attractive woman with jet black hair. Sylvia was being picked on, both girls said. Every time something, anything, went wrong, Mrs. Wright would shout, "Paula, get the board!" Jenny backed up Sylvia's claim that the latter was constantly punished for things she didn't do.

Diana blew them off. They were exaggerating. They had to be. No one likes to be punished but they probably deserved it, she thought.

The Baniszewski home had visitors. Phyllis Vermillion's visits, the assaults she witnessed, and her failure to do anything about them have already been described.

A twelve-year-old girl named Judy Duke described some of the goings-on to her mother while Mrs. Duke was washing dishes. "They were beating and kicking Sylvia something terrible," the girl reported.

"Oh, well, they're just punishing her, aren't they?" Mrs. Duke asked rhetorically.

The Rev. Roy Julian tried to visit all the members of his congregation. The Baniszewskis attended his fundamentalist Christian church and he was at their home in September. He and Mrs. Wright chatted amiably while sitting on the worn couch of her living room.

Mrs. Wright complained about her husband's failure to pay child support, her numerous medical problems, and all the troubles she had with the kids. Sylvia was by far the worst of the lot, Mrs. Wright asserted. In a horrified tone, she told the man of God, "Sylvia has been skipping school and making advances on older men — for money!"

The Rev. Julian remembered Sylvia, the pretty girl who had "come forward" one Sunday to confess her faith. How awful if she should be sinning so terribly! He asked to speak with her.

Gertrude told him, "Ask her sister."

Jenny, who had been constantly threatened by Mrs. Wright, mechanically recited some of Sylvia's misdeeds: "She tells lies. And at night, after all of us go to bed, she slips down and raids the icebox." Jenny hoped she could please Gerty without having to repeat the most humiliating, sexual sins attributed to her sister. It appeared to work.

Rev. Julian prayed with Gertrude, then left.

He came back for another visit a few weeks later. Again Mrs. Wright complained about the terrible problems she was having with Sylvia. "Sylvia said at school that Paula is going to have a baby," Gertrude claimed. "But I know my daughter, and I know Sylvia. Paula's not going to have a baby; it's Sylvia."

The minister was concerned about the hostility Paula had confessed she harbored. "Paula told me," he claimed, "that there was hatred in her heart for Sylvia."

Mrs. Wright told him it was the other way around and the minister left the house for the last time.

A Few Close Calls

Sometime in October, Diana Shoemaker came to the home to visit her sisters. Gertrude could not allow her to see the condition that Sylvia was in so she refused to permit Shoemaker to enter the residence. Gerty claimed the Likens parents had given her permission to keep Diana away from her sisters. Diana insisted that she wanted to see her sisters and Mrs. Wright ordered her away, threatening to have the young woman arrested for trespassing.

Very shortly before Sylvia died, Jenny ran into Diana on the street. Jenny told her older sister, "I can't talk to you or I'll get in trouble," and hurried away from her.

A public health agency had received a report about a girl suffering running, open sores at the Baniszewski house. A public health nurse came to the door October 15. She was attired in a starched white uniform. "Mrs. Wright?" she asked.

Gertrude nodded and invited her in.

The stranger informed Gertrude that she was a public health nurse and wanted to talk about Mrs. Wright's children because of an anonymous report that there was a girl there with multiple sores.

Jenny was in the room at the time, terrified of Gertrude and full of hope. Was this rescue?

Mrs. Wright looked at her with eyes that must have been full of menace, repeating silently the threat she so often made to the girl verbally: "If you say anything about Sylvia, you'll get the same treatment she's getting." Out loud, Gertrude ordered Jenny to go to the kitchen and do dishes. Jenny promptly complied.



The Baniszewski's basement

Then Mrs. Wright turned her attention back to the nurse. "I know who you're looking for," she began, "Jenny's sister Sylvia. She has sores all over her body. She won't keep herself clean. I finally kicked her out of the house. She's not worthy to stay here. She's a prostitute." Gerty told the concerned nurse, "I don't know where she would be now."

The two of them were, in fact, sitting right above the basement in which Sylvia was locked and bound.

The nurse returned to her office. There she filed the report on the Baniszewskis on a "one time only" card, meaning there was to be no follow-up.

Just five days before Sylvia's death, the police came to the Baniszewski residence. Gertrude called them. As reported by John Dean/Natty Bumppo, "Robert Bruce Hanlon, banged on the door that evening, demanding the return of some things he said the children had stolen from his basement. Gertrude told him he was knocking on the wrong door . . . She called the police, telling them she had found Hanlon halfway through her window. The police locked him up on a burglary charge."

Phyllis and Ray Vermillion witnessed these events from their car. They were parked at the curb at the time. Phyllis Vermillion became concerned about Hanlon and talked to the police about him, helping to free him of the charge. One wonders again why she didn't tell the police, at this time or previously, about the things she had witnessed involving Sylvia.

Sylvia's Last Weekend

The last weekend of Sylvia's life began when Mrs. Wright decided to let her sleep upstairs in a bed again. However, she attached a strange condition to this: Gertrude instructed John, Coy, and Stephanie to tie Sylvia to the bed so she could not get up during the night to go to the bathroom. "You can't go to the bathroom," Gertrude said, "until you've learned not to wet the bed."

Sylvia wet the bed that night.

The next morning began with a second forced striptease, again climaxed by Gertrude forcing Sylvia to insert a soda bottle up her vagina. Then Mrs. Wright decided to take another revenge on Sylvia for having slandered Paula and Stephanie at Tech High. "You have branded my daughters so I will brand you!" she told the confused teenager.



Richard Hobbs (left) and Gertrude Baniszewski

Then Gerty suggested to Ricky Hobbs that he "tattoo" Sylvia. He eagerly accepted the assignment. Sylvia was forcibly stripped, then tied down, and gagged. Gertrude heated a sewing needle and carved an "I," apostrophe and part of the "M" before handing the needle to Hobbs and telling him to finish the job.

Ricky started carving, then stopped to ask Mrs. Wright how to spell prostitute. She wrote the message out on a piece of paper for him and he burned it into Sylvia's belly.

In a few minutes, Ricky, Paula, and ten-year-old Shirley Baniszewski decided to put another brand on Sylvia. It would be a letter "S" for Sylvia or slave (this point is confused). Ricky burned the first curve onto Sylvia's chest. Then he and Shirley called Jenny over and ordered her to put the second burn on. Jenny was petrified. When she had tried to get out of hitting Sylvia, she had been slapped. Would she be burned if she refused to inflict this torture? Nevertheless, she refused. Shirley burned the second curve on but got it backward so that the number "3" appeared on Sylvia's chest.

In front of Randy Lepper, Shirley Baniszewski, Richard Hobbs, and Jenny Likens, Mrs. Wright taunted Sylvia about the words burned into her stomach. "What are you going to do now Sylvia?" Gertrude said. "You can't get married now, you can't undress in front of anyone. What are you going to do now?"

The weeping, mutilated girl choked out between sobs: "I guess there's nothing I can do. It's on there."

That evening, Sylvia was again relegated to the basement where Coy Hubbard flipped her against the walls. Later, Jenny visited her sister who told her: "I'm going to die. I can tell."

Sylvia was allowed to sleep upstairs that night and the next afternoon she was bathed by Mrs. Wright and Stephanie; however, this was a normal, warm bath rather than a scalding one.

The Letter Before End

Then Gertrude and Paula forced Sylvia to write a letter to her parents. Sylvia started to begin the note like the one she had previously been forced to write, "Dear Mom and Dad" but Mrs. Wright told her to stop and made her start over with the peculiar salutation "To Mr. and Mrs. Likens." After Sylvia's death, Mrs. Wright would turn over this letter to a cop. She would tell him that Sylvia had been absent from her house for a few days, then wandered into the backyard, clutching this epistle. The unsigned note read, in part, as follows.

To Mr. and Mrs. Likens:

I went with a gang of boys in the middle of the night. And they said that they would pay me if I would give them something so I got in the car and they all got what they wanted ... and when they got finished they beat me up and left sores on my face and all over my body.

And they also put on my stomach, I am a prostitute and proud of it.

I have done just about everything that I could do just to make Gertie mad and cause [sic] Gertie more money than she's got. I've tore up a new mattress and peaed [sic] on it. I have also cost Gertie doctor bills that she really can't pay and made Gertie a nervous wreck and all her kids. . . .



Police photo of the letter

Mrs. Wright discussed having someone drop Sylvia in a waste lot. She told John and Jenny that they were going to do this chore that but, before they could, Sylvia made an escape attempt. The hideously mutilated and weakened girl ran to the front door. Gertrude ran after her, catching her just as Sylvia was about to make it to the porch. Then Mrs. Wright dragged her to the kitchen and offered the girl some toast. The sick youngster said she couldn't swallow. Infuriated, Mrs. Wright beat her across the mouth with a curtain rod.

Twelve-year-old John Baniszewski tied Sylvia up in the basement. Apparently, not wanting her young charge to die — at least not until she was elsewhere — Gertrude went down to the basement with an offer of crackers.

"Give it to the dog," Sylvia told her captor, "It's hungrier than I am." Perhaps Sylvia felt she had nothing left to lose and, so, was defiant. Or perhaps the horror of the words branded upon her had sapped her will to live. Mrs. Wright repeatedly punched the girl in the stomach.

The next day was Sunday, October 24. Gertrude and John both beat the girl. Mrs. Wright swung at Sylvia with a chair but it broke before it hit her. The frazzled woman then tried to hit Sylvia with the paddle but hit herself instead, blackening her own eye. Then Coy Hubbard stopped by and hit Sylvia in the head with a broomstick, knocking her unconscious.

During the night, Sylvia repeatedly pounded on the floor of her basement-prison with a shovel; neighbors were disturbed and considered calling the cops to complain about the noise but did not.

The next day, Sylvia was taken upstairs for a final — non-torturous — bath. She was placed in the tub clothed. When taken out of it, Stephanie and Ricky realized that Sylvia was not breathing. Stephanie attempted to give Sylvia mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. It did no good.

Sylvia was dead.

Mrs. Wright told Ricky to call the cops. He had to go to a pay phone since Gertrude's home did not have a telephone. When the police got to the house, a frantic Mrs. Wright handed them the letter quoted above, hoping it would absolve her of blame for the battered corpse lying on a mattress. However, before the officer had a chance to read it, a grieving and terrified Jenny Likens whispered to him, "Get me out of here and I'll tell you everything."

The Torture Killers on Trial

Gertrude Baniszewski (authorities called her by her legal name upon learning she had not been legally married to Dennis Wright) was arrested for murder. So were Paula Baniszewski, Stephanie Baniszewski, John Baniszewski, Richard Hobbs, and Coy Hubbard. Younger juveniles Anna Siscoe, Judy Duke, Randy Lepper, and Mike Monroe were charged with "injury to person." Most of the youngsters readily admitted their actions but when asked for an explanation, deferred to their mother or, if unrelated, offered the excuse, "Gertie told me to."

The poverty stricken and chronically ill Mrs. Wright was hardly charismatic; she was neither hypnotist nor dominatrix but the minors apparently had faith that her "grown-up" status would protect them from the consequences of their actions. As it turned out, they would be appallingly successful in hiding behind her skirt.

The charges of injury to person were dropped against the younger juveniles. Stephanie Baniszewski's attorney got her a separate trial and later the murder charge against her was dropped as well.

Standing trial for first degree murder in Indiana's most sensational case ever were five people: one adult, Gertrude Baniszewski and four minors, Paula Baniszewski, John Baniszewski, Richard Hobbs, and Coy Hubbard. John had only recently turned thirteen.

Paula's time in court would be interrupted by a trip to the hospital to deliver the baby with whom both she and her mother had so adamantly insisted she was not pregnant. It was a girl. In a display of filial devotion, Paula named her child Gertrude.

The courtroom was jam packed with spectators every day. This was the worst single murder the state had ever known and the largest number of defendants it had ever tried at once. The prosecution was seeking the death penalty for all the accused and it was widely expected that, at least in Mrs. Baniszewski's case, they would get it. The death penalty in Indiana at the time was carried out by the electric chair.

Many years later, John Baniszewski was to tell a reporter that he actively *enjoyed* being on trial. He commented, "I took a kind of delight in it. What I really wanted was love but I took the attention instead."

The judge at the trial was Saul Rabb, a grizzled, balding, and bespectacled jurist known for his tart tongue. Representing Gertrude Baniszewski was William Erbecker, a respected, heavy-set attorney considered flamboyant and personable. George Rice, a Ph.D in psychology as well as a member of the bar, was Paula's lawyer. John's attorney, Forrest Bowman, was widely regarded as thorough and dedicated. All of these lawyers worked for their indigent clients free of charge. The only paid attorney, James G. Nedeff, had been appointed by the court to represent Richard Hobbs. Coy Hubbard was, at first represented by Joseph Quill. Quill quit after a week and Forrest Bowman assumed Hubbard's case as well as John Baniszewski's.



Prosecuting Attorney Leroy K. New

The prosecution team was led by Leroy New, a tall, handsome forty-something fellow known for his skill in cross examination. Assisting him was deputy prosecutor Marjorie Wessner. Although women lawyers were still a rarity in those days, the thinking was that it was good to have a female on hand in cases involving women and child defendants and witnesses.

Much of the testimony was sensational and pathetic, often at the same time. Early witnesses included the shocked police officers who had encountered the hideously mutilated corpse of Sylvia Likens along with doctors who enumerated her extraordinary wounds. The star witness for the prosecution was Jenny

Likens. She hobbled to the witness stand in a new dress and, in a voice sometimes firm, sometimes halting, and often choked with tears, detailed the horrors she and her sister had suffered. When Wessner gently asked her why she hadn't sought help, young Likens replied, "I was scared. Gertrude just kept beating me." Defense attorneys would pursue this point at length. Jenny's response was always the same: "Gertrude threatened me if I told anyone, I'd get the same treatment Sylvia was getting."

Blaming the Victim

Although tried together, the attorneys for the defendants often worked at cross-purposes. Gertrude Baniszewski's story was that she had been too sick and chronically tired to know all the terrible things going on in her own home. The children had gone wild on Sylvia without her knowledge. The attorneys for the youngsters tried to shift as much blame as possible onto Mrs. Baniszewski or the other kids.

Mrs. Baniszewski testified in her own defense. She firmly denied all the terrible acts attributed to her. She did not "strike, beat, or kick" Sylvia. Gertrude tried to "paddle" Sylvia but was too weak and had to call Paula to finish the job. She also recalled slapping a misbehaving Sylvia's hands. With all the kids in her home, both her own and their many friends, a lot of fights broke out. Mrs. Baniszewski sometimes tried to break them up, she testified, but was usually too weak and sick even to make the effort.

However, even as Gertrude testified for herself, she often seemed to be testifying *against* the dead Sylvia. Her story of how she first heard about Sylvia brings up the issue of the girl's sexual conduct. According to Mrs. Baniszewski's testimony, a girl came to her door looking for Darlene MacGuire, who often visited the Baniszewski kids. Mrs. B. went to the door with Darlene and the visitor "related to Darlene — she wanted to know whether she knew where she could get hold of Sylvia Likens. . . . the reason this woman was hunting for Sylvia was supposed to have been Sylvia had been out with her husband. . . Darlene brought Sylvia Likens over to our home two days later and introduced her as the girl this other girl was looking for. That is how I first became acquainted with Sylvia Likens."

Another way the accused appeared to attempt to indict the victim occurred in her description of how the agreement to board the two girls was made. "Sylvia asked her father if she could stay with us," Mrs. B. claimed. ". . . I immediately said, 'No, I could not take care of you children. I have too many of my own and too many worries and too many responsibilities without adding any more. [Sylvia] said, 'Well, we can take care of ourselves, we are used to that.'" Just determined to live with the Baniszewskis — at least as Gertrude told it — Sylvia "turned around to her father and said, 'Daddy, you could pay her for letting us stay here.'"

In an exchange with the prosecutor, the accused insisted that Sylvia was unremittingly rebellious.

BANISZEWSKI: She would not do anything I told her, no.

NEW: She was disobedient?

BANISZEWSKI: She would not mind me, no.

NEW: Did you whip her for that?

BANISZEWSKI: I believe I testified I whipped her. Or tried to one time.

NEW: How many times was she disobedient to you?

BANISZEWSKI: I told you she would not mind me at all.

NEW: How many times.

BANISZEWSKI: I think I answered your question. I said she would not mind at all.

NEW: Ever?

BANISZEWSKI: Not that I can recall.

Drama in the Courtroom



Marie Baniszewski

To back up Gertrude's story, Marie Baniszewski was called to the stand. Only eleven years old, Marie was a lovely girl with dark blonde hair cut short and curly bangs over her forehead. She appeared in court in a blue pastel dress with eyelet sleeves. Her expression was understandably somber. Her eyes were blurred with tears as she got into the witness box. Tears streamed down her pale cheeks when Erbecker asked her why she was there. Marie replied, "I'm here to testify to see if my Mom killed Sylvia Likens."

Marie testified that she had seen her Mom hit Sylvia only "when she was bad." She went on to swear that she had never seen her mother kick the girl, burn her, or mistreat her in any other manner. Marie had seen other kids do all those things but Mom wasn't present; she was in bed sick.

The next day Marie was cross-examined by New. The elementary school aged child was tearful right from the start. Asked why by the prosecutor, she replied, believably enough, "I'm nervous!"

Marie repeated the denials of the previous day to the prosecutor, whose questions of this fragile witness were relatively low-key. Finally, he took her to the day Sylvia was branded on the stomach. As she had previously, Marie maintained that it was her ten-year-old sister Shirley who had lit the matches for the needle and that her Mom was in bed sick, knowing nothing of the mutilation.

New continued questioning Marie until finally the sobbing child shouted, "Oh, God, help me!" Then, *Perry Mason*-like, the witness for the defense turned into one for the prosecution. Marie had heated the needle; her mother had been there and started the "tattoo." She had seen Mom burn Sylvia and beat her. She had heard her mother order Sylvia down to the basement.



Defense Attorney William Erbecker

In his summation to the jury, Erbecker relied on the only possible mitigating factor in Mrs. Baniszewski's defense — mental incompetence — even though her official plea was a simple Not Guilty. "I condemn her for being a murderess, that's what I do," Erbecker said, "but I say she's not responsible because she's not all here!" He pointed to his head.

The other defense attorneys all tried to shove as much blame onto Gertrude and the others as possible while pleading that the tender ages of their own clients made them less than fully responsible.

Prosecutor New made an impassioned plea for the death penalty for all of the accused. He told them that, "The issue here is . . . law and order. Will we allow such acts? Will we allow such brutality on a human being? If you go below the death penalty in this case, you will lower the value of human life by that much for each defendant."

When the verdicts, came back, only Gertrude Baniszewski was convicted of first-degree murder. To the surprise and consternation of many observers, the jury did not sentence her to death. She appealed and was granted a new trial in which she was again convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison.

Paula was convicted of second-degree murder. She appealed and was granted a new trial but passed it up to plead guilty to voluntary manslaughter. She was released after a few years.

The murder charge against Stephanie Baniszewski was dropped as were the injury to person charges against Anna Siscoe, Judy Duke, Randy, Lepper and Mike Monroe.

John Baniszewski, Coy Hubbard, and Richard Hobbs were convicted of manslaughter. Each spent a grand total of eighteen months in a juvenile detention facility.



John & Gertrude Baniszewski saying farewell after their convictions.

1985: SLAM into Action

In 1985, after serving two decades in Indiana Women's Prison, the parole board voted to grant Gertrude Baniszewski a parole. However, a court ruled that the board's hearing had not been properly open to the public and a new vote had to be taken.

Two anti-crime groups, Protect the Innocent and Society's League Against Molestation (SLAM), instantly swung into action. Interestingly, SLAM was founded by Patti Linebaugh, the grandmother of Amy Sue Seitz, a two-year-old molested, tortured, and murdered by convicted child molester Theodore Frank. Perpetrated in California, that crime, like this one, would be called "the worst crime ever committed against one victim in the state's history."

Members of SLAM and Protect the Innocent pounded the pavements of Indianapolis seeking signatures of citizens opposed to the parole. They had no trouble getting them even among those who were too young to remember the case because Gertrude Baniszewski's name had, in the two decades of her incarceration, become that of an Indianapolis "bogeywoman." They ended up gathering more than 4,500 signatures in just a couple of months. Jenny Likens appeared on television to demand that the notorious Baniszewski be kept behind bars.

Despite the outcry, when the parole board again voted, it was three to two in favor of the parole, exactly as it had been on the first vote. Baniszewski's conduct as a prisoner had been quite good. She worked in the sewing shop and tended to make favorable impressions upon both prison staff and other inmates. Many of the younger imprisoned women called the child killer and mother of seven by a title most familiar to her: "Mom." According to the *Chicago Tribune*, prison psychiatrists "termed Baniszewski a 'healthy, stable, pleasant and agreeable' person who wants 'to try to make up for the past and leave the world a little better.'" At the hearing, Baniszewski teared up frequently and expressed remorse but claimed amnesia about the crime. Indeed, her statement of remorse was enigmatic: "I'm not sure what role I had in it . . . because I was on drugs. I never really knew her. [But] I take full responsibility for whatever happened to Sylvia." She left prison December 4, 1985.

The torture-murderer moved to Iowa where she lived out her life under the name Nadine Van Fossan. A long-time heavy smoker, she died in 1990 of lung cancer.

Richard Hobbs, who did most of the dirty work of etching the words into Sylvia and half that of burning the "3," died of cancer when he was only 21.

Coy Hubbard, who took such excessive revenge again and again for a slur against his ladylove, Stephanie Baniszewski, served time for burglary some years after his brief stint in the reformatory. He obtained work as a mechanic. He was later tried but acquitted for the murders of two men.

In Memoriam

John Baniszewski surfaced a few years ago after the Jonesboro, Arkansas tragedy in which a couple of junior high school students gunned down four peers and a teacher. He decided to come forward to say that there is hope for young murderers and that they can turn their lives around. Baniszewski had changed his name to John Blake.

When he spoke publicly for the first time about Sylvia's death he said he still could not adequately explain why he and the others turned on the girl the way they did. He said that he harbored a great deal of anger over his parents' marital break-up and the lack of adequate food and clothing for him and his siblings.

Blake acknowledges that his punishment was inadequate to the terrible crime. "A more severe punishment would have been just," he comments. Blake claims he turned his life around after finding God. However, the Baniszewski family went to a fundamentalist church both before and during the time the unfortunate Likens girls boarded with them. In his adult life, Blake has had no run-ins with the law. He has worked as a truck driver and realtor and served as a lay pastor. He is happily married and the father of three although he is now disabled by diabetes. His vision is blurred and he requires the assistance of a cane or walker to get around.

Stephanie Baniszewski became a schoolteacher. She also married and had kids as did Paula, who moved to Iowa and is said to live on a small farm there. It is not known whether or not she had contact with her paroled mother.

The Likens family continued to endure considerable hardship. Jenny Likens enrolled in a Job Corps program in 1966 and later got a job in a bank. She also married. Lester and Betty divorced in 1967. Benny Likens, Jenny's twin brother, began showing signs of severe mental illness a few years after his sister's hideous death. He became a semi-recluse, tormented by voices only he could hear.

Betty Likens died in 1999 at the age of seventy-one. A search of her keepsakes revealed a yellowed newspaper clipping of Gertrude Baniszewski's obituary together with a note by Jenny saying, "Some good news. Damn old Gertrude died. Ha ha ha! I am happy about that."

Benny Likens died only four months after his mother. He was forty-nine and had been mentally troubled for some time. Only fifteen when his sister Sylvia died, he served in the army and worked in various restaurants, often as a cook, when he got out. He started hearing voices and was diagnosed as a schizophrenic. According to the afterward in *The Indiana Torture Slaying*, Lester Likens found out his son was dead when a letter the father had written to Benny was returned marked "Deceased."

The people of Indianapolis have not forgotten Sylvia. A memorial to her will be dedicated this year on June 22. A poem by Ivan Rogers will be on the plaque, reading: "I see a light; hope. I feel a breeze; strength. I hear a song; relief. Let them through for they are the welcome ones."

Earlier Works Inspired by the Likens Case

The murder of Sylvia Likens has been dealt with in at least five, and possibly six, works. The easiest to get hold of is *The Basement* by feminist Kate Millett. Prior to starting this book, Millett had put on several sculptural exhibitions inspired by the Likens case.

The Basement is an odd combination of nonsense and brilliance, of fact and fiction together with the author's personal reactions to the crime. Millett foolishly reads all kinds of cosmic implications into it and projects her own beliefs — pacifist as much as feminist — onto the dead girl in ways that defy credibility.

On the other hand, the book contains much powerful, poetic prose and astute observations that ring real. Millett's account of the courtroom testimony is riveting. Some of *The Basement's* fictionalized passages are both lyrically intense and utterly believable: they "burn a hole in the page" (Nadine Gordimer once said this is the point of fiction) and mind.

Many readers of *The Basement*, both those who liked it and those annoyed by the author's fictionalizing, close the book yearning for a "just the facts" account of the case. That account is found in *The Indiana Torture Slaying*, a quickie paperback by reporter John Dean (not of Watergate fame) who was briefly called to testify at the trial. Millett got much of her information from this book and she properly gave him credit.

1966, the year when this book was published, was not a good time for books about true murder cases. It was put out by Bee-Line Books, a publisher specializing in cheap pornography with titles like *Peekin Place* so it never found its proper audience.

Recently reissued by Borf Books, it is good journalism, written in a restrained and compassionate manner. There are problems with it, however. A student of the case whom this writer will call "Craig Kelley" complains that the "author almost canonizes Stephanie," a girl who, on at least one occasion, helped tie Sylvia up and who might have done more to check the outrages of her boyfriend, Coy Hubbard.

Mr. Kelley makes another good point when he says, "Dean just skips over a lot of really significant things. He reports that GB had only three spoons in the house and then goes on to something else."

The Likens case inspired a horror novel called *The Girl Next Door* by Jack Ketchum. Ketchum has turned the calendar back a bit, setting his tale in the 1950s. Pretty Meg and her sister Susan have been orphaned and sent to live with their Aunt Ruth Chandler, a mother of three boys whose home is a magnet for neighborhood kids. *The Girl Next Door* is a repulsively readable story. Ketchum has given the tale a haunting spin by having it narrated by David, a teenaged boy who watches Meg's tortures with a combined sense of titillation and disgust. Ketchum believably depicts David's confusion of conscience and his reluctance to take a stand against the others and stop the show — until it is too late.

More Recent Inspirations

Patte Wheat brought the story into the 1970s in *By Sanction of the Victim*. The story is told from the viewpoint of the victim, young Marjorie who is, along with her little brother Bruce and their dog Rocket,

boarded at the home of Florrie Genoud. It is a powerful work of compassion and depth. Co-founders of Parents Anonymous, a group for potential or actual child abusers, give both a foreword and an after-word to the novel. However, the title, suggesting that the tormented child "sanctioned" her own abuse (a suggestion that is *not* made in the body of the work) is obscene.

It is possible, although not certain, that the Likens case served as an inspiration for Mendal Johnson's only novel, *Let's Go Play at the Adams'*. The parallels are not nearly as strong as in *The Girl Next Door* and *By Sanction of the Victim*. Johnson sets his story in affluent suburbia. There is no adult ringleader. A group of kids ranging in age from seventeen to ten tie up Barbara, their twenty-year-old babysitter. None of the moral accusations that were leveled against Sylvia — that she was a glutton, a thief, a slanderer, and a prostitute — figure in this novel. However, there is enough resemblance between the *Adams'* tale and the Likens murder to suggest a connection. The teenaged Dianne is described as "bony" like Mrs. Wright. The main torturers of Sylvia were two females and three males as is the case in *Adams'*. Finally, the murderers burn Barbara with a hot poker before finishing her off. They do not, however, make words out of the marks.

If Johnson was influenced by the Likens case, he, like Craig Kelly, saw it as "the ultimate example of how cruel children can be," a sort of *Lord of the Flies* scenario come to life. Mr. Kelly believes that the Likens torture "was about fun (twisted and perverted as it was). The neighborhood kids were having a great time. I think GB was a complete whacko and the kids were the major villains." After all, Mr. Kelly notes, Mrs. Wright lived in a house with ten people in it and only one spoon which convinced him that she was "a total basket case, incapable of raising children or managing life."

Although not *about* the Sylvia Likens case, a book called *Dear Corinne, Tell Somebody! Love, Annie* was inspired by it. Its author, poet, playwright, and composer Mari Evans, told *The Indianapolis Star* that she first became concerned about child abuse because of Likens' horrible death. Evans was deeply involved with the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and her book is directed primarily at African American youngsters.

A never-published play called *Hey, Rube* was also inspired by this slaying and that leads us to a most bizarre coincidence. The author of that play, Janet McReynolds, is the wife of the man who played Santa Claus at the Ramsey family's Christmas party just a couple of nights before six-year-old JonBenet Ramsey was murdered. Two of the factors in young JonBenet's life that may have played a role in her death were her bed-wetting and the early sexualization of the tiny beauty queen, making the parallels to the murder of Sylvia Likens eerie indeed.

A Place of Refuge

The house on 3850 East New York Street in which Sylvia died stands today. There have been several owners and renters but most have not stayed long. The house stood empty for fifteen years before real estate agent Bob Perry sold it in March 2003 to Trey and Tammy Davis. Neither the seller nor the buyers knew of the home's history at the time of the purchase.

Trey Davis is a real estate investor and ordained minister in the non-denominational Overcoming church. Tammy Davis is co-owner and administrator of their real estate investment firm, Refuge Property Management. "I bought it [the East New York St. house] as an investment property for my brother and his wife, Stacy and Julie Davis," Trey Davis recalled, "who are trying to get into the real estate investment business themselves."

Davis set about cleaning and renovating it. As reported by the Associated Press; "The living room ceiling was falling through, the attic was littered with pigeon droppings, and the house needed new plumbing, electrical wiring, carpeting, and heating."

He first heard about the house's gruesome history from some neighbors but "didn't put a lot of credibility in it." He and his brother searched the Internet for "Indiana Murders" but came up with nothing relevant.

"Then I put in "Indiana Murders Sylvia" and pulled up this story at Crime Library," Davis said. "My brother and I both stayed up until 2:00 a.m. reading and researching the case." The two of them thought long and hard and prayed about it, then decided that the place of Sylvia's torture and death should become a shelter for homeless young women.

"The house had been left as a reminder of a nightmare," Davis said, "because no one ever did anything positive with it. If you continue to put a negative stigma on the house, the neighborhood won't progress."

As Bob Perry discovered, "It's the neighborhood haunted house. And it's never been able to keep an owner, and it's never been able to keep a renter."

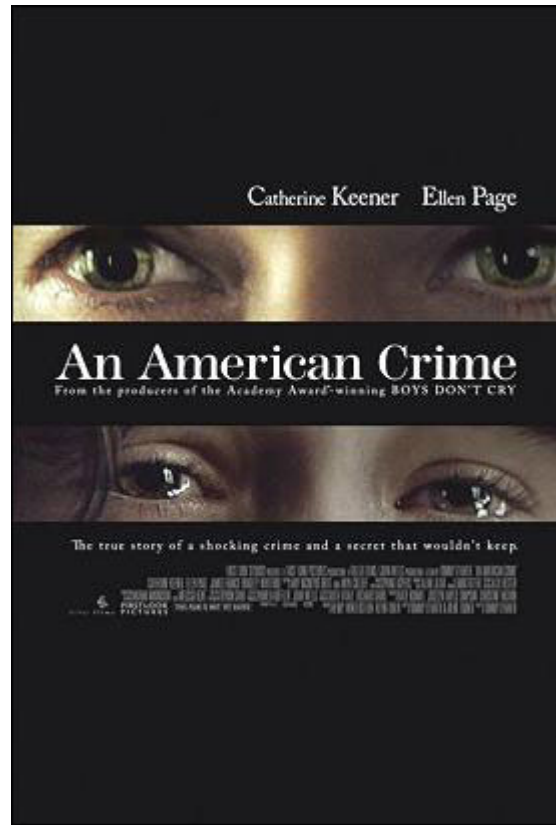
Davis emphasizes that many people are involved in working to turn the house into a shelter. "My brother and sister-in-law and Bob Perry are all seeking donations and trying to find people who will volunteer their services."

Several Indianapolis groups have pledged support including Wheeler Mission Ministries, Outreach Inc., Mezzetta Construction, and A2S04 Architecture.

Once the shelter opens, it should provide housing for about ten needy women in the 18-24 age range. There is a beautiful irony in transforming this place of torment into a refuge of love and healing.

—Abraham, Priya, *The Indianapolis Star*, 6/27/03.

"An American Crime"



"An American Crime" movie poster

An American Crime, a motion picture based on the Sylvia Likens case, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival on January 19, 2007 and is scheduled for general release in August 2007.

The director of *An American Crime*, Tommy O'Haver, wanted actress Catherine Keener to play Gertrude Baniszewski because he had been as impressed by her performance as author Harper Lee in *Capote* as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences which nominated it for Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role in 2006. "I thought her performance was underplayed," O'Haver said. "That was the sort of sensibility I wanted for the film."



Director Tommy O'Haver

O'Haver knew that the facts of the Likens case are horrifying and told an interviewer for the *New York Times* that he did not want his film to sensationalize its inevitably shocking material. "It would have been easy to take this story over the top," he observed. "So I purposely pulled back. My mantra was 'restraint, restraint, restraint.'"

Keener was apprehensive about playing the abusive Gertrude. She describes her misgivings and ultimate decision: "As a mother I said to myself, 'I can't do this.' Later I thought: 'I'm a mother. I kind of should.'"



Actress Catherine Keener plays Gertrude Baniszewski

When O'Haver and Keener met to discuss the film, Keener said, "I'm really scared to do something like this." O'Haver replied, "I have to tell you, I'm scared too. In some ways I think that's why we have to do it."

O'Haver had been fascinated by the Likens killing since he first read about it 19 years after the fact when Gertrude Baniszewski came up for parole. Then a high school student living in an Indianapolis suburb, O'Haver had just read *Lord of the Flies* and saw a parallel between that novel and the real-life crime. When asked what haunted him about this case, he answered, "The *Lord of the Flies* aspect, the mob mentality, was so unusual. The fact that Sylvia is sort of an iconic victim of abuse. It has haunted so many people for one reason or another and it's difficult to explain why but I thought her story needed to be told."

O'Haver joined with colleague Irene Turner to thoroughly research the Likens case. The pair pored over the court transcripts of the trials and filled three notebooks with information before co-writing the screenplay.

To make the film, O'Haver says that he and Turner tried to answer the questions, "Why" and "What kind of people would do this?"

Iconic Victim of Abuse

O'Haver describes *An American Crime* as "an interpretation of the facts. It really is a fictionalized version in some ways. We try to hit all the major points in the trial as to the stories revealed. Then we created an interpretation as to how this could have happened based on that. A lot of it has to do with Gertrude's character and trying to explain how someone who was a human being and not necessarily evil to begin with could tip over the edge and commit such a heinous act."



Actress Ellen Page plays Sylvia

Canadian actress Ellen Page plays Sylvia. Reading the script profoundly affected Page. "I was just blown away and could hardly believe it was a true story," she commented. "I remember literally just going on the computer and staying up all night and reading everything I could. It just, like, splintered my heart."

Not everyone is happy that *An American Crime* has been filmed. Sylvia's older sister Diana, now Dianna Bedwell-Knutson, said, "No one ever even asked us about it. It's their gain, our pain."

Jennifer Morrow reviewed *An American Crime* for *Fangoria.com*. She describes it as "unrelentingly bleak. That particular adjective has lost a lot of its meaning in recent years, after being indiscriminately applied to everything from hardcore gorefests to perfectly straightforward flicks which merely lack a happy ending. On the other hand, it's hard to think of a better way to describe a movie which opens grimly, ends desolately and maintains a steadily increasing sense of dread in between."

Morrow praises Ellen Page for performing "admirably" and writes that Page's "hint of defiance under Sylvia's wide-eyed surface" helps make Sylvia "a living, breathing girl, not some cardboard angel." This reviewer describes Keener as "utterly compelling as Gertrude. She slips from sainted compassion one moment to absolute cruelty the next." Morrow continues that Ari Graynor, who plays Paula Baniszewski, "is a particular standout" who has "a full-lipped, sullen sensuality (and a sadistic streak to match) which instantly codes her as adversary to the reserved Sylvia."

Morrow criticizes some aspects of the movie, citing "a number of missteps" and finding that one late scene is "a baffling mess." She also notes that "true-crime purists" may dislike that way some of the abuses inflicted on Sylvia are either only hinted at or completely left out. However, she concludes, "What *An American Crime* lacks in blood, it makes up for in gripping psychological anguish as the audience must watch as a happy teen who engages in pillow fights upstairs suddenly morphs into a humiliated girl undergoing twisted punishments in the living room, and finally into the quivering creature tied up in the basement."

Writing for *Variety.com*, reviewer Todd McCarthy has a less flattering opinion of *An American Crime*. McCarthy writes, "Tommy O'Haver brings no depth or insight to his account of a horrific true-life 1965 murder case." McCarthy continues that O'Haver "seems clueless as to how to make something palatable and illuminating of the twisted psychology and pathological behavior at the heart of this tragic tale."

McCarthy is unimpressed by the performances of Keener and Page that he finds have "a rote, under-rehearsed feel that never convinces." He believes Keener's Gertrude lacks the "steely, insidious power" that the real one must have possessed to "keep the kids in her grasp." He thinks Page makes an uninteresting "passive victim."



The Girl Next Door, by Jack Ketchum

An American Crime will not be the last movie inspired by the case to be released in 2007. *The Girl Next Door*, a movie based on Jack Ketchum's novel of the same name, was directed by Gregory Wilson (*Home Invaders*) and is now in post-production. *The Girl Next Door* will have its premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival in the spring. Jennifer Morrow writes, "It remains to be seen which of the two diverse takes will be

the better film, but considering how well-made *An American Crime* is, *The Girl Next Door* certainly has a hard act to follow."

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