

HELP IS OUT THERE - 'TAKE YOUR TIME. HEAL AS YOU CAN.'

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Author: JIMMY NESBITT, Courier & Press staff writer 464-7501 or nesbittj@courierpress.com

About two weeks after she was raped, Penny Mitchell hobbled with the help of a cane into a therapist's office.

She had moved to a new city to be closer to her family.

(Mitchell asked that her new hometown not be published out of fear her attacker might find her.)

Asked to evaluate on a scale of 1-10 her quality of life before and after the rape, she found only her relationship with family had improved.

Everything else -- pride, happiness, trust in the world and hope for the future -- was worse.

The therapist diagnosed Mitchell with post-traumatic stress disorder, a psychiatric disorder that can occur after a life-threatening event such as military combat or a violent assault. Women are twice as likely as men to develop the disorder, according to the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Mitchell suffered flashbacks that kept her awake at night and confined her to home during the day. She lost 30 pounds and dropped three waist sizes. She trimmed her blond hair above the shoulders and dyed it red to change her appearance. Her fiance, Mike, put bars on their front door and bought a Great Dane.

The flashbacks sometimes sent Mitchell running for cover under the bed or in the closet.

"A lot of people who have never been there can't understand how real it is," she said recently.

Medical bills piled up. Mitchell needed laparoscopic surgery to repair scar tissue. Her broken teeth required four months of dental care and partial plates. And she is still waiting for a surgery to repair her knee. The worst of the physical injuries appeared in December, when a doctor told Mitchell her uterus had to be removed. It was displaced during the rape.

"It was pretty devastating to me because I wanted to have children with my husband," Mitchell said.

Mitchell had a son and daughter from a previous marriage, but Mike was never married and didn't have children.

Wedding

When she married Mike, she wore a traditional wedding dress. Her mother altered it so it would cover her shoulders.

The wedding, Mitchell said, was one of the only days "since February that I have not thought about what happened. That was one of the happiest days of my life." Her parents renewed their 50th wedding vows at the ceremony.

Even though Mitchell left Evansville and changed her appearance, she still worried that her attacker would find her.

She stayed in contact with Evansville police detective Jim Harpenau, of whom she speaks highly.

Mitchell always has believed that the man who raped her inside the Chili's restaurant may have been someone she fired at the restaurant, which she managed. Or she wonders whether it was a relative of a former employee.

Harpenau said he interviewed several of her ex-co-workers. Their statements "led me to a couple of things," Harpenau said, declining to elaborate. Police don't have any fingerprints and still are awaiting the results of DNA tests, Harpenau said.

Mitchell never saw her attacker. The only description she could give was that he slurred when he pronounced words with the letter S. Harpenau is confident that someone will "grow a conscience."

"It will never be dead," he said of the investigation.

Mitchell thinks the rape could have been prevented if another employee was with her after the restaurant closed. Quality Dining Inc., the company that owns the Chili's restaurant where the crime happened, adopted a policy that requires at least two people to stay in the restaurant until everyone is gone, Mitchell said.

Quality Dining is based in Mishawaka, Ind., and operates 41 Chili's and many other restaurants, including Burger King, Papa Vinos, Porterhouse Steaks & Seafood and Spageddies. Company President John Firth declined a phone interview but responded to a question about the policy in an e-mail.

Concern

"We continue to have great concern for (Mitchell) and are cooperating with the ongoing investigation. We have multiple policies, procedures and security devices in place that are designed to prevent crimes from occurring in and around our restaurants," Firth wrote.

"One example that has been in place from the day the Evansville Chili's was opened is our closing process, which requires that at least two employees be present when closing the restaurant. The closing process also requires a number of other security procedures that I would not want to discuss publicly out of concern that doing so could compromise their effectiveness."

Mitchell said she attended several seminars with Quality Dining's safety manager, and "we were never supposed to have somebody with us when we closed."

She has not returned to work in the 14 months since the rape.

Although she still suffers from flashbacks, her life is improving. "My family and I have grown much, much closer," she said.

Mitchell's daughter, Kara, 17, said her mother "has calmed down a lot."

For a while, Kara said her mother wanted to know where she was at all times. If she went to the movies with friends, Kara was expected to check in several times. One day, Kara got a letter from a boy she went to high school with. The boy wrote that he saw her underwear one night while he was peeping into her window.

"I freaked out so bad that I locked her and myself in the house for 10 days," Mitchell said.

"It was very, very hard for me," Kara said. "But I had to think about why she was acting that way."

Mitchell hopes other rape victims will benefit from hearing her story.

"I want other women to know that there is a lot of help, and the best thing they can do is find an excellent support team," she said. "The people who say get over it and move on with your life have no concept of what you're going through. Take your time. Heal as you can."

As long as her attacker is free, Mitchell believes she will live in fear.

"Prior to this, I was probably one of the strongest women you could ever meet," she said. "Always motivated. Never saw the glass half empty. I found (a) positive out of everything and smiled. Everybody loved Penny."

"Now, I have none of that. I'm on a journey to try to find myself again."

Caption: Photo Information Box

BOB GWALTNEY / Courier & Press

Penny Mitchell still finds herself overcome by crippling fear a year after her rape. Trips outside her home put her courage to the test and even in her home she can be taken down by panic. The one special place she feels safe is in front of her fireplace with her new dog, Romeo. HOW TO HELP

* Anyone with information about the rape of Penny Mitchell can call Evansville police detective Jim Harpenau at 435-6072. *

The Albion Fellows Bacon Center recommends the following Web sites for information on victims of sexual assault:

www.incasa.org www.rainn.org www.albionfellowsbacon.org www.missingkids.com * The Albion Fellows Bacon Center has counselors available 24 hours a day. To speak to someone, call 424-7273.

Memo: Editor's note: This is the final installment of a three-part series on the Feb. 4, 2005, rape and beating of a woman who police say survived one of Evansville's most brutal rapes. The case remains unsolved. The series, reported with the help of the victim, is based on police reports, numerous interviews with the victim, her family, her friends and the police.

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