

Twice Adopted, Once Murdered: Larry Swartz

Marie: Lawrence Joseph Swartz Bitzel Usilton (known to his friends as Larry) died of an apparent heart attack on December 24, 2004 at the age of 37. Surviving him were his loving wife and child. He is also survived by a sister, Anne, and a brother, Michael David – both of Maryland. Preceding him in death were his adoptive parents, Robert Lee and Katherine Ann Swartz. By the time he was 6 years old, Larry had lived with 1 birth mother, 4 sets of foster parents, and 1 set of adopted parents – he murdered mom and dad when he was 16 years old.

(Interlude) Ring around the rosies, A pocketful of posies, Ashes, ashes, We all fall down.

Sherry: Welcome to the Parricide Podcast. I'm Sherry...

Marie: ...and I'm Marie...

Sherry: ...and today we're talking about the murders of Robert Lee and Katherine Ann Swartz. We feel like this is a very complicated case and we can't truly do it justice if we don't take a deep dive into this family's history and the individual histories of both of their sons. Part 1 will be that in-depth analysis. Part 2 will be available next Tuesday - we'll cover the murders, his attempted cover-up, and his subsequent adoption. If you enjoy listening to our podcast, please subscribe to it or like it while we chat.

Sherry: Pretty, reserved Katherine Anne Sullivan - Katie for short - was attending graduate school at the University of Maryland. This was unusual for a young woman back then.

Marie: How far back was this?

Sherry: It was in the '60s.

Marie: Okay. That is unusual.

Sherry: She didn't have a lot of money – and neither did her parents. So, when she decided to spiff up her car, she bought bright floral Contact paper. She was covering up her rust spots with huge flowers when a man – also a grad student - stopped by to see what she was doing. He was intrigued by this witty, quirky woman and after a quick conversation wherein she explained what she was doing, he headed to class and didn't give her another thought...until he saw her again in the college cafeteria.

He immediately struck up a conversation with her. He was very cute and at least as smart as she was (she'd been the valedictorian of her high school class and she really liked smart boys). She confided in a friend that she'd met an older man who was a know-it-all and the biggest problem was that he actually did seem to know it all! They kept it casual, although they did date on occasion, and Katie went on to finish college while Bob, a sporadic student at best, dropped out and got a job. They started to date again the Autumn after Katie graduated. Bob was convinced he'd found the love of his life. But Katy wasn't so sure about that.

Despite her doubts, Katy took Bob home to meet her family at Christmastime and they were married the following June. This was in 1970. Prior to the wedding Bob left his Protestant religion and became a

Catholic. It didn't matter what religion he was; he was deeply religious and wanted to do good things in the world.

They decided to settle in Cape St. Claire, Maryland where Katy (now Kay) became a high school English teacher and Bob joined NASA as a computer engineer. They both loved spending their free time picketing Planned Parenthood Centers and trying to convince young women to not have abortions.

Marie: What kind of Protestants were they?

Sherry: That's a good question. His ancestors had been Quakers, but his grandfather had joined a Protestant church. In looking at the types of churches they went to; they were community churches, so probably Evangelical.

Marie: Oh okay. They met in grad school, he converted to Catholicism, and then one of their hobbies was harassing pregnant women.

Sherry: That's not a nice way to say it, but yes. (laughter)

Marie: Okay. I mean, I know. I know they were seeing it as a way of saving children but they, maybe were not respecting the rights of these individuals.

Sherry: Yes, I would agree with that. In fact, Bob was quite zealous about it, and he would actually leave the picket line and be confrontative with these women at times. And it got him in trouble a few times. So, I think that would be fair.

Marie: Ohh, okay. So, he was pretty bold and very convinced that he was right.

Sherry: Yes. He was.

Marie: Okay. It's interesting to kind of get a feel for the parents' personalities.

Sherry: Yeah. They're both very intelligent. They're highly intelligent and very committed and passionate about their beliefs. Anyway, they bought a big house, hoping to fill it up with children, but they never did have any children. They decided to put their money where their mouths were – so to speak. They knew that women who were getting abortions would often say it was better to have an abortion than to bring a child into the world who was unwanted. They decided if they were going to be pro-life, they needed to take some of these unwanted children into their home.

Marie: I'm not sure if I would call it heart-warming, but that makes me feel a little bit better about their hobby, because they were serious about being pro-life. They actually cared that these children were going to be born with nowhere to go.

Sherry: Yes. So, they were acknowledging that even though they did have a passion for something, they wanted to try to make that an easier decision for at least a few women. But when they learned it was going to take years to adopt an infant, they decided to adopt older children. They had no problem with that. In fact, They wanted a sibling group.

Marie: I've heard that's the hardest group to adopt, is a group of siblings.

Sherry: A sibling group is a very difficult group to adopt. And I think that they had big hearts in that they wanted to really make things right.

Brooke: And keep a family together.

Sherry: Right.

Sherry: Children's Aid decided that wouldn't be a good placement – 4 boys could be a lot - so they offered them a boy who was deeply in need of a family instead. And, for the first – but not the last time in his life -Lawrence Joseph Swartz was adopted.

(musical interlude)

Marie: How old was Lawrence – or Larry -when they adopted him?

Sherry: Ah. Larry – is what they did call him. You're right. And he was 6 years old when they took him into their home.

Marie: Okay. So, he was still pretty young.

Sherry: He was young, but he was pretty old for an adoption.

Marie: I guess First Grade?

Sherry: Umm hmm. And he'd been through a lot.

Marie: We should probably talk about his early childhood.

Sherry: Yeah. Because back when Bob and Katie were getting married, 20-month-old Larry was being abandoned for the last time at an apartment complex. He was used to his mother (who was a waitress) leaving him for long periods of time - but this time, she just didn't come back.

Marie: That is so sad. Where did she go? Was she just at work – and then forgot him?

Sherry: She had actually decided to abandon him. She had met a new man, named Dan, and Dan didn't like children. And he really didn't like Larry. So, she decided she would go off with Dan.

Marie: So, like, her boyfriend decided he didn't want kids and, although she had kids, she was like, "Oh, well I don't anymore?"

Sherry: Sort of. She was a little bit flaky.

Marie: That's – flaky is a kind term, I guess we'll go with flaky. So, he's been abandoned. Who found him?

Sherry: A neighbor actually heard crying in the apartment above her and she went upstairs and knocked. She could hear the child in there, rustling around and crying. And no one came to the door. She had a phone number that she could call for emergencies; to find his mom. So, she called it, but she couldn't reach her. So she called Family Services. The police came and broke in the door and found Larry in a terrible state. So, they took custody of him and put him in a foster care home; his first.

Marie: Poor Larry.

Sherry: Yeah, I feel really sorry for him. He had a really rough childhood in his early years. Anyway, he entered the foster system at that point and, according to the Evening Sun, he spent the next 4 years meeting 4 new sets of foster parents – two of whom were supposed to adopt him - and those placements became failed adoptions.

Marie: Ohh. So, he had a mother who rejected him and then two more families where he thought he was home and then they said, “Oh, no, we don’t want you either.”

Sherry: Before he turned 6 years old.

Marie: He’s so young, and he’s had so much rejection.

Sherry: He really has. In fact, here’s how his foster placements went: His first foster placement lasted only a few months. He did really well in that foster care situation, but his mother came back into the picture and wanted to spend time with him. So, they made arrangements to move Larry so that he would be closer to her home.

Marie: So, he had to be moved from a home that’s working for him to spend more time with this woman?

Sherry: Right. And that was devastating for him. But by the time he got to his second placement, he was a stoic little boy who was no longer crying and had kind of turned his emotions off in order to survive it. His 2nd placement lasted for a few months and his mom was about as sporadic as you would expect her to be. She wasn’t coming, she started using him to bargain with Dan – “If you marry me, I’ll relinquish rights. If you won’t marry me, I’m taking the baby back.” So, his 3rd placement happened because they had found an adoptive family for him. So, he was placed in a family that had an infant and a child who was his age.

Marie: That’s a hard family to have. Two children who are, like 2 years old?

Sherry: I don’t know what DHS was thinking. When I read that, I thought, “They set that little boy up to fail.” And fail, he did. After about a year, he still had his mother who was indecisive about relinquishing rights...

Marie: “Do I want this baby or not.”

Sherry: Yes. And the family decided that it wasn’t working out.

Marie: I think it would be really hard to have 2 children who are the same age, and one of them you’re not sure if you’re going to be allowed to keep. So, you’re putting in the work of potty training and helping him deal with anxiety (because I’m sure he had huge abandonment issues) and...all of this work...and they’re saying he might be leaving them. You can’t get too attached to this kid because he might be leaving.

Sherry: Right. And the mom never really felt connected with him. In fact, when they were removing him from their home, the mother suggested that they find a placement for him where he would be the only child in the home.

Well, they placed him with another family. And this family kept him for 3 years – and they were as indecisive as his mother about whether they wanted him.

Marie: Ohhh.

Sherry: So, he was in a really bad situation. The mom did relinquish rights and they said, “It’s go time. Let’s get him adopted.” They went through the probationary year and the family said, “Oh, we have problems with finances. We want to wait.” And then they kept coming up with excuses. And then at the end, they said, “Eh, we’ve decided we really don’t want him. He has a lot of problems.”

Marie: Well, that’s not very fair. Because they took in a child who was a toddler which is like, as far as adoptable ages, toddlers are easier to adopt. And now he’s 5, probably almost 6, and he’s been through Kindergarten. He’s been through the baby years. It’s a lot harder to get adopted when you’re older. So, they really...and his mom did the same thing...they wouldn’t decide and left him in a worse position. And more rejection, more instability, and more of just this feeling that ‘nobody really likes me,’ I guess.

Sherry: Yes, I am devastated when I read of how this kid was treated. And I think the family was really mixed on what they wanted to do. They did see a kid who had a lot of troubles. And they did kind of like him. When they decided to not adopt him, they wanted to still keep him in their home and DHS said, “No. We’re going to take him out of this placement.” And they wouldn’t let go. They had to actually have a little fight to get Larry out of that home.

Marie: Well, that doesn’t seem fair. He deserves a family. And if you don’t want him to be your family – he needs a family.

Sherry: I absolutely agree.

Marie: I wonder what they were thinking.

Sherry: I think they really kind of liked him. But they knew that he had some problems. He was being held back in the 1st grade, he had difficulties with concentrating, he was a constant bedwetter, he liked to take the other kids’ lunches at school and eat it – which caused all sorts of problems for this family.

Marie: I’m sure he was in trouble a lot for that.

Sherry: Yeah. And he was upset a lot of the time. In fact, he had a habit of getting up in the middle of the night to make that sure he still had a grownup in the house. So, he still had a lot of anxiety from that initial abandonment.

Marie: Which makes sense. I mean he's; it's only been a couple of years. That was his formative years. It wasn't just one event.

Sherry: That was half his life.

Marie: Yeah, he was left alone a lot. And then one day, he was left alone, and she never came back. He doesn't know where he belongs. Of course he's anxious.

Sherry: Right. And I think that we need to say traumatized. I think it would be fair to say that he had a very traumatic beginning.

Marie: Yeah. If there's a textbook case of trauma, it's probably this boy.

Sherry: Right. And these parents were experienced parents. They had older daughters and, as prospective adoptive parents, they were looking at trouble down the road. They also suggested that he be placed with a family where he would be an only child. And, bingo, Bob and Kay didn't have any children. And Bob and Kay were not seeing a little boy with all of the problems. All they saw was a little kid who, if he received massive doses of love and attention, should turn out just fine. It was like a young couple who had looked at the Grand Canyon and declared it an easy hike. They didn't realize what really lay ahead of them. But Larry is now adopted, and this family thinks this boy is the world!

Marie: It would be so hard to not look at this little boy who's had such a hard time but was still a sweet boy (everybody said he was sweet and kind) and not go, "Oh yeah. All he needs is a little more attention. All he needs is someone to say, 'We love you.' And he'll be fine."

Sherry: Right. So anyway, about a year and a half after his adoption, his parents brought home a second son to adopt. His name is Michael David Swartz.

Marie: So, Larry is about 8 now?

Sherry: Right. And Michael is also 8. Michael is 6 months older than Larry.

Marie: So foster care, again, gave a family 2 children who are the same age?

Sherry: Yes.

Marie: That's so strange! Because people talk about how hard it is to have twins and they've given the essentially twins!

Sherry: From very very difficult backgrounds. Michael, by temperament, was a very different boy than Larry. Larry was very sweet and very average – as far as intelligence. And Michael was trouble from Day 1, from the way the reported it. And he was very bright.

Marie: So, now they have this young family with 2 boys who are the same age; two (dare I say) idealistic parents, um and both children have behavioral problems.

Sherry: Right, right. And different issues that had to be sorted out.

Marie: Umm hmm.

Sherry: So, anyway the troubles with Michael seemed to push all of the positive parental attention toward Larry. Larry was a little bit slow in school and he was in classes for the kids with learning disabilities.

Marie: And Michael was in a lot of trouble in school, right? So, they had, they had Michael, who was academically more gifted, but was a much more difficult child, and then they had Larry who – he wasn't perfect – but he was, maybe, easier.

Sherry: Yeah. And a sweet kid.

So, Bob was very involved in their church. He became a lay minister and the family spent a lot of their free time engaged in socials and classes centered on living a good, clean life. They really were trying hard to raise both of these boys up to be good men.

Marie: Yeah. And they – before they had children – were clearly deeply religious and had some very idealistic views about morality and how to live a good life.

Sherry: Yeah. In fact, every January – on the 22nd – the family would travel to Washington DC to participate in the March For Life. They were trying to pass their values on to these boys. The March for Life is a protest to the abortion laws that were enabled by Roe v. Wade on that date.

Marie: So, they were still very involved in this pro-life movement. But I think we also need to acknowledge that in the 70's Prolife would not have some of the – I mean, I know it was still very politicized – these days being Prolife is seen as a much more extreme stance than it would have been seen in the 1970s?

Sherry: I believe it was in the 1970s that the Pro-lifers were bombing abortion centers and killing doctors? I think some were really just picketing and, like I said, Bob could get annoying but he...

Marie: He wasn't bombing anyone, for sure.

Sherry: Right. He was trying to live a good life and trying to make the world good according to his belief construct. And so, they would say, "How could anyone not want these children? How could anyone want to abort children like these?"

Marie: I can see why. Especially after adopted some of these children who were, you know, unwanted (it's a horrible term) but these...I think it would be really hard to think that children just like your children were out there being aborted when they could be being adopted. And at this point these boys are so young, they're like, "Look! This is an easy solution!"

Sherry: They're darling!

Marie: People just need to adopt more children!

Sherry: Right! And Michael did not come without his own issues. He had failed one adoption placement and he still had – well this is kind of odd – he’d failed an adoption placement, but his father was still involved. His father was still coming around yet saying, “I’m not sure if I want to relinquish. I’m not sure that I want to give my son up.”

Marie: So, both of these children had parents who didn’t want to take care of them but didn’t want to let go.

Sherry: Right.

Marie: Their biological parents.

Sherry: Right. And Bob and Kay actually had to go to court armed with a slew of attorneys and social workers and psychologists just to get custody of him. To adopt him – it took them 2 years to finally adopt him. Not because they didn’t want him or because he was on probation - like Larry was in that other family. But because his father would not let him go.

Marie: That is so hard, because of course you want children to be with their biological parents if they can be. But it’s not fair to that child to never get to settle into their new family, if they’re going to need a new family.

Sherry: Yeah. I always say Limbo is Hell – and both of these boys spent time in Limbo as children.

Marie: They did. So, you can kind of understand some of their behavioral problems, knowing what we know about psychology. Knowing how important stability is for children.

Sherry: And knowing that their inexperienced, new parents didn’t understand what they were seeing.

Marie: Yeah. They had no idea.

Sherry: Let’s take a break.

(musical interlude)

Sherry: When Larry was 13 years old, his parents drove their family to New York and surprised them with a new baby sister, Anne! Annie was a sweet four-year-old from South Korea. She had been abandoned by her parents, leaving her available for adoption. Larry adored Annie; and Bob and Kay felt their family was finally complete. If only they could make Michael behave, everything would be great!

We talked about how they had very different needs and very different personalities. Bob and Kay were more than highly challenged by these boys. Michael had always seemed to irritate Bob. Friends and family noted that Bob was especially tough on Michael. When it came to

learning something new - like soccer or softball – neither of them liked to lose and they were very combative with each other. Bob would teach Larry a new skill, but he would demean Michael and try to force him to learn the skill on his own until Michael would stomp away angry. Kay had to actively buffer the kids from Bob’s disciplinary gruffness. Bob yelled at the kids a lot. Bob hoped Michael would get control of himself and use his energy to get into the Naval Academy someday. But Michael just got worse as he got older. No form of discipline or punishment seemed to work with him. Like I said, Bob yelled at the boys a lot for minor infractions of the rules and the parents would take away privileges each time a boy acted out.

Marie: Were they equally tough on them when they were young? Or were they tough on Michael and a little soft on Larry?

Sherry: From everything I read, I believe they were tougher on Michael. But Michael was a tougher kid right out of the gate. So, that would be understandable. You don’t need to discipline someone who was following your rules. So, Larry was trying to step in line and follow the rules and Michael was trying to push every boundary. I think this is a little bit different because his parents seemed to really adjust based on the boys’ needs. For example, if you read newspaper articles, they say the parents were very very hard on these boys and had high expectations of them as far as school went. That the parents were always pushing them to succeed. But if you look at the records and you look at the court information, it shows that Bob basically expected Michael and Larry to get C’s. They weren’t pushing them to get A’s; they had adjusted their expectations from the Naval Academy material to ‘You boys need to get, at least, straight C’s.’ So, I do feel like they were doing a lot of things that parents do to adjust expectations as they learned to know their children. And I think a lot of the discipline Bob was meting out was basically efforts to get the kids in line – which is why it looked tougher on Michael than it did on Larry. Because Larry was already towing the line.

Marie: So, you’d said that Michael was a much harder kid than Larry was. What was Michael doing that made him so hard?

Sherry: Where Larry was very acquiescent - when his parents would give him corrections, he would take the correction and make the correction – Michael was actively oppositional. He was very bright, so when Bob would give him a correction, he would spar with him. Instead of just saying, ‘Yes Sir’ and doing something, he would try to throw things at him to argue with. So, he was a little bit argumentative. He was also a blatant liar. He would tell them huge lies -that they knew were lies – and then he would stick with them. Which they really had a problem with. And Larry would lie, but Larry was kind of sneaky about it.

Marie: So, we’ve said Larry was sneaky; you said it a few minutes ago. But what do you mean? Why was he described as sneaky?

Sherry: I’m not sure what exactly he was doing. But his cousins and his friends all said that he was really sneaky. He would do bad things and he would set Michael up to take the fall or he would get away with it because of the way he did things. The parents all thought he was a

lovely, well-mannered boy. But often-times - the secret world of children; the kids know more than the parents – and all of the kids said that he was sneaky.

Marie: Well, that will happen sometimes. If you've got a brother who is known to be the bad boy - it's really easy, if you're mostly good, when you're...you know... (on occasion) not good to pass it off as his fault.

Sherry: Right. When it comes into question, it's easy to make him the fall-guy. And when you look at the night of the murder, that's exactly what he did. He started setting Michael up as the murderer right from the start. 'Oh, my brother can sneak out of the lock-up.' 'My brother has been around.' 'My brother has threatened to, you know, kill our parents.'

Marie: 'Oh, was he tall, like Michael?'

Sherry: Yes.

Marie: When they were talking to the sister.

Sherry: Yes. And when they were interviewing Annie, Annie sat on his lap the entire time. He said Annie needed him there. So, I don't know if he was supporting Annie or making sure the story stayed in line? So, he was sneaky.

Marie: So, Michael was a big liar and he was, maybe not very obedient. Was he doing anything else? Was he into drugs or crime or anything serious?

Sherry: Yes. As Michael got older, his problems just got worse. He had a lot of Breaking and Entering convictions, he was into alcohol abuse at an early age, drug abuse at an early age. Here's a spoiler, Michael gets kicked out of the house when he's 13 years old. And at that point he already has problems with drug abuse, alcohol abuse, breaking the law. Bob would spank him and yell at him when he broke the rules and Michael said the line was always drawn at disrespect and cussing. Bob hated to be disrespected and he would not tolerate disrespect of Kay. So, every time Michael was disrespectful – which was most of the time – he would get spanked or yelled at. And Larry wasn't disrespectful, so he wasn't getting spanked or yelled at at that same time. Bob also believed that physical punishment was something that was important, but he didn't think physical punishment (like beating the kid up) but he would do things like assigning Michael manual labor. Things to punish him for acting out. For example, Michael was angry at his dad one day and let out the air in the tires of a truck...

Marie: Umm hmm.

Sherry: And Bob knew he'd done it and Michael knew he'd done it – but Michael wouldn't admit he'd done it. So, Bob assigned him with the task of filling all of those tires with a bicycle pump. He felt that all of that physical energy would tire Michael out and give him something to do. Which would maybe make him a more obedient child. You see that with a lot of parents. They figure manual labor is going to make the kid a better kid. But the neighbors would look out there and see poor Michael doing all of these manual tasks that were probably usually reserved

for an adult – like removing tree stumps – and they thought that Michael was being picked on or treated badly when really Bob was trying to use physical activities to, kind of, keep him tired enough to not be so rebellious.

Marie: Okay. Well, and I can see why the neighbors would think that it was suspect. Especially if only one of the boys was out there removing tree stumps and refilling tires with a bicycle pump.

Sherry: Right! I agree, and especially when those boys are the exact same age.

Marie: Kids are already constantly comparing how they're treated. And if one kid gets something and the other one doesn't, it's a fight. And if one kid is punished, they're mad – even if they did something. Because they don't feel like it's fair that they're punished more often. And it doesn't really matter that they're bad more often. And I can't imagine have a sibling that's your exact age being treated so differently.

Sherry: Right. And I think we need to remember; I'm saying Oh Michael was this bad boy who was doing all of these bad things. He was very oppositional. And he was! But remember, he came to them from another family. He was 8 years old. He had already been in a failed adoption. He had been through a lot of the same things Larry had gone through; but his personality was different so he started acting out in a different way than Larry would.

Marie: Yeah. And he came 2 years later. So, Larry showed up when he was 6, when he was a 1st grader. The difference between 6 and 8 is only 2 years but, because of where you are developmentally, it's a big difference.

Sherry: You're absolutely right there! Michael entered the family at an older age and a little awkwardly because the child whose adopted 2nd is usually a younger child. He was actually a little older and was already much taller than Larry. So, Michael was Larry's older younger bigger brother and he didn't have a sure place in the family because he dad was still refusing to relinquish parental rights.

Marie: That would be so hard.

Sherry: And where Larry was anxious and feared abandonment and became very loving and very agreeable - trying to keep his parent engaged with him - Michael acted out and avoided emotional connection to protect himself. I don't think these parents understood these differences or even knew how to handle them any more than the boys did.

Marie: So, as they get older, of course their relationships change and it sounds like they had to adjust their expectations because Michael was smart enough to succeed but wasn't succeeding because he had so many behavioral issues and Larry could behave at school but wasn't doing well at school.

Sherry: And the parents weren't differentiating very well between the boys. They weren't understanding how they needed to handle those differences differently. Umm, the newspapers and a lot of the public really judged this family, saying that the parents were too hard on the

boys. They had high expectations of them. And, at first, they did have high expectations. They had ambitions of sending both boys to the Naval Academy, but these parents were actually acting as typical parents were. They were changing the dreams for their children as they got to know the children better. Umm instead of...

Marie: Holding on?

Sherry: Yeah, some parents will just hold on and go through like a bulldozer. But instead of doing that, Bob decided that he probably wasn't going to get Michael into the Naval Academy, so his goal became, 'Let's just keep him out of jail during his high school years.'

Marie: That's a good goal. And more doable. I think Bob and Kay were doing their best and learning as they went and I think it really can't be emphasized enough that we can't judge them based on modern standards, because they had no idea about, like, special skills for parenting traumatized children. There was no way for them to go and read a parenting book about this.

Sherry: The research wasn't there. You're absolutely right. And I think Ron Baradel, who becomes Larry's attorney, said it best. He said, "They were well intentioned, well-meaning people but they were particularly ill-equipped by personality to deal with the kind of problems these children were dealing with."

Marie: Umm hmm.

Sherry: I think that really says a lot. You know, he was saying they weren't bad people, they were good people. They may not have been the best parents for both of these children, but I'll be honest with you, I don't know what parent could have effectively handled 2 boys of the same age with such different temperaments and with such different backgrounds.

Marie: It's true.

Sherry: So, Larry had a few adventures with his excitement seeking, law breaking, older younger brother. Umm but he didn't really have the stomach for that excitement. So, he tended to stay out of trouble. He didn't like to be in trouble with his parents. He'd try to be a source of solace to Bob and Kay. When they were angry, he would listen to them; he would change his behaviors - where Michael would just push the boundaries and push the boundaries and be disrespectful and talk back.

Marie: Well, as they got older Michael started committing crimes, right?

Sherry: Right. He was committing crimes at a very young age.

Marie: Okay, so it would make sense that Larry would, maybe, not be willing to follow his brother quite that far.

Sherry: Right, right. He had a whole different personality. He was a different person.

Marie: So, how are these, kind of, straight-laced parents dealing with the surprise of their who their children were growing up to be?

Sherry: I don't think they were handling it well. I think that the home that they dreamed of never really came to be. They were not able to provide stability in a storm of chaos as Michael was getting into more and more trouble at home, at school, and with the law. Um. The neighbors were all judging them; thinking that Bob and Kay were unnecessarily rough on Michael. They were watching him walk 5 miles to school and then walk home 5 miles from school in junior high. And they thought, 'What terrible parents! They're giving Larry a ride.' Not realizing that Michael was getting kicked off the bus for fighting, was not getting up in the mornings so he wasn't getting ready for school, was being given detention for misbehaving in school all the time, and I think his parents were working really hard to try to give natural consequences for bad behavior. 'You won't get up for school, you walk to school.' And that was really typical back then.

Marie: And I think it is hard, because if you have a child where no punishment, including spanking, works you kind of lost confidence and run out of skills. They just had to try to come up with punishments that might affect him.

Sherry: Right. And sometimes they weren't punishments, they were deterrents.

Marie: (laughter) And I guess that's important, but that's not something they would have talked about.

Sherry: Right, right. You're right. And they didn't understand how Michael's chaotic, disrespectful behavior was changing them, as well as the family, for the worst. When you have a child who is acting out within the family, it disrupts the entire family functioning: not just that child or not just the parents. So, Michael was lying and sneaking out of the house at night. He really had a penchant for sneaking out of the house at night. And Bob and Kay worked really hard to let the boys know that they were loved, but they were coming to the end of their ropes. They were seeing their family fall completely apart because of Michael's bad behavior and one night Michael disobeyed his parents yet again. He asked if he could go out with his friends. His parents said, 'No, it's a school night. You know you don't go out on a school night.' He snuck out!

And when he returned this time, he found the doors and windows were all locked. After what he felt like were hours of pounding on doors and screaming at his parents to let him in, Kay opened the door a crack, flipped Michael the bird, and yelled, "If you want to be out, stay out!"

Marie: Okay. So, this is a very conservative, Catholic woman flipping off her teenaged boy.

Sherry: Right. You could tell she'd lost it. She'd completely lost it at that point. And the next day Michael was reported as a runaway by his mother and he found himself back in foster care. So, he never did get back home.

Marie: So, how does foster care work? Does that mean they un-adopted him?

Sherry: They had some choices there. You can't really un-adopt a child.

Marie: That's what I thought.

Sherry: But, as any parent, you could relinquish parental rights.

Marie: Ohh.

Sherry: So, there's a gradient and relinquishing parental rights would be the last thing. He was an incorrigible child and the State did ask them if they wanted to relinquish their parental rights on him and they said no. They didn't really give up hope on him, but they really couldn't have him at home. They needed to – had two other children to raise. So...

Marie: That would be such a hard choice.

Sherry: Right. A heartbreaking choice.

Marie: But it would be horrible. Especially where his other siblings were adopted, I'm glad they didn't relinquish parental rights.

Sherry: At that point.

Marie: Yeah. Because I think that gives the impression of, 'Oh, well we'll just return you if you are bad.'

Sherry: Right. And I think Larry did actually get that impression. Anyway, Michael ended up at The Long Stretch Youth Camp. And he lived there for four years. It's a residential treatment facility that has camping and horse riding and lots of different things that can really be therapeutic for kids and it's filled with therapy to try and shore the kids up and ensure that they can have a good adulthood.

Marie: Did he do well there?

Sherry: He seemed to do quite well there. He was moving toward graduation – or independence – and the camp contacted Bob and Kay (who were still paying support to the State for Michael's care) and they asked them if they would be willing to have Michael come home. Michael really wanted to come back home and be with his family.

Marie: Okay.

Sherry: Bob and Kay talked about it for quite some time and then they called the camp back and said, "If Michael can behave and be respectful for one full year, he can come home."

Marie: Okay. That seems like a reasonable compromise.

Sherry: Right. Because they'd already been told he would have another year to go.

Marie: Umm hmm

Sherry: So, they were saying he just needs to toe the line for that year. If he's really ready, we'll take him. And he seemed to be really excited about that. But a few short months later, Michael blew that out of the water by screaming at Kay and calling her an f-ing bitch because she would not sign off on letting him – a 16 year old boy in reform school – marry his much older girlfriend.

Marie: Oh dear. How did he get an older girlfriend?

Sherry: I have no idea.

Marie: That's probably a story in and of itself.

Sherry: It probably is. But at that point, when he screamed at his mother and called her that, they were like, "Nope. This is a sign he is clearly not even close to ready." And they were done. So, at that point, they did start talking about relinquishing parental rights. But, that Michael could be given back was not lost on Larry.

Marie: That is really unfortunate. And I think you can see that as we get more into the murder. I think that that fear of rejection is my personal theory on motive.

Sherry: Umm hmm, I...yeah...and we'll talk about motive (unclear) next.

Marie: But we're not there yet, I know.

Sherry: Umm hmm (laughter) So let's talk because this is about...

Marie: This is Larry's podcast.

Sherry: Well, it's difficult. It's his parents' podcast. Which is why we're talking about both of them. Because Michael is the one who looks, like, most likely to murder his parents.

Marie: I'm shocked it wasn't Michael. After reading all of the source material, it's tempting to get a conspiracy theory and go – there's no way it was Larry.

Sherry: (laughter) You're right. You're absolutely right. But all of the evidence does point to Larry. So.

Marie: And he confessed.

Sherry: So, during the tumultuous years, easygoing Larry had become popular at school. Nobody cared that he wasn't the best student – because he didn't get good grades. He was very handsome, he was very polite, and he was very well liked. His bad-boy brother seemed to add to his popularity, rather than detract from it. And Larry – he told his parents he wanted to become a priest and his parents were really proud of this. So, they sent him off to Seminary Training his first year of high school and he went to a boarding school that was going to teach him how to be a priest. After 2 semesters of failing the required Latin course (and a few rumors

regarding his sexuality in the dorms) the Seminary invited Larry to leave, and being a priest was no longer on the table. And here's another rejection. Which we forget that failing the Seminary is another group of people saying, 'We don't want you.' To Larry.

Marie: All teenagers experience some level of rejection. But when you have that deep rejection as a child, I think that the small rejections hurt more.

Sherry: Right. And he never ever felt that he fit. Belonging is such an important thing to people. They need to belong. And I don't think Larry every belonged anywhere – in his head – even though he did.

Marie: Even though he was popular, even though his family loved him – it just wasn't – it never sunk in all the way.

Sherry: Umm hmm. So, when he returned to live at home, Larry was pleasantly surprised to realize that his parents had relaxed the rules now that Michael was gone. And he was able to go out with his friends during school nights, he was able to have fun. But Larry had his own set of problems that his parents hadn't been aware of, until he came home drunk one night.

Marie: Ohhh. So Michael's misbehavior had masked Larry's problems.

Sherry: Right. So, Bob and Kay were still grieving over their failures with Michael and they weren't sure where they had gone wrong. But, you know, they didn't want Larry going down that same path. When they found him drunk in his bedroom, they started with the restrictions again. They put him on restriction – he could go to church, he could go to school, and he could go to his sports events. That was it – he was to be home at all other times. So they cut out all social things for almost a year – trying to shorten that leash and make sure that Larry was on the right track. And he saw that as brutally cruel.

Marie: Well, I'm sure that would be very hard when you're in high school. But you shouldn't be getting drunk in high school. And I think a lot of parents are very strict about being drunk in high school.

Sherry: Remember, he kills them when he's 16. So, he's coming home drunk before that age. He was really young. And so when they put him on restriction, they thought, 'We'd better start looking more closely for potential trouble.' And they found a boy who incessantly lied and snuck out of the house. And they realized he was drinking a lot. And then one day Annie found pills in his jacket pocket – which Larry had thought was Speed.

Marie: So, they weren't really Speed but Larry thought he had bought Speed?

Sherry: Yes.

Marie: Ohh.

Sherry: His mom took them to the Pharmacist to have them analyzed.

Marie: (laughter) How clever!

Sherry: That's such a parent, right? And the Pharmacist saved the pill but never analyzed it until after the murders. He took it to the crime lab and said, 'These were pills.' And Larry did admit that he'd taken some and that they hadn't done much for him. So, they were still in his jacket pocket.

Marie: They were just fake Speed.

Sherry: Right. But the fact that he was doing drugs was not lost on them when they had already lost one son.

Marie: Umm hmm. And the really wanted him to have a future, so I can see why they were saying – it's the classic thing – no sex, no drugs, no rock and roll. (laughter)

Sherry: Maybe a little rock and roll. (laughter) So anyway, his grades continued to be very low and his drinking was pretty heavy – I think – because Kay mentioned her concern that he was becoming an alcoholic - to his Uncle and to the parents of a few of his friends. But his parents are a little confusing because they're very indulgent of him. She's worried about him drinking; she's telling everyone, 'You need to watch him when he's with you because he tends to drink and that's now a problem; I think he's an alcoholic.' But then they went to a wedding and she handed him champagne. And then she said, "It's a special occasion." I don't think she understood that everything is a special occasion to a 14-year-old boy.

Marie: That's true!

Sherry: Larry would often, you know, say his parents confused him because the rules changed a lot. And I think what he didn't understand was they would make a rule and then they would change the rule momentarily to indulge him – because he would want something. So, Larry who had always had a really good relationship with his mom was now straining against the new restrictions. And his relationship deteriorated a little bit. There were still loving moments between them that were noted by people. Like when they were in a car with family, he was in the back seat and he leaned forward and gave his mom a hug from behind.

Marie: Ohhh.

Sherry: Yeah. So it's not like they were hating each other. They just had conflicts. Which is also normal for teenagers; to be conflicted about their feelings for their parents.

Marie: That's true.

Sherry: Anyway, Larry was pushed to get good grades and he complained loudly about his parents' impossible requirement that he carry C grades or better.

Marie: Which might have been genuinely difficult for him.

Sherry: I could understand you thinking that. But according to *Sudden Fury* by Leslie Watkins, his teachers believed he was largely disinterested in his coursework. He never turned in his homework, he didn't participate in class, and his teachers said he needed to engage and at least try. Somewhere in the chaos of all of this, Larry started hiding alcohol in his bedroom and drinking. And Bob was yelling at him a lot. And Larry hated being yelled at. He did not like displeasing his parents to start. But being yelled at was just torture for him. But Larry disclosed to both of his defense attorneys, much to their chagrin, that he had never been physically abused.

Marie: Okay.

Sherry: He told multiple people, multiple times, that his father had never physically abused him. The first morning when he was talking to the police officer – that officer asked him about his relationship with his parents and asked him if his father was physically abusive. And he said, “No. But he yells at me a lot.” But most people started overlaying their problems – it was really weird – they would overlay their problems in their childhood with what Larry experienced in his childhood.

Marie: I think it's hard not to, because he has such a sympathetic story.

Sherry: And he's such an attractive boy.

Marie: That does – we've seen that with girls, too. That how good looking they are changes the way that people feel about someone who's a convicted murderer. Which is kind of crazy, because I'm sitting here (saying to myself) “I know he's a murderer. I've read how he murdered his parents and it was horrible.” Umm...

Sherry: But look at how cute he is!

Marie: Well, not even look at how cute he is – I'm sure I'm just as influenced as everybody else – but I'm reading about his childhood going, “I feel so bad for this kid!”

Sherry: Umm hmm.

Marie: And um, it's hard to kind of put together, “I feel so bad for this kid.” With the horrible things he did. It's cognitive dissonance is what it is.

Sherry: It totally is. It totally is. And his parents also had a lot of cognitive dissonance because they did continue to tell him, “These are the consequences for your actions.” But then indulge him. Here's another example, they told him he couldn't take Driver's Ed until he earned all C's in one semester – because they were trying to engage him in the school process.

Marie: Yeah, motivate him.

Sherry: Right. And he never did get all C's...but...he was enrolled in Driver's Ed the semester after he turned 16. So they would change the rules, but the arbitrary changes all seemed to be ways that indulged him without requiring him to perform as demanded.

Marie: Which I think makes sense.

Sherry: To Larry family was family. And Michael was family. And he kept in touch with Michael and felt bad for Michael when he returned from the Youth Camp and found himself hitting that foster care circuit. His parents wouldn't have anything to do with him because of the situation where he yelled about his girlfriend. The girlfriend, by the way, disappeared. And they said, "What happened to your girlfriend." And he said, "Oh she and the baby were hit by a car." (Because he later claimed she was pregnant.) "She and the baby were hit by a car and died." And that was the last anyone heard of her.

Marie: That's almost unbelievable.

Sherry: They never knew because Michael. Always. Lied. So, in early January of 1984, Michael was committed to Crownsville Hospital Center for court ordered psychiatric testing after he pulled a knife on a counselor at the Fellowship of Lights – which is a shelter for runaways and homeless in Baltimore. Michael had threatened to kill his parents several times – as per Larry so we don't really know if it's true or not. But Bob and Kay weren't willing to take the risk of bringing Michael home and disrupting their family again.

Marie: I think that makes sense. It's a big ask.

Sherry: It is a big ask. But what they didn't understand, is they were looking in the wrong direction.... for trouble.

Next Tuesday, we'll tell you all about how the murders took place and share a later confession that Larry made to a friend. We'll talk about why there wasn't a trial for this case and then we'll talk about Larry's 2nd adoption. You will not believe this story! Yes, he was adopted a 2nd time by a family who knew all about him killing his adoptive parents! To wrap everything up, we'll tell you what's happening with his siblings.

Marie: What do you think, listeners? We'd love to hear your thoughts on this episode. Also, we are currently putting the finishing touches on our episode list. If you know of a parricide that you would like to see covered, please send us the name of the parricide offender and we'll add it to our list.

Sherry: Feel free to join our discussions on Instagram (@parricidepodcast), Facebook (Parricide Podcast), or by writing to us at parricidepodcast@parricide.org.

Marie: And if you like our podcast, please subscribe to the Parricide Podcast and share it with your friends. We'd like to thank Jade Brown for our theme music and the Baltimore

Sun, the Evening Sun, and Leslie Watkins for a variety of information and the photos we used for this show. You can see the photos at parricide.org; just click on the Parricide Podcast once you get to the website.

Sherry: Bye, for now.

(theme music) Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.