

Safe At Last...Or Is She?

By Mindy Appel, LCSW, ACSW, DAPA, BAS

This is Nicole's story—a courageous 18-year old Louisiana State University student, whose life drastically changed on Monday morning, July 24, 2000, as she parked her car in the customary place in front of the mall and anticipated a day of work at Williams Sonoma.

This is also about the incredible courage of her parents, older sister, and an out-pouring of care and concern from her family and friends, from the Sheriff's department, and from the community at large. Nicole's traumatic sojourn galvanized everyone into a united support system facing the intensity of panic and anxiety, fear, shock, sadness, and anger that such a thing could happen in a populated area, in broad daylight, in the year 2000.

It began innocently enough as Nicole pulled into Lakeside Shopping Center, in Metairie, and parked her car in the usual place. She was sitting in the car, gathering her purse and about ready to go into the mall to report for work, when a man approached the driver's side of her car out of nowhere, and thrusting a loaded .22-caliber pistol in her face, he ordered her to move over to the passenger side of her car, and he got in and started driving east on Interstate 10. From the Times-Picayune newspaper article concerning the abduction, the following description was offered: "This was the man police would later identify as Paul Will. He had thick red hair, a scruffy beard and a scar on his face. He wore floral shorts and black tennis shoes, and he looked like he hadn't showered. The words "Broken Mold" were tattooed at the base of his neck."

As the car accelerated through the I-10/610 split, Nicole had no idea where she was going or what was going to happen to her. She didn't know whether this man was going to rape her, kill her, or both. All she knew was that he was armed and dangerous and that she had little choice in the situation but to remain where she was and cause as little trouble as possible.

During the next 18 hours, Nicole and her abductor covered 1,200 miles, driving from New Orleans to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, stopping for food and gas along the way. Each time they stopped, the man used Nicole's Visa debit card to make his purchases.



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Nicole remembers that this man drove both safely at times, and like a maniac at other times, which matched his moods as well. He went from a kind, concerned fellow traveler, wondering if she were cool enough, and comfortable, to a gun-waving tyrant, intent on getting back at her for the sadness he felt inside. Nicole described him as depressed, and often talking of committing suicide while they were driving, and complaining about how miserable he felt and how bad life was. Nicole's only thought was to keep him talking and driving, and keep his thoughts away from the gun he always held in his hand.

From the very start, Nicole was assured that she would not be hurt. What she could not have known was that this strangely sad man had taken a Greyhound bus from Philadelphia to New Orleans just three days before in hopes of reconciling with his ex-girlfriend, a Tulane University medical student. When she threw him out of her house, he became very upset and decided he would go back to Philadelphia, and perhaps buy enough heroin to overdose, authorities reported. He had spent the night sleeping outside beside a muffler shop, and claims to have been robbed of \$60,000 and beat up while asleep. Authorities could find no proof that this actually happened. That morning, he showed up outside of Lakeside Mall, where his ex-girlfriend also worked at another business, and when Nicole drove in, he saw his opportunity.

During this incredibly long, arduous "drive to nowhere", Nicole tried desperately to keep this man talking about anything and everything. She remembered

that people in these situations often kill their captives because they don't think of them as "persons", but as property, so she tried hard to appeal to him on a personal level, telling him about how her grandfather had died of cancer three years before, and encouraging him to think how sad his mother would be if anything happened to him. Between conversations, Nicole cried quietly behind her sunglasses, so he could not see her, and thought about her family and friends, and wondered if she would ever seem them again.

When night fell, it got very cold in the car, and also very quiet. But always, Nicole could feel the presence of this man with a gun, and she knew she had to keep her wits about her. She prayed constantly, she said, not for being rescued, but more for the wisdom and courage to know what to do if something happened.

By the time they got to Philadelphia, she was sure this gun-wielding man in the seat next to her was not going to hurt her and she relaxed just a little. At approximately 1:20 a.m. on Tuesday morning, in an upscale section of downtown Philadelphia, he pulled the car over, handed her a sweatshirt, told her to stay warm and call her parents, and drove away. With the help of two men who happened to be on the street at that hour of the morning, Nicole flagged down a police car, and a short time later, police located her car with Paul Will still inside. He was arrested and put in jail in Philadelphia under a \$5 million bond. He was charged in two states with 17 separate crimes, ranging from kidnapping and carjacking to armed robbery. At the time, he was also due to face federal charges because the alleged crimes crossed state lines.

Nicole returned to New Orleans on Tuesday night to a hero's welcome and an endless stream of family, friends, and well-wishers who stopped by her house after greeting her emotionally at the airport.

Understanding normal responses to abnormal events can help people cope effectively with feelings, thoughts, and behaviors along the path to recovery. The purpose of this article is to explain Nicole's "true survivor" ordeal and to help people understand acute catastrophic stress reactions which fall under the diagnostic category of Post-traumatic stress disorder, which is described in the DSM-IV

(Diagnostic and Statistical Manual) as: "...a natural emotional reaction to a deeply shocking and disturbing experience. It is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation."

In cases of PTSD, the person experiences a traumatic event in which they are confronted with actual or threatened death or serious injury, and their response to this situation involves intense fear, helplessness and horror. Following the event, they persistently re-experience recollections of the event, sometimes in the form of dreams, or sometimes in the form of the event actually recurring. People with PTSD generally experience intense psychological distress when confronted with things that remind them of the event as well. In an effort to get rid of these uncomfortable feelings, they avoid thoughts, feelings, and conversations associated with the trauma, and/or they avoid activities, place and people that make them remember the trauma.

Sometimes, they are unable to remember parts of what happened. In many cases, the person afflicted with PTSD has decreased interest in activities in which they used to be deeply involved, and they sometimes feel estranged or detached from others (Nicole used the term: "numb.") In addition, they are often not able to give and receive loving feelings, and they sometimes begin to believe that they will not have a normal life, and that life will end abruptly.

People with PTSD sometimes show symptoms that were not present before the trauma occurred such as: difficulty in falling and staying asleep, irritability and outbursts of anger, difficulty concentrating, hypervigilance, and exaggerated startle response. They often feel fragile and hypersensitive to comments they would have ignored before. On occasion, they will have physical manifestations of the stress such as joint and muscle pains. In addition, many suffer from panic attacks, fatigue, low self-esteem, exaggerated feelings of guilt, and feelings of nervousness and anxiety.

Many people who experience traumatic events show no visible outward signs of injury, but there is a serious emotional reaction to such experiences. Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of cognitive behavioral therapy and group therapy, as well as medications which assist in relieving

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the symptoms of depression and anxiety and ease sleeplessness.

As with every human event, no two people respond in exactly the same way to extreme stress. Some people have immediate reactions, while others may not respond until months or even years after the trauma. Likewise, some people recover quickly, while others experience adverse effects over long periods of time. In some cases, the people who seem to bounce back the fastest are also the ones who later become discouraged and depressed.

Although it is impossible to predict the length of time any one person will need to recover from a traumatic event, there are three significant factors which contribute to this variable: the duration of the event – and the seriousness of the loss; the person’s intrinsic ability to handle emotionally exhausting situations; and other life events preceding the trauma which were stressful.

The American Psychological Association publishes a website called “Practice Directorate” which talks about steps to healing which they recommend: (www.apa.org/practice/traumaticstress)

Be patient with yourself. Healing takes time. Ask for help from your personal “support system”; communicate in the way you feel most comfortable; if you don’t want to talk to people, write in a diary. Join a support group for others who have had similar experiences. Eat well and get enough rest and exercise; avoid alcohol and drugs. Keep to routines—eat at regular times, exercise at regular times, sleep at regular times, and pursue hobbies you enjoy, but have not made time for recently. Avoid major life decisions while you are recovering (changing jobs, etc.). Learn about post-traumatic stress and how it affects people.

Permission to write this article was granted by Nicole and her family so that

more people may become aware of the dangers associated with recovering from traumatic experiences. I have had the honor of working with this family throughout this most difficult journey. Fortunately, the outcome here to the kidnap and flight is very positive. It might not have been.

The family, despite feeling chronically fatigued and exhausted, is trying to get back to a “new normal,” as life will never be quite the same. They are starting to attend church regularly again, and they are trying to be more aware of each other and how important it is to savor life’s simple moments more often. Nicole’s mother and father and her sister have gone back to work, and she has gone back to Louisiana State University to start her sophomore year. But nothing will ever be the same.

Postscript: Nicole’s story was covered on a segment of “Dateline” on national television this Spring. As this goes to press, Paul Will is scheduled to come to trial on June 18, 2001. It has been rumored that he will plead “Not Guilty” and, if successful, he will be released to resume his life as a free man. This is certainly an ironic commentary on the judicial system – that the perpetrator may “resume his life as a free man” while the victim, whose only crime was being in the wrong place at the wrong time, will forever be changed by this event.

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