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Cleared in her parents murders, she's moving past 'Vampire Cult'

Heather Wendorf-Kelly, now married and living out of state, reflects on a tragic time she was called a killer. A gothic vampire. An awkward 15-year-old who fell in with the wrong crowd.

Today, at 25, Heather Wendorf-Kelly isn't out to change minds. She's just trying to move her life forward and give the scars of her past time to heal.

A decade after her parents' brutal murder inside their Eustis home in Central Florida, Heather says she wished she had known how to stop the 16-year-old boy who fatally beat the couple -- and captured the nation's morbid curiosity with the "Vampire Cult Killings."

"I regret that I was paralyzed with fear," she said in her first interview with the Orlando Sentinel in more than eight years. "You can't really anticipate what you're going to do and how you're going to deal with the situation if you've never been in anything like that before."

On Thanksgiving Day 1996, Heather was arrested with teen "vampire" Rod Ferrell -- and three other cult followers -- and charged with bludgeoning Richard and Ruth Wendorf to death.

Ten years ago today, a grand jury refused to indict her in the slayings. She remained in detention, however, and was not officially cleared until Jan. 28, 1997.

She was vindicated, or so she thought.

In a faint Southern twang, Heather talks about her new life in North Carolina. About learning to sculpt at art school. And about marrying a local theater and film director last year.

She said she doesn't harbor grudges against modern-day vampires, though she thinks her case -- she calls it a "legend" -- has generated a cult following of its own.

"It was mind-boggling to me how big it was," she said.

'He was charming'

Heather's voice quivers a bit when she recalls details surrounding the killings that have since been made into a low-budget film, several true-crime books and a TV docudrama. Back then, she was a Eustis High sophomore with stringy auburn hair who tied a Barbie doll on a noose to her backpack.

She met Ferrell at school, a year before the Eustis High dropout moved to Murray, Ky. With long black hair and a matching trench coat, Ferrell claimed he could suck human blood and live forever.

"When I first met him, he was not like a lot of the other kids," she said. "He seemed older just because of how he spoke, how intelligent he was.

"He was charming. . . . He could tell a lie like it was the truth."

Ferrell, then 16, was later given a life sentence for fatally beating Richard Wendorf, a 49-year-old manager at Crown Cork & Seal in Winter Garden, and his wife, Ruth, 54, a volunteer at Eustis High.

Several days before Thanksgiving, Ferrell drove from Kentucky to Eustis with a carload of teenage vampire groupies to meet up with Heather.

"Part of it was just a game to me," she said about the "vampires" and their "crossing-over" rituals during which the teens drank one another's blood.

"I didn't take a whole lot of it seriously," she said. "It was something to have, something special in your life that you felt secret about."

Sister found bodies

Heather wasn't there on the night of Nov. 25, 1996, when Ferrell and Howard Scott Anderson, 16, entered the Wendorfs' Greentree Lane home through the garage.

Anderson later told detectives he couldn't kill Ruth Wendorf as planned. Instead, Ferrell beat Richard Wendorf, asleep on the couch, and repeatedly clubbed Ruth with a crowbar when she threw hot coffee on him.

The Wendorfs' bloodied bodies were found when Heather's 17-year-old sister, Jennifer, returned home from work.

Heather didn't know about their deaths until later -- when she was on the way to New Orleans with Ferrell and his friends in the dead couple's Ford Explorer.

"I just wish I knew exactly what I could have done and did it," she says. "You're just second-guessing yourself and paralyzed with fear by the whole thing."

Three days later, detectives caught the teens in Baton Rouge, La.

In the following months, all the teenagers involved -- except Heather -- pleaded guilty to some role in the killings.

Ferrell pleaded guilty to murder and was initially sentenced to death. But because of his age, he later was given a life sentence.

Anderson, now 26, pleaded guilty to being a principal to first-degree murder and also is serving a life sentence.

Two other girls, who knew about the murder plot but didn't aid Ferrell, were convicted of being principals to third-degree murder, armed burglary and principals to armed robbery. Dana Cooper, now 29, is slated to be released from a Florida Panhandle prison in 2012. Charity Keese, now 26, was released in March but couldn't be reached.

Denies hating parents

Although she was cleared of any wrongdoing in the slayings, the tragedy alienated Heather from her friends and family.

"It's hard not to feel guilty when every news station in America is telling you you're guilty," she says.

Ferrell told detectives and the media that Heather hated her parents and wanted him to kill them.

A decade later, she still denies it.

"Most of my childhood was just perfect," she says. "I'll always have that to build upon."

As a little girl, Heather watched her mother draw and "took after her." Before and after Ruth's death, going to art school was Heather's "golden shining" dream, she said.

When she started high school, she favored purple hair and black fishnet stockings. And becoming a vampire seemed like a cool thing to do.

In the months leading up to the killings, Heather's grades dropped, said Al Gussler, a Lake County sheriff's detective who was the lead investigator in the case. "She started having problems in school," he said.

He remembers interviewing Heather days after her parents were killed.

"Just how many vampires are in Eustis?" he asked.

"And she just sat back and folded her arms and said, 'You'd be surprised.' "

Moved out of state

Heather lived with Lake County foster parents after the killings.

"I had to keep some distance from my family so everyone could heal," she said. "I don't think there was any animosity, just avoidance."

At 17, she escaped the small town where everyone knew -- and judged -- her and attended a summer art program at the North Carolina School of the Arts.

She went by the nickname Xoe in hopes she wouldn't be recognized.

"Not a whole lot of people [at the school] knew," she says. "Sometimes people would get clever and figure things out."

Her future husband, Dan Kelly, was one of the first people Heather told.

It was surprisingly easy divulging her secret after a couple of weeks, she says.

"I was straight up about it, really," she says, and remembers blurting out the story at his house one night.

"There's some people you get closer and closer to, and it's just not right not telling them," she says.

Kelly says his wife doesn't live in fear of being recognized or taunted.

"There are some people who have less-favorable opinions," he says.

Heather doesn't spend time searching for all the "Vampire Killings" stories that still spread. She did, however, edit her own Wikipedia.org entry on the Internet because it spouted lies, she says.

Heather is working on her sculptures and sketches and hopes to finish art school next year. She acts in community theater near her home in central North Carolina and jokes about all the therapy she has had.

"It's really about me learning," she says of her life now.

Someday, Heather says, she'll tell her story to the children she hopes to have.

Some things about Heather haven't changed much in 10 years.

"I don't have anything against goth," she says. "I still wear black sometimes. It's not like I'm happy sunshine girl."

As for the rest of her family, Heather says she broke their silence with a Christmas card. A letter to relatives in 2002 described what she had been doing during the past years. And in the months before her grandmother died, Heather got a response.

"She called up, and we didn't talk about it; we just said, 'I'm sorry,' " she says.

Heather attended her grandmother's funeral in 2003 and saw the rest of the family.

"It was weird because it's a funeral, so you're sad," she says. "But it was weird because it was a family reunion."

She's expecting another family reunion at Christmas, when she will stay with her sister who still lives in Lake County. Heather says that despite the trauma of the killings, she and Jennifer have remained close. Other people she hasn't seen in years simply remember her face.

"I can go to Lake County and get people turning their heads," she says. "They definitely recognize me."

By Christine Dellert
Orlando Sentinel, 18 Dec.

'Vampire rapist' dies of cancer

KINGSTON, Ont. -- A serial killer known as the "vampire rapist" died of acute skin cancer at Kingston Penitentiary, a coroner's inquest heard yesterday.

Wayne Boden, who raped and murdered four women between 1969 and 1971, leaving bite marks on his victims' breasts, died in the palliative care unit of Kingston Regional Hospital in March.

Boden suffered from a rare form of lymphoma cancer.

Large cancerous tumours, 12 centimetres long and 10 centimetres wide, spread across Boden's body, said Dr. David Dexter, a pathologist who conducted the autopsy.

Boden was transferred from his home institution in Bath to prison in Kingston last February. He later requested that he not be resuscitated in the event of heart failure. He died at age 58.

Boden, described as a sexual sadist, received an indefinite sentence in 1972.

CP,
winnipegssun.com, 21 Dec.

Dracula sinks teeth into Eastnor castle

BRAM Stoker's classic chiller, Dracula, comes to BBC1 in a stylish new re-working for the festive season. Filming took place at Eastnor Castle, near Ledbury, during the summer for this Christmas special.

Scenes were filmed in The Gothic Drawing Room, the Long Library and the main entrance to the castle while it remained open to the public, giving visitors a glimpse of what is in store.

"It was very exciting to have the Dracula filming at Eastnor," said general manager, Simon Foster.

"We are all very much looking forward to seeing the film, which I'm sure will be very scary!"

The film is at 9pm on December 28 and stars Marc Warren as Count Dracula and David Suchet as Abraham Van Helsing.

Hereford Times, 21 Dec.

Castle for sale, £40m. Would suit vampire

The Transylvanian castle of Vlad the Impaler, the inspiration for Bram Stoker's Count Dracula, is on sale for £40 million.

Bran Castle, near the historic city of Brasov, in central Romania, is one of the country's most popular tourist destinations because of its association with 15th-century Prince Vlad Tepes III, also known as the Impaler for his favoured method of executing

opponents. According to varied accounts, Vlad either spent several days in the castle or was briefly incarcerated in its dungeons.

The impressive 14th-century fortress last belonged to Queen Victoria's granddaughter Queen Marie of Romania, but in 1956 it was seized by the Communist authorities, who turned it into a museum.

Seven months ago the castle was given back to Queen Marie's grandson, Dominic von Habsburg, of the former House of Habsburg. The conditions of the restitution agreement included a pledge to keep the castle open as a state-run museum for three years, even if the property was resold.

Mr von Habsburg, 68, a US-based graphic designer, lived in the castle as a child until his family were expelled by the Communist regime in 1948. In a recent interview with *The Times* he claimed an emotional attachment to his old home, but has now decided to put it on the market for more than £40 million.

Corin Trandafir, his lawyer in Bucharest, said the asking price was realistic, and that the owners would like to see the castle returned to the local community. The local council of Brasov has been given first refusal on the property.

"The castle is one of Romania's biggest attractions and its value will drastically multiply when the country joins the European Union this January. There is no organised tour of Romania that doesn't include Bran Castle," he said.

"The price is by no means exaggerated. The estate includes about seven acres of forest and three smaller buildings. Once the three-year period expires and the museum management becomes private, it will turn into a lucrative source of income for the new owners.

Mr Trandafir said that Mr von Habsburg wanted the castle to be owned by local people, which was why he had offered it to the council. "They have 30 days to review our offer, and then the property will be put on the market," he added.

Aristotel Cancescu, the council president, confirmed that the local authorities were very interested in acquiring Bran Castle because it was part of Romania's cultural heritage.

"This castle is a major tourist attraction and a great asset for our region, and we need to seriously think about buying it," he said.

Bojan Pancevski
The Times, 26 Dec.

As Dracula image is laid to rest bats make a recovery

Threatened species of bat could be on the road to recovery in Wales after shedding their "vampire" image.

According to latest figures from the Bat Conservation Trust (BCT), part of the reason for a revival is that bat volunteers are helping to dispel the popularly held myth that bats are "blood-sucking vampires that get stuck in your hair".

BCT believes the increases are a result of a combination of factors, including greater public awareness of bats as gentle, harmless creatures of the night.

Volunteers undertake "roost visits" providing free advice to householders to take away any fears they may have about having bats hanging upside down in their lofts.

And they run an out-of-hours service for the National Bat Helpline, which offers free information and advice on bats, directly saving the lives of thousands of bats every year and providing help and education on bat issues to the public.

The figures show an increase in the populations of four bat species - Daubenton's bat, the lesser horseshoe bat, common pipistrelle and Natterer's bat, which are all also benefiting from better protection of more roosting sites and improved agricultural practices.

Jaime Eastham of the BCT said, "Finding out that you share living space with bats can be a bit of a shock, mainly because of the myths that bats can get stuck in your hair, bite you and suck your blood.

"But these Dracula-type of myths are just untrue.

"There are only three types of vampire bats in the world and they live in South America where they can land on cows and give them a lick, rather than suck their blood.

"Bats are not blind, they have a good sense of direction and would not want to get stuck in anyone's hair.

"Anyone who has seen a bat up close or has heard them will know that they are fascinating to watch."

She said bats were not just roosting in old barns and cottages but were moving into modern houses in Wales now too, particularly if they are located by their "food highways" near insect-laden rivers and woodlands.

But Amy Coyte, chief executive of the Bat Conservation Trust, said the population increases are tiny compared to the numbers of them that have been lost.

"We remain very concerned about a number of species, particularly the brown long-eared bat, which we fear may be starting to show signs of decline," she said.

"It is vital that we are able to continue monitoring bat populations. Long term population trends help to inform conservation work and give us a clearer picture of the state of the UK's bats - and of our environment as a whole."

"But these figures are good news for some of our bats and a testament to the enormous effort of thousands of volunteers all over the country working to save them.

"The excellent data enables us to measure progress in our efforts to conserve these wonderful animals, which contribute hugely to our natural heritage."

BCT believes bats can tell us a lot about the state of the environment, as they are top predators of common nocturnal insects.

BCT has been keeping track of bat populations since 1997 through its National Bat Monitoring Programme (NBMP), a long term project involving thousands of volunteers. Last year alone, a record 1133 people took part in the NBMP surveys and more sites are being monitored than ever before.

Sally Williams, Western Mail
icwales.icnetwork.co.uk, 29 Dec.
