

What do you think about when you think about America in the nineteen sixties? Whether you were alive during this time or not you know about this period. When I think of the sixties I think of a powerful movement that changed a nation and the once innocence that people felt in the fifties wasn't quite as strong as it had once been. In nineteen 1965 the state of Indiana would be rocked to its core when a murder would happen that would be called by the prosecutor "The most terrible crime ever committed in the state of Indiana." This was said during the trial of Gertrude Baniszewski who would be convicted of the torture and death sixteen-year-old Sylvia Likens. I'm sure most of you have at least heard of this case. If you haven't, then prepare for a gut-wrenching story. This one has always been hard for me to listen to although it showcases so many things. How trusting, naive or even desperate a person could and still can be. I mean do you really know a person enough to trust them after a shorting meeting? Enough to leave your children with them? First, let's start out by getting to know the woman who was the monster behind everything that happened in this case.

Gertrude Baniszewski was born on September 19, 1929, in Indianapolis to Hugh Marcus and Myrtle Van Fossan. She was one of six children and life was rocking throughout her life. At the age of ten, she would watch her fifty-year-old father die from a sudden heart attack. When she was sixteen she dropped out of school and married John Baniszewski; an eighteen-year-old young man with a violent temper and had four children by him. The couple would stay together for ten years and within a year she met and married Edward Guthrie only to divorce after three months due to the fact that he was tired of having her children around. Not long after that she and her former husband, John, got remarried and stayed together for another seven years and had another two kids but they finally divorced for good in 1963. At thirty-seven years old Gertrude began to have an affair with twenty-three-year-old Dennis Lee Wright who only continued her cycle of abuse by the hands of a man. She would have her last child from Wright. Totally she would have seven children and six miscarriages. Not long after the birth of her last child, Dennis Lee Wright would leave her without a solid income as he was supporting both her and all of the children. Now supporting the whole family on nothing but her ex-husband spotty child support payments and her list of odd jobs that she would do such a doing others laundry, sewing, and babysitting.

Gertrude was said to have dealt with countless chronic illnesses on top of having an unhealthy diet since she barely ate and was said not to have the best hygiene; everything cumulating together causing her to have a skeletal and sickly appearance.

Born January 3, 1949, to Lester and Betty Likens, Sylvia Likens was the middle child between two sets of twins; Diana and Danny who were older and Jenny and Benny who was younger and suffered from polio. I was unable to find anything out about the boys of the family but the girls, at least the younger of the two girls who would be at the center of the case.

Sylvia was born into a family that was far from stable. Her parents, who were carnival workers, moved often and they had financial struggles. The couple also had a rocky marriage, often separating and getting back together regularly. Being carnival workers the Likens traveled for work and often boarded the girls with people, usually their grandmother, since it was more expensive to take them with on the road with them. It was this decision that would cause the road to take a dark turn for young Sylvia. In

1965, after Betty Likens had been arrested for shoplifting, leaving Sylvia alone to care for her young sister Jenny to whom she was very close to. Betty had taken both Sylvia and Jenny from their father Lester, thus kidnapping the girls. While their mother was out of the picture the girls wandered the neighborhood where they would meet Paula Baniszewski through another neighborhood friend Darlene McGuire. They all went back to the Baniszewski's household where they hung out for the day and after hearing about the current situation with their mother, Paula offered for the two to spend the time. The next day Lester Likens arrived in town and tracked his daughter's to the Baniszewski home after he had talked with his wife, resolving the problems they decided to travel as carnies. Now it's unknown who suggested that the girls stay at the Baniszewski's, being boarded for twenty dollars a week which was a lot of money during that time. Lester Likens left his two girls in Gertrude's thought to be thoughtful hands but he actually left them in a neglectful, dirty home that barely held food to keep church mice fed let alone a household with seven children plus two extras and Gertrude herself. None the less, they stayed there soon after the horror would begin.

At first, things were normal and went well for the girls and the Baniszewski's. They attended school, social functions and even church on Sunday. However, when Lester missed a payment, Gertrude's temper showed for the first time when she forced both girls to lie across the bed with skirts and underwear to their ankles to which she beat them with paddles on their bare bottoms. It was said that both Lester and Betty returned to check on their girls but nothing was said of the beating. Soon Gertrude focused on nothing but Sylvia, abusing her by any way possible. Theft, humiliation and then finally physical abuse would follow. Paula Baniszewski kicked Sylvia in the genitals after she had accused her of being pregnant when in fact it was Paula that was pregnant after having an affair with a married man. The children, after the getting the green light from Gertrude herself, would beat Sylvia, push her down the stairs and Gertrude had even accused Sylvia of prostitution after knowing that the young girl had extra money, money that she likely got from doing her own odd jobs or collecting cans that was something that the girls were said to have done. Gertrude would go on long-winded sermons about filthiness of prostitutes and women in general.

Later Likens was accused of spreading rumors at the high school that she attended that both Paula and her younger sister Stephanie were prostitutes. These apparent rumors provoked Stephanie's boyfriend Coy Hubbard to beat Sylvia as well. After this, many other children joined in on the torture, abusing Sylvia at the encouragement of Gertrude. They used her as their plaything. The following list is things that both Gertrude and the other children were said to have done to her.

- Putting out cigarettes out on her skin, apparently over a 110 times

- Beating

- Starving

- Tying her up

- Forcing her to eat feces and drink urine in later torture and early one even vomit after she had been forced fed food with an abundance of condiments.

- Hitting her with objects such as dishes and bottles
- Clawing at her body
- Being used for Judo practice from Coy Hubbard, Stephanie Baniszewski's boyfriend
- Being burned with scalding hot water as her bath
- Provoking physical fights between Sylvia and others; after telling another young girl that Sylvia was spreading rumors about the girl's mother Gertrude pitted the girls against each and even forced Sylvia's younger sister, Jenny to participate and when she didn't she was
- Accused her of stealing that lead into her accusing her of prostitution as well, kicking her in the crotch again and then moving back to theft and to "cure" her of her sticky fingers problem and burnt each of her fingers tips with a cigarette.

Although all of the abuse was something to turn a person's stomach, there was one form of abuse that took place on at least two occasions. After being accused of prostitution yet again Sylvia was forced to strip in front of a group of children, under threat of beating Jenny, and while fully naked and handed a glass coke bottle where she was then forced to masturbate with it.

After this incident, things only got worse for Sylvia, including many if not most of the things that I have listed above. Following this Sylvia was moved to the basement of the Baniszewski home. This would be where the more gruesome torture would occur. After defecating on herself and the surrounding area due to lack of a toilet, to clean her Sylvia was she was bound by the ankles and wrist and dunked into the scalding water to which afterward Gertrude would rub salt over her whole body. Over time Gertrude even made money on Sylvia by charging kids to come to view her like a caged animal and even allowing them to have a hand in harming the poor girl. She was kept naked and barely allowed to eat and when she was fed it was something that was soup without a spoon or dry toast. It was in the basement where she was also forced to clean up her feces by eating it and to collect her own urine and forced to drink it. We soon come into October, the last month of Sylvia's life. On October 21st Gertrude has Sylvia brought upstairs and tied to be the bed, allowing her to sleep upstairs and saying that if she can control her bladder then she would be allowed to continue to sleep upstairs and in a bed. The next morning after it was found out that she had urinated she was once again forced to strip in front of everyone and to once again masturbate with Coke bottle. Once done and dressed, Gertrude suddenly said that since Sylvia had branded her daughters by apparently branding them so she was going to brand her literally. She forcibly stripped Sylvia again and tied her down along with a gag in her mouth to muffle her screams of pain. After heating a needle to the point where it was orange with heat, Gertrude started to carve/burn into her stomach. She got the 'I' and 'M' done herself but then encouraged neighborhood boy and one of the ones who had been around since the beginning, Ricky Hobbs to finish it. Wrote out across the sixteen yours stomach was the phrase 'I'm a prostitute and proud of it.' Gertrude left, leaving Sylvia tied up and gagged but they weren't done with her. Paula, Ricky Hobbs and ten year old Shirley then carved a very rough looking 'S' on her chest. The belittling continued and afterward, this was when she was then taken back this was when she was used as a human target for Coy Hubbard's Judo moves.

That night Sylvia was visited by her sister and where Sylvia told her younger sister that she knew that she was going to die. After the visit Gertrude brought Sylvia back upstairs where she allowed her to sleep in a bed again, sleeping until midday. She was woken up by Gertrude on October 23rd and she was given a bath by Gertrude and one of her daughters. Afterwards, she was dressed she was forced to write a letter to her parents as guided by Gertrude who had her start it by writing 'Dear Mr. and Mrs. Likens' and wasn't signed. The following, although written by Sylvia, are Gertrude's words.

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 Gertie more money than she's got. I've tore up a new mattress and peaed 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.

Once finished Gertrude made plans to have some of the kids take Sylvia nearby to a garbage dump where they would leave her body although she was still alive. Hearing this Sylvia, although badly injured, tried to make a run for it, darting out of the house but in her weakened state she was caught quickly and taken back to the house. After fixing her dry toast and refusing to eat it since she couldn't, Gertrude beat her with a curtain rod and then she was taken back to the basement with a plate of dry crackers that she still refused to eat and kicked because of the lack of trying.

October 26th, 1965 – Sylvia's last day alive. Sylvia was brought upstairs by Ricky Hobbs and Stephanie Baniszewski where they placed her in yet another warm bath only with all of her clothes on suddenly realized that Sylvia wasn't breathing. By the time Stephanie tried to get her breathing again it was too late. Sylvia Marie Likens was dead at the age of sixteen. She suffered nothing but humiliation and torture by someone she thought she could trust in the last part of her life. Gertrude had the children return Sylvia's body to the basement and strip her naked while Ricky Hobbs called the police from a payphone nearby. When police arrived Gertrude handed them the note that she had forced Sylvia to write but luckily Jenny Likes was able to whisper to officers to get her out of there and she would tell them everything that had happened. With the discovery of Sylvia's body and Jenny's statement, the police arrested Gertrude along with three of her child Paula (17), Stephanie (15) and John (13) along with Ricky Hobbs (15) and Coy Hubbard (15). Other neighborhood kids that witnessed and possibly participated were also arrested for "injury to a person" although these charges were later dismissed. The main group was held without bail and on May 19th, 1966 Gertrude Baniszewski was charged with the first-degree murder of Sylvia Likes and although spared the death penalty she was sentenced to life in prison. The others involved were charged with either second-degree murder or manslaughter.

Ricky Hobbs, Coy Hubbard, and John Baniszewski were all sent to a reformatory for only two years only to be paroled in 1968. John changed his name to John Blake and seemed to be the only one of the Baniszewski family to feel remorse. He spent the rest of his life trying to make that know of his misdoings. He had a family of his own and died 2005 of cancer at the young age of fifty-two. Coy Hubbard surprisingly didn't change his name and reportedly stayed in the area until his death in 2007. Ricky Hobbs, who had a relevantly heavier hand in Sylvia's demise died at a very early age of twenty-one in 1972 of lung cancer. Paul Baniszewski gave birth to the child she had been carrying in secret while

locked away. In 1971 she stood trial again where she pled voluntary manslaughter and she later released in 1974. Changing her name also she wasn't heard from again until it came to light about her true identity and she was released from her job as a teacher in 2012 for falsifying her information on her job application. Stephanie Baniszewski was the only one, other than the younger children, that didn't serve any time and that was probably because she turned state's evidence. She too changed her name and gained a family of her own, apparently also working as a teacher. The person who was the mastermind behind everything that happened, Gertrude Baniszewski also got a retrial in 1977 alongside her daughter, Paula, and she but she was still found to be guilty. In 1985, twenty years into her time served she came up for parole and it was granted after she had proven to be a model inmate. She claimed that she couldn't remember her actions in the 1965 torture and murder so she never took her share of the responsibility for the crime. She only served twenty years and moved to Iowa, also changing her name and died on June 16, 1990, of cancer.

Above is just a brief summary, peppered with details because this was a hard topic to cover. Knowing that there were people who could do this to another human being is heart-wrenching. This isn't the only case I know about but it is one of the hardest. Now, it has been speculated that along with her physical health issues, Gertrude also could have had mental health issues which could have very well be and that is something that should be taken seriously, although more is known about it now than there was in 1965 but that doesn't excuse Baniszewski for she did. Not only did she take a young girl's life in her hands and rip it apart but she allowed the other children to do the same and perhaps because an adult said that it was okay to do they didn't think anything of it. If an adult told you to do something when you were a child, as long as it wouldn't hurt you then it was okay, right?

I don't like to focus on the murder(s) but rather the victims although in order to understand the case you have to dive into murder's background a little too. Sylvia's life was taken far too early because she was given over to someone that was trusting so was thought to be. There is also there is wonder about how much Lester Likens really knew about the Baniszewski home, not checking everything out before he left his daughters there; whether it was just pure ignorance or out of desperation to try and better his family by working but unable to take his children with him. I often wonder what was going through Lester's head after he found out what had happened and during the trial. I'm sure he was kicking himself. I know I would be. On top of her father not fully checking out the home, there were countless times where someone witnessed or someone had been told about the abuse that was happening and yet did nothing. For the ones who simply turned a blind eye including a reverend, a social services worker, and a neighbor, they left a little girl to die but it wasn't just because they kept their mouth shut it was partly because of times and handing out a bit more of a corporal punishment regiment or they just didn't want to stick their noses into others business where not all the story was known. Either way life was lost and either way, although time was served and in the end, they all seemed to pay even more but somehow doesn't feel like it was enough for such a tragic crime.

This blog was one of my longer ones so far but there was a lot to cover and I even cut down on the details, giving you nothing but the basics but I think that it still painted a horrifying, stomach churning and heartbreaking picture. Again this one was a very hard case to cover, even though I've read about it over and over again. Like always I have added some pictures but I have to warn you that some are extremely graphic. This is your warning although if you're reading this it's fair to say that you're true crime junkie like me and you've already seen these pictures but if not, you can't say I didn't warn you.

Until next time –

Ali



This perhaps the most known picture of Sylvia Likens



Jenny Likens during the trial



Gertrude Baniszewski



Paula Baniszewski



John Baniszewski (left) and Coy Hubbard



Ricky Hobbs



The infamous Baniszewski home before it was finally torn down in 2009



Sylvia Likens